



MAINE RAIL NEWS

MRG, Inc. (Maine Rail Group)

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*A volunteer group
working to enhance
rail services in Maine*

September / October 2026 Newsletter

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---- Ed Hanscom, newsletter editor

MRG President's Message

It is exciting to be able to report and reflect on good news. And the news for rail is positively game changing for Maine.

The first piece of good news is the awarding of the FRA grant of \$48 million to construct a new station in Portland. This ends the long-time penalty for all stations north of Portland. It will decrease time for riders from Brunswick and Freeport by 17 minutes, not to mention over a million dollars annually in operating costs.

The new station:

- Means a location closer to jobs and Portland attractions. The new station, located on St. John Street, will have access to Fore River Parkway and the new bicycle trails being built. It is served directly by bus line 1 which connects east and west Portland and is within easy walking distance of the Congress Street bus service going north and south. Close by are the Maine Medical Center, Mercy Hospital, Haddock Field, and the new Hearts of Maine soccer stadium.
- Decreases schedule times for future extensions of service to Lewiston, Waterville, Bangor and Rockland.

- Provides the opportunity for increases in service frequency, as the present station's operational constraints limit service to six round trips a day.
- Will be built at the preferred location, chosen after a thorough study of all options and supported by CSX, MaineDOT, and the Urbanist Coalition of Portland.

The second piece of good news is the awarding of the FRA grant to the Massachusetts Bay Transit Authority (MBTA) for almost \$140 million to double track 6.8 miles from Andover to Reading, including improved signaling, fencing and the removal of a street crossing. Since this is the route of the *Downeaster*, this means improved scheduling both for reliability and frequency.

The third piece of good news is the MBTA's \$1.06 billion grant award to replace the 1930 Charles River Bridge to North Station in Boston. The new bridge will increase the number of tracks going into North Station and will improve reliability, which again will mean improved service for the *Downeaster*.

The fourth piece of good news is that the enhanced Wells Station is expected to open at the end of October, allowing a passing track and dual platform loading on both sides of the double track, again improving operation for the *Downeaster*.

The fifth piece of good news is that CSX is almost finished with Positive Train Control on the entire *Downeaster* route, and it will be activated soon. This system improves safety and operations, all more good news for passenger and freight rail service in and out of Maine.

Finally, July saw a record number of riders (along with record fare box revenue) on the *Downeaster*. There were 63,000 riders for July alone – for a rail line that those naysayers claimed, “no one will ride.” Fiscal reporting showed that the *Downeaster* operations came in under budget for 2025-26 and the *Downeaster* has taken nearly 11 million passengers off the roads from its start in 2001.

In other good news, a recent poll in Michigan showed why the public wants more train service --- because the public wants:

- The choice of relaxing while traveling
- The chance to get up and stretch
- Comfortable seats
- Environmental benefits
- To avoiding having to drive in “bad weather.”

And for those of us using the *Downeaster*, I would add avoiding the doubling of tolls on the New Hampshire Turnpike and paying for parking in Boston.

Across the nation, of the 36 ballot measures this year supporting increased funding for transit, 32 of them passed, showing an 89% success rate. The population wants and needs more transit options. While funding continues to flow for expanding roads which we cannot afford to maintain, many people are finding cars too expensive and unpleasant to drive. We in Maine need to look for leadership in expanding public transit, including passenger rail. With major elections coming up in November, please ask candidates where they stand on increasing transit options for our state.

--- Peter Cole, President of the Maine Rail Group

More on the North Station Bridge Replacement

Source: Massachusetts Bay Transportation Authority

As mentioned in President Cole's message, the Massachusetts Bay Transportation Authority (MBTA) will be replacing the Boston's North Station Draw 1 Bridge. This bridge is critical to users of the Amtrak *Downeaster* and the MBTA's northern commuter rail services, as it provides rail passengers with access to North Station to reach downtown Boston and connecting transit services.



The existing Draw 1 is actually two parallel draw spans constructed over the Charles River in 1930 for the Boston & Maine Railroad. Each of the draw spans carries two tracks across the river into North Station where the tracks fan out to the 10 tracks leading to the passenger

platforms. After nearly 100 years of managing rail and river traffic at this busy location, the time to replace Draw 1 has come.

The bridge replacement project, budgeted at \$1.286 billion, replaces the two existing spans with three modern vertical lift spans, each carrying two tracks, thereby increasing the number of tracks over the river from four to six. In the process, the tracks from the third lift span will enable train access to North Station's now dormant Tracks 11 and 12. The project will also replace Control Tower A and upgrade track, signals, communications, and other infrastructure. During the project, four active tracks over the Charles River will be maintained through the use of a temporary rail bridge. The North Station Draw 1 Bridge Replacement is expected to be completed in 2032.

Editor's note: The two additional tracks across the Charles River and at North Station will provide added capacity for expanded passenger rail services from the MBTA and the Downeaster.



More on the Andover-Reading Track Improvements

Source: Massachusetts Bay Transportation Authority

Likewise mentioned in President Cole's message, the Massachusetts Bay Transportation Authority will be double-tracking the last single-track bottlenecks on the Haverhill Line between Andover and Reading. Including improvements to signals, grade crossing controls, station platforms, and right-of-way fencing, the total project is budgeted at \$174.5 million. The project is to be constructed in two phases in 2028 and 2029.

Phase 1 (in 2028) will focus on the portion of the Haverhill Line between Andover and Wilmington Junction. This is where project improvements will benefit the *Downeaster* most directly. The *Downeaster* uses the Haverhill Line between Haverhill and Wilmington Junction (located just north of North Wilmington), where the *Downeaster* leaves

the Haverhill Line for the Wildcat Branch, which connects the Haverhill Line with the Lowell Line. The Downeaster then uses the Lowell Line on its way to Boston's North Station. (The following 2024 map shows the connections and spatial relationships between the Haverhill Line and the Lowell Line.)



Phase 1 work will include double-tracking the 0.3 mile segment of single track in the village of Ballardvale, eliminating the grade crossing at Tewksbury Street, constructing crossovers and high-speed switches to smooth the flow of train traffic through the double-track line between Andover and Wilmington Junction, improve track structure and drainage, and create high-level passenger platforms at Andover and Ballardvale stations.

Phase 2 work (in 2029) will include double-tracking the Haverhill Line from Wilmington Junction to Reading, improving grade crossings, building high-level passenger platforms at North Wilmington and Reading stations, and installing 10 miles of right-of-way fencing.

Editor's note: The lesser-used Wildcat Branch, which is used by the Downeaster, some Haverhill Line express commuter trains, and occasional CSX freight movements, will remain single-track, but the Phase 1 improvements will benefit all users of the Wildcat Branch.

Rail News Brief

NEPPRA:

On their website, the Northern New England Passenger Rail Authority reports that the **Amtrak Downeaster** carried **568,384** passengers in State Fiscal Year 2026 (July 2025 through June 2026). This ridership figure for SFY 2026 is the second highest in any SFY in the *Downeaster's* history, 5% less than the record-holding SFY 2024, and 3% more than SFY 2025. The strong SFY 2026 result was achieved despite the shortage of coaches available to the *Downeaster*. (See the following table for recent monthly and annual ridership numbers.)

Downeaster Ridership by Month and Year				
Month\Year	2023	2024	2025	2026
January	35435	41238	39431	38023
February	33383	42045	38894	34195
March	38277	46537	44131	49025
April	44730	48976	39909	48623
May	39986	46412	35176	46030
June	45027	50853	43033	50312
July	57876	57854	55074	63000+/-
August	61769	56667	59386	
September	52994	51640	48735	
October	54816	52059	49539	
November	48005	46828	45515	
December	46905	47027	43927	
Calendar Yr	559203	588136	542750	
Fed Fisc Yr	540584	591948	549683	
St Fisc Yr	517414	598426	552649	568384
Bold numbers indicate record high ridership.				

NNEPRA gained back one coach in the Spring of 2026 so that two daily round trips between Brunswick and Boston can be made with the normal four coaches and one café car. Until more coaches are returned to service, the remaining *Downeaster* round trips must be made with only three coaches and one café car.

Editor's note: With the recent uptick in ridership, partly due to the return of a fourth coach on some trains and the winding down of construction projects along the CSX line, the Downeaster may be able to top the 2024 calendar year ridership record by the end of December. The restoration of the fourth coach to other round trips will be important to keep the momentum of ridership growth going.

Rail News Brief

Casco Bay Rail website:

A new name has appeared on the Maine railroad scene: **Casco Bay Rail**. The company has a website: <https://cascobayrail.com>. The company's vision is "to become a vital link in Maine's sustainable freight future -- - revitalizing underused infrastructure, supporting new industries, creating solutions for Maine communities and building the next generation of rail operations in New England." The website lists services offered by Casco Bay Rail, including transloading and logistics, rail operations management and market analysis, supply chain design and optimization, and technology and data driven approaches.

Casco Bay Rail now offers transloading in Maine and has a partnership with Lynch Logistics called Dirigo Transfer Warehouse, located on Hotel Road in Auburn, Maine. [Lynch Logistics is a Maine-based trucking company specializing in forest products handling. The Auburn warehouse has a rail spur served by the St. Lawrence & Atlantic Railroad.]

Casco Bay Rail recently acquired its first locomotive: EMD GP10 CBRX #764. The locomotive was used in Maine by the Maine Eastern Railroad [operator on the state-owned Rockland Branch from 2003 to 2015] prior to being returned to New Jersey for continued revenue service and then stored awaiting the return to service. The 764 is undergoing routine maintenance and the return-to-service commissioning process.

Editor's note: The Maine Eastern Railroad was a subsidiary of the New Jersey-based Morristown & Erie Railway.

T-Shirts Are Always in Style!

It's fair season! A perfect time to be sporting the MRG limited edition "I ♥ Maine Trains" T-shirt. They are also perfect for that Amtrak outing, train-chasing mission, or volunteer work gang workout. Or do some early shopping for the holiday season! These beautiful navy-blue shirts are currently available in sizes L and XL at \$10 each (plus shipping and handling, fixed at \$10 for small quantities).

MRG, Inc. is a 501(c)3 non-profit corporation dedicated to railroad education and enhanced rail services in Maine and New England. Membership is open to all who share our goals and interests. Annual dues are \$40 (\$20 for students and first-year members). Inquiries are welcome.

Send an email or a letter to reserve your shirt, or show up at an upcoming MRG event (no shipping and handling charge!).

Editor's Note: You can send an email to trains@mainerailgroup.org or a letter to MRG, Inc., P.O. Box 5494, Augusta, ME 04332.

The New 2026 Edition of the New England Rail Map!

MRG has just published the 2026 edition of the *New England Rail Lines and Regional Gateways* and orders are coming in! The map is offered in folded, rolled, or laminated formats. Copies may be purchased at train shows and fairs on MRG's calendar or by mail. The price schedule is listed below.

New England Rail Map 2026 (22"x29")			
Map Format	Folded	Rolled	Laminated
Price per Map	\$5	\$5	\$10
Shipping Cost	\$6 (1 to 5 maps)	\$12 (1 to 5 maps)	\$12 (1 or 2 maps)

Bulk order pricing available on request.

Editor's note: You can send an email to trains@mainerailgroup.org or a letter to MRG, Inc., P.O. Box 5494, Augusta, ME 04332.

Mark Your Calendar!

Regular MRG, Inc. meetings are virtual by Zoom, starting at 7pm unless otherwise advised. Please check the [Maine Rail Group](https://mainerailgroup.org) website for changes or send an email to trains@mainerailgroup.org for a link to the meeting. You can also find Maine Rail Group on Facebook (1000 subscribers), Linked In, and Instagram.

MRG, Inc. Board Meeting, September 16, 2026

Common Ground Fair, Unity, September 25-27, 2026

Cumberland Fair, Cumberland, Sept 27 – Oct 3, 2026

GFMRRRC Train Show, Auburn, October 17, 2026

MRG, Inc. Board Meeting, November 18, 2026

EMMRRRC Train Show, Brewer, November 21, 2026

MRG, Inc. Board Meeting, December 16, 2026