



MAINE RAIL NEWS

MRG, Inc. (Maine Rail Group)

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

September / October 2025 Newsletter

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---- Ed Hanscom, newsletter editor

MRG President's Message

Our annual meeting this year showed the power of rail transit as we traveled on the Downeaster from Brunswick to Durham and back again. Both trains were full of passengers of all ages traveling to visit people and places. The crew was responsive and ensured the safety of all passengers and addressed the needs of individuals. Despite being a Saturday in July with the roads full of slow traffic, our train was on on-time. Rather than road rage and frustration, our passengers were relaxed and enjoying themselves.

The reality is that expanding rail service is a slow and long journey. For example, the Mardis Gras train service, running from New Orleans to Mobile, AL, was a 19-year effort by residents along the line as well as the Rail Passenger Association (RPA). It took continuing efforts by proponents and support by politicians to make the twice-daily service a reality.

Our hopes for similar service expansion to Bangor and Orono suffered a setback from the legislature last May due to cowardice by those who voted on short term fears rather than looking to the future. We lost the chance to apply for the start of a funding grant which would have fast-tracked the process to begin service. At present, an uncertain federal budget process means that expansion is temporarily blocked. But upcoming elections for governor may change the momentum, and several

candidates from both parties are expressing a positive attitude towards rail expansion.

In the meantime, we need to keep the idea of extending Downeaster service alive. Conway Scenic is still focused on opening the Mountain Division for freight and excursion service to Portland. Vermont Rail System is working on reopening freight service from St. Johnsbury, VT to Whitefield, NH. The Cumberland & Knox Railroad is having success in moving freight on the Rockland Branch and has purchased passenger equipment for future excursion service on the line from Brunswick.

Good ideas take time and commitment. MRG will continue to educate and advocate for the use of rail for its economic, environmental, and safety benefits. The RPA study funded by MRG and TRNE documented that expanding train service to northern Maine would result in \$61.7 million a year in economic benefits in part due to increased tourism and decreased road wear. The benefits of improving the quality of life by providing transit for families, young people, and seniors are immeasurable. Sixty percent of surveyed Maine residents reported they would, even without seeing potential schedules or stops, take advantage of expanded rail service.

Our efforts must continue, but we need your help to extend our outreach. We are planning to attend the Common Ground Fair and the Cumberland Fair, but we cannot enhance our outreach without more help. Even if each of our members could volunteer just one day per year, we could better connect with the public. We also need volunteers to attend their city council meetings to get town support for rail. We need registered voters to ask candidates where they stand on getting a better transportation system for all Mainers.

People sometimes forget what transportation means for all of us. One passenger train does the job of hundreds of automobiles. One ton of freight can move 500 miles on a gallon of fuel on rail, making it 3 to 4 times more efficient than moving it by truck. Without alternatives, people cannot get to work, and operating a car costs \$12,000 a year. Young couples needing two cars, combined with the high costs of housing, are prevented from building for

their future. Roads do not pay for themselves, and general tax revenues are being used to support them at the loss of funds for education, recreation, and building needed infrastructure for public transit. Thirty percent of Americans do not drive, and 40,000 Americans a year die in traffic accidents.

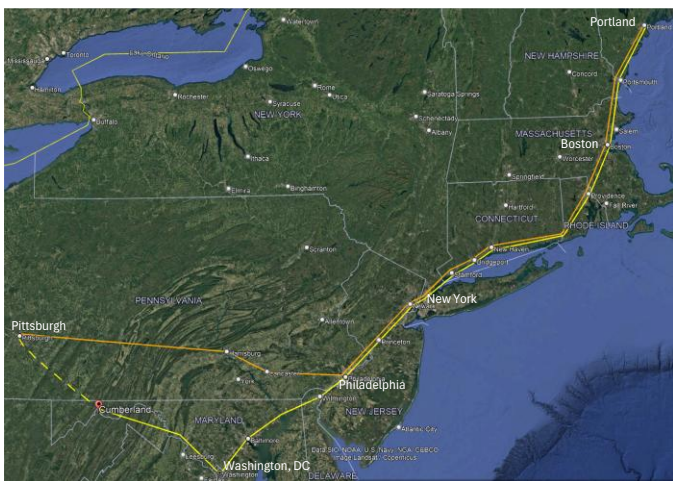
Rail, whether for freight or passengers, is energy efficient, safe, and vital for Maine as an all-weather form of transportation. It is part of a balanced approach to transportation.

Thank you for all you do in supporting rail to bring about a better future for all.

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

Seven Trains and One Bike

In August 2025, the editor of this newsletter embarked on an eight-day carless vacation involving seven trains and one bicycle. I had one traveling companion: a high school buddy named "Gus". Last year, we rode Amtrak's Empire Service from Albany to Buffalo so that we could ride our bikes from Buffalo to Albany along the Erie Canal Trail. This year, we decided to go a step further and take a carless vacation trip out of Portland, ME so that we could ride the Great Allegheny Passage (GAP) from Cumberland, MD to Pittsburgh, PA. To do so, we would book Amtrak trains from Portland to Cumberland and from Pittsburgh to Portland, bringing our bikes and saddle bags along as luggage. Bike reservations would be booked for each train. We would also book our lodging in the cities and towns we planned to stay in along the way. The following map traces the route of the trip.



In planning and booking, we discovered that taking our bikes from Portland to Cumberland or from Pittsburgh to Portland was a two-day proposition, so we traveled by train for two days to Cumberland, by bicycle for four days to Pittsburgh, and by train for two days to Portland. Here is an account of the eight-day journey from a railroading perspective.

Day 1. Gus and I arrived at the Portland Transportation Center at 6:30 AM, in plenty of time to catch Downeaster train 692, due to leave at 7:18. Amtrak likes to have riders with bikes arrive at least 30 minutes before departure so that the bikes and their owners are properly positioned for getting on the train. The Downeaster charges an extra \$8 to carry a passenger's bike. All the other Amtrak trains we used charged \$20. For the Downeaster and all the Northeast Regional trains we used, bikes were stored on the coaches in special storage spaces used for carry-ons or reserved bikes. We arrived at North Station in Boston on time.

We had 3:50 to catch the Northeast Regional 135 at South Station, so we had some time to relax. Getting from North Station to South Station by bike is not as difficult as one might think, thanks to the off-street paths and on-street bike lanes connecting the two. Northeast Regional 135 runs from Boston to Washington, but we chose to get off in Philadelphia so that we could pedal to our hotel in early evening daylight. We found that the Northeast Corridor train conductors *really* encouraged passengers to intermediate stations to quickly disembark, especially when the train is running late. We arrived in Philadelphia after our scheduled 7:32 PM arrival time but found our hotel before dark.

Day 2. Our Northeast Regional 103 to Washington, DC left Philly at 10:20 AM so we had time to detour to the "Rocky" steps and statue on our way to the Amtrak station at 30th and Market. We arrived at Washington Union Station close to the 12:22 PM arrival time. With layover time until the departure of the daily Floridian around 4:00, we biked to the Capitol, the Mall, the Lincoln Memorial and other attractions. The Floridian is a long-distance Amtrak train running daily between Chicago and Miami by way of Washington. It is the only train that serves Cumberland, MD. Unlike the Downeaster and Northeast Regional trains, the Floridian stores bikes in a baggage car and is checked before departure and reclaimed at arrival at the passenger's destination. The northbound Floridian, Amtrak 40, arrived late and left Washington about an hour late. The train arrived in Cumberland around 8:45 PM, about 90 minutes later than the scheduled arrival. Some of the delay was attributed to train congestion on the CSX mainline near Cumberland. The hotel was so close to the Cumberland station, we could see it from our coach seats.

Days 3, 4, 5, 6. These four days focused on bicycling the 149-mile Great Allegheny Passage. The GAP is a rail-trail that was established after the Western Maryland (WM) and Pittsburgh & Lake Erie (P&LE) route between Cumberland and Pittsburgh was abandoned in stages between 1975 and 1991. The WM, connecting to the P&LE at Connellsville, PA, provided a competitive alternative to the Baltimore & Ohio (B&O) when the connection was made in 1912. Of the 89 miles between

Cumberland and Connellsville, the 15 miles between Cumberland and Frostburg, MD remains operating at as a scenic short line with excursion trains in a rail-with-trail arrangement. Beyond Connellsville, the GAP follows the alignment of P&LE into Pittsburgh.

In days 3 and 4, Gus and I followed the steady 1.5% grade of the WM up to the Eastern Continental Divide and the gentler descent to Connellsville. The climb to the Divide from Cumberland involved gaining almost 1800 feet of elevation in 24 miles. Along the way, we crossed some major WM bridges and viaducts and passed through several major tunnels. We were never far away from the very active former B&O mainline (now CSX) with many freight trains on its double tracks.

In days 5 and 6, we continued a gentle descent on the former P&LE line from Connellsville to Pittsburgh. The CSX mainline remained close by, but, as we got nearer to Pittsburgh, the trail transitioned to active Norfolk Southern (NS) territory on the south side of the Monongahela River. At two locations, the GAP crossed over the NS, providing good vantage points to see NS freight trains and yard switching. Biking into Pittsburgh around 2:00 PM, we had time to sightsee before retiring to our hotel near the Pittsburgh Amtrak station.

While biking the GAP, Gus and I enjoyed many scenic views of Allegheny ridges, deep valleys, and winding rapid rivers. The towns were compact, nestled along the railroads between the ridges and the rivers. But it's sad to think that, except for a whitewater rafting center near a state park, none of the towns appeared as prosperous as they once were when the WM and the P&LE were thriving. And how many more tourists would be able to enjoy the Eastern Continental Divide and other rural landscapes if a train was available to take you up instead of your own pedal power?

Day 7. Gus and I rose early to catch the daily eastbound Pennsylvanian, Amtrak 42, to New York City. The Pennsylvania Station in Pittsburgh is a grand building with a grand entrance. The former railroad office tower is now used for a hotel and business offices, but the Amtrak use of the building is relegated to the basement, where only the Floridian and the Pennsylvanian stop. Pittsburgh deserves more train service than this. We checked our bikes, which were loaded onto the baggage car, boarded the train, and left shortly after 7:30 AM.

The Pennsylvanian took us back east across the Alleghenies toward Harrisburg, PA, passing through historic towns like flood-ravaged Johnstown and railroad shops-centric Altoona. We navigated famous Horseshoe Curve, constructed by the Pennsylvania Railroad, and saw NS westbound trains with locomotives in the front, middle, and rear.

The terrain flattened as we approached Harrisburg. In Harrisburg, the tracks sprouted catenary (overhead wires)

which continued on to Philadelphia and the Northeast Corridor. The catenary is used by the electric locomotives used to lead the Keystone Service trains between Harrisburg, Philadelphia, and New York. While the Pennsylvanian was stopped in Philadelphia, the diesel engine which had been with us since Pittsburgh was removed from the front of the train, and an electric locomotive was coupled on the rear, making it the new front of the train for the remainder of the trip to New York.

We pulled into New York's Penn Station on time at 5:00 PM and got to see its new Moynihan Train Hall for the first

time. It's one of the great railroad station spaces in America, and it was busy on a Friday afternoon that had not only the evening commuters, but also the students returning to college, Red Sox and Yankees fans in town for the evening game, and the US Open tennis tournament starting up that weekend in Queens. After biking to our hotel near Herald Square, Gus and I hopped on a D Line subway train to the Bronx to watch a 7:00 game at Yankee Stadium. Boston won 1-0, and we were back to the hotel by 11:00.

Day 8. Gus and I boarded Northeast Regional 162, which was running later than its 10:00 AM departure schedule. By the time we reached Boston's South Station, the train was over forty minutes late. We biked back to North Station and boarded Downeaster 695 five minutes before its 3:45 PM departure time. The return leg of the Downeaster was uneventful, and we arrived in Portland on time, with our wives there to welcome us back to Maine.

Reflections. As Gus and I reflect on our journey, one observation that we made repeatedly is that Amtrak trains are full. There is a latent demand for train travel that is not now being met. How many potential rail passengers were turned away because available trains were completely booked? More equipment, more service frequency, and more destinations could help.

Another observation was that Amtrak ridership is a melting pot of age ranges, income levels, and ethnicities. From ninety-something to nine months, from wealthy to working-class, from Amish to Armenian, from retiree to returning student, from wheelchair-bound to bike-trail-bound, Amtrak serves them all.

Finally, we proved that carless vacations are possible. Without so much as a taxi, an Uber, or a rental car, we traveled over 1600 miles and visited five major cities and numerous smaller towns. One of the keys to successful carless vacations is good intercity passenger rail service, which the Northeast Corridor can provide. Another is good local transportation options such as rail and bus transit, bike infrastructure (routes, rentals, and parking), sidewalks, and walking paths. It also helps to have rail and bus stations near hotels, restaurants, and other attractions. We're already thinking about next year!

Rail News Briefs

NNEPRA:

Progress is being made on the platform improvements at the Wells, ME station. The following photo taken in August shows the concrete foundation of the second platform, located on the southeastern side of the double-track mainline. The two platforms will be connected by an enclosed walkway over the two tracks. The eight miles of double-track and the two platforms will provide greater flexibility and efficiency for CSX freight trains and the Amtrak Downeaster traveling through the Wells area. The entire Wells project is expected to be completed by November 2026.



August 2025- Construction progresses with foundation walls taking shape on the south side platform, while pile driving continues on the north side for foundation support.

MaineDOT:

MaineDOT is preparing to update its Family of Plans, which includes the Long-Range Transportation Plan, Active Transportation Plan (for bicyclists and pedestrians), Aviation Plan, Rail Plan, and Transit Plan. "MaineDOT is seeking input from you on these transportation plans. We have launched an on-demand, virtual public meeting where you can learn about each plan and submit your feedback and comments." As MRG member Patty Barber reports, the link to the Family of Plans does not yet exist on MaineDOT's public input page, but MRG members and like-minded people need to be prepared to provide input to the Rail Plan (and any other plans, as appropriate) when those opportunities present themselves.

A Great Look and a Great Gift!

That's right! We're talking about the MRG Limited Edition (I "heart") Maine Trains T-shirt. They are perfect for that Amtrak outing, train-chasing mission, volunteer work gang workout, or just about any other casual occasion. These were MRG's best-selling item at the 2024 Common Ground Country Fair.

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). Send an email or a letter to reserve your shirt, or show up at an upcoming MRG event (no shipping and handling charge)! Look for them at this year's Common Ground and Cumberland Fairs and at upcoming train shows this fall.

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 <https://mainerailgroup.org> website for changes or send an email to trains@mainerailgroup.org for a link to the meeting.

Common Ground Country Fair, MRG booth, September 19-21, 2025

Cumberland Fair, Cumberland, September 25-27, 2025

GFMRRRC Train Show, EL HS, Auburn, October 11, 2025

MRG, Inc. Board Meeting, October 15, 2025

Maine Transportation Conference, Augusta Civic Center, December 4, 2025

MRG, Inc. Board Meeting, December 17, 2025



Maine Rail Group (MRG, Inc.)

A non-profit group working to enhance rail service in Maine
www.mainerailgroup.org

2025 Membership:

Name _____ Renewal (\$40) _____
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Please mail check to: MRG, Inc., P.O. Box 5494, Augusta, ME 04332

THANKS for supporting the Maine Rail Group!

MRG, Inc. is a 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.