

## **Public Policy Needed to Expand Passenger Rail Service In The State of Maine**

The state of Maine is at a turning point in terms of public policy towards maintaining and expanding rail passenger service. Save for the Covid 19 interlude, traffic on Amtrak's Downeaster has been showing positive growth and acceptance since its inception. It is well recognized that rail passenger service cannot exist without governmental subsidies. On the other hand, neither vehicular traffic (roads) nor air traffic (FAA and airports) can exist without public subsidies.

Politicians like to avoid the use of the word taxes. Instead, they use the word investment as a surrogate for taxes. So let's be candid. Federal and State tax monies will be required to maintain and expand rail passenger service. Expand suggests the state needs to have a documented plan to grow the service over the next decade and beyond.

Let's focus on "planned" passenger rail service. LD 227 was passed in the last state legislative session. It calls for a propensity study to look at expanding passenger rail service to Bangor. Ideally, the service would use the existing right of way – Brunswick, Augusta, Waterville, Bangor. This reaches a majority of the state population north of Portland. Included are the colleges of Colby, Thomas, Husson and a jumping off point for U Maine at Orono. Just ask the students at the University of New Hampshire at Dover or the University of Rhode Island at Kingston. They love the train. Additionally, Bangor serves as a hub for Canadian travelers wanting to travel south. Via bus shuttle, Acadia National Park is in striking distance and Bangor has become a great medical center.

While the propensity study is a good first step, the State of Maine really needs to up the propensity study to what is called a "feasibility study". Since LD 227, the U.S. Department of Transportation's Federal Railroad Administration (FRA) has established the new corridor Identification and Development Program which will establish a pipeline of projects ready for funding – allowing them to be implemented faster and with greater coordination than ever before. The program will serve as a key vehicle for directing federal investments and technical assistance toward new or improved intercity passenger rail services across the nation. To tap this sources, three things are required. 1. The state must have the need for the study as part of state's rail plan. The state is currently updating its rail plan. 2. The State must conduct a feasibility study. In this regard, legislators in the next session must pass a bill to underwrite the cost of conducting a feasibility study which would analyze the viability of restoring passenger rail service to Central Maine. The study would include demand analysis and traffic forecasts, an engineering analysis and estimation of capital/operational/administrative costs to determine whether the project is likely to succeed. The study is also designed to identify potential issues and problems that could arise from pursuing the project. 3. The State's governor and Department of Transportation must support the study.

It is time for the State to become serious about expanding rail passenger service. Regardless of the outcome in the fall elections, Maine cannot afford to pass up the economic development that will occur by expanding service. An increasing tax base will offset the state subsidies if done correctly. It is time for the legislators to act and call for and fund a feasibility study to expand rail passenger service in Maine.

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