



# MAINE RAIL NEWS

MRG, Inc. (Maine Rail Group)

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<https://mainerailgroup.org>

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

## January / February 2025 Newsletter

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---- Ed Hanscom, newsletter editor

### MRG President's Message

If you are reading our newsletter, it is highly likely that you love trains. Maybe you like the ability to travel without fighting traffic and the cost and hassle of parking at your destination. Maybe it is because you want to arrive relaxed. Or maybe you are part of the 30 percent who do not drive due to the cost of car ownership, health issues, or age issues. Or perhaps you just like walkable downtowns that are accessible by train.

Trains are part of the transportation solution – they serve as the backbone of public transit service for Maine. We might not be getting light rail or commuter trains in the near future, but with the Downeaster celebrating its 10 millionth passenger in a state with only 1.4 million people, it is time to reflect on what that backbone of service has meant for the Downeaster corridor:

- Family outings to locations in Maine such as Old Port, the Children's Museum, art museums from Brunswick to Boston, shopping in Freeport, not to mention outings to Boston.
- Medical appointment visits are easily and comfortably reached in Portland and Boston.
- Tourists (who help Maine's economy) visiting for a day, a weekend or a week in Portland, Freeport, or Brunswick.

- Tour groups using the train to Wells or other stations to start their adventure.
- Work force support for specialists traveling to Maine, who are then able to use the service whether at BIW or the other industries along the corridor.
- College students from Bowdoin, University of Southern Maine, and U.N.H. using the service to go home during breaks and for social outings.
- Young families making do with one less car and being able to reach work locations either within Maine or down in Boston.
- Family members visiting grandchildren without the difficulty of driving.
- Bicycle riders who can bicycle one way and ride the other, or as an environmentally friendly way to access the outdoors.

Then there are always the naysayers who say that Maine cannot afford to subsidize train service because roads are free. Let's look at the facts:

- The average cost of owning a car is \$1015 a month, and when you add in housing, it is difficult to keep the combined costs under 45% of a working person's income.
- The MaineDOT Workplan shows \$1.1 billion dollars a year spent on highways (or \$800 per resident per year), with 20% coming from the Federal Government and 50% coming from bonds, general funds and other revenue, and user fees making up only 30%.
- Meanwhile, Maine State Transit Plan shows Maine spending about \$130 million on transit (operating and capital expenditures in 2021). Of that amount, about 50% was federally funded, 12% was State funding, and the rest was from the fare box or locally funded.
- Maine lost 171 people in car accidents last year, not to mention injured individuals and the costs in emergency responses, and it is difficult to capture the full cost.

The Downeaster is successful because it has made incremental improvements. Starting with Boston to Portland service in 2001 with four trips a day at a maximum speed of 60 MPH, it now has five round trips a day to Brunswick with a maximum speed of 79 MPH. From its first concrete step in planning, it took 10 years for the service to start. It now is looking forward to Positive Train Control (PTC) being implemented which will allow more service, with the first increase being a morning train from Wells to Brunswick allowing for an 8:00 am Portland arrival. In addition, a new station for Wells is entering the construction stage and a new station for Portland is in the advanced planning stage.

So, for those of us who see passenger trains as a stimulator of economic development and as an energy efficient mode of transit, we say that **serious planning for serving the entire state needs to start now**. Trains move people, not just cars. Trains focus development helping to stop sprawl. They supply transit for those who love to walk and ride bicycles. They attract tourists who want to genuinely enjoy their stay in Maine and are a way to keep Maine unique.

We at MRG hope you will join us in our efforts to get out the word that rail is the way to the future. We need to protect our State-owned corridors for the future and take advantage of federal grants for extending our Downeaster service to serve all the people of Maine.

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

### **“Safety for All” was the Theme of the 73<sup>rd</sup> Annual Maine Transportation Conference**

On December 5, 2024, over 500 transportation professionals descended on the Augusta Civic Center for the 73<sup>rd</sup> Annual Maine Transportation Conference. The conference attracts planners, engineers, officials from all levels of government, consultants, contractors, organizations, educators, and students from all over Maine and beyond to share with their peers their successes and challenges and to see what more than 60 exhibitors have to offer. The one-day program included a keynote address, followed by eight sessions with speakers on a variety of “policy” or “technical” subjects relating to the theme of the conference.

The theme of this year’s conference was “Safety for All”, so nearly all of the programmed speakers made presentations on some aspect of transportation safety. Perhaps due to this year’s theme, highway safety issues dominated the program. (Often, in past conferences with other themes, one or more sessions are dedicated to multimodal topics with speakers on airports, cargo ports, railroads, transit, and non-motorized travel.)

One safety issue repeatedly identified that relates to non-drivers is the need to improve safety for pedestrians and other non-drivers in Maine’s villages, towns, and cities to make those places more livable. These non-drivers include the same people that could use rail and bus transportation to get around without the need for access to an automobile.

Railroad interests were well represented among the exhibitors, with Maine Rail Group, TrainRiders Northeast, the Amtrak Downeaster, and Conway Scenic Railroad, each operating a booth. The rail booths attracted a steady flow of visitors, especially during the breaks between speaker sessions. MRG’s booth was operated by Jack Sutton, Stan Koski, and Ed Hanscom. MRG found booth visitors to be supportive of rail corridor preservation and increased passenger and freight service.

### **Maine and Norway: A Comparison**

Sources: Wikipedia, MaineDOT, Statistica, US Bureau of Transportation Statistics

As mentioned elsewhere in this newsletter, “Safety for All” was the theme of the 2024 Maine Transportation Conference in Augusta. The Federal Highway Administration has been putting more emphasis on safety in recent years in response to the nationwide death toll on US highways increasing to over 40,000 people annually. Their “Road to Zero Fatalities” initiative to reduce highway deaths in each state has been inspired, in part, by the success of Scandinavian countries in reducing highway fatalities --- even by European standards. It’s probably no coincidence that the safety of transportation in these Nordic countries is part of the reason that the United Nations perennially rates Iceland, Norway, Denmark, Sweden, and Finland among the 10 happiest countries in the world. (The US shows up in the top 30, but not the top 20.)

The US is not Scandinavia, but some parts of the US, including Maine, have some similar characteristics: similar per capita incomes, a relatively cool climate, low population density, and a rocky coast. The following table compares some of the geographic and transportation characteristics of Maine and Norway. What insights can be gained from this comparison?

The table shows that Norway is bigger than Maine in both land area and population by a factor of 4 or so. In terms of overall population density, however, the two lands are very similar, with Maine being slightly denser than Norway. The similarity in population density might suggest that Maine and Norway have similar transportation systems.

Comparison Measures	Maine	Norway	Maine : Norway
<b>Geography</b>			<b>Ratio</b>
Land Area (sq mi)	30,862	140,817	1.0 : 4.6
Population (millions)	1.36	5.55	1.0 : 4.1
Population Density (people/sq mi)	44.1	39.4	1.0 : 0.9
<b>Transportation</b>			<b>Ratio</b>
Public Roads (miles)	22,787	57,754	1.0 : 2.5
Motor Vehicles	1,100,000	2,600,000	1.0 : 2.4
Railroads (miles)	1,072	2,556	1.0 : 2.4
<b>Transportation Use</b>			<b>Ratio</b>
Vehicle-Miles Traveled (billions/yr)	14.8	28.2	
Vehicle-Miles Traveled per Person	10,882	5,080	2 : 1
Traffic Fatalities per Year	156	116	
Traffic Fatalities per Million People	115	21	5 : 1
Bus Trips (millions/yr)	5.7	290.0	
Bus Trips per Person	4.19	52.25	1 : 12
Train Trips (millions/yr)	0.6	56.8	
Train Trips per Person	0.44	10.23	1 : 23

A comparison of basic transportation infrastructure indicates that Norway, with more land and population, has about 2 and half times the road mileage, registered motor vehicles, and railway mileage that Maine has. In terms of highway use (vehicle-miles traveled), Norway has just under twice the vehicle-miles traveled in Maine. This suggests that the average traffic volumes on Norway's roads are somewhat less than Maine's average volumes. This is reinforced by the comparison of vehicle-miles traveled per person, which shows that the average Norwegian travels by motor vehicle about half the number of miles per year as the average Mainer.

The dark side of the traffic comparison shows that Maine has more traffic fatalities per year than Norway, even though Norway has more people, more miles of road, and more vehicles. On a per person basis, a Mainer is five times more likely to die in a highway crash than a Norwegian. How is this possible?

Part of the answer lies in Norway's use of buses and passenger trains. The total number of bus passengers per year in Norway is nearly 300 million. In per capita terms, the average Norwegian takes the bus over 50 times a year, while the average Mainer rides 4 times a year. The story is similar for intercity rail passengers. While the average Mainer rides Amtrak more frequently than the average American, thanks to the service provided by the Downeaster, intercity rail use by the average Norwegian, at 10 trips per year, is more than 20 times that of the average Mainer. It should be noted that the rail passenger figures in the table do not include the 160 million urban tram and suburban (commuter) train trips made by Norwegians each year.

The US Bureau of Transportation Statistics reports that trains and buses are safer than cars by a factor of 10 or more. With people in Norway traveling less by car and more by bus, tram, and train than their Maine (and US)

counterparts, it is no surprise that Norway would have fewer traffic deaths per capita than Maine. If Maine had Norway's traffic fatality rate, Mainers would probably be happier with the safety of their transportation system.

However, Maine cannot match Norway's safety success overnight, but Maine can move incrementally in Norway's direction by improving its bus and train networks and by taking advantage of transportation and land use policies that make communities more walkable, bikeable, and transit-friendly, allowing people to be less reliant on private automobiles in their daily lives.

## Rail News Briefs from the Region and Beyond

MaineDOT:

On January 9, 2025, the Maine Department of Transportation announced that Maine Switching Services (MSS) of Unity has been selected to take over operations and maintenance of the 56-mile state-owned Rockland Branch railroad line from Brunswick to Rockland. MSS is a privately-owned railroad services company that provides rail car repair in Unity and industrial rail car switching for paper mills in Rumford and Skowhegan. The company already operates on the state-owned Belfast and Moosehead Lake Railroad in cooperation with the Belfast and Moosehead Lake Railway. MSS intends to resume freight service to existing rail customers on the Rockland Branch this spring and offer scenic train rides and rail excursions by this fall.

Vermont Rail System (VRS):

On December 11, 2024, the New Hampshire Central Railroad (NHCR) reactivated the line between Groveton and Whitefield, NH, resuming freight service to Whitefield customers after 6 years without traffic on the 20-mile branch line, which links the St. Lawrence & Atlantic in Groveton with the former Maine Central Mountain Division at Whitefield. Conway Scenic Railroad operates the Mountain Division in New Hampshire. The New Hampshire Central was purchased by the VRS in April 2024 to expand its rail services into New Hampshire. *Editor's Note: This restoration of service on the NHCR line shows that dormant rail lines with tracks in place, like Maine's portion of the Mountain Division, can be reactivated. Furthermore, by improving rail connectivity in the region, the line reactivation enhances the potential of restoring rail traffic on Maine's Mountain Division.*

Canadian Pacific Kansas City (CPKC):

On November 21, 2024, CPKC originated its annual Holiday Train from St. John, NB for the first time. The Holiday Train travels throughout the CPKC system

collecting food donations for the needy, while entertaining the donors at stops along the way. The train made stops in Brownville Jct. and Jackman, ME on its way west. *Editor's Note: Beginning the CPKC Holiday Train's journey on Irving-owned railroads between St. John and Brownville Jct. shows the importance that CPKC places on St. John as an Atlantic port in its overall network reach.*

### MRG Memberships Can Be Renewed for 2025

If you haven't already renewed your membership in the Maine Rail Group, there's no time like the present, now that we're through the holidays and into 2025. Stay informed on Maine railroads and support MRG's mission. You can use that mail-back membership renewal envelope you got in November or use the form on this page of the newsletter. Membership rates are the same as they were last year: \$20 for students (and new members) and \$40 for other renewing members.

### Maine Rail Group (MRG, Inc.)

A non-profit group working to  
enhance rail service in Maine

[www.mainerailgroup.org](http://www.mainerailgroup.org)



### 2025 Membership:

Name _____	Renewal (\$40) _____
Address _____	New/Student (\$20) _____
City _____	Donation \$ _____
State _____	Zip _____
E-mail _____	Total Enclosed \$ _____
Affiliation _____	Phone ( ) _____
Volunteer Interests _____	
Contact Preference: _____	by U.S. Mail _____

**Please mail check to: MRG, Inc., P.O. Box 5494, Augusta, ME 04332**

THANKS for supporting the Maine Rail Group!

### MRG Has "I (heart) Maine Trains" T-Shirts

Maine Rail Group has T-shirts available for sale to promote awareness and appreciation of railroading in Maine. The "I (heart) Maine Trains" message will appeal to the full spectrum of those with an interest in Maine railroads. When you wear the T-shirt, you can spark a conversation and discover others who also share an interest in railroads. These navy blue T-shirts were MRG's best-selling item at the 2024 Common Ground Country Fair and 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 train show (and avoid the shipping and handling charge)! *Editor's Note: You can send an email to [trains@mainerailgroup.org](mailto: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](mailto:trains@mainerailgroup.org) for a link to the meeting.

**MRG, Inc. Board meeting, January 22, 2025**

**Amherst Railway Society show, W Springfield, MA, January 29-30, 2025**

**ME 3R Model Railroad & Doll House Show, Augusta, February 15, 2025**

**MRG, Inc. Board meeting, February 19, 2025**

**MRG, Inc. Board meeting, March 18, 2025**

**MRG, Inc. Board meeting, April 16, 2025**

**GFMRRRC train show, Topsham, April 26, 2025**

**SPECIAL EVENT COMING IN APRIL!** Hold the date of **April 23** for an all-day live symposium at Thomas College regarding the efforts to bring rail service to Waterville, Bangor, and Orono. Guest speakers are being lined up, and it promises to be an exciting day with speakers and moderated panelists from the rail community and the leaders in Maine. It is great to have our young people involved in taking the lead in bringing about a better future!

More details will be posted on the MRG website, the MRG facebook account, and in the next MRG newsletter as they become available.

--- President Peter Cole

*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.*