



MAINE RAIL NEWS

MRG, Inc. (Maine Rail Group)

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

March / April 2026 Newsletter

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---- Ed Hanscom, newsletter editor

MRG President's Message

A Seattle based coalition named "Transportation Choices" recently unveiled a campaign "Build the D__n Trains". While many times I feel the same way, MRG's mission of advocating for a balanced transportation system to include the use of rail-based transportation for both freight and passengers is a little more nuanced.

Our membership includes individuals who believe in this for many varied reasons. Some just love to ride on trains, and the ability to leave their car behind. Others are railroad professionals who believe in what they are doing. Others see the environmental benefits of steel wheels on steel rails being the most energy efficient system of moving people and goods, not to mention the light touch of tracks as opposed to multilane highways. But for whatever reason we are glad you are here.

For this edition, I want to focus on economic theory but do not let the word "economic" scare you. Economic theory at its basic means choices, the concept that "human wants and needs are limitless while resources are limited" defines the core problem of scarcity. It means that if I have \$100, how do I spend it? For while my choices are limitless, \$100 is all I can spend.

Why am I talking about economic theory when you want to read about trains? It is simple when you look at the

Maine State's 3-year \$4.5 Billion budget which was recently released, expenditures include:

- Bus service \$292 million
- Aviation \$177 million
- Active transportation (bike lanes, trails, and sidewalks) \$93 million,
- Passenger Rail \$91 million
- Ports and Marine services \$74 million
- Freight Rail \$70 million
- State and state-aid highways \$3.5 billion or 75% of the total MaineDOT budget. Of note, 60% of Maine's roads are not included because maintenance is supported by local municipal funds.

In recent conversations I have had with legislators and traffic engineers, it has often been stated that 'everyone just prefers to drive' and therefore transit options are not needed. In addition, they argue that Maine is rural and does not have the population to justify having transit options.

What they are really saying is they want the freedom to drive and thus require everyone else to subsidize their driving.

In a recent white paper from Strong Towns, *Mission Accomplished*, the report goes into detail regarding the truth behind the Highway Trust Fund. The belief that drivers pay user fees is a falsehood. Since 2008, billions of dollars have been taken from general revenues to fund the trust fund. The requirements push local DOTs to build more roads rather than maintain existing roads. This only leads to the need for more funding from non-user fees. <https://www.strongtowns.org/missionaccomplished>

Regarding drivers in rural areas, a recent Streetsblog article reported on a Wisconsin DOT study which disclosed the highest rates of non-drivers were not in big urban areas, but in rural counties where 40 percent of the population could not drive or did not have a vehicle. The solutions included rural bus lines and "road parallel shared-use paths."

In November of last year, Illinois lawmakers shifted transport revenues away from excess roadway construction and moved them into funding the region's trains and buses. Americans are experiencing soaring transportation costs and congestion. Illinois realized there are alternatives to building and expanding roads at the cost of neglecting alternative solutions which would include multimodal infrastructure.

A new analysis from the non-profit, non-partisan Institute for Transportation and Development Policy (ITDP) shows that, if the rest of the country followed Illinois's example and repurposed larger shares of their transportation expenditures into "multimodal" solutions (bus, rail, and biking), everyone would benefit. They analyzed that Maine would see a net savings of \$86M per year by 2050 by reallocating funds to build 79 miles of new Bus Rapid Transit (BRT) (this is not putting buses on already congested roads) and could build 460 miles of protected bike lanes along existing roads. Extending Downeaster service to Bangor and U of Maine in last year's RPA study showed a **net annual** benefit to our state of \$61.7 million. An interconnected rural transit dedicated urban bus lines, and road parallel shared-use paths all feeding a functioning mainline rail system from Wells to Bangor would go a long way to bringing a fresh start to a new economy for Maine.

Investing in multimodal transportation options raises property values and slows sprawl. It also services the 40 percent of Maine's population who cannot drive or do not have access to a car and allows them to get to work, to shop, and become more productive taxpayers. Add to that the decrease in pollution (which also decreases medical costs) and you have a winning solution to the economic dead end of financing we now have.

What we need to do:

- Continue to listen to what elected leaders say and ask if their votes have Mainer's best economic interests at heart.
- Support the Maine shortline railroads by protecting the state-owned rail rights-of-way and encourage freight traffic to move by rail.
- Build road-parallel shared-use paths in cities and towns to serve short trips and allow easy access to passenger rail and dedicated bus lane transport.
- Encourage housing near transit stations.
- Give priority to maintaining the roads we already have with honest funding sources.

We can never build our way out of congestion by building more roads. Look at Texas and California. Even with 18 to 20 lanes, highways are still congested. We cannot solve transportation by adding lanes and assuming everyone can drive.

At MRG we appreciate your support as we continue to work for the goal of frequent, fast and alternative transportation options for all Mainers so we can live life the way it should be!!

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

MaineDOT Publishes Latest 3-Year Work Plan

Source: maine.gov/mdot/

On February 12, 2026, the Maine Department of Transportation publicly released its annual Work Plan, which outlines the work that MaineDOT expects to do in the upcoming three years. In this latest edition of the Work Plan, activities in 2026, 2027, and 2028 are covered. The \$4.5 billion Work Plan covers all aspects of work including planning, project development (design and construction), maintenance, operations, and administration for all transportation modes.

The table on the following page shows a condensed listing of the rail transportation elements of the Work Plan. The major elements include mainline track rehabilitation, bridge rehabilitation, industrial track improvements, operating revenue and assistance for the Downeaster, and railroad grade crossing improvements. The infrastructure rehabilitation and improvement elements amount to more than \$70 million over the three-year period, while the operating revenue and assistance for the Downeaster is estimated at about \$30 million per year. This brings the total rail activity in the 2026-27-28 Work Plan to more than \$160 million.

In addition to the 2026 projects in the Work Plan, there will be other projects under construction in 2026. The Wells passenger platform project will be getting its finishing touches this year. (See separate News Brief on this topic.) There will be several projects, carried over from last year's Work Plan, that will break ground in 2026. Most are IRAP (Industrial Rail Access Program) projects, and one is three-year mainline and yard track upgrade effort that is largely funded by a major CRISI (Consolidated Rail Infrastructure and Safety Improvements) grant. Below are the 2025 projects carried over to 2026 but not listed in the new Work Plan.

2026 (carry-overs from 2025)		
Thomaston	new track, rehab & other impr-IRAP	\$ 4,189,000
New Limerick	new track-IRAP	\$ 1,983,000
Rumford	track rehab-IRAP	\$ 1,668,000
Saco	track rehab-IRAP	\$ 49,000
Auburn	track rehab-IRAP	\$ 488,000
Madawaska	track rehab-IRAP	\$ 488,000
Easton	track rehab-IRAP	\$ 245,000
EMR in various locations	line upgrades & yard restorations-CRISI	\$ 66,600,000

When the carry-over projects are added to the 2026-27-28 Work Plan projects, over \$140 million in infrastructure projects are planned for the next three years.

Locations	Work	Funding
2026		
Bangor, Hampden, Sebobeis Plt, South Portland, Stacyville	highway crossing improvements at 5 locations	\$ 1,897,000
Statewide, TBD	highway crossing impr	\$ 440,000
Statewide	highway crossing maintenance	\$ 700,000
Downeaster	oper revenue & assist	\$ 30,200,000
Brooks, Knox, Thorndike, Waldo	bridge masonry pointing on the Belfast & Moosehead Lake	\$ 100,000
New Meadows, Carlton, on the Rockland Branch	rr bridge preconstruction engineering	\$ 595,000
Skowhegan	new track-IRAP	\$ 830,000
Statewide, TBD	track impr-IRAP	\$ 4,000,000
Statewide, TBD	state-owned lines	\$ 1,410,000
Statewide, TBD	line improvements	\$ 1,500,000
2027		
Statewide, TBD	highway crossing improvements	\$ 1,200,000
Statewide	highway crossing maintenance	\$ 700,000
Downeaster	oper revenue & assist	\$ 30,200,000
Madawaska Subdivision	rehabilitation of 9 rr bridges	\$ 17,065,000
Mapleton	rr bridge rehabilitation	\$ 1,490,000
New Limerick	rehab of 2 rr bridges	\$ 1,780,000
Statewide, TBD	future FRA grant, track improvements	\$ 12,000,000
Statewide, TBD	track impr-IRAP	\$ 4,000,000
Statewide, TBD	operational impr, state-owned lines	\$ 1,410,000
Statewide, TBD	line improvements	\$ 1,500,000
2028		
Statewide, TBD	highway crossing improvements	\$ 1,200,000
Statewide	highway crossing maintenance	\$ 700,000
Downeaster	oper revenue & assist	\$ 30,200,000
Statewide, TBD	future FRA grant, track improvements	\$ 12,000,000
Statewide, TBD	track impr-IRAP	\$ 4,000,000
Statewide, TBD	operational impr, state-owned lines	\$ 1,410,000
Statewide, TBD	line improvements	\$ 1,500,000

While all of the above projects will enhance existing rail infrastructure and operations, there are a few projects in

the new Work Plan that destroy rail infrastructure if implemented as envisioned. In Hiram, Brownfield, and Fryeburg, a programmed \$12 million project would replace 10 miles of Mountain Division track with a rail trail. Another Work Plan project would commit \$400,000 to preconstruction engineering for a rail trail on 4 miles of the Mountain Division in Standish. A third Work Plan project would commit \$600,000 to preconstruction engineering for rail trail on 9.4 miles of the former St. Lawrence & Atlantic line between Portland and Yarmouth. Each of these projects would replace track with trail, rather than build trail beside track.

Rail News Briefs

NNEPRA::

Work progresses on the **new Wells platform area**. The February 2026 photo shows the view looking toward Portland. The new platform is on the right. The Wells Transportation Center building is out of view on the left. The overhead pedestrian walkway connects the two platforms as it passes over the two CSX mainline tracks. The framework of the platform structures is being sheathed in panels of cross-laminated timber (CLT). The platform area modifications are set to be completed in the fall of 2026. Along with the recently completed 6-mile double-track extension, the two platforms at Wells will allow passengers to get on and off the Downeaster from either side of the mainline, improving schedule flexibility and reliability for both the Downeaster and CSX.



NEPPRA:

At the January 26 NNEPRA Board of Directors meeting, Executive Director, Patricia Quinn presented the status of the **Portland Station Relocation** project. While the completed project study recommended Site 3 (on St John St between the MaineHealth garage and Barber Foods), the City of Portland recently indicated a preference for

Site 2 (on St John St between Congress Ave and the MaineHealth garage. For various reasons (including land availability, site constraints, development cost, interference with Congress Ave traffic flow, and other factors), Ms. Quinn made the case that Site 3 is superior to Site 2. Additional details of the January 26 discussion can be found at [2026-0223-Board-Packet-FINAL.pdf](#), the information packet for the February 23 Board meeting.

Editor's note: If you live or work in Portland, MRG encourages you to find out the facts regarding the station sites and communicate your thoughts and preferences with your City of Portland representatives. The progress of this project depends on informed public input.

Railway Age:

On February 11, in remarks made to a meeting of AASHTO's Council on Rail Transportation, Federal Railway Administration Deputy Administrator Drew Feeley hinted at a **potential restructuring of Amtrak**. AASHTO is the American Association of State Highway and Transportation Officials. No written report or recommendations are available currently. The general understanding in the industry is that the reorganization would create three entities under the Amtrak umbrella: an infrastructure entity, a rolling stock entity, and an operations entity. Numerous passenger rail stakeholders have commented. The February 28 *Railway Age* article can be found at [FRA's 'Kind of a Little Bit' Amtrak Restructuring - Railway Age](#). The Rail Passenger Association's February 20 analysis can be found at <https://www.railpassengers.org/happening-now/news/releases/rail-passengers-statement-on-proposed-amtrak-restructuring/>.

Editor's Note: MRG's own Richard Rudolph, as a spokesperson for the Rail User's Network, offered comments in the Railway Age article.

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.			

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.

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](#) website for changes or send an email to trains@mainerailgroup.org for a link to the meeting.

MRG, Inc. Board Meeting, April 15, 2026

Great Falls Model RR Club Train Show, Topsham, ME, April 25, 2026

MRG, Inc. Board Meeting, June 17, 2026

MRG Annual Meeting, details to be determined

Maine Rail Group (MRG, Inc.)

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



2026 Membership:

Renewal (\$40) _____
 New or Student (\$20) _____
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THANKS for supporting the Maine Rail Group!