



MAINE RAIL NEWS

MRG, Inc. (Maine Rail Group)

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

September / October 2024 Newsletter

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---- Ed Hanscom, newsletter editor

MRG President's Message

Maine Rail Group has worked extremely hard the last few months to make sure the public is exposed to the fact that increased and expanded rail service is good for the environment, the economy and for improving the quality of life by providing choices.

During July and August our efforts were focused on informing the public of the threat to the Maine portion of the Mountain Division (running from the port in Portland through Westbrook, Windham, Gorham, Standish, Hiram, Brownfield, and Fryberg). Efforts have been underway to take out the rails, destroy the roadbed, and replace it with pavement or crushed gravel.

After attending events in Standish, Sebago, and Brownfield, what MRG and TRNE volunteers heard over and over was that people did not want the state to pull up the rails but were open to "rails with trails" as exists in Fryberg and Windham. Over 200 signatures were collected from local residents along the corridor that stated:

"Whereas the removal of track from the Mountain Division rail line would result in the permanent and irreparable loss of a freight and transit corridor, and undermine the future economic vitality of region, the undersigned request that the State of Maine instead build a trail parallel to that rail line, allowing for trail activities while at the same time preserving the tracks on that line for future rail use."

At a MaineDOT hearing in Brownville on the trail plan, many local residents in the area brought up local taxpayers' costs of trail maintenance. Answers from the MaineDOT representative were mostly vague, responding that it would depend on the engineering design. Major questions remain such as highway crossings, EMT services, trailhead creation, fencing for abutters, trash, and restrooms. The paved section is approximately one million dollars per mile, fifty percent higher than the first study. MaineDOT also admitted those costs estimates were made before it was discovered bridges might need to be redesigned, and that the earliest the engineering study would be completed would be 2026, and that final costs would undoubtedly be higher.

While the "trail-only" group stated that at hearings over 200 people spoke in favor of the construction of the trail, recent information gathered by TRNE and MRG volunteers found over 200 local residents did not agree with the trail-only option. The trail-only group claimed that increased economic development would come from sales at local markets, the creation of B & Bs and bicycle shops. But observations at other rural trails show most people driving in for the day and leaving, adding only trash and exhaust. The good news is that the earliest construction of the trail without rail could start is late in 2026 and the rails would be left in place until that occurs.

A great big "thank you" to Train Riders Northeast who have shared our booths during the summer, and for whom we will be supporting at the Common Ground Fair with information about the Downeaster. The 470 Railroad Club has graciously volunteered to have our information at their booth at the Cumberland Fair.

Meanwhile, Maine Rail Group is working to expand its reach on social media, our website, and physical attendance at events around the state. The upcoming events can be seen on our calendar, but we always need volunteers for our booths. We have attended five events this summer and will be at the Common Ground Fair in September. Our goal is to reach beyond the typical train show to connect with a broader public that might be interested in options for transit including rail transit.

We remain committed to getting the word out about the advantages of rail transit and look forward to hearing from our members and new members on ways to better communicate with you and the public. Be sure to follow us on Facebook, Instagram, or our website.

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

**Bangor to Boston Passenger Trains --- Part 2:
A Look at Comparable Services Offered Today**

Sources: Amtrak, 2020 Census, VTrans

In March/April 2024 issue of Maine Rail News, we looked back at the diesel passenger rail services being offered between Bangor and Boston in the 1930s and 1940s. The introduction of streamlined diesel-powered train sets allowed 5-hour trips between Bangor and Boston and 2-hour trips between Portland and Boston. In this issue, we look at some comparable Amtrak services offered today between smaller urban areas (under 200,000 population) and large urban areas (over 2 million population).

Four Amtrak services have been identified for comparison: two from the Northeast and two from the Midwest. The Northeast services include the *Downeaster* (Brunswick, ME to Boston) and the *Ethan Allen Express* (Burlington, VT to New York City). The Midwest services are *Illinois Zephyr / Carl Sandberg* trains from Quincy, IL to Chicago and the *Illini / Saluki* trains from Carbondale, IL to Chicago. These are also the “peer” services used in the MaineDOT-sponsored transit propensity study undertaken in 2022. Route maps of four Amtrak services (highlighted) are shown below.

Routes of the *Ethan Allen Express* and the *Downeaster*



Routes of the *Illinois Zephyr / Carl Sandberg* (left) and the *Illini / Saluki* (right)



The following table provides a comparison of various characteristics of the route corridors and passenger services. Following the table are comparative observations about these characteristics.

State of Origin	Illinois	Illinois	Vermont	Maine
Passenger Rail Service	Zephyr/CS	Illini/Saluki	Ethan Allen	Downeaster
Origin City	Quincy	Carbondale	Burlington	Brunswick
urban population	43427	31448	118032	31361
Destination City	Chicago	Chicago	New York	Boston
O-D Distance (mi)	258	310	309	145
Round Trips Daily	2	2	1	5
Avg Travel Time (h:m)	4:22	5:30	7:32	3:20
Intermediate Stops	8	9	13	10
Avg Stop Spacing (mi)	29	31	22	13
Overall Speed (mph)	59	56	41	44
FFY 2023 Ridership	114521	270017	86638	542639

Origin City and Urban Population: All four origin cities have urban populations under 200,000, but only Burlington is what the Census Bureau would consider an “urbanized area” (an urban area with more than 50,000 population, serving as the core of a “metropolitan area”). Urban population is a good indicator of population density, as well as overall population. (The urban population of Bangor is over 60,000, more than all of the comparable origin cities, except Burlington.)

Destination City: All four destination cities have an urban population over 2 million. Chicago, New York, and Boston all have robust transit systems that allow people to travel within the city without the need for a private automobile. For many, using transit and walking would be the

preferred way to get around in these three cities. (A close look at the Amtrak ridership statistics for these comparable routes shows that the destination city is the main attraction for passenger trips.)

O-D Distance: For three of the service routes, the origin city is between 250 and 310 miles from the destination city. The exception is the *Downeaster* route, where Brunswick is 145 miles from Boston. (Bangor, as the origin city for a service to Boston, has an O-D distance of about 250 miles.)

Round Trips Daily: The two Illinois services offer two daily round trips to Chicago. The *Downeaster* offers the most daily round trips (five) to Boston. The *Ethan Allen Express* offers a single daily round trip between Burlington and New York. Only since 2022, has the train originated in Burlington. (Before 2022, the *Ethan Allen Express* route was shorter --- originating in the smaller Vermont city of Rutland.) The state rail plan for Vermont calls for an additional round trip between Burlington and Albany, NY (via Bennington) to supplement the *Ethan Allen Express*.

Average Travel Time: The two Illinois services keep an average scheduled travel time around 5 hours between the origin and destination cities. The *Ethan Allen Express* service is about 7 ½ hours between Burlington and New York. The *Downeaster*, with its shorter O-D distance, covers the route between Brunswick and Boston in a little more than 3 hours. (Recall that Bangor to Boston travel time was around 5 hours in the 1930s and 1940s.)

Intermediate Stops and Stop Spacing: The number of intermediate stops between origin and destination for these four routes ranges between 8 on the Quincy-Chicago route to 13 on the Burlington-New York route. However, both Illinois routes average about 30 miles between stops, whereas the Vermont and Maine routes have shorter average distances between stops --- 22 miles for the *Ethan Allen Express* and 13 miles for the *Downeaster*.

Overall Speed: The two Illinois services have a scheduled average overall speed approaching 60 mph between the origin city and Chicago. The Vermont and Maine services have a scheduled average overall speed over 40 mph. The table shows that the average spacing between stops is highly correlated with the average speed that can be maintained.

FFY 2023 Ridership: Ridership on the four services is related to the number of daily round trips and inversely related to the average travel time between origins and destinations. For all services except the Quincy-Chicago service, the 2023 riderships for the 2023 Federal Fiscal Year have exceeded pre-pandemic (2019) ridership levels of 200,000 passengers per year.

So, what does all this mean for Bangor to Boston passenger trains? What the comparison shows is that smaller urban areas that are 250 to 300 miles from large urban areas can have successful intercity passenger rail services. Bangor compares favorably to the smaller urban areas of this comparison, in terms of both its population size and its distance from a large urban area. Bangor is larger than the origin cities or Quincy, Carbondale, and Brunswick, each of which is successful in supporting two or more round trips to their respective destination cities. The O-D distance (250 miles) from Bangor to Boston is shorter than the distances from Carbondale to Chicago and from Burlington to New York and on par with the distance from Quincy to Chicago.

Bangor to Boston also has potential intermediate stops that would add to the ridership already generated in the Downeaster corridor. Lewiston-Auburn is another urbanized area of more than 60,000 population. Augusta (Maine's state capital) and Waterville each have urban populations of about 25,000 each. These three communities are larger than many of the intermediate stops along the comparable Amtrak service routes.

Another takeaway from the comparison is that a travel time of 5 ½ hours (or less) between origin city and destination city is part of a formula for success. This allows for same-day round trips in which activities can be completed in the destination city while getting the traveler out of and back to the origin city at reasonable times. This is the type of schedule used by the two Illinois services to Chicago and by the historic *Pine Tree* service connecting Bangor to Boston.

To cover the 250 miles from Bangor to Boston in 5 hours or less, the overall average speed must be 50 mph or higher. The *Flying Yankee* of the 1930s did this by limiting intermediate stops to five (Waterville, Lewiston, Portland, and two more). That meant an average station spacing of 42 miles or more --- much wider spacing than the 13-mile average spacing of stops on the *Downeaster*.

Therefore, a future Bangor to Boston passenger rail service would likely be most effective as a *limited* or *express* service, stopping at a select list of stations. This type of operation would not only shorten travel time between Bangor and Boston, but between Portland and Boston (down to 2 hours) as well. To connect Bangor with communities not served by the express trains, schedules could be coordinated between the express trains and the trains making all stops so that timely transfers could be made between one and the other at Portland.

Based on the characteristics of comparable Amtrak passenger rail services from small origin cities and large destination cities and past success in the Bangor-Boston corridor, Bangor to Boston passenger rail service deserves to be part of Maine's passenger rail planning.

Downeaster Breaks All-Time Ridership and Revenue Records in FY 2024

Source: Northern New England Passenger Rail Authority

With its Fiscal Year 2024 (beginning July 2023) in the books, the Downeaster passenger rail service between Boston and Brunswick has set new FY records for both ridership and revenue. FY 2024 ridership reached 598,426 passengers, breaking the old ridership record set in FY 2018. (See the following table.) Meanwhile, revenue exceeded \$13 million, more than \$2.5 million higher than the previous revenue high set in FY 2023. In every month of FY 2024, the previous year's monthly ridership was exceeded, generally by 10% or more. In June 2024, Downeaster ridership exceeded 50,000 in June for the first time. With the new FY 2024 figures, the Amtrak Downeaster has clearly passed historic pre-pandemic highs and is on a path toward higher heights of ridership and revenue. Continued growth in ridership and service, the Downeaster will have an even greater impact on improving the social and economic well-being of the people in Northern New England.

RIDERSHIP	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024
January	37,963	42,431	4,447	20,396	35,435	41,238
February	40,460	42,817	5,756	27,600	33,383	42,045
March	46,787	18,278	8,606	31,519	38,277	48,976
April	48,694	299	13,054	37,745	44,730	46,537
May	44,429	0	18,643	36,388	39,986	46,412
June	48,234	768	25,668	42,580	45,027	50,853
July	55,168	4,028	37,260	52,056	57,876	
August	60,944	8,099	38,534	51,736	61,769	
September	47,817	8,538	32,682	45,677	52,994	
October	50,363	10,383	37,383	47,822	54,816	
November	47,573	6,233	32,722	43,636	48,005	
December	46,260	4,408	28,966	39,649	46,905	

Rail News Briefs from Around the Region

MaineDOT:

The Maine Department of Transportation reported that a "request for proposal (RFP)" will be released for the **Rockland Branch**. At present, freight customers are being served by truck connections. The RFP will be for freight only, freight with scheduled passenger service, or freight and excursion train service.

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.

Conway Daily Sun:

In late July, the historic **Flying Yankee** passenger train set has been relocated to the Conway Scenic Railroad for the completion of its restoration to ride the rails again.

NNEPRA:

The **new train station in Portland** is moving forward, with Site 3 chosen for further planning and development. Site 3 would allow for a direct connection to the Mountain Division line. TRNE and MRG both commented on the need for additional space in the station itself and that more than 108 parking spaces would be needed. Also mentioned was the need for a transit connection between Ocean Terminal, the new station, Concord Bus Station, and the airport as well as bike access to the station which is already being considered.

CSX took advantage of the August restricted Downeaster service to **replace three crossings in Portland** and to realign switches. The service disruption was for the **double tracking** between the Wells station and the Route 4 crossing in North Berwick, which has made great progress this summer. Tie replacement work scheduled for September has been delayed awaiting final FRA approval on the grant funding.

Kennebec Journal:

CSX continues its **track upgrades in central Maine**. In August, continuous welded rail (CWR) and rebuilt highway grade crossings were being installed in Oakland, Maine.

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 Fair outreach, Sept. 20-22, 2024

MRG, Inc. Board meeting, September 25, 2024

GFMRRRC Train Show, Lewiston, October 12, 2024

MRG, Inc. Board meeting, October 16, 2024

SMMRC Train Show, Westbrook, November 9, 2024

MRG, Inc. Board meeting, November 20, 2024

EMMRRRC Train Show, Brewer, November 23, 2024

MRG, Inc. Board meeting, December 18, 2024