

MRG, Inc. (Maine Rail Group)
Box 5494, Augusta, Maine 04332
<http://mainerailgroup.org>

A volunteer group working to enhance rail services in Maine

March / April 2022

Greetings,

Membership

Welcome aboard: Kimberly Lindlof, President, Mid Maine Chamber of Commerce and Patricia Barber of Hiram, ME. (Not related to MRG, Inc. president Russ Barber of Belfast).

Patty supports reactivation of the Mountain Division railroad with parallel trail where feasible. Her comments to the MEDOT Mountain Division Advisory Council appear below in this newsletter.

MRG, Inc. Newsletter distribution changes

If you get your Maine Rail Group (MRG, Inc.) newsletter sent to you by email (and we hope you do), you may notice a name change. Jack Sutton is still the editor but Peter Cole has agreed to help out with the distribution, assisted by directors Ed Hanscom and Stan Koski. This work includes updating membership status, distribution lists, addresses, website coordination and fielding incoming correspondence. Ed and Stan work and live, respectively near the Augusta Post Office and Peter is already in charge of our website.

The link on the newsletter email will send you immediately to our website pdf reader, so you can read the newsletter without downloading it, or you can download and print it.

Maine Rail Group's email remains trains@mainerailgroup.org, or you can send a message through the contact section on the website mainerailgroup.org. If you write in the content of the message the name of the person you are trying to reach, it will be forwarded to that individual.

Jack thanks Peter, Ed and Stan for assuming these newsletter distribution responsibilities.

MRG, Inc. Social Media Outreach - Nate Shea

MRG, Inc. welcomes Nate Shea for his six months exploration of outreach development through social media. Here's Nate's biography:

A lifelong Mainer, Nate is an avid fan of passenger rail and creator of the "Bring the Downeaster to Bangor" Facebook page, which currently has over 1,700 likes and followers. Nate has maintained social media pages and written press releases for other social activism groups in Maine. Nate works as an IT specialist at the University of Maine Advanced Structures and Compositive Center in Orono. He lives in Brewer with his wife two daughters, and a cat and dog.

Through this forum we are hoping to encourage more public participation at the public sessions, which will be held by the rail consultants engaged by MaineDOT to conduct the Transit Propensity Analysis for passenger rail study through Augusta to Waterville and Bangor.

MRG, Inc. Passenger Rail Committee News

By Richard Rudolph

Tremendous progress has been made since my last report concerning MRG's rail committee's efforts to build public support for the restoration of passenger rail service through Central Maine.

According to Senator Joe Baldacci, Bangor has contributed \$20,000 and Waterville \$5,000 to MaineDOT as required for the propensity study. This amount is the first half of the required amount needed, and according to Senator Baldacci, with this first installment the MaineDOT can now initiate the process. The process includes selecting a firm to conduct the Transit Propensity Study as required by LD227, which the legislature passed last year, and Governor Janet Mills signed into law. The second half of the money needed is to be provided by entities which support the service next fiscal year.

Dr. John Koons and I presented at a recent Augusta City Council Informational Meeting explaining why Augusta should also contribute funds for the study. The new Mayor, Mark O'Brien, ended the meeting on a

positive note and thanked us stating that he supports passenger rail and believes in the work that MRG has been doing over the years. The city of Augusta should participate by voting to provide funds to help pay for the Transit Propensity Analysis. Augusta's support of passenger rail is on the Augusta City Council's planning session agenda, which has been rescheduled to be held on February 26 at the Augusta Civic Center.

Members of the MRG rail committee have also presented PowerPoint presentations to two additional Rotary Clubs in Augusta and Waterville to build public support for restoring passenger rail to Central Maine. We will also be giving a PowerPoint presentation to the Topsham Rotary -Espresso on March 14.

Members of the MRG Rail Committee have also interviewed two candidates to serve as our social media director, a six-month position with a stipend. Nate Shea, a Brewer resident who works at the University of Maine in Orono as an IT Specialist, has been selected and is already at work reactivating MRG's Facebook Account and creating an Instagram Account as well. He will be creating postings on both social networking sites to provide greater public knowledge of the benefits of train service both for the environment and the mid-Maine economy. This increase in exposure to benefits will build enthusiasm for passenger rail service through Augusta to Bangor.

As chair of the Rail Users' Network and board member of MRG, Inc. this writer also testified at the Surface Transportation Board's hearing, held virtually on February 15-16, regarding the route. CSX, which owns this single-track railroad runs ten freight trains daily and Amtrak plans to restore passenger rail service from New Orleans to Mobile, Alabama. This service existed before Hurricane Katrina destroyed the line, and freight rail owners now demand that Amtrak should cover the \$2.3 billion dollars in estimated costs for upgrades needed to allow two daily round trips on the route. This writer, as well as other opponents, spoke against this demand by citing the Federal Rail Administration's estimate of \$113 million to upgrade the track. We also mentioned that if CSX has it way, it would set a dangerous precedent and would undermine Amtrak's 2035 plan to establish new state-supported passenger rail routes such as MRG's effort to restore passenger rail to Central Maine as well as elsewhere in America.

Finally, we are planning to hold a virtual public information forum (using Zoom) on April 27, from 6:30 - 8:00 pm, to highlight the benefits of passenger rail.

Passenger Rail Issues Elsewhere - Noteworthy Regarding Expansion Proposals for Maine

- According to reports, Manchester, NH officials have approved a layover location for the proposed Massachusetts Bay Transportation Authority (MBTA) Capitol Corridor commuter rail extension through Nashua to Manchester. The proposed location, known as Manchester-South is adjacent to Elliot Urgent Care and Manchester Transit Authorities on Gas Street.
- Pittsfield MA, where Amtrak and CSX had not reached agreement as of mid-January on an operating plan and costs associated with a proposal to introduce the "Berkshire Flyer", one daily train a day on Fridays and Sundays between Pittsfield, Albany and New York City for a 20-week period, from Memorial Day to Columbus Day 2022. This equates to 80 passenger trains per year over a 40-mile segment of CSX's Albany to Worcester line, that is now used by Amtrak's Lakeshore Limited.

Cambridge Systematics – Maine State Rail Plan Update

MaineDOT has engaged Cambridge Systematics to help update Maine's official Railroad Plan. Cambridge Systematics contacted Russ Barber and Jack Sutton for input.

With Bob Holland's advice it was stressed that future State Rail Plans should coordinate with economic plans for the state, including freight and passenger business retention and development, including tourism.

For example, Bob said: *"In the February 2022 issue of Railfan & Railroad magazine there is a colorful article by Logan Tourtillotte that chronicles in detail the operations on Pan Am's East End. While overall the impression is that traffic levels have diminished over the years, there are some bright spots. One notable is a new lumber load out at Enfield. In fact, the article points out that a new siding was installed (2020<->2021) at Enfield to facilitate operations. Another is the resumption of the Old Town pulp*

plant. Anyone interested in Pan Am operations should read the article. Overall, I would characterize the operations as fragile, but enough of a base that CSX can grow on especially if Maine gets serious on economic development.”

Aroostook County freight rail opportunities are suggested by this article from MRG, Inc. member Jack Norris:

Potatoes Move by Rail in Northern Maine for First Time in 45 Years

VAN BUREN, Maine – For the first time in more than four decades, potatoes are moving out of northern Maine by rail.

A banner crop of potatoes in northern Maine this year has forced growers along the former Bangor & Aroostook Railroad – a carrier once synonymous with moving spuds – to turn to rail once again.

This winter, reefer cars are being loaded in Van Buren on the Maine Northern Railway and shipped south to Pan Am Railways. On Pan Am, they’ll move west to be interchanged with CSX Transportation and finally Union Pacific, which is moving them to Washington State. At least 33 cars have been moved so far, according to MaineDOT.

Throughout the 20th Century, the BAR – better known to locals as the “B&A”, despite the Boston & Albany’s use of those reporting marks – moved hundreds of thousands of tons of potatoes every year from Aroostook County. But with the construction of the interstate system and poor service by other carriers, BAR eventually lost that business. By the mid-1970s, many of its reefer cars were in storage. But a poor crop in Europe in 1976 sent the railroad scrambling to get its fleet back together for one final season moving spuds to Searsport, where they were loaded onto ships.

After that final season, the railroad put its fleet away for good. The BAR would go bankrupt and become the Montreal, Maine & Atlantic. Today, the south end is owned by Canadian Pacific and the north end is operated by J.D. Irving’s Maine Northern, a sister operation of New Brunswick Southern.

Finally, the impending sale of Pan Am to CSX, together with previously announced plans to upgrade the Pan Am line between Waterville and Mattawamkeag suggest interest in expanding freight

rail volume to St. John, New Brunswick where seaport capacity is now being expanded. This implies interest by CSX to improve rail shipping economics by removing double stack container clearance restrictions between Ayer, MA and Mattawamkeag. Formerly, movement of double stacked containers was constrained by the PAS route via the Hoosac tunnel.

MaineDOT Mountain Division Advisory Council

President Russ Barber and Jack Sutton are appointed members of MaineDOT’s Mountain Division Advisory Council. In this role we advocate for retention of the corridor and its railroad infrastructure, allowing for parallel recreational trail development within the corridor, where a trail is safely feasible at separate incremental cost.”

Justifying our advocacy to keep the Mountain Division rails in place, we cite need to update local Maine freight and passenger opportunities mentioned in HNTB’s report of December, 2007. It’s further advised that the State of Maine, through its ownership of part of the Mount Division line, should not foreclose the opportunity to reconnect the line to New Hampshire and Vermont, through Conway Scenic Railroad to St. Johnsbury, VT and beyond to White River Junction, VT. A seasonal passenger service operated over this route would connect existing Amtrak Downeaster and Vermonter services already operating through Portland and White River Junction. This connection could offer travel opportunities for tourists from Amtrak-served points throughout the nation to visit a wide range of northern New England’s most attractive destinations without private cars. The option should be explored cooperatively by the three northern New England states without Maine foreclosing it unilaterally by converting its Mountain Division corridor segment to trail.

Comments to MaineDOT Mountain Division Advisory Council by Patricia Barber

The following comment to the Advisory Council by Patty Barber, a local resident and MRG, Inc. member, expresses her view.

I am Patty Barber, Hiram, Maine resident who lives within walking distance from the Mountain Division line and president of Hiram Snowmobile Club, which runs a trail

along the Mountain Division line. The way I understand this is there are four options:

- 1) Status Quo keeping the rail line intact to allow possible return of rail options, no walking/biking path.
- 2) Trail only – tearing up the tracks, convert to trail. No rail options.
- 3) Trail alongside rail – a nice option in theory, the best one, but difficult and expensive to do along the entire line, but could be feasible for certain sections.
- 4) Trail until rail – which no one really touched on tonight, again, nice in theory, but I feel this is a misrepresentation of reality. Once the rails are torn up, and a trail in place, the trains are never coming back. I can't find any examples of where this has been successfully done. In my book, a trail until rail option is the same as a trail only option, sacrificing any future rail use.

Snowmobiles – In my experience, there is no way snowmobiles can co-exist on a walking/x-country ski trail. Anyone who has ever had to dive off a snowmobile trail into a snowbank to avoid rapidly approaching sleds knows what I am talking about. In fact, the status-quo railbeds in place but not in use – is a huge benefit to sledders. If a trail is built for walkers, the snowmobilers would lose a large piece of their trail system.

So who benefits?

A trail only system would benefit walkers and bikers, property owners and some tourism along the line.

Return of rail would benefit the environment, businesses along the line, residents who have no public transportation options, property owners whose values increase in areas served by rail, tourists who could go from Portland to the White Mountains to ski, X-mas shop, and hike, local Amish communities who depend on rail to travel, the list is large and varied.

And for those of you who say “It's been 30 years.” “No trains will ever return to the Mountain Division line.” I say you're wrong. Train travel has been an increasingly viable option. Car ownership has become prohibitively expensive for families. Young people have been using mass transit in larger and larger numbers. The recently passed infrastructure Bill has allocated large amounts of money to expand and improve rail passage. Amtrak itself has stated that a priority for them is to expand rail services to rural, poor and underserved communities. It won't be another 30 years until train travel returns to the area. And if it never returns? Then you convert the abandoned tracks into a kickass snowmobile/ATV trail.

So what's the best option?

I feel that if we build the trail alongside rail where it is reasonable and feasible to do, leaving the tracks intact for future use, that many communities will benefit. For the walking/biking trail advocates who want a totally connected system, they can then look at different types of connections between these segments, as we talked of tonight – along roads, through adjacent properties etc.

To conclude, the best operation would be to start the process, build segments of trail beside rail where feasible, and retain return of rail possibilities.

Thank you for this chance to speak.

NS offers starting bonuses to conductor trainees

Reflecting difficulties in maintaining qualified staffing for demanding operating positions, a Norfolk Southern press release of February 18, 2022 reports NS's offer of up to \$5,000 for conductor trainees in priority NS markets. Quoting NS representatives, “Conductors play a critical role in keeping freight trains moving ... We are hiring people who want a high degree of responsibility, thrive in autonomy, and desire a sense of pride in the work they do.”

According to a news release, starting pay for employees begins at \$52,000, increasing over four years to a minimum of around \$63,500, but most earn more than the minimum. Conductors have the opportunity to be promoted to an engineer position, with guaranteed minimum annual pay of approximately \$94,000. The average NS train and engine employees earned wages of \$95,000 before benefits.

Mark Your Calendar

Regular meetings are virtual, by Zoom, starting at 6pm unless otherwise advised. Please check in advance for changes if you plan to participate. President Russ Barber (rustyrailsis@gmail.com) will send links to virtual meetings by request.

Mar. 16, 2022 – MRG, Inc. meeting

Apr. 27, 6:30-8:00pm virtual (Zoom) public information forum

For the MRG, Inc. Board, Jack Sutton

MRG, Inc. a volunteer non-profit corporation, is dedicated to railroad education and enhanced rail services in Maine and New England. Membership is open to those sharing our goals and interests. Dues \$40 /yr. (effective 1/1/2022). Meetings are bi-monthly. Inquiries welcome.