



MAINE RAIL NEWS

MRG, Inc. (Maine Rail Group)

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

May / June 2025 Newsletter

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---- Ed Hanscom, newsletter editor

MRG President's Message

One thing I have learned this year is that in the rail advocacy business life is never dull. I have been fortunate to meet many wonderful people, too many to name individually, but it does restore one's faith in the ultimate belief that, given time and the correct facts, people will understand what we are trying to accomplish.

Without going into detail, May going into June is a pivotal time if we are to see the start of passenger rail expansion anytime in the next 10 years. Many false statements were made to the Maine Legislature's Joint Committee on Transportation regarding LD 487 and sadly, despite our work, the Transportation Committee voted 9 to 1 to oppose LD 487, the bill asking the Northern New England Passenger Rail Authority to apply for a federal Corridor ID grant. There were two major arguments. The first was about the flawed propensity studies the State did by "counting cars on our interstate," and the second was the tired argument that not enough people will ride the train. The same arguments were used against the creation of the Downeaster, while present opponents of expanding it are now bragging about the high ridership of the Downeaster (600,000 riders in 2024). However, with a positive minority report coming from the Transportation Committee, the full State House of Representatives will consider LD 487 later this spring.

To counter the false arguments, MRG is raising funds to pay for a study from the Rail Passenger Association looking at the ridership and economic costs and benefits using data from Maine counties and towns that would use the service. This same analysis was used in the successful application by the Montana Rail Authority for the same corridor ID grant program.

The study, while far less expensive than Maine's "count the car study," would seriously deplete our reserves and MRG, along with TrainRiders Northeast, are desperately in need of contributions, large or small to pay for the study. For more information, please visit our website to read the letter and to mail or donate contributions.

We are planning to host Jim Matthews, president of the Rail Passengers Association on May 15 in Augusta to address state legislators and hold a press conference sharing the results of the study.

We also are sharing the results of the rail portion of a statewide Critical Insights Poll (available on the website) which showed that 60 percent of registered Maine voters anticipated they would take the train at least occasionally and 63 percent would support a bond issue to pay for capital improvements needed (trackwork, stations, and maintenance facilities).

On April 23, MRG and Thomas College held a successful Maine Passenger Rail Summit at Thomas College. In the Keynote presentation, Lee Khan, Board Chair of Vermont Rail Action Network, shared the importance of focusing on both freight and passenger service, as they are both needed for economic development. Other sessions dealt with environmental benefits and tourism. This conference has brought together the business community, the tourism industry, and the environmentally focused organizations, showing that by working together we can create a Maine which supports families and protects what is special about Maine.

One of our successes this year was close collaboration with local railroads which will be key to saving Maine's rail

corridors servicing Maine businesses with freight service. No longer is the State focusing on tearing out rail corridors and replacing them with a “million dollar a mile trail” but rather looking at restoring freight service to support local employment centers and help take heavy trucks off the roads, thus saving taxpayers road maintenance costs.

Again, thanks to all of us working together, we are making a real difference for Maine. It has been a real pleasure to see those of us who envision rail as a key part of the future really reaching out and working together in Maine.
--- Peter Cole, President of the Maine Rail Group

Statewide Poll Shows Maine Public Supporting Expanded Passenger Rail

The *Critical Insights on Maine* poll, conducted by Digital Research, Inc., asked Maine voters questions on (1) their overall likelihood of riding on expanded passenger rail service along a proposed route through central Maine to Bangor and Orono, (2) their likelihood of riding for specific purposes and destinations along the proposed route, and (3) their support or opposition to funding some of the costs of the expanded service through a statewide bond.

The poll was conducted in early Spring 2025, with 600 participating registered Maine voters evenly distributed across age groups, males and females, education levels, Maine’s regions and congressional districts, and party affiliations. The surveys included general questions and also specific questions on multiple issues. Half of the participants were surveyed by phone and half responded online.

(1) Overall Ridership, Frequency of Use

Based on a brief overview statement outlining the proposed expanded rail service from the existing Amtrak *Downeaster* footprint north through the route proposed, nearly six-in-ten Maine voters surveyed could envision themselves or those close to them riding the train at least occasionally, including fully two-in-ten who would ride it more often (either “regularly” or “all the time”).

Potential ridership numbers are consistent across demographic and other classification subgroups examined in the poll, with younger residents and those with a more favorable view of Maine’s direction as a state tending to be most optimistic about their potential ridership frequency.

(2) Occasion-specific Ridership, Frequency of Use

For specific occasions measured in the survey, likely ridership figures (based on the proportion who see themselves riding at least “occasionally”) are most robust for leisure travel purposes, including general pleasure trips, going to concerts/sporting events/cultural opportunities, and shopping/dining/downtown visitation along the route. In each case, roughly six-in-ten (or more)

of Maine voters anticipate at least occasional trips on the proposed expanded service route.

Anticipated usage figures for stated purposes that are more pragmatic in nature (medical facility visits, commuting/business travel, and attending or visiting schools or colleges along the proposed route) are somewhat less robust than those seen for leisure travel.

(3) Voter Reaction to Bond Funding

A majority of Maine voters polled (fully 63%) would support funding some costs associated with expanded passenger rail service through a statewide bond.

Support is consistent across demographic and classification subgroups, with more highly educated residents and those with a more favorable view of Maine’s trajectory as a state (particularly Democrats) tending to be most supportive of a bond approach; while Republicans are less supportive of a potential bond approach to funding, it is still notable that just over half of these voters would still support a statewide bond.

Editor’s Note: The results of this Critical Insights poll, conducted by a highly respected and reliable polling service, show that support for expanded passenger rail is much stronger among Maine voters than some would expect. This is information that decisionmakers need to understand to make sound decisions for a transportation system that meets the needs of all Maine citizens. For more detailed findings from the Critical Insights poll, use this link, [Why expand service](#), to download and view the 21-page report.

Thomas College Hosts Passenger Rail Summit

On April 23, 2025, Thomas College, in collaboration with the Maine Rail Group, hosted the Maine Passenger Rail Summit on its campus in Waterville. The event, with a one-day program running from 9 AM to 3 PM, featured numerous speakers on a variety of topics related to passenger rail transportation in Maine. The event was attended by scores of representatives from business, transportation, tourism, educational, and environmental interests.

The keynote speaker was Lee Khan, Board Chair of the Vermont Rail Action Network (VRAN). Her inspiring talk emphasized the importance of coordinating rail freight and passenger opportunities to realize economic and environmental benefits. This was followed by a pre-recorded statement of support for expanding passenger rail services into Central Maine by retired Senate Majority Leader George Mitchell, who recounted the cooperation and leadership required to bring the *Downeaster* passenger rail service into existence.

Then, the Summit moved to three panel discussions on the topics of economic development, environmental

impacts & benefits, and tourism & recreation. The economic development panel included moderator Kim Lindlof of the Mid-Maine Chamber of Commerce, Matt Eddy of the Mid-Coast Council of Governments, and Tom Testa of the Downeast Scenic Railroad. The environmental panel included moderator Eric Howard of the Environment & Energy Technology Council of Maine, Andrew Blunt of the Sierra Club Maine Chapter, and Josh Caldwell of the Natural Resources Council of Maine. After lunch, the tourism & recreation panel was led by Thomas Kittredge of the City of Belfast, with David Swirk of the Conway Scenic Railroad, Finn Kelly of the Belfast & Moosehead Lake Railroad, and Jason Briggs of VIP Tours and Charter Bus Service. An important announcement to come out of the panel discussions was that Conway Scenic was in negotiations with MaineDOT to operate freight service on the Mountain Division between Portland and New Hampshire.

The final portion of the program included a promotional video for the Full Speed Ahead series of train-related movies and other events scheduled for Mid-Coast Maine in early May, a student presentation on the history and future of passenger rail in Waterville, and a sharing of final thoughts by Summit attendees. The student presenters included Nick Weiss, Michael Johnson, Nicholas Alexander, Bismarck Akoto, and Bella Sturtevant.

Editor's Note: A special "thank you" goes to host Thomas College, the students, and their guiding faculty member, Matt Gilley, the Program Director of the Centers of Innovation, for making the Maine Passenger Rail Summit a success.

Cumberland & Knox Railroad Now Operating

Source: Maine Switching Services

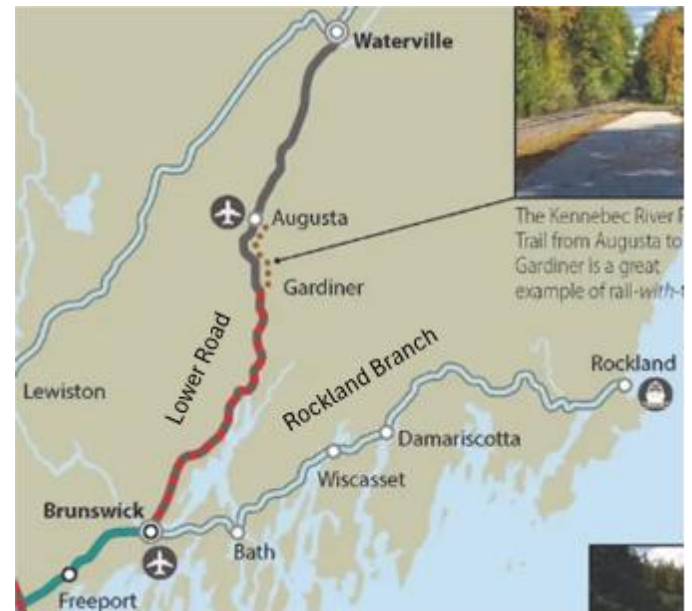
As of April 28, 2025, the Cumberland & Knox Railroad (CKRR) under Maine Switching Services has officially signed the final draft of the 56.6-mile Rockland Branch lease agreement from the Maine Department of Transportation (MaineDOT). Operations will commence immediately, with CKRR activating signaling systems for freight service to begin.

CKRR is pleased to announce that through ongoing collaboration, Dragon Cement Products of Thomaston, ME, will resume freight service utilizing the Rockland Branch. This move comes as Heidelberg Materials closes on its acquisition of the Thomaston property and continues to evaluate the facility's strategic importance. CKRR is additionally meeting with other former freight customers on the corridor to find ways of making their businesses succeed utilizing rail.

"As a small business established in Maine, we are dedicated to supporting industrial and economic growth

along the Rockland corridor," explains MSS President Joe Feero.

It is the continued goal of CKRR to offer passenger rail services on the Rockland Branch. CKRR is open to collaborating with the Northern New England Passenger Rail Authority (NNEPRA), on future passenger rail projects. Separate from NNEPRA, CKRR is currently determining the best means of commencing excursion rail operations; including what equipment will be used, where stations may be located, and when it will be most practical to commence any excursion passenger rail.



The CKRR has also submitted a proposal to the MaineDOT for the "Lower Road" rail corridor. With the awarding of the Rockland Branch in January 2025, CKRR recognizes the essential need of the Lower Road to support freight and passenger rail operations on the Rockland Branch.

CKRR's proposal to MaineDOT outlines potential phased plans for reopening the corridor for rail usage. This proposal will better position CKRR to capture the growing demand for rail tourism in Maine; expand on the success of the growing rail cycle industry; and work with business and community partners to develop freight traffic on the Rockland Branch and Maine's rail network.

CKRR has engaged in open dialogue with advocates of rail removal to collaborate on possible solutions to meet the needs of both rail usage and recreational trail interests along the Lower Road corridor.

"CKRR envisions its operations on the Rockland branch to be Brunswick centric. Limited space in the Brunswick terminal area, as well as Rock Junction, make expansion

of rail support facilities limited," says MSS President Joe Feero.

President Feero goes on to explain that "CKRR further envisions that the Lower Road to Augusta and beyond will be well suited for hybrid passenger rail serving Brunswick, Gardiner, Augusta, Winslow, and Waterville. We would welcome the opportunity to partner with MaineDOT to explore various hybrid passenger rail options before the rail is removed for the corridor".

The Lower Road runs approximately 33.5 miles north from Rock Junction in Brunswick, ME, to the state capital in Augusta, ME. Municipalities along the line also include Topsham, Bowdoinham, Richmond, Gardiner, Farmingdale, and Hallowell.

Founded in 2020, Maine Switching Services is a multifaceted railroad services provider. Based in Unity, Maine, MSS provides railcar switching services for paper mills in Rumford and Skowhegan, as well as locomotive and railcar repairs in Unity. In addition, MSS currently operates trains on the state-owned Belfast & Moosehead Lake Railroad corridor.

Editor's Note: The interest shown in the Rockland Branch and the Lower Road by Maine Switching Services, and in the Mountain Division by Conway Scenic Railroad, is powerful evidence of the potential of these underutilized state-owned rail corridors. These companies have earned the opportunity to build the economies and qualities of life in these corridors by providing rail transportation services to support local businesses and livelihoods. Isn't this the type of corridor renewal that Maine's State Railroad Preservation Act intended?

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.

MRG, Inc. Board meeting, May 21, 2025

Build Maine Conference, Skowhegan, June 3-4, 2025

MRG, Inc. Board meeting, June 18, 2025

MRG, Inc. Board meeting, July 16, 2025

MRG Annual Meeting on the Downeaster, July 19, 2025.

MRG, Inc. Board meeting, August 20, 2025

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.

Maine Rail Group (MRG, Inc.)

A non-profit group working to
enhance rail service in Maine
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 E-mail	_____
		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 ANNUAL MEETING ON THE DOWNEASTER IN JULY!

Hold the date of Saturday, July 19, for the Maine Rail Group's 2025 Annual Meeting. Members and guests will board southbound train #694, with the choice of Brunswick (11:00 AM departure) or Portland (11:48 AM departure). Our meeting will be held in one of the coaches as we speed our way from Portland to Durham (NH), where we will disembark and wait a few minutes for northbound train #693 (1:12 PM arrival) to take us back to Portland (2:25 PM) and Brunswick (3:10 PM). This would be a great trip to check out the summer scenery and the newly extended 9 miles of double track between Wells and North Berwick. After a long winter and spring of educating and advocating for railroads in Maine, MRG has earned this!

As more details become available, they will be posted on the MRG website and the next MRG newsletter.