

Guest column: Infrastructure planning intersects with trail project at critical time

pressherald.com/2021/10/05/infrastructure-planning-intersects-with-trail-project-at-critical-time/

By Nikkilee Cataldo

October 5, 2021



There are people in Brunswick – and in many neighboring communities around Merrymeeting Bay – who share a vision to dramatically improve recreation and transportation in our region. For over a decade, volunteers, municipal officials, and non-profit leaders have been working toward the completion of the Merrymeeting Trail, a 26-mile multi-use trail that would join the Kennebec River Rail Trail in Gardiner to Brunswick’s Androscoggin River Bicycle and Pedestrian Path, linking Augusta to Brunswick (and one day to Bath!) in an incredible “capital to coast” connection.

Across Maine (and the nation), communities connected by mixed-use trails enjoy economic, environmental, and public health benefits. Trails attract visitors who spend money on local businesses. They provide alternative transportation routes for workers and students, getting those who want to commute on foot or on bike off our increasingly congested roads. Human-powered transportation reduces the state's greenhouse gas emissions, supporting Maine's Climate Action Plan. And research has shown that every dollar invested in trails yields three dollars of savings in medical costs, as trail users are better able to stay active as they get older.

Brunswick knows the value of trails. Our Androscoggin River Path – envisioned to connect to both Topsham and Bath – is just a couple miles long but sees thousands of visitors each year. Everyone from kids learning to ride bikes, elders on walks to maintain their health, dog walkers, and those dedicated to intensive sports like marathons and triathlons use the trail daily. Connecting to the Merrymeeting Trail would relieve some of the path's growing pressure and traffic, while offering Brunswick and Topsham residents a safe and easy way to reach the parks and villages north of Merrymeeting Bay. It would also offer a safe long-distance trail for local high school and college cross country teams.

Several new laws have important implications for the Merrymeeting Trail project. One has created a process that allows the Maine Department of Transportation (MDOT) to consider repurposing unused rail corridors as trails on an interim basis – allowing them to be used as trails until the corridor is needed again for rail. Another requires MDOT to create an “active transportation plan” (it's called “active” because it is focused on human-powered transit like walking and cycling) in the next 18-months, and to consider unused rail corridors in that plan. Finally, the state has also added \$25,000 to the MDOT budget to work through a Merrymeeting Trail public advisory process – a proactive effort to engage communities in the project.

All this planning comes at a pivotal moment. There is the very real potential for significant federal investment in infrastructure, which means it's critical that Maine be ready to direct funding to priority projects. Thinking holistically about our transportation future means that by considering the full depth and breadth of our state's needs we are invested in rail where it makes sense, and connecting our communities with multi-use trails along some of Maine's unused rail corridors -where it doesn't. Unused rail corridors like the one connecting Brunswick to Augusta are languishing public assets, and it's time to use them for the highest community benefit.

It's an exciting moment for the Merrymeeting Trail, and it's an enormous opportunity for Brunswick and nearby communities. If you'd like to learn more or get involved, visit merrymeetingtrail.org, which has maps of the route and lots more information. You can also contact your local and state representatives and let them know you support the Merrymeeting Trail. If we work together, we could soon have one of Maine's most extraordinary community assets – and a major economic driver – right here in our region.

Nikkilee (Lee) Cataldo is a resident of Brunswick, associate director at the Brunswick-Topsham Land Trust and member of the Merrymeeting Trailblazers.

Comments are not available on this story.

[« Previous](#)

[Letters: Upside-down flag in Brunswick gets strong reactions](#)

filed under:

[Times Record](#)

© 2021