

**Special Report:
"DOWNEASTER
WORKS AS AN
ECONOMIC
TOOL"**

(begins on page 8)

TRAINRIDER

THE NEWSLETTER OF TRAINRIDERS/NORTHEAST



Chairman's Update

Submitted by Wayne E. Davis

As some of you may remember, our newsletter editor—Paula Boyer Rougny—who has done yeoman duty as Editor for seven years—gratis—is pulling back to write another book and take some well deserved R&R. I can relate to that since Paula and I are the same age. However, I don't want to leave till we get the Downeaster to Freeport and Brunswick and see 80 mph Downeasters streaking back and forth between Portland and Boston on a second rail. So until our hardy little board of directors kicks me out I'm staying. BUT WE NEED A PERSON TO BE THE EDITOR RESPONSIBLE FOR OUR TOP-NOTCH "TRAINRIDER" NEWSLETTER. We have no money to pay an editor, but we would be very appreciative of all that he or she would do. I have always felt that our newsletter is the most important thing we provide to our dues paying members. So, please, someone come up with a contact. I shall be eternally grateful.

—Wayne

—Opinion—
The Portland Press Herald
September 7

The high price of gasoline has brought a welcome revival of interest in alternatives to the automobile.

Our car culture has given Americans almost unlimited freedom to travel. But it's also a major contributor to land-gobbling suburban sprawl, our expanding waistlines and the pollution that causes climate change.

During the last year, gasoline and diesel prices spiked as global oil supplies and high demand were exacerbated by instability in the Middle East and a temporary shortage in refining capacity due to Hurricane Katrina.

One of the few winners in this high-price energy landscape has been the DOWNEASTER. The Portland-to-Boston Amtrak line has been setting ridership records every month. Nearly 330,000 passengers boarded the train during the year ending in June. That's a 31% jump over 2005 and the biggest increase recorded anywhere on the Amtrak system.

So it's only appropriate that Gov. Baldacci issued an executive order directing the Northern New England Passenger Rail Authority to work with the state on extending rail service to Brunswick and Lewiston-Auburn, with the potential for seasonal links to other Maine destinations.

The order also calls for investments along

STATE'S PROMOTION OF RAIL IS ON THE RIGHT TRACK

the DOWNEASTER's existing route, which runs through Old Orchard Beach, Saco and Wells.

Less welcome is the balloon floated by independent gubernatorial candidate Barbara Merrill. Merrill has called for Portland-to-Montreal rail service to be sup-

ported, in part, by the proceeds of a rail-car casino.

Promoting such an unambiguous social benefit as mass transit by linking it to such an equally unambiguous social ill like gambling is a Faustian gambit that could hardly be less helpful. Half-baked ideas like these are better left unoffered.

Americans' interest in mass transit has waxed and waned before. Prior to the state investing big money in a series of rail-dependent strategies, it ought to conduct a series of sober studies to determine the costs and the benefits of expanded rail service with an eye to the long-term.

The slight easing of gas prices and the discovery of new oil reserves in the Gulf of Mexico should not be an excuse for the return of irrational apathy about our economy's vulnerability to energy shocks.

If indeed energy prices were to stabilize at lower levels, it would most certainly be fleeting reprieve from the inevitable day of accounting.

We'd be wise to consider this opportunity to resurrect a viable alternative to the automobile.

ABOUT THE ABOVE-MENTIONED EXECUTIVE ORDER:

IT WAS MUSIC TO OUR EARS to learn about Gov. Baldacci's executive order, to read the Associated Press article about it in Maine newspapers, and to receive e-mail forwards from rail advocates coast to coast testifying that the story about the governor's decision was covered by their newspapers, too.

The AP story addressed Gov. Baldacci's concern over Maine's increasingly congested highways and his aware-



ness of the DOWNEASTER's increased ridership and the economic impact on towns the train serves.

The executive order that he signed on September 1 calls for a plan for expanded passenger rail service to interior and coastal communities, also for more clear economic development plans near train stations along the existing route, which connects Boston's North Station and Portland.

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... EXECUTIVE ORDER

(continued from page 1)

"Every month the DOWNEASTER is breaking new ridership records," said Baldacci. "We've made the trains faster and better. The DOWNEASTER is bringing new energy to downtown economic development in Old Orchard Beach, Saco and other communities. It's time to head north."

His order directs the Northern New England Passenger Rail Authority and its executive director, Patricia Douglas, to work with the state DOT and review all existing expansion studies and present, by December 1, "a clear set of next steps for investment north of Portland."

He requested that TrainRiders/Northeast's chairman, Wayne Davis, be part of the planning.

"I've asked for an action plan to get year-round scheduled service to Auburn and Brunswick. We may use Amtrak, or we may build a commuter service, but there should be no doubt that we will get there," said the governor.

He has directed Martha Freeman of the State Planning Office to help guide the economic development that will be happening near the existing DOWNEASTER stations.

"We need a regional approach to smart development strategies that will help communities direct growth into old mills and other assets near current and future train stations," said Baldacci.

The executive order cites several reasons to anticipate growing demand for passenger rail services, including increased gasoline prices, a federal mandate for state action to mitigate increased air emissions from highway projects, and further congestion on the state's highways, especially portions of I-95.

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—Gov. John Baldacci

LET'S CONNECT ALL THE D.O.T.S

AFTER STEADY DECLINE OF RAIL SERVICE ACROSS THE 20TH CENTURY, IS NEW ENGLAND READY FOR REVIVAL? The Connecticut General Assembly just approved a \$2.3 billion transportation package that includes funds to start up commuter rail service from New Haven through Hartford to the Massachusetts state line.

Originally, the service would have stopped at Hartford, but Massachusetts convinced Connecticut to look further north with the goal of connection to Springfield—and potentially beyond, to Brattleboro, VT.

Still unresolved: rail appropriations of \$30 million by the Mass legislature.

In the meantime, ridership on the DOWNEASTER's Boston/Portland service rose to more than 293,000 passengers last year, up from 248,000 in 2004.

Public transportation advocates admit all this is just a start at restoring the six-state network that existed a century ago.

Mainers would like to see DOWNEASTER service extend to Brunswick and Rockland (with possible ferry service to Bar Harbor). Vermonters are anxious to get passenger rail service reconnected to Montreal. Nashua wants a rail connection to Lowell, a first step toward full Boston/Montreal service that would include Concord, Montpelier and Burlington.

Serious investment in eastern Mass commuter service, backers say, would

serve New Bedford, Fall River and other towns that need economic stimulus and offer more affordable housing than Boston or its close-in suburbs.

But can piecemeal efforts create the integrated air-highway-rail-water transportation system New England really needs to be competitive? On some transportation issues—especially protecting the six states' position when Congress debates funding formulas in major federal transportation bills—business leaders of the New England Council have helped the region's Washington representatives work in tandem. But where's some out-of-the-box thinking on such ideas as a REGIONAL RAIL NETWORK TO CONNECT NEW ENGLAND'S LEADING AIRPORTS?

As 14 nations around the world invest robustly in high-speed (up to 210 mph) rail, why aren't New England political leaders pushing for a radical upgrade of Northeast Corridor service into New York, the economic capital of the world?

New England, notes Connecticut resident and New York Regional Plan president Robert Yaro, "is presently experiencing all the disadvantages of the most congested, expensive population corridor in the Western Hemisphere with few of the advantages that should flow with easy

access to New York as well as Boston."

One possibility: a formalized New England-wide infrastructure authority, to start making priority investments. James RePass, leader of the Providence-based National Corridors Initiative, favors that step, inclusive of the long-missing rail tunnel between Boston's North and South Stations.

What transportation steps are priority items if New England's to be a 21st-century competitor? How can highways, rail, air, ports, passenger and freight service be linked? How can transportation moves

dovetail with terror- or storm-driven disaster planning?

The challenge is not small. An example: Railroad freight now carries less than 1% of goods shipments in New England—so it comes by trucks instead. Those big rigs will claim 60-100% more of the region's crowded road space by 2020.

So some big thinking and acting is imperative. The six governors must step forward, acknowledge their states' transportation futures are intertwined, and create an organization to unravel the puzzles.

A few restored rail links are great—but no substitute for a clear New England-wide strategy.

—Excerpted from *courant.com*, June 18, written by Neal Peirce and Curtis Johnson. See *newenglandfutures.org* for more information.

**In 2020—
14 Years From
Now—Big Rigs
Will Claim
60% to 100%
More Space on
New England's
Highways**



When Martha Freeman, the state's planning director, thinks about a train station, she sees a hub of activity. People arrive from different places and other forms of transportation; they come from work and from play. Goods and services are connected to the station, and in a larger sense, smart land use, housing and environmental policies.

Economic development for Maine is like a train station, Freeman said. It's a hub into which workers and customers, goods and services flow.

Simply put: More people want to live and work near where they can get around without cars, and policy makers are looking for ways to make that happen. So for the governor running for reelection this fall, calling for better train service surely can't hurt.

The biggest obstacle to any new train service in Maine is money. By one measure, it could cost \$70 million or so to upgrade tracks, build stations and buy equipment on the 25 miles between Portland and Brunswick. Moreover, Freeman and other officials say, it's impossible to precisely measure the economic impact of Amtrak's DOWNEASTER.

(Editor: It might be difficult, though not impossible, to measure the total economic impact. For example, restaurant and lodging income along the DOWNEASTER's route is up while similar income in the rest of New England is down. And DOWNEASTER ridership is soaring—all those riders must be spending money wherever they visit along the route.)

There's broad agreement that passenger trains must work in tandem with highways, air and ferry services to provide the well-rounded transportation network Maine needs to grow its economy, and state officials will have to identify the most practical ways to expand regular service beyond Portland, and in an era of shrinking government resources, figure out how to pay for it.

In terms of ongoing costs, the

GROWTH ENGINE

In addition to the Governor's Executive Order and the Portland Press Herald's timely editorial, the Maine Sunday Telegram ran a story called "Growth Engine" on the first page of its Business Sunday section on September 10.

It was a long, thorough piece by Tux Turkel that was accompanied by several photos and a map of the southern Maine coast. We had to excerpt it, below, to make it fit into our own, much smaller space.

DOWNEASTER has an operating budget of \$10 million a year. Passenger fares support 45%, according to NNEPRA. Federal money picks up 80% of the remaining cost; the states are responsible for 20%. It's unclear where money would come from to support any expanded service.

Federal matching funds can be tapped for start-up commuter rail projects, through the FTA. The state has been pursuing that money for preliminary design work on a Portland/Brunswick route.

The DOWNEASTER connects cities on a national rail system. Some riders do use it to go to work, commuting, say, between Wells and Boston. But a train that operates only four times a day isn't really geared to commuters.

"Frequency is the secret," said Wayne Davis, chairman and co-founder of TrainRiders/Northeast, the citizens' group that was instrumental in creating support for the DOWNEASTER. A successful commuter route between Lewiston and Portland, he said, would have to run with enough frequency to be an alternative for drivers.

"If Portland and Lewiston had frequent service," said Davis, "I bet it wouldn't be six months before the cars were filled going back and forth."

Officials in York County, however, suggest that any direct link between the DOWNEASTER and economic development is largely anecdotal. *(Editor: We don't know what's anecdotal about the Saco Island Project, for example, which was proposed partly because of its proximity to Saco's DOWNEASTER station.)* Clearly, the presence of train service is a plus, they say, and the appeal will only grow as time goes by. The problem is trying to tease out the train's contribution to economic growth in a region bisected by the recently widened Maine Turnpike and touched by the housing boom and exodus of baby boomers from Boston.

But officials in Saco and Biddeford say they consider the train an important tool for attracting residents and businesses. In trying to lure the University of New England to establish a school of pharmacy downtown, for instance, Biddeford's city manager John Bubier is promoting the ease with which teachers can travel from Boston.

"You can study stuff until you're blue in the face," said Bubier. "It's time for the transportation gurus to put rail on an equal footing with highways and air travel."

Baldacci wants the rail authority and the MDOT to report back on Brunswick and Auburn service by December. The planning office has been asked to work with other interested parties, hold at least two public forums and make recommendations by March.

Freeman said that Maine also wants to consider the impact of passenger trains on some "big picture" values that defy easy price tags. They include how transit-oriented development fights suburban sprawl, oil dependency and global climate change.

—Tux Turkel can be contacted at 207-791-6462 or tturkel@pressherald.com

YOU CAN STUDY STUFF UNTIL YOU'RE BLUE IN THE FACE. IT'S TIME FOR THE TRANSPORTATION GURUS TO PUT RAIL ON AN EQUAL FOOTING WITH HIGHWAYS AND AIR TRAVEL.

—John Bubier, Biddeford City Manager

AFTER WAITING YEARS FOR A LIMITED-ACCESS, FOUR-LANE HIGHWAY, the people of northern Maine are left disappointed once again. Plans for a North-South Highway from Houlton to The Valley have been postponed except for two small segments: the Presque Isle Bypass and Route 161.

With the price of diesel skyrocketing and the costs of oil-based road building materials soaring, the reason given is not as facetious as it might seem. And it's not just the cost of plowing and maintaining that puts this highway ever more out of reach—just getting it built in the first place could cost a fortune.

But before the MDOT writes off Aroostook County for much-needed improvements to its transportation systems, I urged Commissioner David Cole, Gov. John Baldacci, our congressional delegation and the leaders of Aroostook County to consider giving us a modern railway system if they will not or cannot give us a decent highway system.

A railway system would give us all the benefits and more of a North-South Highway at a fraction of the price. An efficient, new railway system would provide cheap, easy transport of our produce—potatoes, potato products, lumber and paper.

Rail would be a draw for our burgeoning tourist industry. The trip here could be as much fun as the stay. Tourists either could put their cars and/or snowmobiles aboard the train for use when they get here, or rent fuel-efficient cars or snow sleds when they arrive. Folks in

LET THE TRAIN TAKE THE STRAIN

Europe put their cars aboard trains so it is not as far-fetched as it sounds.

And before the snowmobile enthusiasts and four-wheeler lovers form a lynch mob for my suggesting converting some of their much loved trails back into railway lines, there surely could be enough trails left in each community to continue these recreational opportunities.

Rail has so many advantages over highway travel. Even the railway ties made to build the railway are wood—a renewable resource produced right here in Maine—unlike tar made from imported oil products.

Rail provides many stable, well-paid jobs: drivers, conductors, ticket collectors, mechanics, cooks and wait staff, cleaners, shunters and maintenance crews to name a few.

Rail is fast and efficient. It's four hundred miles from Paris to London, yet even with a 28-mile underwater tunnel, the trip can be made in three hours. Imagine traveling from Presque Isle to Augusta in two hours (the politicians should love that idea) or to Portland in two and a half hours.

Rail is much kinder to the environment. It takes less energy to build and maintain and a fraction to travel on compared with cars and trucks. Rail would help reduce the greenhouse effect.

This is not a pipe dream. This is how people in other industrialized countries love, including Canada, and this is how we

should expect to live.

Once we did have the benefits of rail in Aroostook County. My mother-in-law and her sister remember hopping aboard the Bangor and Aroostook Railway in New Sweden and traveling all the way to Boston.

We have witnessed how much passenger travel has picked up on the DOWNEASTER from Portland to Boston. This success story should be repeated—especially in a county like ours with such long driving distances.

A few years ago, Sen. John Martin of Eagle Lake introduced LD 599, requiring the commissioner of economic and community development to ensure that the potential use of rail is considered whenever economic development projects are planned.

Economic development was the only reason cited for the North-South Highway by MDOT Project Manager Ray Faucher. Martin's legislation was passed in 2003, and although MDOT has been studying the North-South Highway for 10 years (to the tune of \$12 million), I urge our leaders to show courage, vision and common sense in providing Aroostook County with the 21st century transportation system it needs and deserves—by studying the rail option.

To borrow a British Rail advertising slogan, "Let the train take the strain."

—Excerpted from an op ed by Brenda Nasberg Jepson that appeared in the Bangor Daily News August 17. Ms Jepson, who lives at Madawaska Lake, is a documentary film-maker who started her film career producing training films for British Rail in London.

AND A REPLY TO THE ABOVE OP ED:

BRING BACK RAIL SERVICE

The op ed commentary, "Let the train take the strain," was impressive. We should do something about getting our railroads back in service.

On August 7 I went to Philadelphia on Amtrak and it was a comfortable ride, with room to stretch out my legs. The new modern trains are even more comfortable.

When a wheel rolls on a rail it's like a bearing: the load simply goes easier; that means more load can be pulled for a given

amount of fuel than a rubber wheel on asphalt, and it is kinder to the environment.

The tandem hook-up trucks use is dangerous; truck trains don't belong on the road, not to mention that they wreck the roads. If the trucks are going to do this, then we need to get our railroads back so tandem hook-ups can be done on trains.

With so much delay at airports, flying isn't as fast a way to travel now, depending on where you're going. Also, airlines don't serve food anymore. On the train there is a café car and the prices are reasonable.

The DOWNEASTER train from Portland to Boston is a success story. I would like to see

Amtrak come to Bangor, and maybe it would if northern Maine could get a new modern railway system.

—Donald Bickford, Orland.

The above letter-to-the-editor of the Bangor Daily News was published Sept. 5

From the editor: Not only will politicians love the advantage of rail service to Augusta. Citizens from across the state who like to attend hearings or meet their elected representatives, or visit Fort Western or the Maine History Museum (one of the best kept secrets in Maine), or hike the trail along the Kennebec River from Augusta to Hallowell or Gardiner, will also appreciate regularly scheduled rail service.

ALARMED OVER AMTRAK

POTENTIAL LOSS OF ONE OF TWO DAILY TRAINS SERVING TIDEWATER, VIRGINIA, RAISES CONCERNS ABOUT TRAFFIC GRIDLOCK FOR JAMESTOWN'S 2007 BIRTHDAY FESTIVAL.

Although rail advocates say Amtrak cuts will hurt the growth of Richmond's Main Street Station, which opened in 2003 after a \$51.6 million renovation, their immediate concern was over losing already limited service to Williamsburg and Newport News.

"They really hoped to have a lot of people be able to come by rail (to next year's festival) and now we're eliminating one main source of travel," said Lois Walker, president of the Virginians for High Speed Rail. "It's devastating for the whole

Williamsburg and Jamestown area."

The group sent letters to Virginia's U.S. senators and other members of Congress questioning Amtrak's plans to revise its schedule in late October.

Amtrak confirmed that it is studying the elimination of one of two sets of daily trains linking Tidewater with Washington. The change could cut 14 train trips, or nearly half of the 30 trains that traverse the corridor each week.

Newport News reported more than 92,382 Amtrak passengers in fiscal 2005, about flat from 2004, while Williamsburg increased 2,000 passengers to 37,450. Richmond's Main Street Station had 11,792 passengers, up from 8,693 in 2004. In all, Amtrak operates 20 trains daily in Virginia.

Students at the College of William and Mary frequent the trains, said Paul Freiling, a Williamsburg city councilman, noting that the city spent \$1.6 million to renovate the Williamsburg Transportation Center, which serves Amtrak, Greyhound, local buses, taxis and car rentals.

Eliminating Amtrak service would be "a direct undercutting of a good-faith effort on the part of the city to promote public transportation," Freiling said.

In a 2003 speech, Colin Campbell, head of the Colonial Williamsburg Foundation, predicted gridlock on interstates 64 and 95 if alternative forms of transportation are not developed in time for the 2007 festival.

—Excerpted from an article written by Chip Jones for the Richmond Times Dispatch, Aug. 25

CALIFORNIA MAY REPLACE THE COAST "STARLATE" WITH NEW COMMUTER TRAIN

San Luis Obispo—LOCAL GOVERNMENTS ARE BEING ASKED TO SUPPORT A NEW AMTRAK TRAIN CALLED THE COAST DAYLIGHT, connecting the downtowns of Los Angeles and San Francisco by way of San Luis Obispo.

The push for a new train service is under way even as the proposed train's nocturnal cousin, the Coast Starlight, has a slacker's reputation for tardiness. The Starlight is so notorious—Amtrak's own web site suggests riders expect delays of six to 10 hours—that some riders have nicknamed it the "Coast Starlate."

The Starlight connects San Luis Obispo to the Bay Area and Southern California, as it runs between Los Angeles and Seattle. The Pacific Surfliner—which connects San Luis Obispo to San Diego and 22 stations along the way—has a much better on-time reputation and a more commuter-oriented bent.

The Coast Daylight is a priority project for the state, and its future could be assured if the statewide transportation bond measure known as Proposition 1B passes in the November 7 election, but some believe its future is assured regardless.



"This is going to happen," said Peter Rodgers, San Luis Obispo Council of Governments administrative director. "I don't know if it is going to happen in a year or two or 10. But this train is proposed as the next service extension in the entire California Rail Plan."

The state would have to contribute about \$7 million annually to the operating costs of the Coast Daylight for it to be successful, he said.

OLD TRACKS. Beyond the funding, there is a hang-up for the train linked to the very problems that plague the Starlight: old dilapidated tracks. The cost to improve the tracks could run between \$20 million and \$100 million, said Rodgers.

The infrastructure issue is what plagues the Coast Starlight, particularly north of Sacramento. The agreement that established Amtrak in the early 1970s called for passenger trains to get priority over freight cars on the nation's tracks. But the reality has been much different.

Sidings, or the side tracks where trains pull out to let another pass, are often too small for freight trains, which can be a

mile long. The result is that Amtrak trains have to pull off in the sidings and let the freight trains pass, repeatedly causing multiple delays.

The San Luis Obispo Tribune asked readers for their input on the above story, and what they had to say follows:

■ We live in Grover Beach and my husband takes the train to his job in Fullerton twice weekly. This means at least a six hour ride each way, and that's if there is no delay. He can't understand why there's a bullet train on the East Coast but not here. (Angela)

■ On a recent trip from Oakland to San Luis Obispo, the train was delayed at least six hours—each way! I was able to use Amtrak bus service, and this is the route I will choose in the future. (Joan Gannon)

■ I would love to take the train up North. We take it often and it was delayed only once. With kids, it is the only way to travel, and with increased gas prices it is the only way. Trains all the way to San Francisco would be heaven. Would having wireless internet be too much to ask? (Teresa)

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...CALIFORNIA

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■ I just returned to my home state after 10 years in NY/NJ riding NJ Transit, subways in NYC, Amtrak—all great services we CAN and MUST have here in California. Let fuel prices go sky high. I'll take the train. (no name)

—The San Luis Obispo Tribune,
Aug. 14. Excerpted from a story by
Sally Connell

From the editor: The bullet train referred to is the Acela. As for on-time statistics and crew/passenger relationships, the DOWNEASTER leaves every train in America behind in the dust.

The irony is that, with the exception of towns in Maine not convenient to the DOWNEASTER, the whole country knows its reputation for on-time arrivals and friendly service. Newspapers in other parts of the country give rave reviews to the DOWNEASTER.

As for towns out of range of rail service—Bangor, Bar Harbor, Calais, Greenville, and dozens more—their economic futures may be looking up; see page 1 for Governor Baldacci's latest executive order.

NEW MEXICO RAIL RUNNER TAKES OFF

Rail Runner Express, the 15-mile commuter-rail system extending from Albuquerque to Bernalillo, NM, carried more than 4,000 passengers on July 15, its first day of service. By the end of its first week, trains were filled to capacity and additional cars were being added.

—Excerpted from *Trains* magazine,
October

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(continued from page 8)

the original complex. (An ariel photograph reveals a mass of formidable brick buildings built at crazy angles to one another, the island, and the river that separates Saco and Biddeford.) So far no deals have been signed, but negotiations are the order of the day. In the meantime a valiant café whose presence is the best kept secret in Biddeford hides away in a corner of one of the buildings.

Those not in the know have to look for a sandwich board sign at curbside on a side street, follow its arrow past mill buildings and along a swath of pavement until they run into the brick wall of another mill, whereupon a second arrow on a sign points to the left. Only the sewage disposal plant is to the left, surely you have gotten lost in the bricks. But... look! A door! On its window is a handwritten sign, "Union Café."

Owned by a University of New England medical student and his artist wife, the café includes an art gallery, a few beat-up armchairs and two or three mismatching tables and chairs. It is funky, civilized (real mugs, not paper cups), and serves excellent coffee, tea, other beverages (soy milk) and simple eats.

On nearby Main Street is a beautifully refurbished civic theater—a real class act—several ethnic restaurants, a handful of recently-arrived businesses, and a large antiques shop. The train stop is two or three blocks away inclusive of bridge span.

The Union Café is the harbinger of what's to come to the Biddeford segment of the mill complex. Eventual plans may include a park with paths on both sides of the river and across the island, to give access to the DOWNEASTER without having to walk in traffic fumes.

A recent press conference unveiled the plans for the Saco Island project at which Wayne Davis and Patricia Douglas represented TrainRiders and the Northern New England Passenger Rail Authority. We know there wouldn't have been an investment group announcing a local economic upswing if the DOWNEASTER didn't stop there in the first place. Passenger rail service is the catalyst. And who brought passenger rail back to Maine? WE DID. Thank you.

OLD ORCHARD BEACH

The town once known for its one-third-mile-long pier where people danced to the big

band sounds of Glenn Miller, Tommy Dorsey and Guy Lombardo and heard performers such as Frank Sinatra and Louis Armstrong, and its still extant amusement park rides and arcades, is experiencing its own economic miracle only a 10-minute drive from Saco-Biddeford.

A good seven miles of the 15-mile span of beach along Saco Bay belongs to Old Orchard, and to the regret of some but the joy of others, many of the tiny old cottages and souvenir stands are being replaced with year-round condominiums, over-55 communities, and new neighborhoods on winding roads with underground utilities and large old trees—all of it pricey but less so than other parts of the coast.

The Dunegrass development has its own golf club, with plans for a swimming pool and tennis courts. A five-story condo called the Grand Victorian, smack on the beach in the downtown, offers central air-conditioning and an indoor pool with a wall of windows that gives onto breaking waves. Some balconies look at Spain and some up or down the long sand beach. Three-bedroom condos have balconies that offer both.

A Starbucks and other retailers occupy ground floor space—or will. The Grand Victorian opens in mid October just as this newsletter goes to press. The building itself is a charmer that puts to shame cardboard box apartment buildings you often see along the coast—of Maine and other states. It has been built with extraordinary engineering and materials to withstand hurricanes and even a tsunami. And guess what else it offers.

A quick walk around a corner to the Old Orchard Beach train station—a lovely little yellow building that also houses the Chamber of Commerce and an information center. It is across the street from a new municipal park (playground, tennis courts, bandstand, weekly concerts) and yet more new condominiums.

To tell the truth...there isn't a station here any more than there is in Saco. But in Old Orchard, a person who is waiting for the DOWNEASTER can wait inside the Chamber of Commerce.

People are buying condo units because they can walk to the station where a train delivers them to Portland in 10 minutes and

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Boston in about two-and-a-half hours. (For the record, the Grand Victorian had only nine out of 51 units left to sell two months before its October opening).

Other town house condominiums are located a short mile from the station and less from the beach, which is never less than pristine-clean, and accessible at the end of every street. Even the Dunegrass development in the countryside is only two miles away.

A new hotel/condo/conference center is scheduled to be built diagonally opposite the Grand Victorian. It will rise up and over the train tracks, which is a first in Maine, and provide access to not only the train but a multi-story parking garage.

Old Orchard Beach is a seasonal train stop. But everybody expects that to change as the town continues to grow. In the interim commuters make the 10-minute drive to Saco-Biddeford from November through May.

The question of do we love it or is it time for it to go surrounds the age-old Palace Playland amusement park, which is on the beach—and next to the Grand Victorian and opposite the hotel that will be built. Some townspeople say it is part of Old Orchard and here to stay; they cite the fact of 4th generation family ownership. Others feel that new, upscale housing will spell its doom. Or that the land it occupies will become too expensive.

The fact remains that Palace Playland attracts a mob that celebrates, seemingly on every square inch of downtown sidewalk and street, into the wee hours, seven nights a week from Memorial Day to Labor Day.

Anyone who has been on board the DOWNEASTER after dark in summer has seen the spectacle, which is guaranteed to draw every passenger to the windows that face the beach. In addition to the teeming crowd, the flashing lights of the roller coaster, the Terminator, the merry-go-round and other rides blink rapturously into the night sky. You don't know whether to smile because everyone out there seems so happy, or shrink in alarm at the density of the beast.

To my outsider's eyes, the will it go or will it stay issue is destined to be solved by

time. Whether townspeople are pro or con, what will happen will happen. It's in the hands of the gods, and how they do like to play with us mere mortals.

In addition to the Biddeford-Saco-Old Orchard bus service, Old Orchard also has a bus that runs between the train station and the South Portland Mall. As for Biddeford, it has its own mall in process of opening, with every big box you can name. Said one resident, named Nancy: We don't have to drive to Portland anymore!

I repeat my mantra: The DOWNEASTER is responsible for much of the above cited economic development successes. Now: It's on to Brunswick, Lewiston-Auburn, and Rockland.

After that, our goal (No. 4 out of 5, as set down in 1989) is to open up our state capital, Augusta, and beyond it Waterville, Bangor, Acadia National Park and the rest of Maine.

It is our hope that when completed, this objective—trains that connect every region and cause the economic tide to rise—begin to create a more fully realized economic entity instead of the Two Maines that currently exist. We want the train to continue making miracles. ■

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In April, two professors emeritus from the University of Cape Town will lead a 16-day trip through South Africa on the Rovos Rail. It includes Victoria Falls in Zambia, a safari and a river cruise in Botswana, and a stop at the prison where Nelson Mandela was held. Rates begin at \$10,450 per person based on double occupancy.

For information, call 877-338-8687 or visit www.smithsonianjourneys.org

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SACO

Once upon a time the cotton mill complex that spills across the 15-acre Saco Island into Biddeford was the largest one in the world. It employed 10,000 people.

Decline took over, abandonment, then random touches of life—a company here, a studio there, a branch of the University of Maine, even a row of condominiums banked with leafy green trees and appealing street lamps. These areas of activity are set down among thousands of square feet of deserted space, where weeds sprout between building foundations and macadam, and vacant buildings are closed off by spans of razor-wire fencing.

In December of 2001 a train began stopping on the island four times a day in each direction. (*Editor: There are now five a day.*)

Five years later—September, 2006—a real estate investment group announced plans for a \$80 to \$100 million mixed use makeover of the island. Work will begin in the spring, and the group is talking commercial space in addition to 80 condo units at prices in the three-quarters of a million category. There will be a waterfront park and a marina.

With the sea five miles away and the Boston-Portland train 500 feet away, we assume the condo units will soon be considered rare gems no matter what their asking prices. In the meantime, if you don't have a boat you can drive 10 min-

DOWNEASTER WORKS AS AN ECONOMIC TOOL

utes to a 15-mile-long sand beach with adjoining foot and bicycle paths and views of the Wood Island lighthouse.

If you don't want the burden of a car, an excellent bus transit system has operated between Biddeford, Saco and Old Orchard Beach for 40 years. It stops at supermarkets, the hospital, and the beach, and as soon as the boffo new mall in Biddeford is completed it will go there too.

Notice I mentioned the train, not the station. Unlike other towns where the DOWNEASTER stops, Saco never built a station, nor did it have an old one to renovate. The island platform where the train stops is called Biddeford/Saco. It is a substantial platform, heated underfoot and roofed overhead. The first winter, passengers froze their toes while waiting. Subsequently the town of Saco built two Plexiglass ends for the platform.

My ears grow cold just thinking about the days I commuted from a rail platform beside a river. The winter wind carried no mercy, and this wasn't even *Maine*. It was Hastings-on-Hudson, NY.

A heated station stood on the land side of the tracks, but those souls waiting for a train to make the run into Manhattan had

to cross up over a tall bridge and down, and stand, and wait, and wait, and well nigh perish from the wind off the river.

People who wait for the train in Saco in winter have all my sympathy, but it's in the cards that as soon as the condos and offices start bustling with life, a station will appear. The DOWNEASTER gave rise to the development, and it is inevitable that the development will now give rise to a station.

The Saco Island investment group has a few not-terribly-serious problems to iron out—parking, taxation, space for boats to be tied up at slips in the Saco River (they will stick out into the shipping lane, say some), but overall the project is a done deal and an economic success story.

Officials in Maine towns where the DOWNEASTER stops say they cannot point to a direct, proven link between the train's arrival in 2001 and subsequent economic development. TrainRiders doesn't agree with that assessment, which—we can understand municipal hesitation—is a difficult one to prove. But it is no coincidence that in the Boston area the statistics show that housing development goes where the railroads go.

BIDDEFORD

It's written in the stars that the mill makeover will spread to Biddeford, the town that hosts the southwesterly half of

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