

Work Set to Begin on Rail Corridor Rehabilitation

AUGUSTA — The Maine Department of Transportation (MDOT) and the Maine Department of Conservation (DOC) have announced that construction is set to begin on the 85-mile Calais Branch Corridor Rehabilitation and Downeast Sunrise Trail Project.

The Calais Branch Corridor Rehabilitation Project is an interagency effort that will rehabilitate and preserve the 85-mile rail corridor for future rail use as well as provide a wide, compact gravel base, multi-use trail for snowmobilers, ATVs, pedestrians, bicyclists, cross country skiers, equestrians and others.

Vaughn Thibodeau & Sons of Bangor will rehabilitate the rail bed corridor from Washington Junction in Hancock to Ayers Junction in Pembroke.

“This project has been in the works for almost 20 years,” said Jim Fisher, transportation planner for the Ellsworth-based Hancock County Planning Commission. “The MDOT has spent a lot of time putting together a management plan with the DOC, which has extensive experience in running multi-use trails in other parts of the state.”

Fisher said 18 months of rail bed rehabilitation is ahead, but that portions of the trail could be opened to snowmobiles this winter, most likely in the Machias area.

“The full trail won’t open until winter of 2009, but things are happening very quickly,” Fisher said. “The contract was just awarded, and already two miles of rail have been removed.”

The MDOT purchased the Calais Branch Corridor from Maine Central Railroad in 1987, in order to preserve the corridor for future rail use. This project, overseen by both the DOC and MDOT, will remove the substandard rail, repair washouts, place decking over bridges, rehabilitate the corridor and construct an 85-mile multi-use trail and parking lots. Rehabilitation of the corridor is expected to take approximately 14 months and the cost of the project is \$3.9 million. The multi-use trail is expected to open in the fall of 2009.

The DOC will manage and maintain the trail and corridor until circumstances warrant the return of rail use to the area.

“This project is very important because it rehabilitates the deteriorated rail bed and preserves it for future rail use,” said MDOT Commissioner David Cole. “In the interim, the region will benefit from a multi-use trail in the corridor that will attract visitors, help the economy and provide recreational opportunities for people in the region until rail returns.”

“Putting this asset to use for the region as a multi-use trail is enormously important,” said state Sen. Dennis Damon (D-Hancock County), chairman of the state’s Transportation Committee. “Studies have indicated that it is not feasible for rail to return at the present, the rail is substandard and needs to be removed before rail can return in the future.”

“It makes sense to rehabilitate the corridor, protect it and put it to good use for the region. I look forward to the day when we can put down new rails and re-establish rail in the Downeast region.”

The Sunrise Trail Coalition worked with communities in the Calais Branch Corridor region for several years to develop a vision and plan for the creation of an interim multi-use trail along the corridor. After many years of study, Governor John Baldacci assigned the MDOT the task of developing a management and maintenance plan for the corridor, including the multi-use trail, in July 2005.

“This project is an important step in maintaining the rail corridor as an asset,” Baldacci said. “The preservation of the structure ensures the option to expand rail to eastern Maine in the future.”

The scenic rail corridor runs along the entire Downeast coastal area, connects multiple scenic conservation areas, intersects Downeast salmon rivers, and is very near two state designated scenic highways. Officials believe the multi-use trail will bring economic and recreational benefits to the Washington County and Hancock County areas similar to other rail trails in central and northern Maine. Those benefits include people visiting area attractions, staying at local hotels and visiting local restaurants.

“These types of trails are enormously popular and help fill up area hotels and restaurants throughout the year,” said DOC Commissioner Patrick K. McGowan. “People really appreciate the opportunity to walk, bike and use ATVs or snowmobiles on long-distance trails; this will be the longest in the state.”

The project does have its detractors.

A group including longtime environmental activist Nancy Oden of Jonesboro planned to gather at the Whitneyville railroad crossing Wednesday morning to question MDOT officials and express their disappointment with the project.

The group is concerned about the project’s effect on area residents and wildlife, including noise and pollution.