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## Rails to Trails: An economic engine

by Leslie Bowman

When the rails and ties were removed in 2006 from an 85-mile stretch of the Calais branch railroad corridor running through Hancock and Washington County, some observers saw it as threat to the economy. However this joint effort of the Maine Department of Transportation, the Maine Department of Conservation, and several citizen organizations to provide a wide gravel base and repaired bridges for year round recreational use was also designed to preserve the corridor for future rail use.

To demonstrate that the newly-complete Down East Sunrise Trail is an economic engine, a group of bicyclists set off for a week this fall. Taking off from Washington Junction (two miles east of Ellsworth) and stopping overnight at various B&Bs, cottages and inns; dining at area restaurants and even chartering a boat from Eastport to Lubec, this was no ordinary group.



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The fourteen members, ranging in age from 62-86, have been promoting the creation of this trail for

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nearly twenty years. "We were a lot younger then." remarks Bill Ceckler, president of the Trail Coalition, a non profit advisory group, looking back to the first meetings. He singles out Sally Jacobs as the driving force of this loosely organized, yet tightly knit group of seniors. It was Jacobs that cut the ribbon on Sept 21 at the grand opening celebration.

On day four, they gathered for breakfast and to settle their tab at Robinson Cottages in Edmunds. Bill Robinson's family has owned the cottages on the shore of the Dennys River for decades. He has long complained "railroad, no trains; five salmon rivers, no salmon." The prosperity brought by these byways was history. But today, things may be looking up. Also trail-side is the North Street Café in Cherryfield. Owner Judy Bradley remembers "when we first opened in 2007, the recession hit." Now, with groups coming in off the trail, "this is just what we needed to help the business grow."

Other businesses have experienced a bounce, especially on weekends when the parking lots at the trail's access points are filled with vehicles, many with ATV trailers. "They are coming from all over the state," according to trail manager, Charlie Corliss who has arranged for overflow parking at Washington Junction. In Machias, the trail crosses U.S. route one near Helen's restaurant. Owner, Julie Barker has seen more customers at her restaurant and nearby inn. This winter, should the snow come and hold out "we are looking forward to the kind of day we had last winter when 40 snowmobiles were parked across the street. Everyone benefits including Subway, the Bluebird and Irvings."

Some feared that having ATV's and bicycles; snowmobiles and x-country skiers share the same trail might cause trouble. Trail manager Corliss, has heard differently; "motorized and non-motorized not getting along? I am hearing just the opposite"

And not just visitors are using the trail. This fall, the area high schools are hosting cross- country events on a stretch near Machias. Some are even commuting to work via the trail. Leroy Merritt travels three miles each way from his home to work at the DOT in Cherryfield; for the simple reason of "saving money."

Dr Peter Knowles, lives at Ayres Junction (the trail's eastern terminus) and works in Machias. Although he does not commute, he often uses the trail and has watched its transformation. By the 1980's the trains had stopped running and the right of way saw little use, "you could not use the rail bed for running or bicycling and the ATVs were creating paths beside old rails." Knowles would like to see the last 17 miles to Calais be turned over for recreational use "so that the large volume of ATV and snowmobile traffic could bring business to the border town." No plans are in the works for an extension in that direction, but to the west, according to Corliss, "there is a push to finish the last two miles into Ellsworth. The trail would most likely run along side the rail bed of the Downeast Scenic Railroad, and may go out to bid this spring.

For Jacobs and her group, when the trail stops, they find a way to get where they are



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going. For the final leg of their adventure, Captain Skip Harris of Fundy Breeze transported bicyclists and gear from Eastport to Lubec. And what if they put the railroad back across the trail bed? Ceckler chimes in "we will make sure that the trains have bicycle racks."

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