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S	M	T	W	T	F	S
30	31	1	2	3	4	5
6	7	8	9	10	11	12
13	14	15	16	17	18	19
20	21	22	23	24	25	26
27	28	29	30	1	2	3

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County business leaders rally for rail service

By Jen Lynds
BDN Staff

CARIBOU, Maine — Aroostook County business leaders partnered with municipal and other county officials Friday to lodge support for keeping rail service in The County.

During a morning meeting in the city, more than 25 of them voiced support for the Maine Department of Transportation's grant application for federal Transportation Investment Generating Economic Recovery funding. The state DOT is looking to secure \$23 million to purchase and improve rail service in the state.

The TIGER discretionary grants are issued by the federal DOT as part of the American Reinvestment and Recovery Act of 2009.

Leaders Encouraging Aroostook Development, a 23-year-old economic development group, has thrown its support behind the application. It also sought support from businesses and county officials, and respondents have signed letters of support in favor of the grant funding.

The grant application will be submitted early next month, MDOT spokesman Mark Latti said Friday.

The decision comes after Montreal, Maine and Atlantic Railway's announcement last week that it wants to sell or abandon its tracks between Millinocket and Madawaska. The company said the 241 miles of track are no longer profitable to maintain.

Railway officials said during last week's press conference that they would ask the state to consider buying and maintaining the tracks. Citing the economic downturn and heavy losses, the MMA officials suggested that the state's purchase of rail service would be the best possible solution.

The 241 miles of track are about half of what the MMA, formerly the Bangor & Aroostook Railroad, owns in the state. The lines are used by freight trains transporting products such as pulpwood, heating fuels, wood chips and cooking oil over the tracks in northern Penobscot and Aroostook counties.

Trains travel the line two or three times per week, according to MMA officials.

The tracks and land are worth about \$17 million. Upgrading the tracks would cost an estimated \$6 million, and the annual maintenance expense would total about \$2.5 million.

No decision on the matter has been made. The legal process for abandoning rail lines takes between eight and 12 months.

"To LEAD, this is a critically important issue," Virginia Joles, the president of LEAD, said Friday. "We need rail service in The County because we have businesses that rely on it as a cheaper source of transportation. We do not need to get rid of our infrastructure in Aroostook County. We need to keep it."

Travis Turner, plant manager at Louisiana-Pacific in New Limerick, attended Friday's meeting and said the company transports approximately 50 percent of its outgoing shipments by rail.

He pointed out that four truckloads of LP product can fit on one rail car.

"It is very important for our company to have rail service," said Turner. "It helps us keep our costs down, and we need to come up with a solution that will keep rail in this area. LEAD's involvement is both helpful and wanted."

LEAD is not the only party looking to keep rail service in the region.

This week, state Rep. Charles "Ken" Theriault, D-Madawaska, submitted legislation for the 124th Maine Legislature's second regular session that would authorize a \$20 million bond allowing the state to purchase and up-grade the 241 miles of track.

Theriault, a member of the Legislature's Transportation Committee, said in an interview that he felt "something has to be done about the possible abandonment of these tracks and subsequent abandonment of service to so many towns."

He also expressed hope that federal and grant funding could be secured to keep the tracks in use.



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The bill proposal will go before legislative council in September for inclusion in the second session of the Legislature.

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