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8/25/09 | 20 comments

RAILROAD

Legislators seek to save rail line

New bill would authorize \$20M bond for purchase, upgrades

By **Jen Lynds**
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MADAWASKA, Maine — To soften the blow of news that Montreal, Maine and Atlantic Railway desires to sell or abandon its tracks between Millinocket and Madawaska, legislators in Aroostook and Penobscot counties are working to introduce legislation that would allow the state to purchase the tracks.

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 upgrade 241 miles of railroad track that serves northern Maine businesses.

Theriault said Monday that the bulk of the legislation is still being worked out and described the bill as the first step in what could be a lengthy process.

The bill comes on the heels of the railway’s decision regarding the 241 miles of track, which the company said is no longer profitable to maintain.

At this point, the company is asking the state to consider buying the tracks and maintaining them. Citing the economic downturn and heavy losses, MMA officials suggested that the state’s purchase of rail service would be the best possible solution.

The tracks and land are worth about \$17 million, MMA officials said during a press conference last week. Upgrading the tracks would cost an estimated \$6 million, and the annual maintenance expense would total about \$2.5 million.

A decision on the matter is not yet final. The legal process for abandoning rail lines takes between eight and 12 months.

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.

Theriault said he has not been involved in conversations between the state and MMA, but said he wanted to keep all of the state’s options open.

“This is still a fresh bill, and I am still working things out in my mind,” Theriault acknowledged. “I just wanted to submit the bill so that we could

explore all of our options. I wanted to make the first move. I feel that if the tracks were abandoned, it would isolate this area and hurt economic development.”

Theriacult, a member of the Legislature’s Transportation Committee, added that he felt “something has to be done about the possible abandonment of these tracks and subsequent abandonment of service to so many towns.”

At this point, Theriacult said, he has not heard a lot of talk among local business owners about the railway situation. He estimated it would increase as the process moves forward.

“I feel this would put our region in a real bind if we did not have rail service to deliver goods,” he said. “We need to maintain that service here. I would really like to be in touch with the governor and others involved and get everyone on board to discuss options.”

Theriacult said he hopes to secure federal and grant funding to keep the tracks in use.

Theriacult has gotten support for the bill from other legislators, including Rep. Patricia Sutherland, D-Chapman, and Sen. Troy Jackson, D-Aroostook County.

Rep. Herb Clark, D-Millinocket, also has spoken in support of the bill.

“The rail line is one more connection that Aroostook County has with the outside world. We simply cannot afford to lose it,” Jackson said in a written statement Monday.

“Ensuring that these rails remain a viable shipping option for manufacturers in the northern part of the state is extremely important,” added Clark.

The bill proposal will go before legislative council in September for inclusion in the second session of the 124th Legislature.

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