

## PASSENGER TRANSPORTATION

### Grade: C-

#### Overview

Ridership on transit in Maine grew 113% from 2004 to 2006, but only 55% of transit vehicles are in good condition. Passenger rail continues to expand, but a sustainable funding source has yet to be identified. Ferry services provide primary transportation from the island communities and require \$12.5 million to replace two vessels. Funding levels for all modes need to grow in order to meet demands.

#### Introduction and Background

For the purposes of this report, passenger transportation includes traditional mass transit, but also passenger rail, car-pool and van-pool programs, and bicycle and pedestrian focused projects. The Maine State Ferry Service is also included, due to its importance to the overall transportation system. However, the four private intercity bus services, currently one of the primary modes of connectivity in this rural state and a vital part of Maine's transportation system, are not included as they do not receive public funding.

Transit, for the purposes of this report, is limited to the 21 rural and small urban transportation systems that are supported by the Maine Department of Transportation (MaineDOT) through funds mostly provided by the Federal Transit Administration (FTA). These services are reliant on other infrastructure (roads, bridges, ports and railroads) in order to operate efficiently and effectively.

Maine's 21 transit systems fall into one of three categories:

- **Regional transportation systems.** There are nine regional transit systems receiving MaineDOT funding support (and one that is not funded) that serve rural areas of the state known as Full Service Transportation Brokers (FSTBs). In general, the systems serve low income, elderly, the disabled, and clientele of the Department of Health and Human Services and other agencies.
- **Fixed route transit systems.** There are 13 systems that generally operate on a fixed route according to a schedule and they include urban bus systems as well as inter-city services. For example the Bangor Area Transit (BAT) Community Connector is a fixed route public transit system operated by the City of Bangor for the communities of the Greater Bangor Urbanized Area. The Casco Bay Island Transit District which provides ferry service between Portland and various island communities also receives funds through MaineDOT/FTA.
- **Transit systems supporting the tourist industry.** Four of the providers above also operate services on a seasonal basis including the Island Explorer, a fixed route, seven day per week seasonal service on Mount Desert Island which is operated by Downeast Transportation, Inc.

Passenger rail service includes Amtrak's Downeaster from Portland to Boston which is operated by Amtrak under a 20-year agreement with the Northern New England Passenger Rail Authority (NNEPRA). The 116-mile corridor is owned by Pan Am Railways and the Massachusetts Bay Transportation Authority.

Other transportation systems include GO MAINE Commuter Connections rideshare program operated by the Greater Portland Council of Governments and administered by the MaineDOT and the Maine Turnpike Authority (MTA); 50 Park & Ride lots with over 2,200 parking spaces, funded and maintained by MaineDOT (39 lots, 1423 spaces) and MTA (11 lots, 794 spaces); and the Maine State Ferry Service (MSFS), which is the primary mode for access to the mainland from six of Maine's year-round island communities.

To increase both bicycle and pedestrian mobility, MaineDOT instituted a program to construct paved shoulders, bike lanes and/or sidewalks. In addition, this includes the construction of the three shared-use (separated from highways)

trails: the Mountain Trail, 45 miles from Westbrook to Fryeburg; the Downeast Trail, 87 miles from Ellsworth to Ayers Junction; and the Eastern Trail, 55 miles from Kittery to South Portland.

## Condition and Adequacy

### Ridership

In 2006, total ridership on transit systems serving Maine was estimated to be 8.1 million, an increase of 113 percent from 2004 estimates, and most transit systems have experienced additional jumps in ridership from 2006 to 2008. For example, Lewiston-Auburn's City-Link transit service in 2006 carried approximately 215,000 riders, an increase of over 25 percent over 2004. In Bangor, ridership increased on the Bangor Area Transit system by more than 10 percent in 2007, and during the first full half of 2008, the system carried more than 800,000 riders representing another 12 percent increase.

As fuel prices continued to rise in 2008, ridership on transit systems across the state experienced even greater growth. In May 2008, the Zoom Turnpike Express Bus service, operating from Saco to Portland along the Maine Turnpike, reported a 93 percent increase since April 2007. Van pools run by GO MAINE, have a waiting list, and in early 2008, the database of users surpassed 5,000 participants for the first time. A Park & Ride lot study in 2007 identified 12 lots that are nearing capacity. One of those has been expanded (Scarborough Exit 42) and additional capacity for the Saco Exit 36 lot will be completed by Fall 2008.

### Transit Vehicle/Ferry Vessel

According to MaineDOT, 217 of the state's 393 transit vehicles in Maine are in good condition (55 percent), 62 are in fair condition and scheduled for replacement (15 percent) and 119 were considered critical, scrap, or poor condition (30 percent). Of the five active vessels used by the Casco Bay Island Transit District to provide nearly 900,000 passenger trips per year, the oldest is nearly 35 years old. The Maine State Ferry Service provides service to 1.6 million passengers per year and its seven ferries range in age from 15 to 49 years old. The oldest only provides limited service to Matinicus. Of the seven, three are rated good, two as fair and two as poor. The 40-year-old vessel, *Governor Curtis*, was slated for replacement in the 2006-2007 biennial budget, but has yet to be replaced.

### Amtrak Downeaster

The Downeaster's ridership, with approximately 442,000 riders in 2008, grew 28 percent from 2007 to 2008. An additional passenger car has been added to meet the added demand for the five round trips per day. Amtrak's Downeaster cars and locomotives range in age from 10 years to more than 35 years old and it operates with two train sets with typical seating capacity of 232 for the one-way, 2 hour and 25 minute trip. The Portland layover facility is inadequate to service the trains efficiently and cost effectively, so all heavy maintenance is performed in Boston. While some schedule delays occur due to the limited capacity of the rail line, the Downeaster continues to get the highest customer service ratings in the Amtrak system. Plans are in place to continue service to Brunswick in the future with connections to the seasonal Rockland Branch. Amtrak and NNEPRA have agreed to a tentative schedule that would utilize existing Amtrak equipment.

### Bicycle/Pedestrian

Due to the increased focus in recent years, including increased investments in bike lanes and paved shoulder, in 2008 the League of American Bicyclists ranked Maine as 6<sup>th</sup> in the nation for being bicycle friendly.

## Investment Needs

Financial support from the FTA to MaineDOT is distributed to 21 rural and small urban transportation systems. The FTA allocates these funds by formula and identifies annual funding levels for five years. The majority of these funds are used for operating support. Federal and state funds can cover 90 percent of the capital costs or 95 percent if that agency is using clean fuel vehicles like Compressed Natural Gas (CNG) or bio-fuels. These funds can support up to 90 percent of the administrative costs and up to 60 percent of an operating deficit. In 2006, Maine received \$11.6 million in FTA program funds. In 2008, that allocation increased to just over \$12 million. In both years, these FTA funds were matched with \$555,000 in state funds; however, in the 2007-2008 budget year, only \$517,009 in matching funds was distributed and in the 2008-2009 budget year, only \$528,000 was budgeted by the state. As operating costs rise, the burden on local communities increases. This represents a growing challenge for

municipalities in Maine. In 2007, the total budget for all public transit operators in Maine was \$46.8 million, approximately \$4.7 million short of the \$51.5 million strategic need per biennium as identified in the 2005 MaineDOT State of the System (SOS) report.

Finding sustainable funding sources for new or expanded transit services is a concern, though there have been success stories in Maine. The Island Explorer on Mt. Desert Island established a sustainable funding source utilizing special national park entrance fees and FTA rural funds. The Mountain Explorer, a seasonal service in Western Maine connecting the ski areas with local towns, operates with the majority of funding provided by local businesses and towns. This promotes economic development, reduces congestion and air emissions caused by cars. MaineDOT recently concluded an evaluation of unmet general public transit needs in Maine. This transit needs study, which concluded prior to the current rise in fuel prices and subsequent increased interest in transit, identified \$660,000 in additional operating funds needed annually and \$250,000 in start-up funds needed to implement services such as coordinated transit and job access and reverse commute programs. The greater interest in transit will only increase the unmet needs.

Maine's 21 transit systems operate 393 vehicles, ranging in size from minivans to full size transit buses. With 45 percent of these vehicles in poor to fair condition, the state is falling behind on the needed replacement schedule. The 2008-2009 biennial budget included \$17 million total capital funds, with \$8 million for vehicle replacement. The total cost to replace all those vehicles scheduled or in poor conditions is close to \$18 million. In addition to replacing vehicles, switching the Portland METRO fleet to clean and domestically secure Compressed Natural Gas (CNG) fuel, and continuing to expand the Island Explorer propane fleet are state priorities due to positive impacts to environment. This will require approximately \$15 million over the next five years to fully implement.

Casco Bay Island Transit District is seeking \$5.5 million in capital investment for a ferryboat replacement that has been identified as a "high priority" project. In 2006, the Maine State Ferry Service required \$10.6 million to replace the *Governor Curtis* and make improvements at two berthing pens. In the 2006-2007 budget and the 2008-2009 budget, \$3.7 million and \$2.86 million were allocated, respectively, for these improvements. The state has been unable to find a shipbuilder to build the \$7 million replacement ferry. As of 2006, the minimal state funding (\$2.4 million) and fare box revenues (\$3.4 million) provided for the operating budget and minimal maintenance of the vessels and facilities. According to the SOS report, to maintain the aging fleet, approximately a 20 percent increase in the operating subsidy is necessary in the operating and maintenance budgets. Recent spikes in fuel costs will also have a detrimental effect on the level of service unless the budget is increased or vessels and engines become more fuel efficient.

The Downeaster line's 2007 operating budget was \$15.7 million. Seven million came from fares, \$1.7 million from MaineDOT and the remaining \$7 million was provided by Congestion Mitigation and Air Quality (CMAQ) federal funding. Beginning in October 2009, CMAQ funding will no longer be available for this use as those funds are only available for new projects and not to sustain operations indefinitely. In late 2006, a task force on passenger rail funding met, and in January 2007 they provided recommendations to the Legislature and the Governor. Recommendations linked the Downeaster's role in regional economic development<sup>1</sup> and included tax revenues from car rentals, general merchandise sales, meals and lodging, and vehicle sales. According to a recent *Portland Press Herald* article,<sup>2</sup> general fund revenues have been committed by the Governor to replace the CMAQ funds. New Hampshire and Massachusetts do not contribute to the operating funding, even though a portion of the ridership is from those two states. In the 2008 Legislative session, a \$30 million federal loan was authorized to upgrade the tracks from Portland to Brunswick in order to support a 60 mph train connecting passenger rail between Portland and Brunswick. In addition, a transportation bond was approved in 2008 to provide \$6.5 million to improve the Downeaster's layover facility in Portland.

MaineDOT is currently expanding the Portland and Augusta rideshare programs with a budget of \$200,000 per year. This amount is only adequate to incrementally expand the program statewide. MaineDOT has \$281,000 in the

<sup>1</sup> "New Report shows Downeaster Train adds Billions to Maine's economy" [www.amtrakdowneaster.com](http://www.amtrakdowneaster.com) dated April 7, 2008

<sup>2</sup> "With gas prices up, so is ridership for Downeaster" by David Sharp, AP, *Portland Press Herald* article dated July 22, 2008

2008-2009 biennial budget for Park & Ride lot improvements. The MTA has an additional \$500,000 in 2009 for Park & Ride lot improvements within the MTA corridor.

In 2005, only \$2.5 million was invested in bicycle and pedestrian projects and the Safe Routes to School Program (SRSP) had a budget of only \$5 million over a 5-year period. At that time, the SRSP had received more than \$14 million in municipal requests. In the 2008-2009 budget, \$13.37 million is dedicated to bicycle and pedestrian improvements, including SRSP. This is over a \$4 million increase from 2006-2007. In 2006, the three trails of significance needed \$70 million to build.

**Table 1** Data/Budgets are based on latest information available.

<u>Mode</u>	<u>Annual Ridership</u>	<u>Annual Budget</u>	<u>Capital</u>
Transit	In 2006 was 8.1 million, and growing due to recent interest	\$47 million	\$17 million (2 yrs)
Maine State Ferry	1.6 million	\$5.8 million	\$2.86 million (2 yrs)
Downeaster Rail	441,769 (including MA and NH ridership)	\$15.8 million	\$36.5 million (bonds)
Go Maine Ride Share	7,000 on list	\$200,000	(included in \$17 million under transit)
Park & Ride Lots (MTA & MaineDOT)	2,217 spaces	\$500,000 (est.)	\$781,000 (2 yrs)
Bicycle/Pedestrian	-	-	\$13.31 million (2 yrs)

**Conclusions and Recommendations**

Most areas in Maine do not have the population density to support typical transit services, but many Maine citizens and visitors need transportation options in addition to driving a car. Choices are made based on convenience, schedule, costs and the environment, and as Maine’s population ages, these alternatives will become increasingly important. FSTBs provide on-demand, door-to-door non-emergency medical transportation to thousands of Maine residents in rural communities. In order to fulfill the needs of the communities, FSTB services have been expanding beyond health care to include transportation to work and school. There is a concern that these agencies are already under resourced.

Fixed-route transit providers’ limited funds restrict their ability to continue meeting growing demand. Rising operating costs burden local providers and jeopardize service to an expanding customer base. Finding a sustainable funding source to supplement the fare box is a challenge for passenger rail. In addition, funding for ferries is minimal and will result in decreased service in the future. Ferries are the only mode of transportation from the islands, increasing the importance of maintaining them in the most long-term and cost-effective way.

According to the MaineDOT’s *Connecting Maine* report, these modes of passenger transportation will be competing with funding shortfalls for the next 10 years in the comprehensive transportation system of more than \$3 billion out of a total 10 year projected need of \$6.5 billion. Each mode is an important part of the overall transportation system, and Maine faces some big challenges to provide residents with an adequate transportation system. Maine ASCE gives passenger transportation in Maine a Grade of C-.

Maine ASCE’s recommendations for passenger transportation include:

- Promote and implement statewide land use strategies and demand management measures (e.g., the discouragement of the use of cars by increasing parking fees in urban areas). This would slow growth in traffic in urbanized areas and promote transit use or car/van pooling;
- Provide additional financial support for Regional Full Service Transportation Brokers (FSTBs);
- Consider coordinating FSTB’s with statewide programs for alternative transportation. This would expand capacity, which would allow the FSTBs to serve a broader function as regional travel management resource centers to provide one-call resources for carpooling, ridesharing, and park and ride information;

- Consider additional state funding for fixed route transit providers where population densities merit, as well as for ferry services, though fare box revenues should be increased proportionately for both modes as well;
- Implement the recommendations from the joint MaineDOT/MTA 2007 Park & Ride Lot Study;
- Provide passenger rail with funding from state's general fund as Governor has stated and as recommended by the "2007 Task Force on Passenger Rail Funding," as well as expanding support to the State Transit Air Rail account; and
- Persuade NH and MA to provide equitable support of Amtrak's Downeaster service.

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