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## Expansion of Amtrak to Brunswick spurs interest in service for Augusta

A Maine Eastern Railroad official says the company could add both freight and passenger trains.

By MEGHAN V. MALLOY, *Kennebec Journal*

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Now that Maine is receiving grant money to finance the expansion of passenger rail from Portland to Brunswick, the possibility of freight and passenger service to Augusta is attracting attention.

"Yes, absolutely," said Gordon Page Sr., vice president and director of passenger operations for Maine Eastern Railroad.

"With the award of the \$35 million to (Northern New England Passenger Railroad Authority), it makes the extension of service from Maine Eastern into Augusta that much more real."

As part of President Obama's economic stimulus plan, the Northeast corridor – 11 states and Washington, D.C. – received \$1.1 billion in grants to develop or upgrade high-speed rail. The White House plan envisions 1,542 miles of track upgraded and 84 miles added.

One of the recipients is the Northern New England Passenger Rail Authority, based in Portland.

According to its Web site, the Northern New England Passenger Rail Authority is a Legislature-created authority that develops and provides passenger railroad service within Maine, and from Portland to Boston. The authority does not own Amtrak's Downeaster, but it manages the service's budget, customer service and contracts.

"I definitely think it's a economic generator," Patricia Quinn, executive director of the Northern New England Passenger Rail Authority, said of the planned extension.

Quinn said the work will result in service stretching from Boston to Rockland and open doors to central Maine. One of the junctions on the extension is in Yarmouth, which has tracks that extend to Auburn.

"This project is much more than just 30 miles between Portland and Brunswick," Quinn said.

Page agreed. "That Brunswick connection is crucial," to bringing service back to Augusta, he said. "Maine Eastern (Railroad) has had high hopes that we'd become a connecting line for the Downeaster."

Page said the company is "first and foremost a freight service. It's always our interest to develop freight customers on that line." Maine Eastern also operates a seasonal passenger rail service from Brunswick to Rockland.

The stretch of track in question, called the Lower Road and stretching from Brunswick to Augusta, has been quiet for several years.

"There isn't an awful lot of activity on there," Page admitted. "I'd say there hasn't been routine service on it for over a decade."

Page said he did not have an estimate on what it would cost to revive and refurbish the defunct track.

"This won't happen immediately, and I expect Maine DOT will want to look at this closely," he said. "And at this point, by the time (railroad) service is upgraded, any number I give would be different."

In May 2008, Maine Eastern Railroad did a one-time excursion from Rockland to Augusta along the Lower Road for the Maine Rail Group, in part to draw attention to the possibilities of returning rail service to the capital.

At that time, Quinn called the railroad industry a "lifeline" for Maine.

Last week, she stood by that assessment, saying the expansion of the Downeaster track alone will have "a ripple effect that impacts areas well beyond just central Maine."

And securing the funding wasn't a simple matter of applying, Quinn added.

"There were 259 applications from 37 states to get a piece of the \$8 billion available," she said. "So this was a very competitive process."

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