

Beth_Brogan@TimesRecord.Com

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FREEPORT — With federal funding due to expire at the end of 2008, Amtrak's *Downeaster* rail line must secure state support or risk losing the service, rail officials told legislators this week at a meeting at the Harraseeket Inn.

Although the *Downeaster* has transported more than 1.6 million travelers since its first run in 2001, the rail line faces a shortfall of \$7-8 million, said Northern New England Passenger Rail Authority (NNEPRA) Executive Director Patricia Quinn, adding, "It's time for the state of Maine to decide we're going to keep this, and fund it or decide it's going to go away."

This year, in addition to federal funding and \$1.5 million in state money, the *Downeaster* generated \$6.1 million in revenue. That's a 5-percent increase over last year, and ridership has increased by the same margin. But the federal funding — \$6 million this year — was originally designed to get the program going, and will soon expire.

Quinn appealed to legislators this week to find state funding for the rail, which has brought new residential and business development, Quinn said, and could be incentive for further development if the lines are not only maintained, but extended. About 30 miles of track, between Portland and Brunswick, are all that keep the train from connecting Boston and Portland to Rockland, where a private excursion train currently runs. Extending the line to Yarmouth, she said, would allow the train to connect with the St. Lawrence and Atlantic line, which could open up access to Lewiston and Montreal.

"Many people in the U.S. think that Maine is the end of the road," said Senate President Beth Edmonds, D-Freeport. One way to change that, she said, is by connecting our rail to Montreal.

Pan Am, formerly Guilford, which owns those tracks, has said it will take a \$30 million capital investment to upgrade the tracks from Portland to Brunswick — about \$1 million a mile — which Quinn said is "cheap compared to other transportation." While no one has yet proposed it, Quinn said one option would be to bond \$30 million for 20 years, for \$3 million per year.

Edmonds supports maintaining — and extending — the rail.

"I cannot imagine that this state will ruin this opportunity," she said, "but I'm a little nervous because people feel their pocketbooks are being pinched." Losing the rail line, she said, "would be a colossal mistake."