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Feds OK rail link funding

By Beth Brogan, Times Record Staff

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BRUNSWICK — An Obama administration announcement Wednesday night that the U.S. Department of Transportation will fund a \$35 million upgrade of 30 miles of railroad tracks from Portland to Brunswick was “well-timed” good news for local officials facing the economic impact of Brunswick Naval Air Station’s impending closure.

“The timing couldn’t be better,” Brunswick Town Council chairwoman Joanne King said today. “We needed to hear this.”

The funding is being distributed by the Federal Railroad Administration through the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act. It funds the track upgrades, not passenger rail operating costs.

The award, to the Northern New England Passenger Rail Authority, will fund upgrades for tracks that run from Portland through Freeport and into Brunswick, where Amtrak’s Downeaster line is expected to arrive by the end of 2012, according to a statement by U.S. Rep. Chellie Pingree, D-Maine.

On Tuesday, Patricia Quinn, executive director of the Northern New England Passenger Rail Authority, said an agreement is in place for Pan Am Railways to rehabilitate the tracks, and that Amtrak has agreed to extend the service if the tracks can be upgraded to passenger-rail standards.

Pingree said work will begin immediately on the rail line, creating more than 200 jobs.

State Transportation Commissioner David Cole said today that obtaining the “hyper-competitive” federal funding is a testament to the communities and organizations involved, the congressional delegation and Gov. John Baldacci. He said the Maine rail upgrade could be one of the first projects in the country to get under way with funding from a public transit enhancement program that President Barack Obama unveiled Wednesday night as part of his State of the Union speech.

The train will travel from Portland’s train station along the Pan Am line through Woodford’s Corner in Portland, rather than the line that runs parallel to Interstate 295, Cole said. The other route would not be possible because that line would have needed a new bridge over the Presumpscot River.

The train will then travel through Falmouth to Yarmouth Junction, where the federal money will fund upgrades to “lay the groundwork” for a future rail upgrade headed to Auburn, Cole said.

“It’s been a long, long haul,” he said.

In recent years, much of the economic development in Freeport and Brunswick has been based on the hope that passenger rail would return to the area. In 2009, the \$45 million Freeport Village Station opened across the street from the tracks.

In Brunswick, shops, a restaurant and a visitor/ train station have already opened at Maine Street Station, a project funded by the town and Massachusetts developer J. Hilary Rockett Jr.

“This is a great thing for our town,” King said today. “We put all our energy into the Maine Street Station project, and a lot of resources too, so this is the culmination. And we’re ready to go. It’s so awesome.”

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"There's a reason why people in retail, the hospitality industry and state government" are excited about the announcement, Rep. David Webster, D-Freeport, said today.

"This will fulfill the dream for an awful lot of Maine people to be able to get on the train in Mid-coast Maine and ride all the way to Boston," said Wayne Davis, chairman of Trainriders Northeast, in a statement. "Nearly 5 million people go from the Boston area to Freeport to go shopping. That's a big market that the Downeaster can tap in to."

Cole said legislation allocating half of car rental sales taxes to the train's operating budget was included in the application for federal funds, noting, "We have an understanding with NNEPRA that the first part of that money is to make sure there is sufficient funding to operate this railroad."

"Extending this critical rail service to Brunswick will not only build upon the these successes but also create jobs and further boost tourism in the Mid-coast region, giving the Brunswick area, which is coping with the closure of Brunswick Naval Air Station, a much-needed economic shot in the arm," Maine Sens. Olympia Snowe and Susan Collins, both Republicans, said in a joint statement.

Peter Robbins, who owns Bohemian Coffee House adjacent to the tracks, said he has been pessimistic — but always hopeful — about the arrival of passenger rail to downtown Brunswick.

"They've been talking about the train coming to Brunswick since they tore down the train station," he said today. "It's one of those 'don't count on it' issues."

Today's announcement was a pleasant surprise, Robbins said, noting, "More people is always good, and more people with money is better."

With a surplus of affordable housing due to Brunswick Naval Air Station's closure, Robbins said Brunswick will likely become more attractive to homeowners if the cost to commute to Portland is affordable. In addition, he said a local bus service planned by Coastal Trans will make the train that much more accessible to Bath and other area residents.

David Farmer, spokesman for Baldacci, said today that the expansion of passenger rail north of Portland has been one of Baldacci's long-term goals, and predates his administration.

"The planning that has gone into this paid off because the project is shovel-ready and the investment will start creating jobs almost immediately," Farmer said.

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