

CASE STUDY

Portland, ME



The Honorable Mark Dion

MAYOR | PORTLAND, ME

Maximizing the potential for transit-oriented development through strategic siting of a new Amtrak station

Nested along the Atlantic coast in the Casco Bay, Portland is the largest city in Maine with a population of 68,000. Its history as a maritime center is still visible today in its industrial working waterfront, though its economy has transitioned to more service-oriented industries. With a thriving arts scene, a historic downtown, five universities, and great connectivity with other New England population centers, Portland is a desirable place to live, work, and visit. This popularity has led to challenges like housing shortages, parking concerns, and debates about neighborhood character as development pressure has increased. In 2024, the city completed its first land use and zoning overhaul in over 50 years, ReCode, which seeks to better address the city's needs for housing, design, preservation, conservation, its working waterfront, energy, and transportation.

Case Study: Downeaster Amtrak station siting

Portland's Amtrak station is currently located two miles west of downtown, across I-295 and a large interchange from the city center. Portland was once the terminus of the Downeaster Amtrak line to Boston, but the line now continues on to New Brunswick, ME – an addition that involves a complicated and

How can city leaders ensure that the Amtrak station's relocation closer to downtown provides the most effective use of taxpayer funds and maximum public benefit?

time-consuming turnaround from the Portland Station spur. This critical rail connection sees five daily round-trip trains; to improve service and lower costs, Amtrak is exploring the possibility of relocating the station back to the main rail line and removing the spur from its service. This will allow trains to run uninterrupted along the main rail line parallel to St. John Street,

closer to downtown Portland, and allow Amtrak to add one additional round trip per day.

The decision of where exactly to site the new station lies with the Northern New England Passenger Rail Authority (NNEPRA), the quasi-independent state agency that oversees day-to-day operations of the Downeaster line. Three options were initially outlined, which have since been narrowed down to two. City leaders recognize this once-in-a-generation opportunity to reshape the transportation landscape of their city, and wish to weigh in on the site selection to ensure maximum public benefit from this critical investment.

The remaining two options are geographically quite close – mere blocks apart along St. John Street – but the impacts of each location could differ significantly. Both options are nearly a mile closer to downtown and avoid the I-295 crossing; however, both sites still feel removed from downtown due to street connections and steep topography, requiring a thoughtful approach to connectivity and future development.

Site 1 has been ruled out due to feasibility issues. Between the remaining two options, key differences exist:

Site 2: Northern St. John Street behind Maine Central Railroad Building

Located a few blocks south of Congress Street – a natural connection to downtown with ongoing design improvements for pedestrians and bicyclists – this option offers the cleanest connection to Portland’s core, with high frequency bus service in operation along Congress Street. Urban form in the area includes a historic railroad administration building, a few single-family homes, a suburban-style shopping center, and a few additional retail establishments. Site 2 is also located less than a quarter-mile from Maine Medical Center, the state’s largest hospital and a major employment hub. Maine Medical Center owns Site 2, which is already zoned for transit-oriented development (TOD), as well as an adjacent employee parking deck.

Site 3: Southern St. John Street near Commercial Street

Located at the southern end of St. John Street – a half-mile walk from Congress Street – this site’s surroundings are much more industrial in character (and indeed the site is only zoned as industrial). The most direct connection to downtown, via the auto-oriented West Commercial Street, is sparsely populated by industrial and commercial waterfront uses. A trail runs alongside a portion of the

street, but no human-scale amenities appear on the 1.5-mile stretch of West Commercial Street before arriving near downtown. The desired site includes industrial properties with multiple owners.

City leaders have a strong preference for Site 2 due to its more urban and connected location, and are now seeking guidance for making the case to NNEPRA – while also preparing for the need to make the most of Site 3, if selected. Both sites have the potential to help enact decades of local policy and planning efforts that bring economic development and transit-oriented development to this corner of the city.

In terms of connectivity, St. John Street lies just below the bluffs that make up the Western Promenade, where a scenic park sits along the top of this natural barrier. Pedestrian access will most naturally occur along Congress Street to the north, while vehicular access also makes sense along West Commercial Street to the south. A steep trail offers an additional connection across the bluffs from Valley Street, near Site 2, though its topography and isolated park setting make it less inviting at times.

While the Amtrak station itself may be a modest platform like the current station, Portland’s leaders see the potential for significant TOD and urban connectivity improvements around this catalytic project. Precedents of interest to the city – especially pertaining to transit-oriented development, connectivity, and urban form – include North Station in Boston, Raleigh Union Station, and the smaller-scale Brunswick Station closer to home.

Ultimately, city leaders are seeking advice on making the most of this generational opportunity to reshape the transportation and development landscape of their community.

Questions

1. With NNEPRA focused on the impacts on train operations and feasibility, how can city leaders best make the case for Site 2?
2. Are there any unseen drawbacks to Site 2, or hidden benefits of Site 3, that the city should consider? If NNEPRA opts to move forward with Site 3, what strategies will help improve the outcomes of the new station?
3. How can city leaders best collaborate with stakeholders to envision public-private partnerships around the new

development opportunities created by the train station relocation?

4. How can connectivity be improved between St. John Street and downtown, regardless of which site is selected?
5. What solutions might exist for connectivity and improving future development prospects nearby?

Recommendations

Zoom out to the bigger picture of what winning means for your community: fight for Site 2 strategically, but know that Portland can “win” with either site. A new train station closer to downtown and the city’s employment/medical anchors will be of great benefit to the community in either location.

Making the case for Site 2

- + Make this option more attractive to NNEPRA by figuring out what barriers the city can help remove: perhaps helping with private land acquisition, getting county land into the mix, or finding funding for rebuilding the spur to make Site 2 function better operationally.
- + Invest in telling the full story of why Site 2 is preferred: in addition to the economic analysis already conducted for Site 2, conduct the same for Site 3 so the contrasts are clear. Make the case with data, seeking out the strongest points of comparison.
- + Tell the story with a clear narrative that gains public momentum and puts pressure on leaders to do what’s best for the community. In particular, tell the story of how more people could get to/from Site 2 than Site 3, presumably improving ridership with greater connectivity and TOD opportunities. Use visualizations to depict the on-the-ground experience of getting to/from Site 2 and Site 3, illustrating the possibilities clearly.
- + Seek assistance from your MPO on conducting this analysis, finding grants, and leveraging their political power. Seek additional funding and strategic assistance from MaineDOT.

Improving connectivity

- + However, this will be an uphill battle, so have a backup plan if Site 3 wins out. Insist on some benefits for the city: what would “winning” look like with Site 3? Street improvements,

railroad crossing improvements, connectivity and transit improvements would all make Site 3 better.

- + With either site, improvements to the railroad crossing would benefit Portland greatly, due to the existing pedestrian connectivity limitations and lengthy traffic delays. Explore funding sources like the Railroad Crossing Elimination Grant from USDOT, which “provides funding for highway-rail or pathway-rail grade crossing improvement projects that focus on improving the safety and mobility of people and goods.”
- + In federal funding applications, focus the narrative on promoting efficiency in freight and commerce to align with current administration priorities.

Resources + Examples

- + **Railroad Crossing Elimination Grants:** Look out for the next Notice of Funding Opportunity for this grant from the USDOT Federal Railroad Administration (FRA), authorized in the IIJA through 2026: <https://railroads.dot.gov/IIJA>

Explore previous selections for information about the types of projects and awards: <https://railroads.dot.gov/grants-loans/railroad-crossing-elimination-grant-program>

- + **Additional grants from the FRA:** <https://railroads.dot.gov/grants>

In particular, the Consolidated Rail Infrastructure and Safety Improvements (CRISI) program may be helpful: <https://railroads.dot.gov/grants-loans/consolidated-rail-infrastructure-and-safety-improvements-crisi-program>

- + **Greater Portland Council of Governments:** Your local MPO should be able to assist with economic analysis and data collection: <https://www.gpcog.org>