



Getting Connected

Can a make-believe, 500-mile subway system bring Down Easters together?

Imagine making a morning commute from Machias to Lubec in mere minutes, normally a half-hour drive, while thumbing through the day's newspaper or decrypting a Sudoku instead of watching the road. That'd be life aboard Downeast Rapid Transit, an extensive subway system spanning from Bangor to Lubec, Bar Harbor to Calais. Of course, the rail network doesn't occupy the physical world; it's a conceptual, community art project.

The idea comes from artist and scientist John Bullitt, who moved from Cambridge, Massachusetts, to Steuben a few years ago. Having traded the real-life "T" for the make-believe "D," Bullitt works from a small studio overlooking Petit Manan Light. His background is in seismology — he was a researcher at MIT — so he has a knack for all things subterranean (among his other current projects is a micro-power FM broadcast of the seismic vibrations beneath his home).

He designed the fictional Downeast Rapid Transit, he says, as a conversation starter, to create connections — personal, not transportational — among the people of Washington, Penobscot, and Hancock counties. "It's playing with this funny boundary between imaginary and very real," he explains. To draw people in, the madcap project relies on little details that create a sense of reality. Many of those details exist online: the route map, train schedules, ticketing policies, and oft-updated status reports in case of weather-related service outages. Bullitt has even published serious-sounding technical monographs on the system's functionality, with titles like "Towards an Aesthetic Kinematics of Subway Motion."

Other elements of the art project actually exist in the real world, even if the tunnels and tracks don't. There are parking spots marked FOR D RIDERS ONLY — which has created some confusion among drivers oblivious to the joke and sufficiently deterred by the warning that VIOLATORS WILL BE DISAPPOINTED. Bullitt has also tapped residents who live near designated "stops" to serve as stationmasters. He provides official signage to display outside, as well as business cards and promotional postcards to spread the word about the project. "I never push it on anyone," he notes. "I want to stand back and allow this network to develop on its own." And if locals wind up pondering the virtues of real, tangible public transportation, he says, all the better.

Milbridge resident Kristen Nabarrete manages the Milbridge House Restaurant, a Main Street mainstay for pancakes and breakfast hash. When she heard about the imaginary transit system, she asked Bullitt, a frequent customer, if she could be the Milbridge-Bayside stationmaster. These days, Nabarrete's diners often notice the reserved parking outside or the Rapid Transit postcards by the checkout and ask: "Is this for real?"

Bullitt would tell them it's a metaphor — and a call to action — for growing our nexus of human interaction. He's moved by abstract questions like "Just what does it mean to be connected?" and "What are the threads that weave our lives together?" Sure, some folks might nod politely and back away in the face of such high-flying philosophizing, but there's a pragmatic life lesson embedded in the whimsical art concept. In fact, it's right there in the Rapid Transit rider guidelines: "Consider putting away your smartphone and introducing yourself to a fellow traveler." — JOEL CRABTREE