



Arts & Entertainment



Digging deep Downeast — artist sets up imaginary subway

by Danielle Woerner

The Downeast Rapid Transit system is a long, long way from the “A” train in New York City.

And, for those who know that signature song of the Duke Ellington Orchestra, the DRT won’t get you to Harlem, either. In fact, since it’s an imaginative work of public art rather than a steel-and-concrete subway, it won’t necessarily get you anywhere in the real world.

The DRT is the creation of JT Bullitt, an artist and seismographer based in Steuben.

“It’s meant to be a kind of whimsical, good-hearted gesture, but there’s also a serious idea behind it — a reminder that all of us here in this beautiful place are connected in ways that we can’t always immediately see,” Bullitt said. “There are these invisible, maybe subterranean, connections between us all. That, to me, is really exciting and important, and I just enjoy playing with that.”

The line

The journey begins on the project’s website, www.downeastrapidtransit.com. Area residents may have also noticed a DRT sign outside a home, business or park throughout Washington County. For instance, station signs can be found in Milbridge, Steuben, Cherrvfield and Lubec, among others. All DRT signs have QR codes, which visitors can scan with their phones to see more information.

The online DRT map, appropriately subtitled “the underground connects us all,” shows several intersecting subway lines — Barrens, Lake, Spruce, Peninsula, Moosehorn, Lighthouse, Water and Acadia. The delays sometimes seen on the Water Line aren’t arbitrary. Bullitt wrote code that makes the Water Line automatically shut down on the site in response to official local small-craft advisories.

“It’s the coolest thing,” he said. “The make-believe website is actually telling me something about the real weather. This mixture of the imaginary and the physical world is so interesting to me: how these two worlds intersect?”

About 15 of the stations shown on the map are active, with named station masters and brief descriptions. When a new station sign is to be erected, Bullitt comes equipped with the sign, tools, a ribbon for a ribbon-cutting ceremony, and personalized packets of station business cards and other information.

There are no special rules for station masters, so different private property and business owners handle their roles in different ways. Some just host the sign — whose location must comply with town regulations

and not interfere with traffic or public safety. Others engage in conversation with curious travelers who stop by, even playing out the station master role by issuing passes and having serious discussions about timetables and conditions. If a sign is located on private property, passers-by must ask permission of the owners to “enter the station,” Bullitt said.

Asked how the DRT was born, Bullitt said, “On the surface, the idea came to me when I moved here in 2009 from Massachusetts, outside of Boston, which has an old subway system I used a fair amount. Living here, I began to appreciate how big the distances are, and how it takes forever to get from one peninsula to the next one. You have to drive 5 miles inland and then you zig down Route 1, and then when you’ve made that half-hour trip you can look across the water and wonder, ‘Why couldn’t I just go that way?’ So why not have a subway? It seemed perfectly logical to me.

“There are all these layers to it. It can stimulate conversations about what kind of public transit we have up here, and do we want something more sophisticated than the bus line?”

In addition to the issues of cost and economics, Bullitt said, is the issue of people staying in touch with each other when they live in these scattered towns.

The underground element

Bullitt said he was also interested in the idea of the subterranean and the ancient mythological references to it. Although the underworld is dark and dangerous, it is also a place of rebirth and renewal which a person can descend into and then come out of again.

“You’re not stuck there, as if you’ve been banished to the underworld forever,” Bullitt said. “It’s a journey, one we can all make, whether together or individually. It’s accessible to all of us.”

To that end, the website’s landing page suggests another intersection of fiction and the real world. Not only is there a live local weather map, but also there’s a box monitoring earthquake activity around the world. Bullitt said he has set up some code that will shut down the whole DRT system if there’s ever a strong enough earthquake anywhere — “for the safety of our riders.”

A physics major in college, Bullitt earned a master’s degree in geophysics from the University of California at Berkeley. He later worked at MIT and continued his graduate studies there, doing seismology and researching how waves travel through the earth. He started to experiment with turning his recordings of these deep, slow waves into sound by speeding up their low



Steuben artist JT Bullitt takes measurements in preparation for installing a new Downeast Rapid Transit station sign at Fish Point in Milbridge last week. Photos by Johanna S. Billings

frequencies so they are audible to the human ear. While at MIT, he was deeply inspired by the work of then-visiting Belgian artist and geophysicist, the late Juan Geuer.

“It created an experience of awe and wonder in the tiniest, most familiar, ordinary things,” Bullitt said. “I had a glimpse into a way to integrate science and art that I had never thought about before.”

For the past 10 years, Bullitt’s primary focus has been on developing ways of listening to and sharing the sounds that resonate from the earth itself.

“We live on the surface of this world, and aren’t normally aware that there are these measurable vibrations in the atmosphere all around us. I think it’s important that we become aware of them,” he said.

Some of his recordings have been used by dancers and composers and others have been used in planetariums. His other website, www.Earthsound.com, plays sounds of the earth in real time.

“I’m not composing music, just interested in hearing what the earth is saying,” he said. He is happy when people take the sounds and fold them into their own work.

“It’s all related,” he said.

Grav waves

In February, an international team of scientists detected the first evidence of gravitational waves that were generated by colliding black holes 1.5 billion light years from here. Bullitt had been following this research for years.

“Grav waves are so out of the box of our ordinary experiences,” he said. “They’re incredibly tiny ripples in the fabric of space and time. When they made that announcement, I got really excited, and knew I needed to



Steuben artist JT Bullitt recently installed a new station sign for the Downeast Rapid Transit at Fish Point in Milbridge. Other station signs can be found throughout Washington County.

learn more.”

This past summer, he went to Harvard Summer School to study astrophysics and brush up on his calculus.

Though the variety of these pursuits might seem all over the subway map to some, Bullitt said he is inspired by the ways they link up with each other.

For instance, in the 1980s, a team was scouting the country for a spot to put gravity wave detectors. One of the sites considered was the blueberry barrens in Columbia, though the team ultimately selected a site in Louisiana.

“In honor of that connection between Downeast Maine and grav waves, I put up a DRT station in the blueberry barrens,” he said.

The official stationmasters, though they serve at a distance, are researchers from MIT and Syracuse University.

Bullitt’s current passion is researching atmospheric sound — the very low-frequency waves circling the earth through the air, triggered by natural events such as volcanoes or storms. He wants to develop ways of translating those inaudible sounds into a form people can hear.

All his work, including Downeast Rapid Transit, is operating on different levels of connection, he said.

“I feel like I’m just putting out little seeds, in these station signs like you have now,” he said. “Some people think it’s just hilarious, and some people take it really seriously.”