

Myths about Rails to Trails on the Island (E&N) Corridor. April 2024

Larry Stevenson, the executive director of the Island Corridor Foundation, resigned in March. Larry was formerly the vice-president of marketing for the Kansas City Southern Railway. Larry was the source of many myths about the Island Corridor which are still much repeated despite the wealth of engineering information, economic analysis and BC Court findings which show that rail is no longer viable on the Island Corridor, and that lifting the rails and putting trails on the rail beds is the best way to preserve and keep the corridors in a public transportation use.

We need to dispel these myths so that everyone can understand the real potential and possibilities of a trail on the Island Corridor.

MYTHS, with notes

Myth	Reality	Explanation
<p>Myth No. 1 Rail with trail is the best option for the corridor</p>	<p>Rails with trail cannot be done for a continuous trail on the corridor</p>	<p>The 59 bridges are too narrow for both rail and a trail <i>See note 1.</i></p>
<p>Myth No. 2 If the rails are lifted the corridor will be lost</p>	<p>Lifting the rails does not mean that the corridor will be lost</p>	<p>The rails were lifted on the Cowichan branch of the E&N railway and it has become a trail <i>See note 2.</i></p>
<p>Myth No. 3 Government will pay for rail on the E&N Corridor</p>	<p>There is no funding for rail on the E&N corridor from government or from anywhere else</p>	<p>There are hundreds of millions of dollars available for active transportation trails from governments <i>See note 3.</i></p>
<p>Myth No. 4 If a trail is created rail can't return. Rail banking is illegal in Canada</p>	<p>Rail banking can be part of the trail agreement</p>	<p>The Galloping Goose Trail ROW in the CRD, on an old CNR rail bed, can return to rail if the province requires it to <i>See note 4.</i></p>
<p>Myth No. 5 Rail is more environmentally friendly than intercity bus</p>	<p>In Canada intercity bus is much more environmentally friendly than passenger rail</p>	<p>In Canada, intercity bus emits only 50% of the CO₂ emissions of passenger rail <i>See note 5.</i></p>

Notes:

1. The big advantage of the Island Corridor is that it is still continuous.* All long distance trails are continuous. This is what attracts visitors. If the rails are not removed the Island Corridor Trail cannot be continuous because it has to cross 59 bridges on the route which are too narrow for both rails and a trail. The bridges are mostly between settlements so if the trail cannot cross them we will end up with a lot of short trails going nowhere and no one will use the trail to get from place to place.

There are also many others barriers to a trail beside the rails. A study by Nanaimo Regional District in 2008 identified over 40 places in the NRD where a trail beside the rails was “not practicable.” Other attempts to put a trail beside the rails through the Nanaimo midtown have been put on hold, because of costs, until the future of the corridor is clearer.

A 17 km trail has been partially built beside the rails in the Capital Region at the staggering cost of \$2 million to over \$3 million per km — that is about the same as a provincial two lane highway! The cost on the rail bed with the rails lifted would be \$500 - \$600 thousand per km, about the same as the North Okanagan Trail now under construction.

* If all First Nations on the corridor get their land back (less than 10 km total) the trail will go around the reserves as it does in the CRD.

2. The Cowichan branch of the Esquimalt and Nanaimo Railway was closed in 1988. The rails were then lifted. The Cowichan Regional District created a multi-use trail on the old rail bed. The corridor was not “lost,” This is also possible for the rest of the Island Corridor.

3. In 2015 the Snaw-Naw-As First Nation, whose reserve is bisected by the corridor, asked the BC Supreme Court to return their corridor land to them because the corridor was no longer used as a railway. The court ruled against them, despite finding that there was no business case for rail. In 2021, the BC Court of Appeal (BCCA 333) ruled that the federal government had to provide funds for the restoration of rail or otherwise make a decision by March 15, 2023 or the court would allow the land to revert back to the Snaw-Naw-As.

On March 14, 2023, the federal and provincial governments jointly announced the return of the corridor lands to the Snaw-Naw-As First Nation. No funding for rail was announced then or referred to at any future time.

4. The ROW was originally part of the CNR railway on the island. When the railway closed the rails were lifted and the corridor was purchased by the province. After a campaign by the Greater Victoria Cycling Coalition and others, the land was leased to the Capital Regional District who developed it over 10 years as a highly successful trail.

The lease is renewable but the terms give the province the option of using the right of way for another purpose, including rail, if required. This is what “rail banking” means.

5. Figures published in a joint study by Pollution Probe and Delphi Sustainability Consulting, in July 2020, show that intercity bus is by far the most environmentally friendly means of intercity travel in Canada. The study, based on Stats Canada data, showed emissions per passenger mile for bus to be 55g CO₂e/passenger mile and for rail to be 110g CO₂e/passenger mile.