

Rails to Trails

David Slade

Clear the Tracks for World Class Active Transportation!



Photos left to right:

Cowichan Valley rail trail users near Lake Cowichan;

2 views of the current rail bed failure South of Shawnigan Lake.

Lots of us love trains and all of us local old timers recall hearing the trains whistle and seeing the engines chugging and smoking merrily through our communities of Shawnigan Lake and Cobble Hill. But sadly, those days are gone.

More than 10 years ago now, passenger service and most freight service halted on the now derelict E and N Rail Road. The railroad was built over a hundred years ago to service the logging and mining industries and for years it ran a “quaint” but inefficient passenger rail service between Victoria and Courtenay. The reason for cessation was safety concerns and the lack of funds required for the maintenance and improvements needed to address those concerns. Many people, including myself advocated for years for the return of passenger service to the rail line and hoped that the Island Corridor Foundation (ICF) would find a way to resurrect what could have been a way to get people out of their cars, relieve pressure on the Malahat and take meaningful local action to address carbon emissions and climate change.

But now after 10 years of rusting and rotting infrastructure, and no sign of the hundreds of millions of dollars needed to upgrade the line, perhaps it is time for a different dream. Imagine a trail like the galloping goose, which was also once a rail road, joining all of the communities

of Langford, Shawnigan, Cobble Hill, Koksilah, Duncan and so on North to Courtenay. Instead of a few lonely dog walkers and hikers, thousands of people would use the trail every day. E-bikes would have people commuting to Victoria for work, shopping and appointments as well as providing safe access for cyclists traveling to and from Duncan, Chemainus, Ladysmith, Nanaimo etc. A trail of this caliber with mountain, lake and ocean vistas along its length would attract thousands of visitors a year and pump millions of dollars into local economies, supporting campsites, restaurants, accommodation, artisans and of course bike shops.

There is a familiar, and not unreasonable call to build trails beside the tracks as has been done over almost 35 of the corridor’s 224 km length. Unfortunately, we can see from examples on Southern Vancouver Island that building a trail beside the tracks costs between 10 and 100 times as much as removing the rails and using the existing rail bed as the trail. Worse than that, in places where there are bridges, tunnels, rock cuts, ravines, swamps, and overpasses, a trail beside the tracks can become logistically and financially prohibitive to the point of impossible.

Since 2020 the Ministry of Transportation and Infrastructure has done studies on the rail corridor and

has estimated that it would cost over \$200 million, excluding the cost of new trains, just to bring the rail line back to its original inadequate service and require millions of dollars in annual subsidies to keep it running. Their South Island Transportation study did not identify rail service North of Langford as even a distant future consideration.

So the question is: Do we sit tight and wait for another 10 or 20 or 30 years for money that may never come? Or do we take advantage of the opportunity laying dormant in our back yards and embrace the growing interest in active transportation and E-bikes. We have a chance to improve public health, provide safe bicycle commuting options, act on climate change by getting people out of their cars, and build a significant low impact tourist economy. This is a dream that only needs us to wake up, stop waiting for that distant train whistle and clear the tracks for what really is possible right now.

For more information, please visit <https://fortvi.ca/> (Friends of Rails to Trails Vancouver Island) a non-profit society for which I am a director. We are always looking for more members and support. Our primary objective is to have the E and N Railbed converted to an active transportation corridor from Langford to Courtenay as soon as possible.