

A Pragmatic Look at the **FORT-VI Rail-to-Trail Feasibility Report**

A balanced assessment of the rail-to-trail proposal



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Summary

The FORT-VI report's headline benefit of about \$95 million a year rests on borrowed ratios from two mature trails, applied to a market that is already well supplied with trails, and it treats a rail corridor as a blank slate.

The MJL Engineering study (April 2023) estimates a 289 km gravel-and-asphalt trail costing \$172.8 million, drawing about 986,000 visits and \$94.8 million in annual economic impact. Its own text says these figures were produced without any surveys of trail users or local businesses.

Three problems stand out:

1. **The visitor and spending forecast is not net of what already exists.** It copies the Great Allegheny Passage's visits-per-resident ratio and applies tourist-level spending to local day trips, with no deduction for trips and spending that would happen anyway.

2. **Vancouver Island's cycle-tourism supply is already deep.** Regional trails in the Capital Region alone logged 4.4 million visits in 2025, and a rail-grade trail with heritage trestles already runs from Victoria to the Cowichan Valley. A second parallel trail mostly competes with these rather than adding new demand.
3. **The binding constraint on Island tourism is access, not trails.** Highway closures and ferry disruptions repeatedly cost tourism businesses tens of millions of dollars. A trail adds no capacity to move visitors; a working railway could.

The report's two flagship examples, the GAP and the Otago Central Rail Trail, both depend on a parallel or connecting passenger train to deliver riders. That is an argument for rail-with-trail, not rail-to-trail.

What the report claims

All figures below are from the [FORT-VI feasibility report](#) (MJL Engineering, Davies Transportation Consulting and Intrinsik, April 2023), in 2023 Canadian dollars.

Claim	Figure	How it was derived
Total project cost	\$172.8M	Class D estimate; \$349,073/km civil cost, plus bridges, crossings, rockfall, 10% engineering, 15% contingency
Annual visits	986,268	GAP's 4.3 day trips per Trail Impact Zone resident, applied to 210,340 residents within 1 km of the corridor
Direct annual impact	\$49.9M	Greater Victoria visitor spending (\$237/day) scaled by GAP's domestic/international ratio to about \$43 per non-commuter visit
Indirect + induced	\$44.9M	Multipliers of 0.50 and 0.40 from a Victoria tourism study
Total annual impact	\$94.8M	Sum of the above
Construction impact	\$390.5M	Project cost times Statistics Canada multipliers
Health benefit	>\$200,000/yr	0.04 premature deaths averted per year (WHO HEAT tool)

The report also notes that removing rails and ties was excluded from the cost estimate at the client's request.

Problems in the economic forecast

The \$94.8 million figure is a gross, borrowed estimate; corrected for local spending and displacement, it would likely shrink by well over half.

1. The visit count is copied, not modelled. The report applies the GAP's ratio of 4.3 day trips per nearby resident directly to the Island. But the GAP is one leg of a 335-mile Pittsburgh-to-Washington trail system on the U.S. east coast, drawing on a metro population of 1.85 million around its impact zone. Island visitors must first cross water by ferry or plane.

2. Much of that use already exists. In Greater Victoria, the corridor already carries the 17 km E&N Rail Trail, built beside the tracks, which the report itself describes. Nanaimo's E&N trail is likewise built beside the line. Residents in these zones are already counted in existing trail use, not new demand.

3. Local day trips are given tourist spending. The report assigns about \$43 per non-commuter visit, derived from Greater Victoria's \$237-a-day visitor spending. The Atlantic Canada studies it cites found residents spend \$6.60 to \$19.05 per trail visit. Using those rates for local day trips would cut their spending by roughly 55% to 85%.

4. No displacement adjustment. Money a resident spends at a café after a trail ride is mostly money they would have spent locally anyway. The New Zealand cost-benefit study the report cites explicitly netted out displacement for domestic visitors; the FORT-VI forecast does not.

5. Its own comparables don't support the scale. By the report's own table, the Otago Central Rail Trail drew 17,164 to 25,722 visits a year and about CDN\$1.9 million in benefits. The Island forecast is roughly 40 to 57 times Otago's visits and about 50 times its benefits.

6. Construction spending is counted as a benefit. The \$390.5 million "construction impact" is the project's cost run through multipliers. Any \$173 million public project, rail included, would show a similar number. It is a measure of spending, not return.

7. The health case is small and one-sided. The Rapid Health Impact Assessment was done in under a week and states its aim was to emphasize positive impacts. Its result, about \$200,000 a year, would take over 800 years to equal the capital cost.

8. Quality-control gaps. Table 6.2, labelled as the trail's direct economic impact, actually reprints the GAP population table, so the core spending calculation is never shown. Grade-crossing costs appear as \$10 million in the text and \$12 million in the cost table.

The Island already has a mature trail and cycle-tourism market

The report models the Island as if it were Central Otago, a sparse region where a rail trail was the only cycling product. Vancouver Island is the opposite: trail supply is deep, and the experience the report promises largely exists.

Existing asset	What it offers	Source
CRD regional trails (Galloping Goose 55 km, Lochside 29 km, E&N Rail Trail 17 km)	4.4 million visits in 2025; the CRD is spending \$53.5M to widen and light about 6 km of the busiest sections	CRD
Cowichan Valley Trail (Trans Canada Trail)	A former rail grade with eight trestles, including the 187 m, 44 m-high Kinsol Trestle; linked to the Goose via the Sooke Hills Wilderness Trail in 2017	CVRD , BC Mag
Vancouver Island Trail	Victoria to Cape Scott, about 770–800 km, sharing the rail-grade Trans Canada Trail as far as Lake Cowichan	Lonely Planet , VITA
Mountain-bike hubs (Cumberland, Nanaimo, Cowichan, Mount Washington)	Cumberland describes itself as Canada's fourth most visited biking community; visiting riders spend \$80–100 a day	CTV
Bikepacking and road touring	The 1,000 km Tree to Sea loop on the North Island; proposed Inside Passage Bike Route from Comox to Mill Bay	West Coast Traveller , BCCC

What this means for the forecast:

- **Substitution, not addition.** A visitor choosing a multi-day rail-trail ride already has the Goose-to-Cowichan route, trestles included. A second gravel trail running broadly parallel through the same Shawnigan-to-Cowichan country would split that market more than grow it.
- **The marketable gap is not trail kilometres.** Cyclists can already find more trail than they can ride in a trip. What they lack is an easy way to reach a trailhead without a car and get back from the far end of a linear route.
- **Diminishing returns.** The GAP and Otago succeeded partly because they were the signature product in their regions. On the Island, an E&N trail would be one of many, so the GAP ratios overstate how many new trips it could draw.

Transportation fragility is the bigger tourism risk

Island tourism loses far more to unreliable access than it could gain from another trail. The report does not discuss highway or ferry reliability at all.

Single points of failure on the highway network.

- **Highway 4, 2023.** The Cameron Bluffs wildfire closed the only paved road to Port Alberni, Tofino and Ucluelet for about two weeks, followed by intermittent closures into the fall. Estimated business losses: \$31.2M in Tofino, \$14.5M in Ucluelet and \$14.9M in Port Alberni, over \$60M in one season ([Global News](#), [The Wave](#)). That one event cost more than half the trail's claimed annual direct impact.
- **The Malahat.** It is the only main road between Victoria and the rest of the Island. Crashes and rockslides close it for hours with no detour; during one rockslide closure, the Mill Bay–Brentwood Bay ferry filled up and drivers were redirected through the Gulf Islands ([Goldstream Gazette](#)). After the November 2021 atmospheric river, it closed nightly for a week for repairs ([Nanaimo Bulletin](#)).

Unreliable ferries. BC Ferries cancelled 2,886 sailings in fiscal 2023, 1,163 of them for crew shortages, more than double the year before ([Times Colonist](#)). Cancellations are only 1.6% of sailings, but regular users told the Globe and Mail the uncertainty itself was the hardest part ([Globe and Mail](#)).

A large car-free market the trail can't serve. Victoria received 989,950 cruise passengers in 2025, a record ([CTV](#)). These visitors have hours, not days, and no car. A gravel trail does nothing to get them to Cowichan wineries, Chemainus or Nanaimo. A scheduled train could, and so could foot passengers arriving at Nanaimo or Victoria by ferry or floatplane.

Why this matters for the trail case. A rail-to-trail conversion permanently removes the one continuous transportation corridor, separate from the highway, that parallels these weak links. The province made the same point in 2023: once broken up and built over, the corridor would likely be lost for future generations ([CHEK](#)). Visitors who can't reliably get onto and around the Island won't reach any trail, new or old.

The report's own case studies are rail-and-trail systems

Both flagship examples lean on passenger trains to deliver and retrieve riders, a fact the report leaves out.

Trail	The rail link	Source
Great Allegheny Passage	Amtrak's Capitol Limited parallels the GAP and C&O towpath from Pittsburgh to Washington. After years of trail-group lobbying, roll-on bike service began in September 2015 at every station on the route.	MoBikeFed , Post-Gazette
Otago Central Rail Trail	The Taieri Gorge train runs from Dunedin toward the trail's Middlemarch end. The operator now markets one-way trips with onward connections to the trail, and is working on bike-hire packages.	Dunedin Railways , SheBikesHeBikes

The Otago example is especially telling. When Dunedin debated tearing up the Taieri Gorge line to extend the trail, the rail trail trust's own chair said a trail could run alongside the track, and that she would welcome regular, frequent trains to Middlemarch ([ODT](#), [ODT](#)). Dunedin councillors chose to keep the gorge line open ([ODT](#)).

The lesson for the Island is that the most successful rail trails pair the trail with a train, solving the linear-route problem: ride one way, take the train back. On the E&N, that means rail-with-trail, as already built beside the tracks in Victoria and Nanaimo.

Costs, risks and omissions

The \$172.8 million estimate understates the true cost and ignores the corridor's biggest legal risk.

- **Rail and tie removal excluded.** The report says this was left out at the client's request, so the figure is not the cost of the project FORT-VI actually proposes.
- **No operating or lifecycle budget.** There is no annual maintenance cost for 289 km of trail, 50 decked bridges and 236 crossings. For scale, the CRD is spending \$53.5 million to widen and light about 6 km of its two busiest trails ([CRD](#)).
- **Thin crossing and rockfall allowances.** \$12 million across 236 crossings averages about \$51,000 each, and rockfall mitigation is a flat \$2 million that the report itself says needs refinement.
- **2023 dollars, Class D.** Class D estimates carry wide uncertainty, and construction costs have risen since 2023.
- **Reversion risk is not addressed.** The corridor crosses the territories of 14 First Nations. In the Snaw-Naw-As case, the BC Court of Appeal held that a railway right-of-way through reserve land reverts once it is no longer required for railway purposes ([DGW Law](#)). In March 2023, Canada and BC returned the 10.78-acre Nanoose segment ([CHEK](#)). Removing the rails could strengthen similar claims elsewhere and break the trail's continuity, a point the Island Corridor Foundation's then-CEO made publicly in 2020 ([CFAX](#)).
- **One-way door.** A trail can sit beside a working railway; a gravelled trackbed with rails gone makes later rail restoration far harder and costlier.

Talking points

1. The \$95 million figure was produced without a single survey of Island trail users or businesses, using ratios borrowed from Pennsylvania.
2. It gives local residents tourist-level spending and never subtracts money that would be spent anyway.
3. By the report's own numbers, the Otago rail trail earns about \$1.9 million a year, not \$95 million.
4. The Island already has a rail-grade trail with heritage trestles from Victoria to the Cowichan Valley, plus 4.4 million visits a year on CRD trails alone.
5. One 2023 highway closure cost west coast and Alberni Valley businesses over \$60 million. Access, not trail supply, is the Island's tourism bottleneck.
6. The GAP and Otago both rely on trains to carry cyclists. Their real lesson is rail-with-trail.
7. Once the rails are gone, the corridor is very hard to put back together.

Sources

- [FORT-VI Feasibility Report, April 2023](#)
- [CRD Regional Trails](#)
- [CVRD: Kinsol Trestle](#)
- [BC Magazine: Cowichan Valley Trail](#)
- [Vancouver Island Trail Association](#)
- [CTV: Cumberland mountain-bike spending](#)
- [Global News: Highway 4 closure losses](#)
- [The Wave: Port Alberni, Ucluelet, Tofino losses](#)
- [Goldstream Gazette: Malahat rockslide closure](#)
- [Nanaimo Bulletin: Malahat nightly closures, Nov 2021](#)
- [Times Colonist: BC Ferries cancellations FY2023](#)
- [CTV: Victoria cruise passengers 2025](#)
- [MoBikeFed: Amtrak Capitol Limited roll-on bikes](#)
- [Dunedin Railways: Taieri Gorge onward travel](#)
- [ODT: Rail and trail both possible](#)
- [ODT: Gorge line stays](#)
- [DGW Law: Snaw-Naw-As v. Canada, 2021 BCCA 333](#)
- [CHEK: Snaw-naw-as land returned, March 2023](#)
- [Coast Reporter: Snaw-Naw-As chief on rail](#)