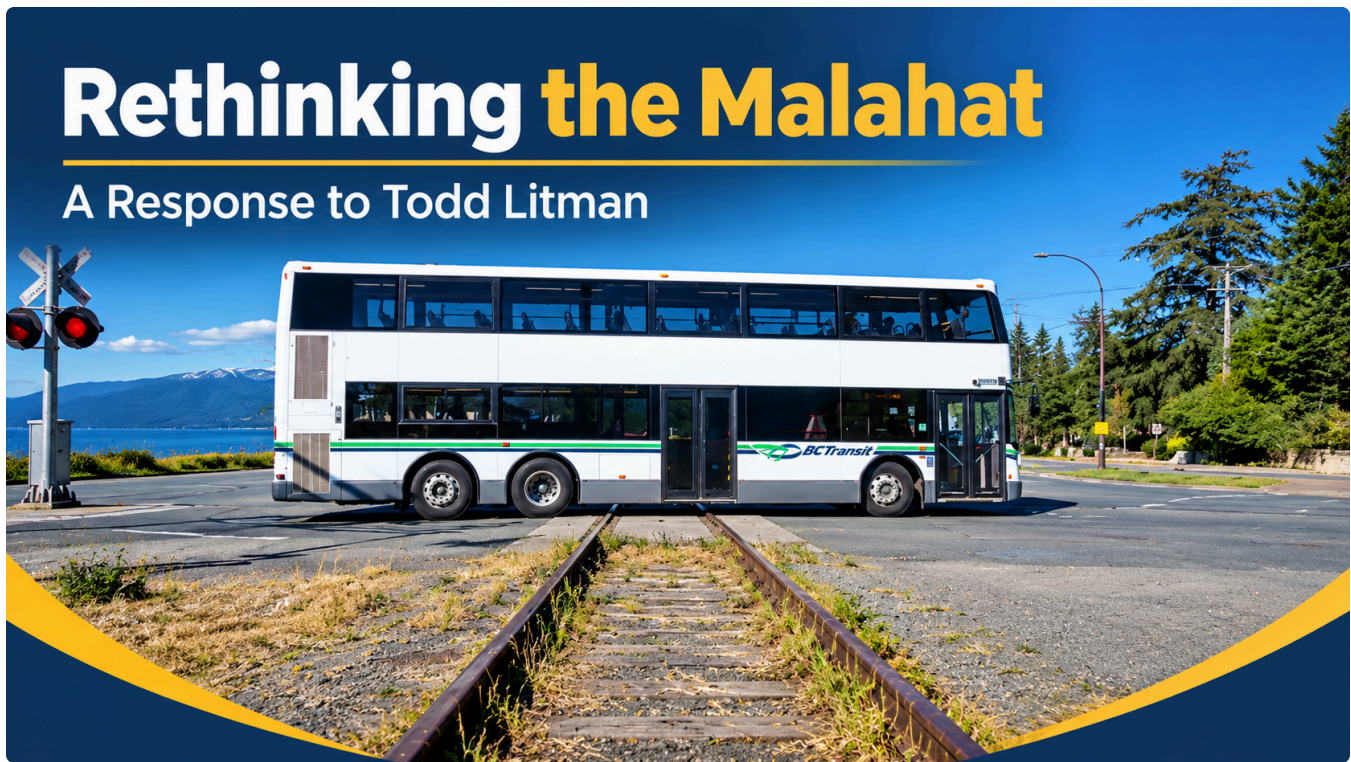




Rethinking the Malahat: A Response to Todd Litman

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Summary

Frequent Malahat buses are worth starting now, but they cannot replace the Island Rail Corridor. Todd Litman's *Rethinking Malahat Solutions* (VTPI, October 2024) rightly rejects highway widening, then judges rail on a minimal scenario his own research would call unfair.

A bus on the Malahat shares the highway's single lane, its queues and its roughly 50 crashes and 12 closures a year. That lane cannot be widened: in February 2026 the Province shelved even a median-barrier project in Goldstream Park. The rail corridor is the only separate right-of-way across this barrier, and the only one there will ever be.

Rail done properly carries peak commuters at far lower labour cost per rider, keeps the Island moving when the highway closes, and can take freight trucks off the road. The answer is buses now and rail for the long term, not one in place of the other.

Where Litman is right

We agree with much of the report, and say so plainly.

- **Widening induces traffic.** Adding a lane typically generates 4,000–8,000 new daily vehicle trips and pushes congestion downstream into Langford and Victoria.
- **Buses can start fast.** Frequent service can run within months, while major infrastructure takes years.
- **Early rail costings were incomplete.** The Island Corridor Foundation's \$431 million business case left out contingency, real stations, First Nations land rights, maintenance facilities and level crossings.
- **Two trains a day at random times would not compete.** No service, bus or rail, succeeds at that frequency.

Our disagreement is with what follows from these points, not with the points themselves.

Litman's own research points toward rail

Litman's guidebook *Evaluating Public Transit Benefits and Costs* (June 2026) makes the case for rail that his Malahat report sets aside.

- **Rail attracts drivers.** It describes rail as more comfortable and prestigious than buses, so it draws more travellers who could otherwise drive.
- **Rail beats the models.** New North American rail and BRT systems attract more riders than standard models predict, so practitioners add a 12-minute in-vehicle "bias constant" for high-quality transit.
- **Rail shapes communities.** Rail has the largest effect on per-capita vehicle travel, because stations catalyze compact, walkable neighbourhoods. Households near new light rail cut daily driving by about 30%.
- **The honest trade-off.** Bus means lower upfront cost and smaller long-term benefit; rail means higher upfront cost and larger long-term benefit.

The Malahat report judges rail only on upfront public cost per trip. By the guidebook's own framework, that is the measure most biased against rail.

The bus shares the highway's weaknesses

Litman's bus runs in the same lane as the problem it is meant to solve. There is no bus lane over the Malahat, and the Goldstream section is one lane each way through a provincial park.

- **Same queues, same closures.** The bus is stopped by the same crashes and the same closures as every car. Its 80–100 km/h speed is an uncongested speed.
- **No room to add lanes.** On February 5, 2026, the Ministry of Transportation and Transit announced it would not proceed with even the Goldstream median-barrier project, citing environmental concerns in the park, and moved the funding elsewhere.
- **First Nations rights at Goldstream.** W̱SÁNEĆ voices, including Tsartlip Elder Carl Olsen, have protested the project for years. They cite fishing rights under the 1852 North Saanich Treaty, salmon spawning habitat, and about 715 trees at risk.

If a median barrier cannot be built at Goldstream, a bus lane cannot either. Litman's report predates the pause, but his plan now depends on a highway that cannot be improved for buses. The rail corridor already crosses the same barrier on its own right-of-way.

People don't choose long bus rides in traffic

The bus trip Litman proposes is long and uncomfortable, and most drivers will not trade their car for it.

- **Long trips.** Duncan to Victoria takes 70–77 minutes by bus on Litman's own figures. Nanaimo and Courtenay are much further; Courtenay to Victoria is about 220 km.
- **A hard ride.** The Malahat's grades and curves are tiring for passengers. A bus offers no washroom, no room to walk, limited bike space and no table to work at.
- **A poor comparison.** Litman's Sooke example, where transit carries 12% of trips, is a short suburban commute with frequent service and bus priority lanes. The Malahat is a mountain crossing and, for many, an intercity trip.
- **The rail factor.** Scherer and Dziekan (2012) found that travellers in Germany and Switzerland preferred rail to buses even when service was otherwise identical, with a rail factor of 63% for regional trains.

Whether that preference comes from psychology or from better service matters little here, because on the Malahat rail wins on both.

The rail scenario tested was set up to fail

Litman’s \$210 public cost per rail trip comes from the 2020 provincial study, which assumed a service no transit planner would choose. Frequency drives ridership, which is Litman’s own core argument for buses; testing rail at minimal frequency and then faulting its ridership is circular.

Feature	Scenario Litman assessed	Commuter service worth testing
Trains	1-4 a day, not timed to the peak	4-5 peak trains toward Victoria in the morning, back in the evening
Speed	38-55 km/h on worn track	Upgraded track and modern rolling stock
Victoria terminus	Vic West, adding 10-30 min to most trips	Downtown, as in Gwyer Webber's tunnel options
Fares	\$20-30 one way	Integrated with BC Transit, as West Coast Express is with TransLink
Propulsion	Diesel	Battery or hydrogen units such as the Stadler FLIRT

A few large trains can carry a real share of the peak. The Malahat carries about 25,000 vehicles and 30,000 people a day. If about 10% of daily traffic falls in the peak hour, roughly 1,500 vehicles travel in the busier direction. A West Coast Express-style train of six 144-seat coaches seats about 860, so four peak trains offer about 3,400 seats. That is comparable to two hours of peak-direction car traffic. The peak-hour share is a rule of thumb and should be confirmed against Ministry traffic counts.

West Coast Express shows it works. It runs five trains toward Vancouver each weekday morning and back in the evening, over 69 km in about 75 minutes. It carried about 2.6 million trips in 2019 and about 1.73 million in 2025.

What a peak-only service can’t do. It does not serve midday, evening, reverse or irregular trips, and the fear of missing the last train keeps some people in their cars. That is why frequent buses and rail belong together, each doing what it does best.

Labour cost per rider, and the cost of growth

At commuter volumes, rail's operator wage cost per rider is roughly a quarter to a fifth of a frequent bus service's. A highway coach carries about 50–60 people per driver; a train carries hundreds per crew of two.

Same 2,500 daily riders	Litman's bus plan	Peak commuter train
Service	43 round trips a day	5 trains each way, weekday peaks
Operator hours per year	about 62,800 bus-hours, one driver each	about 11,500 crew-hours
Operator wages per year	about \$3.5M	about \$0.7M
Operator cost per ride	about \$4–5	about \$1

Bus-hours are Litman's figure. Train crew-hours assume two crew, about 15 train-hours a day padded for split shifts, and 255 weekdays. Both columns assume about \$55–60 an hour with benefits. These are illustrative estimates, not sourced operating budgets.

Growth favours rail. Every additional 50 or so peak bus riders needs another bus, another driver and often another split shift. A train adds a coach with no extra crew, until the platforms are full. As the Island grows, bus labour costs rise with ridership, while rail's barely move.

The fair caveat. Crew wages are a small part of what a railway costs. Track and bridge maintenance, signals, crossings, dispatch and insurance are fixed, so rail is cheaper per rider only when trains are well filled. That is why service design matters: few, large, full peak trains.

Litman's rail operating figure is a placeholder. His \$50 million a year for rail operations is a blanket assumption of 4% of capital, applied to every option. It is not a costed operating budget. A fair comparison would use West Coast Express's operating cost per boarding against TransLink's suburban bus routes, from TransLink's published performance data.

A mixed-traffic bus is not a test of rail

Bus ridership on the Malahat would measure demand for a slow, unreliable bus, not for a fast, reliable train. The baseline is already low: transit carries under 0.1% of Malahat trips today, so even a respectable result could look small.

The risk is lopsided. A strong bus result helps rail by proving the market and showing buses filling up. A mediocre one hurts, because it will be quoted as proof that no one wants transit across the Malahat.

A bus pilot can still produce evidence that matters for rail, if it is designed to:

1. Record origins, destinations and stop-level boardings, to show where stations and park-and-rides belong.
2. Track peak loads, since full peak buses show the corridor needs more capacity than buses provide.
3. Compare ridership on bad days — closures, snow, long weekends — to show the value of a route that avoids the highway.
4. Survey riders and non-riders on a stated-preference question, such as: "Would you take a train that takes X minutes, never stops for highway incidents, and costs Y?"
5. Report the Langford–Victoria section separately, where Highway 1 bus lanes make results more transferable to rail and to the Reconciliation Corridor Initiative's study area.

Resilience and freight

A second route across the Malahat matters most on the days the highway is shut. Litman dismisses rail as a backup because it could carry under 5% of the 30,000 people who cross daily, but resilience is not about carrying everyone.

- **Essential trips keep moving.** A rail line keeps emergency, medical and essential travel going when the only highway closes, as it did in the 2021 atmospheric river. In its 2023 statement the Province cited that event as a reason to preserve the corridor.
- **A bus has no alternative.** When the Malahat closes, the bus closes with it.
- **Freight off the highway.** The Province's 2022 HDR freight analysis found many freight opportunities achievable with less investment than earlier studies assumed, shifting truck trips to rail. Adam Olsen of Tsartlip has said reopening a portion of Island Rail for shipments could reroute commercial trucking off the Malahat.

- **A corridor that can't be rebuilt.** The Province itself warned that if the corridor is broken up, future generations likely could not assemble a continuous corridor like it again.

Recommendations

The choice is not bus or rail. Buses are an operating cost paid every year forever; a restored corridor is an asset that serves the Island for a century.

1. **Start frequent Malahat buses now**, with integrated BC Transit fares, as Litman proposes.
2. **Design the bus service as a measured pilot**, collecting the origin-destination, peak-load, bad-day and stated-preference data described above.
3. **Do not widen the highway through Goldstream Park.** We agree with Litman and with the Province's February 2026 decision.
4. **Protect the full Island Rail Corridor** as a continuous transportation right-of-way.
5. **Advance the Reconciliation Corridor Initiative** between Langford and Victoria, led by the Songhees and Esquimalt Nations, as the first step in restoring rail.
6. **Re-evaluate rail on a realistic service plan:** peak commuter trains, a downtown terminus, integrated fares, modern rolling stock and a bottom-up operating budget.
7. **Develop freight service** on the lines identified in the 2022 HDR analysis and the 2026 Alberni Valley business case.

Litman's report was written before the Reconciliation Corridor agreement, the Goldstream pause and the first federal feasibility funding. We invite him to revisit it in that light, using the framework of his own research.

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