



VANCOUVER ISLAND RAIL CHALLENGES

In Jun 2022 I started advocating for the Restoration and improvement of the Vancouver Island Rail Corridor after finding out that Petition votes had stalled at 1462 votes. Along the way I've run into some very loud voices that continuously say the same misinformed things. With the votes over 10120 now, I thought it might be time to address the main anti-rail rhetoric together in one place.

The graphic shows the main talking points, so I'll address them clockwise from "Make it a Trail", through "Everyone loves their car", "First Nations Land Back", "It will be heavily subsidized", "People don't want it", "Other things are more important", "No one would use it", to "Not enough population." and a closing remark.



Make it a Trail.

Friends of Rails to Trails Vancouver Island (FORTVI) keeps presenting to Regional Districts and spreading around the concept of turning the Island Corridor into a giant curated and paved trail for cyclists and foot traffic to use. Others say that as well, but no others present to the regional districts after the Island Corridor Foundation (current owners) already heard their presentation and have it in their business case to have trails beside the rails, something they have been giving the thumbs up to all over the island.

The issue really boils down to Several First Nations leaders having already expressed that they would not have free to roam cyclists and walkers using their reserve as a thoroughfare or place to wander. Having contained people inside a train is one thing, but freely roaming tourists and people in general wandering about is another.

In addition, to convert the Island Corridor into a Trail only (unlike the Trail beside rails ICF proposes) it would require that the corridor have the rails and ties removed and an environmental impact study done beginning with having the soil sampled every 500 metres before the long stretch of 289km railway ballast reclamation occurs. That would have to be done prior to trail installation, it's a condition of decommissioning a railway, especially one of the E&N's significance, in Canada.

The real issue is justifying the seismic updates and pedestrian conversions of all the trestles for pedestrian use along the corridor and all the landscaping work required to ensure safety. The Kinsol Trestle itself was \$9 million to have it pedestrian ready with guard rails and a walkable surface. Who is going to pay for 48 bridges and trestles on the Victoria line alone to be made pedestrian friendly with guard rails and any other work they might need? A trail of that magnitude has no direct revenue stream, only maintenance requirements for 289km of trail to keep it usable and not overgrown. The notion of tourist dollars coming in is pie in the sky at best. This new trail attracting millions of international cyclists would be a short-lived event at best. Vancouver Island already has thousands of trails, and converting the corridor to a trail doesn't help Vancouver Islanders daily life at all really, especially not the most vulnerable like those with limited mobility. It simply doesn't add up, the corridor goes to some very remote areas of the island with no cell service or services at all for that matter.

In contrast, after a global announcement of the Vancouver Island Railway being restored, either in Partnership with First Nations or owned and operated by First Nations like the 3 other railways in Canada, a flood of tourists would come to ride it and take in the railway views that would suddenly light up the internet after the first train made the trip. Rail passenger services would extend Tourist reach and dollars all the while supporting commuters and all Vancouver Islanders that chose to use it. Just under 900,000 tourists are expected via the 330 Cruise Ships coming this year alone. The Island typically gets 5 million overnight visitors by sea and by air, they would surely utilize it for the views. What would we charge them for a day or family pass?



Everyone loves their car.

The only people that say they love their cars are enthusiasts, or die-hard drivers.

They are people that can afford a newer car with a warranty, or a vintage car with the maintenance costs. They can afford huge car payments, insurance, maintenance, and the gas if it's not electric. They can afford the repairs, likely because they spent money on a warranty, and they can afford the time they spend in their vehicle travelling while being unable to do anything else.

You simply can't tell me that someone living in, or close to, poverty enjoys owning a \$500-2000 beater car that is prone to breaking down, and likely polluting even worse than a typical car due to its age and lagging maintenance. They tend to leak oil, brake and steering fluid, the reason they need to "top up" often. Those cars stress the owner every time they drive that it might break down incurring repair costs and towing fees unless it's cheaper to buy a new \$500-2000 beater car.

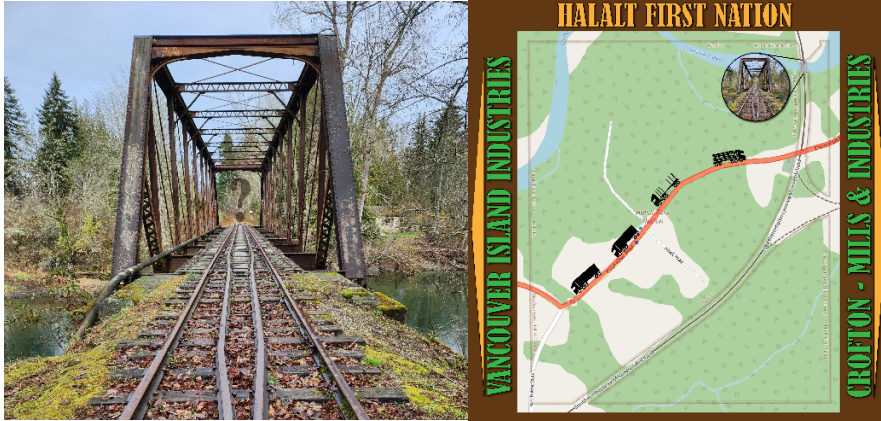
Everyone that can't afford a car is forced to own a car to get around because the transit services on Vancouver Island are worse and worse as you go North from Victoria.

You always have a car payment, either to the loan/lease holder, or in repairs. Even if your car has cost you next to nothing so far, wait for it, if you own it, breakdowns will come.

People have no choice but to drive long distances, which causes more maintenance and repairs through wear and tear, and the distance kills their monthly budget with skyrocketing fuel prices and inflation in general.

Continued car infrastructure investments cause the potential for even more GHG and other pollutants to rise under the "no alternative" car-centric environment the island has. Wider lanes create more space for more cars, and more cars comes with requirements for parking, maintenance facilities, and carwashes. They increase the market for a swath of environmentally toxic fluids like Steering fluid, Oil and Grease, windshield washer fluid, and pollute with rubber from worn tires and brake pad dust.

"Everyone loves their car" is only something said by those in a position of privilege.



Land Back.

If you don't know much about First Nations Treaty Negotiations and what the "Land Back" movement is about beyond the literal interpretation, it might appear that First Nations regaining their land has the effect of breaking up the rail corridor.

We know that the Cowichan Tribes first initiated the talks that established the Island Corridor Foundation (ICF), a 50-50 Directorate between Regional Districts and First Nations. Those facts are documented on their web site [FAQ's \(islandrail.ca\)](http://FAQ's(islandrail.ca)); that shows there is genuine interest within at least some of the First Nations leadership. Six of the twelve Directors at ICF were First Nations, an organization with a constitution for restoring rail and the Directors having a fiduciary duty to deliver on that constitution's goals.

Recently 5 Directors stepped down from ICF where a representative said, "We believe we can more constructively work outside of the ICF to advance the needs of our Nations and to chart a common-sense future for the E&N right-of-way." The Snaw-Naw-As had their land returned right after that.

Reconciliation is a Nation-to-Nation discussion, not a regional district or corporate responsibility. The Island Corridor Foundation is not, nor ever was, in a position to be part of that dialog.

It seems to me that what might be happening is First Nations securing their position to ensure they can benefit from the railway, have a level seat at the negotiating table, and have guarantees that only come from sovereign land rights.

The impacts to the Land and Sea on Vancouver Island from widening roads or creating new highways prematurely when we have an existing rail corridor, would be a massive mistake. Our children will have to bear that in the future as they try to figure out an alternative. It would be missing the forest for the trees, in my humble opinion.

I could be wrong, and I'll admit that, but in general I've learned that First Nations culture is connected to the Land and the Sea. I would be quite surprised to learn these Nation's leaders don't see the future impacts on the island without the rail corridor. Indigenous principals and Indigenuity are being sought out to change our colonial course of mismanaging the land and seas, because they are proven to be better stewards.

My hopes are to see a First Nations owned and operated railway like [Tshiuetin Rail Transportation](#), and [Mask-wa Oo-ta-ban "Bear Train."](#)



PASSENGER RAIL SERVICES ARE A PUBLIC SERVICE, NOT A FOR-PROFIT BUSINESS

PASSENGER SERVICES WILL BE CONNECTED TO BC TRANSIT AND OTHER TRANSPORTATION OPTIONS



HOW MANY INTERCITY BUSES COULD BE USED ON OTHER ROUTES AND STOP IN AT TERMINALS WHEN TRAINS ARRIVE?

**THE TRAIN WOULD BE ON TIME EVERY TIME, BECAUSE IT HAS RIGHT-OF-WAY AND ISN'T AFFECTED BY CONGESTION
IT'S THE RIGHT WAY TO DO TRANSPORTATION ON VANCOUVER ISLAND**



It will be heavily subsidized.

While all forms of Public Transportation are “heavily subsidized,” the most subsidized mode of transport is personal transportation in low occupancy cars. That comes from the continual maintenance of the massive network of roads, highways, and freeways and the costs of building new ones. It comes from the repair facilities, the additional parking lots, car washes, tire centres, and other paved over green spaces roads required to support car-centric construction. There are huge costs to our environment to expand or build new roads, and costs to maintain highways and freeways.

From a Transit perspective, B.C. Transit only obtains 4.5% of its budget from fares, the rest comes from Federal, Provincial, and local government transfers. A publicly funded passenger train moving over a railway that also moves freight means that the overall costs of the railway maintenance will come from the pool of both revenue streams for the railway owner, not only from the passenger service. Where the entire railway is publicly funded, 100% of the maintenance costs are for moving passengers, that is not our case.

The Vancouver Island Railway won't just move passengers, it will also move Freight. It has passing sidings, and they plan for more to increase the number of trains that can operate on the railway simultaneously. So, while the passenger trains would likely be subsidized by the government, the Freight income projection of \$3-9 Million per year will pay for the bulk of the railway maintenance after the rails and ties are replaced and the ballast refurbished.

It's costing \$24 million just to fix 50 metres of the Malahat that was washed out during the atmospheric river in November of 2021, work that is still not finished in 2023. It's only \$431 Million to restore 289km of railway! After that, in terms of the passenger services, it's just about the lifecycle management and maintenance of rolling stock... the Trains.



I would use it as an alternate transportation means	39.7%
I would use it to tour Vancouver Island	28.2%
I would use it for my primary transportation if it was integrated with BC Transit	18.1%
I would use it and get rid of my vehicle if it operated often enough	5.2%
I would never use it	4.5%
I would go on one trip just to check it out	4.3%

People don't want it.

This is simply not true.

The Vancouver Island Transport Corridor Coalition's petition ([Petition: Bring back Vancouver Island Rail Service](#)) has now reached 10,180 supporters to date, that is leaps and bounds more than any other petition for rail I can find in Canada. Poll after poll has shown support anywhere between 75% and 83.6% for restoring rail services. The Island Corridor Foundation conducted a survey in 2020; out of 2979 responders, 81% said they wanted it restored. A 24-hour Chek News poll with 6816 news feed responders had a response of 75% in favour.

My own survey, now over 1000 responders over 10 months of time, shows 83.6% strongly yes 6.5% say yes but have concerns, but only 6% showing a hard no! 1.1% Not really but need details, and Only 2.9% are neutral on the topic. If you would like to participate or see the latest results visit:

<https://poll.app.do/how-would-you-use-vancouver-island-rail>

If you consider the pressure everyone is under from out-of-control inflation, think of those you know that make minimum wage! That is approximately 140,000 people on Vancouver Island according to the Vancouver Island Economic alliance report. Ask yourself, how can they possibly afford a car given rental costs and prices for food and essentials in 2023?

Unfortunately, they must own a car because transit on Vancouver Island is terrible. The best service is in Victoria, but it steadily gets worse and worse as you travel North until it disappears completely if you hope to get North of Parksville. Vancouver Island made international news when BBC's "Race Across the World" participants were completely baffled at the lack of transit to get to the North Island and North on the Mainland. An issue on British Columbia's west coast at large.

We and our children will be saddled with the ever-growing cost of private vehicle ownership without alternatives. Instead, they should be able to save money until they can afford such things, not be forced into ownership by lack of such an essential service as public transportation.



Other things are more important.

There are other very important issues at hand to be sure and there are several projects on Vancouver Island to address some of them. But affordability is a huge issue for anyone that looks at their bottom-line dollars left over at the end of the day. Access to health care is a critical issue as one ages too!

The housing crisis has now allowed 3 suites per home across B.C. because construction isn't keeping up with demand. Access to Doctors and Nurses is a huge issue they are trying to solve by certifying those with qualifications from other countries to move and practice here.

Other important factors are Food, Water, Energy and Essentials security, something that can only be solved by buying and producing locally, as well as strengthening supply lines.

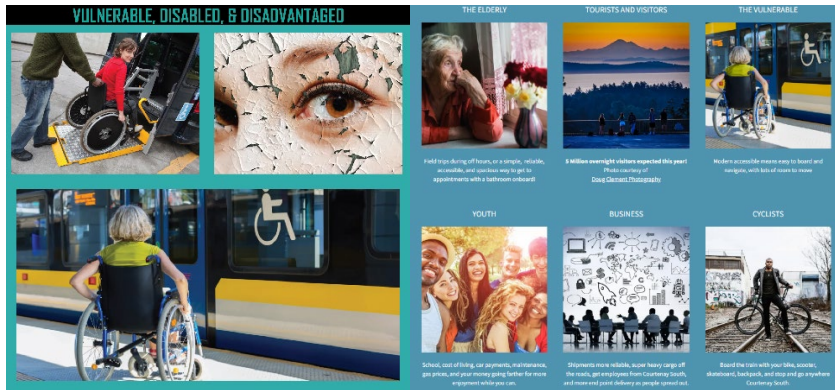
Transportation touches all those issues as well as health access. Restoring the railway and synchronizing buses with it creates an inexpensive way to travel from Courtenay and Port Alberni to Victoria and back.

Those who are health conscious, like Doctors and Nurses and many others, could cycle, e-bike or jog to work or to address their day aided by the train. Anyone can walk or roll onto a train at the terminal with ease, and then walk and roll to and from work, like cycling or using an e-bike, or a wheelchair.

They could lower their own cost of living, especially in the case of Nurses and minimum wage earners that don't make a doctor's wages. Inexpensive transportation makes it more attractive and affordable to live here. To quote the movie Field of Dreams, "If you build it, they will come."

With a mass-transit Right-of-Way corridor up and running, apartments and condos by Terminals could be built bigger and taller proving more homes quicker, while incurring much less demand for space that lower height builds cause. Heights are restricted more because of road capacities and earthquake concerns than any other reason, but road capacities are at the epicenter of the current limitations.

In terms of Food, Water, Energy and Essentials security, having a secondary path up and down the island is the only way to increase the odds of being able to distribute supplies, and for citizens to move on Vancouver Island, should there be road blockages. Worse, should we get hit by a significant Earthquake that knocks out sections of the road or the rail for that matter, both corridors could be leveraged at crossing points to bypass each blockage to get critical supplies where they need to go. So, while all those other important things are critical to address, the railway would increase the success of all of them, while providing Transportation Security.



No one would use it.

Under “People don’t want it” I touched on minimum wage earners and why they would use it out of necessity. In many cases, they would jump at the chance to ditch the \$500-\$2000 Junker and the costs associated, to use a modern train with connections to work, family and friends through a “Transit System” of buses synchronized with the train. I personally know friends and family that have expressed exactly that scenario.

I live in Shawnigan Lake, but I work in Esquimalt along with thousands of other people that live North of the Malahat or in Langford but work in Victoria or Esquimalt or anywhere in between. My gas bill is \$30 per day to drive in and back home from work, and that’s at about 11.7L per 100km, or 20 miles per gallon. My trip would shorten to a 4km drive to and from Cobble Hill Station, or a 2km e-bike ride to where Shawnigan Station would be rebuilt.

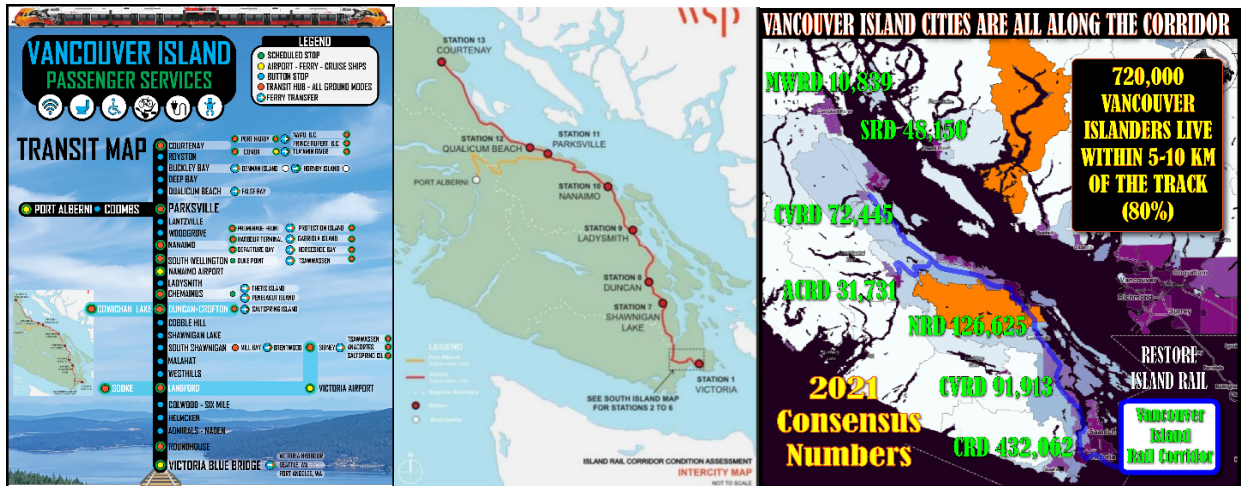
My situation is duplicated thousands of times all over the island, some with different modes of travel involved, but all stuck driving the whole way because of our government’s neglect to provide reasonable transit options.

I’ll be honest, getting stuck on a bus subject to the same road annoyances as driving with a bunch of people I don’t know, especially while waiting on the highway after a collision, is not desirable for me.

I just abstain and drive because I can afford it. Anyone that has been to Europe or even other areas in Canada that have rail passenger services like Ontario, Quebec and Vancouver will tell you the difference between bus and rail travel over a long distance. Switzerland wasn’t built in a day, it all started with a single railway.

Restoring rail-based transit on Vancouver Island would provide a simple, reliable, accessible, and spacious way to get to appointments with an accessible bathroom onboard. Trips from Port Alberni and Courtenay all the way to Victoria would minimize transfers and the need to use private services that cost so much more.

Cyclists would use it to board at one terminal and get off where they want to ride, or use it for extended reach so they can bike to work or for any of their daily travel needs, businesses would use it for Freight as shown in the recent Freight assessment released in Dec 2022 ([Island Rail Corridor Freight Analysis \(gov.bc.ca\)](https://www2.gov.bc.ca/gov/content/transportation/infrastructure/rail/freight-analysis)) and the general population will come to see specific uses for them once the service is back up and running.



Not enough Population

There is ample population that exceeds the basic person-per-hectare required for successful railways.

The mistake many people make calculating our population density is taking the total population of Vancouver Island (864,864 people as of 2021) and dividing it by the total area of the Island (32,134 square km) for the purposes of figuring out if a railway will be successful or not. 864,864 people divided by 32134 km² is 27 people per km², or .27 people per hectare.

That is obviously well below the requirement for a successful railway of 12 people per hectare. Using the online Canada Census mapper however, you can see our population exists right along the railway. We have areas that are well beyond 12 people per hectare. Victoria has the highest concentrations in areas up to 76 people per hectare, Langford was next at 26, Nanaimo 25, Courtenay 23, and Comox 20 per hectare.

Vancouver Island's population is primarily on the east coast of the island facing Vancouver, and in Port Alberni which is mid-island via the very deep Alberni inlet from the west coast of the island that can support deep sea vessels.

There are also the Southern travel needs of the 131,434 residents that live North of Courtenay to consider too. From Port Hardy and Coal Harbour to Victoria, there is only 1 Cancer hospital on Vancouver Island, BC Cancer- Victoria.

Saving money and having a right-of-way comfortable ride to and from appointments would be transformative for Vancouver Islanders. It would also be transformative for all the other reasons for traveling between cities between Courtenay, Comox and Port Alberni through Parksville, Nanaimo, Duncan, Langford, Colwood, View Royal, and Esquimalt to the edge of Victoria and everywhere between. Cycle, bus, ferry or walk and roll from there.

With no bus services North of Parksville, none to Port Alberni, and with Wheels for Wellness leaving there for lack of funding in January 2023, the lack of transit has created a Public Health Crisis for those who don't have a strong community around them to travel to essential services they need to survive.



**IF WE DON'T
RESTORE THIS**

**THEY WILL
DESTROY MORE
OF THIS**

Closing

It's clear to me and every expert I've talked to; clear in every study conducted on the railway to date; clear in every poll made to citizens of Vancouver Island showing huge support, that the railway itself being viable for Freight and Passenger services is not in question.

It's not financially viable to be solely a trail, people don't really love their cars unless they are in a position of privilege, First Nations getting land back is a good step towards reconciliation, and them having a level seat at the table is the right way to go. It would be less subsidized than dedicated passenger only railways, people want it as seen in every poll and the petition, it supports all the other important societal problems that need to be addressed, lots of people would use it for a variety of reasons, and there is enough population since 80% of the 900,000 people on the island live within 5-10km of the railway.

The questions are, do the leaders involved understand the future environmental impacts to Vancouver Island if they let the railway fall to ruin?

Are they thinking with their heart, mind, and eyes wide open?

Have they weighed the impacts on our most vulnerable citizens and our children in the future?

Warren Skaalrud

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YouTube: <https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCIRP8YPGpmczDo2y6CFpx7g>