

Victoria commuters pin hopes on rail plan

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As a long-time veteran of the Colwood Crawl, Don Swagar expects a certain amount of rush-hour congestion during the morning commute from his home in the Western Communities to his job in downtown Victoria.

But this fall, the gridlock on the Trans-Canada Highway outside the provincial capital has been far worse than anything he's experienced in almost 20 years of making the trip.

"There's been a lot more traffic in the last year and a half, and since the beginning of September, it's the worst I've ever seen it," he said. "A drive that used to take me 35 minutes now takes about an hour. It's my new reality."

The trigger for the recent spike in volume on the main highway is a \$7.4-million road-improvement project along the Old Island Highway in nearby View Royal that has caused major delays on the highway, which thousands of commuters use as an alternate route every day.

But View Royal Mayor Graham Hill said the project, to be completed this spring, will do little to address the causes of the Victoria's growing traffic woes – population growth, an over-reliance on the automobile and the absence of a rapid-transit system.

"I would say what we've got right now is just a foretaste of things to come," Mr. Hill said. "The daily traffic now is so intense that if there's one incident, a crash or a tie-up, it backs right up. We have to find a way to get people out of

their cars."

Mr. Hill's tiny suburban municipality, which has grown to 9,500 people from 5,500 in just seven years, straddles both the Trans-Canada Highway and the E&N Railway, a little-used transportation corridor that's widely regarded as ideal for a commuter rail service.

Peak traffic flow on the Trans Canada in View Royal has increased to 1,600 vehicles per hour from 1,400 over the past three years, he said.

However, Via Rail's daily train service on the E&N travels in the opposite direction to rush-hour traffic, leaving Victoria for Courtenay early in the morning and travelling back to the city in the evening.

This fall, the Island Corridor Foundation, which owns the E&N tracks, proposed to move the railway's terminus to Nanaimo and launch an early-morning service geared toward Victoria commuters.

Mr. Hill, a long-time ICF board member, said Via has agreed to provide three refurbished rail cars providing the ICF can come up with an estimated \$15-million to refurbish the deteriorating tracks.

"Commuter rail is a vital part of the response that we need to take to the transportation issues affecting our region," he said. "We're hopeful that both levels of government will respond."

However, studies by the provincial Transportation Ministry have concluded that the region lacks the critical mass of

population required to support rapid-transit links to downtown.

BC Transit is in the midst of a prolonged study of future transit options for Victoria, including light rail, but that process isn't slated to wrap up until the end of next year.

Sue Wood, who commutes 35 kilometres from Shawnigan Lake, a trip that now takes about 75 minutes, said it makes no sense to have the rail line sitting idle when the surrounding roads are so congested.

"We need some kind of rapid transit coming in from Langford and Colwood to take some traffic off the highway," she said. "It's getting to be as bad as Vancouver."

In recent weeks, the line of slow-moving cars has extended through Goldstream Park and up the Malahat to the South Shawnigan Lake turnoff as early as 6:30 a.m., Ms. Wood said.

Many commuters believe construction of a long-awaited overpass at the intersection of McKenzie Avenue and the Trans-Canada Highway would help solve the problem.

However, that project was passed over last year in favour of a \$24-million interchange on Saanich Peninsula near Victoria airport, in the heart of Tory cabinet minister Gary Lunn's riding.

Mr. Swagar is convinced politics played a role in the decision.

"It's crazy," he said. "They didn't need an overpass at the airport, I've never waited more than one light at that intersection."

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