

Barging improvements open doors for freight

Lexi Bainas, The Cowichan Valley Citizen

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While most of the talk is about passenger/commuter service on the former E&N rail line up and down Vancouver Island, the Island Corridor Foundation is also hoping to build up freight traffic. ICF Executive Director Graham Bruce said July 13 that infrastructure improvements at Annacis Island in the Lower Mainland could really open doors for rail freight here.

"That Annacis Island rail barge facility all ties in to the four main intercontinental class A railways. They go out through all of North America. That's built, done, complete and in operation."

This revamped facility allows for more frequent rail barges between the mainland and Vancouver Island. "Instead of once a week, it's now three times a week and could be seven times a week," he said, adding that service is important.

"If you are going to try to get freight back on the rail you either have to be able to get the products that are necessary to those that are looking for them on the Island or the goods to the market in a timely way. And instead of 10-15 days of transport we can now look at three to four days."

That opens up a lot of opportunities.

"That builds. It's going to take time but what we have now is the document (a study from the provincial government into the viability of the Vancouver Island railway line)."
The ICF is finishing up the final touches so it can then approach a variety of agencies for funding of various aspects of the line's operation.

"We can then say 'here we are, due diligence has been done, we think this makes sense, there's supporting documentation for all that, now we need you to come to the table,'" Bruce said.

Foundation taking 'incremental' approach to E&N

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The future is here and it's full of possibilities for an active rail corridor along Vancouver Island's old E&N line, according to Graham Bruce, executive director of the Island Corridor Foundation. Speaking this week about a recently-released report that led the provincial government to decline immediate large scale funding, Bruce said the document can now be used to help buoy up new proposals to the federal government and the Island Coastal Economic Trust as well as the provincial government. The whole idea is to take an "incremental" approach, he said.

The report analyzed rail activity in the Island corridor on four fronts: commuter rail, passenger service, excursion tourism and freight. "Because we had moved to an incremental approach, what we were looking to do is improve service and bring up the railway service and demand and activity while at the same time look for infrastructure investment," he said.

"The report gives us a working document to fall back on as we continue our work in these incremental approaches." What's first? A new take on an old service.

"One thing we're looking to do fairly quickly is moving the VIA service out of Victoria to Nanaimo and then running it south early in the morning followed later by a run up to Courtenay and then back again to repeat. That's phase I," he said.

Phase II will be a second train to address a specific need. "It leaves approximately half an hour later and it would almost be a dedicated train in taking people from the Cowichan Valley to the Naden base in Esquimalt," Bruce said, pointing out that there are about 800 people who live north of the Malahat who work at that naval base.

"We're working on that strategy with the base now," he said. However, those are not the only ideas for attracting riders to a train.

"What we can see that second train doing is running between Langford and Victoria several times a day after it's dropped its big load," said Bruce. "It would then make a midday run back to Nanaimo and then come back to repeat in reverse the run back and forth and then bringing people from the base back to the Cowichan Valley."

Clearly, there is more to the future of ICF rail than simply trundling excursionists up and down the tracks to Courtenay and back. "We're trying to provide more frequency with a dedicated service and more ridership. We're looking for new cars, which we think VIA can supply. We're hoping we can put this together by the spring of 2011," Bruce said.

The report says it "supports the initiatives that the Island Corridor Foundation is undertaking," and the Foundation is actively working to achieve the needed infrastructure requirements.

"We'll be approaching the federal government, the provincial government and the Island Coastal Economic Trust for infrastructure funding necessary to bring that about. We're now working to an overall plan and it's smaller bites that lead to the full vision," Bruce said.

It's not a question of keeping the corridor viable for future use. Bruce says the future is here right now. "People get into the idea of chicken and egg when talking about the rail line but this is a hand in glove. It's the two coming together: the service and the infrastructure, improvement altogether," he said.

"It's not a fanciful thought: it's reality. We actually have seen increased ridership on the VIA service over the last couple of years even if it's been travelling in what people say is the wrong direction. Many times, the train has sold out."

With the new cars, refreshment services, better accessibility with the power ramps plus bicycle hangers, the idea is to attract people who may not have considered the train before, he said.