

TC Items

October 27 - 30, 2009

An E&N commuter rail test

TIMES COLONIST OCT. 30, 2009

It's been a long time comin', but residents of southern Vancouver Island might soon start hearing the lonesome whistle of a train many more times a day -- and what a sweet sound that would be.

An early-morning E&N Dayliner run from Nanaimo to Victoria would start each day. The Dayliner would head back up-island, reaching Courtenay before turning back.

A second Dayliner would leave Nanaimo shortly after the first, making stops in Cobble Hill and Shawnigan Lake to pick up commuters before reaching Victoria. After that it would be used locally, making trips between downtown Victoria and Langford, before doing another commuter run back to Nanaimo at the end of the day.

The increased service is a gleam in the eye of the Island Corridor Foundation, which says it could start in about six months.

There have been complaints for years that the 90-passenger Dayliner goes the wrong way each day -- leaving Victoria in the morning and returning from Courtenay in the evening.

The existing service is ideal for anyone commuting north from Victoria. The problem is that far more people commute the other way, into Victoria from north of the Malahat.

Those people would be among the potential customers for the new service, which would be a good way to test a rail transit system in the capital region. If the Dayliners between downtown Victoria and Langford are full, that would bolster arguments for investing in a proper light-rail system.

The new schedule would bring its share of costs -- including more equipment, more fuel and more staff. Also, the increased rail traffic might be a tough sell among those who live adjacent to the rail line.

Let's hope the problems can be overcome. Let's also hope that the service over the Malahat attracts new commuters and does not just pull people from the bus routes to and from the Cowichan Valley.

We've been asking for a commuter run on the E&N for years. Now, maybe we will be able to find out whether the demand is really there.

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Transportation hub makes perfect sense

by JOHN BERGBUSCH

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Re: "Shift transport hub to Vic West," letter, Oct. 25. A transportation centre on the west side of the Blue Bridge would save millions by eliminating the cost of building a train bridge for a few metres of track on Store Street.

It would remove the bus depot from an awkward site at Douglas at Belleville, making it available for redevelopment. Incoming buses could travel down Douglas, turn right at Bay and head to the terminus on Esquimalt Road. As the writer suggests, a new rail and bus station could be linked with local transit and the regional trail system.

The new bridge, freed of the rail alignment, would have more flexibility in land approaches and design. If built on the Roundhouse site, it could be integrated with the commercial uses recently suggested by Bayview's Ken Mariash. For those who travel green, it is a short walk and even shorter bike ride downtown.

The old CN station on Main Street in Vancouver with Via Rail, Amtrak, Pacific Coach Lines, and Greyhound all operating out of one building across the street from Skytrain works very well. A similar approach could work here too.

John Bergbusch

Victoria

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Fix crawl intersections before McTavish

by RON KIRSTEIN

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A few days ago I read that the McTavish interchange project at the airport was going ahead.

It came to my mind around 2 p.m. while I was snailing through the intersections at Tillicum and McKenzie on the Trans-Canada Highway.

Our tax dollars would be better spent at McKenzie Avenue or on the new bridge in downtown Victoria.

Hundreds of millions have been spent on bridges in Vancouver -- what are we, chopped liver?

I think our government's priorities are

wrong. Vast sums are being spent, yet things we value are being cut.

Ron Kirstein

Victoria

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No need for rail on new bridge

by ERIC NIELSEN

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The city is planning to spend \$15 million to have the train tracks cross the new Johnson Street bridge so that they can stop exactly on the other side of the bridge.

Is the track planned to go all the way to Oak Bay or Beacon Hill Park some day? What is wrong with having the train stop on the west side of the bridge?

Eric Nielsen

Victoria

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Limit transit fare increases

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We will all benefit if more people can be convinced to use buses instead of private vehicles -- but mass transit will be a tougher sell if proposed fare increases go ahead.

The transit commission wants to raise all fares to \$2.50. Today's basic fare is \$2.25, while seniors and youth aged six to 18 pay \$1.40. In other words, the basic fare would rise by 11 per cent, and the discounted one by 78 per cent.

A quick reminder: We are in the midst of an economic downturn. People are watching their pennies.

True, riders will be able to save money by buying in bulk -- but the increases are still substantial.

The cost of a monthly bus or handyDART pass would increase to \$90 from \$73.25, an increase of 22 per cent. A book of 10 tickets would rise to \$22.50 from \$20.25, up 11 per cent. Senior and youth monthly passes would jump to \$52 from \$42, up 23 per cent, and a book of 10 tickets would rise to \$15 from \$12.60, up 19 per cent.

It's not easy to sort out how to pay for transit service. Fares alone are not enough -- this year, they will cover only 38 per cent of the cost. The rest of the money comes through a gasoline tax,

now 3.5 cents a litre, and property taxes, which raise about \$74 from the average home.

Attracting more riders will not help balance the books, because costs will rise accordingly. Transit will always need a subsidy -- and that is not necessarily a bad thing.

Our tax dollars already help pay for roads. If more people are in buses, that means there will be fewer vehicles on the roads. We could postpone or even cancel some infrastructure projects. Money that goes to transit is money that will not need to be spent elsewhere.

At \$2.50, the fare would be too high pull people from their cars. Many people spend less than that on gasoline in a day, and parking is cheap. Private transportation has the added benefits of comfort and convenience.

Before they commit to taking buses, commuters will need to see transit as an efficient, cost-effective alternative. That means keeping the fares low, not boosting prices.

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Comment: B.C. Place wins, Blue Bridge loses

TIMES COLONIST

OCT. 27, 2009 COMMENTS (34)

The timing was not helpful for Murray Coell and Ida Chong, the region's two Liberal MLAs. On Friday, the provincial government announced it was going ahead with a \$458-million new roof for B.C. Place, the publicly owned Vancouver stadium, with taxpayers ultimately picking up the entire cost.

On Saturday, the two MLAs were missing -- as was provincial funding -- when federal Transport Minister John Baird announced Ottawa would cover one-third of the \$63-million cost of replacing the Johnson Street Bridge.

The province, at least so far, has rejected the traditional shared three-way funding approach for this project. Victoria taxpayers, perhaps with assistance from other local municipalities, will pay two-thirds of the cost, or about \$42 million.

Every project has to be assessed on its merits, of course. The government maintains the new retractable roof for B.C. Place -- the largest of its type in the world -- will result in increased economic activity in Vancouver.

Some concerts and other events now

skip the city because the stadium roof won't open, says Tourism Minister Kevin Krueger. He also points to the construction jobs that will be created with the project. (Although the cost per job-year created is more than \$150,000 and large chunks of the work will likely be done out of province.)

The main beneficiaries are the two professional sports teams that will use the building, the B.C. Lions and the Vancouver Whitecaps soccer team. Even spinoff benefits will be concentrated in the Vancouver area.

Yet the cost is being paid by all British Columbians -- something like \$425 for a capital region family of four.

The government notes that it is just loaning the money to the B.C. Pavilion Corp.

But the Crown corporation plans to repay the loan by leasing land it controls around the stadium for development. That land belongs to all B.C. taxpayers. The revenue from developing it could just as easily be used for education or health or to reduce taxes -- or to pay the province's share of the Blue Bridge replacement.

Alternatively, there are more equitable options for funding the B.C. Place roof. Other jurisdictions have levied taxes or fees that helped ensure those who benefited from improved stadiums paid the costs. A range of options are possible -- a surcharge on tickets, for example, or a tax on hotel rooms or a levy on Vancouver businesses. If the benefits are as great and as widespread as the government maintains and the evidence convincing, it would be hard to argue against a plan to ensure that those who gain share most of the costs.

Instead, provincial taxpayers are picking up the bill.

And Chong and Coell are left to explain why a new roof for B.C. Place is a priority, but the capital's largest transportation infrastructure project is going ahead without any provincial support.

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Rebirth of the Roundhouse

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The old railway roundhouse in Vic West could have a new lease on life as a neighbourhood marketplace -- although we should not expect to see pumpkins for sale there for at least a

couple of years.

The site's developer says plans for remediating the land and turning the complex into a market could be ready in about six months. The first tenants might be able to use outdoor areas next year and indoor space in 2011.

The transformation will not be cheap. It is expected that cleaning up the site, making the old buildings structurally sound and bringing them up to seismic standards will cost about \$25 million.

And, as we have learned from the old Memorial Arena, other major projects and just about every home renovation ever done, it's anyone's guess what problems lurk below the surface.

It's a project worth doing. It has the potential to transform the area and there would be several winners.

- Consumers looking for a handy marketplace would appreciate a chance to buy fruits and vegetables directly from producers, just as the producers would like to see more consumers.

- People living in that area -- adjacent to the Songhees residential development -- would finally have some retail outlets close at hand.

- Anyone interested in preserving the city's rich heritage should be pleased that another large building will be given a new use.

The roundhouse sits on a 3.74-hectare national historic site, which was once a rail yard. Plans call for the heritage to be highlighted, which means rail memorabilia will be included in the final design.

The idea is to make the roundhouse reminiscent of Granville Island in Vancouver. There are other success stories as well -- such as the Forks in Winnipeg, which has seen markets, restaurants and shops move into a series of former rail yard buildings.

These urban markets bring life to a city and the Vic West roundhouse is a perfect location for one in the capital region.

The provincial government has contributed \$125,000 to the project through its brown field renewal funding program, aimed at revitalizing abandoned, derelict commercial or industrial properties to spark urban redevelopment, jobs, and neighbourhood renewal.

It's a tiny investment compared to the benefits that are just a few months away.