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A new future for the E&N Railway

Patrick Brown

A half-million dollar report on the Esquimalt and Nanaimo Railway corridor, commissioned by the provincial Ministry of Transportation and Infrastructure, concludes that a massive revival of Vancouver Island's resource industries would be necessary to justify the investment required to restore the E&N Railway's freight operation. The report also says that much greater concentrations of population in the western communities would be needed to justify the railway's use as a rapid transit operation.

Basically, the potential revenue from conventional mixed-use railway operation would not be sufficient to finance the capital costs required to restore the railway to commercially viable operation.

However, the report also sets out an imaginative plan for incremental development of the E&N as a passenger line and transportation spine for the urban growth of southeast Vancouver Island. The plan assumes that the railway would continue to be owned by the Island Corridor Foundation (ICF), a non-profit charity representing the 14 municipalities, five Regional Districts, and 13 First Nations through whose jurisdictions the railway runs. ICF took over the railway in 2005.

Current Operations

The railway is currently operated under a three-year contract by the Southern Railway of Vancouver Island. Most of the 225km Victoria to Courtenay corridor has daily passenger and/or freight service. The freight service is linked to the BC mainland by a barge service to Annacis Island, operated by Seaspan Coastal Intermodal; this provides interconnections to four of North America's major railways. A tourist train is operated from Port Alberni to McLean's Mill; the rest of the 64km Port Alberni subdivision is overgrown and out-of-service.

A Hundred Year History

Operating since 1886, the E&N is a vital transportation

link, and has served the settlement and industries of Vancouver Island well for over a century. But with the decline of mining, forestry, and pulp and paper production on the Island, and competition from road transport, the economics of conventional railway operation are, as the report describes them, 'a challenging business context'.

The railway was built for much lighter loads than today's freight cars, and its condition has been deteriorating over the past few years. As a result, the line requires substantial reinvestment. Some \$70 million to \$130 million would be needed to preserve the corridor from Victoria to Courtenay and to restore the track, stations, and trains in order to retain the existing VIA rail passenger service.

Further options, including upgrading the track for heavier trains, re-opening the Port Alberni line, and implementing commuter rail to Victoria, could require capital expenditures in the \$217 million to \$371 million range, depending on the condition of bridges.

In addition, there would be substantial increases in operating costs, and increased federal subsidies would be necessary.

In order to justify these investments, the railway would need at least five times the current number of passengers, twice the number of tourists, nine times the number of freight carloads, and growth of high-density housing in urban areas all along the corridor.

The Potential

In addition to concluding that present traffic could in no way pay for the upgrading that the line would require, the first section of the report also evaluated the potential markets for the railway.

It said that freight demand could increase if service were improved and cost-competitive with trucking; most potential lay with bulk shipments of lower-value goods and materials. VIA rail passenger service could be improved

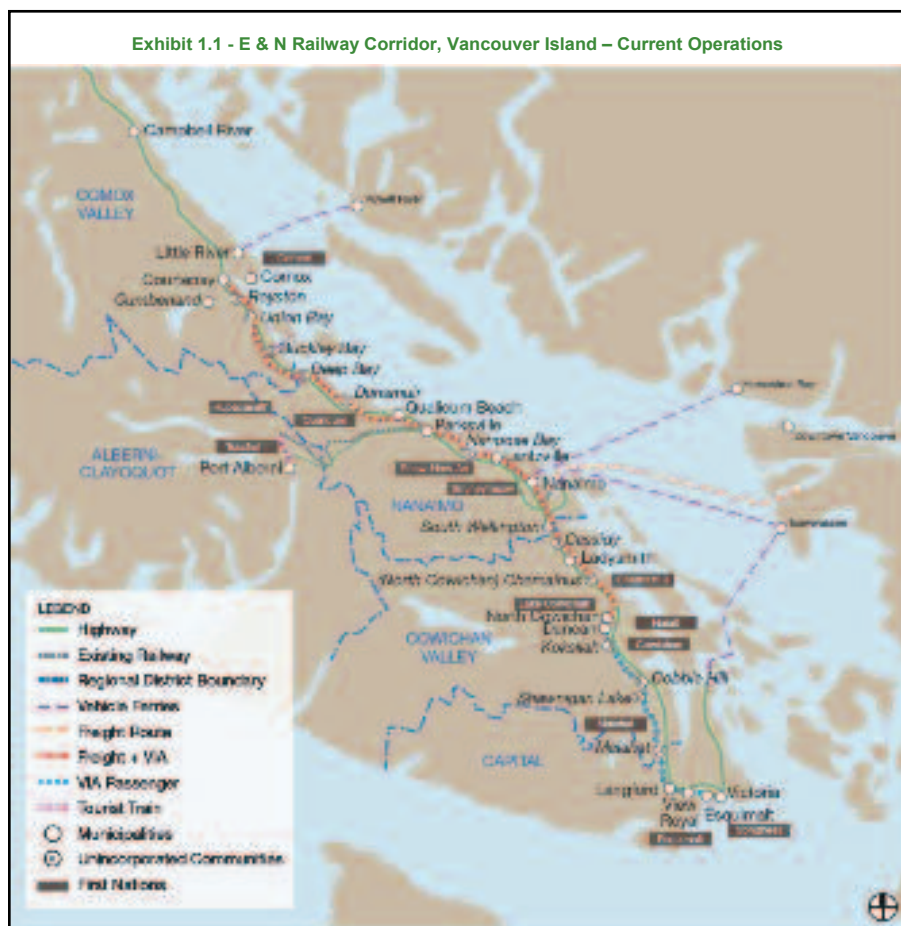
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Exhibit 1.1 - E & N Railway Corridor, Vancouver Island – Current Operations



The railway includes three branches:

- Victoria Subdivision: This is the 225 km railway line between Victoria and Courtenay;
- Port Alberni Subdivision: a 64 km segment between Parksville and Port Alberni;
- Wellcox Spur: 5 km spur from the main line (Victoria Subdivision) to a rail yard and barge loading facility on the Nanaimo waterfront

Recommended Passenger Service and Commuter Rail Strategies

For the Victoria–Courtenay service, the objective should be three or more round trips per day. Start with improvements in travel time and reliability through strategic repairs, including a rock/tree fall warning system on the Malahat section, and bridge assessments. Additional trains should be run three or four hours apart, to provide a midday travel option; additional amenities could be developed at Victoria, Nanaimo, and Courtenay stations.

In the southern and central corridor, reverse the direction of the trains so they run from Duncan and the Cowichan Valley in to Victoria in the early morning and a return in the early evening.

Also suggested were: station areas as transit exchanges and park&ride; increasing development densities near stations; and hourly peak periods commuter service.

Tourism Strategies

With a trail system paralleling the entire railway from Victoria to Courtenay and linked to existing tourist areas, create an excursion ticket option which would provide a rail link between tourist attractions

incrementally, and this would provide a basis for increased tourism services. Successful commuter rail services needed rescheduling of the current service, bus connections, and concentration of higher density development near the corridor.

These assessments fitted with the ICF vision of the railway's future: improved passenger services; freight services centred on Nanaimo and the mainland barge connection; use of the land along the tracks as a recreational trail system, and the historic stations as centerpieces for business developments and tourist services.

on an enhanced daily passenger rail service. Explore rail excursion services for passengers on cruise ships docked at Nanaimo. Continue to host the Alberni Pacific Railway (Port Alberni will host two cruise ships next summer).

Rail Freight Strategies

The objective for freight would be to expand the group of customers (both import and export) to include not only resource industries but also industrial installations requiring bulk material shipments, such as concrete and asphalt plants. Two strategies would be: to promote expanded rail barge shipments to the Annacis Island

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terminal on the mainland, with interconnections to major transcontinental railways; and to tailor shipping rates to be competitive. Any re-opening of the Port Alberni line would depend on committed demand. Potentially, freight service could be extended to Victoria.

Land Use Strategies

Land use planning reviews of Transit-oriented Development (TOD) began in 2009. All communities should consider development hubs (both residential and commercial) around train stations and transit exchanges and both plan and promote them. Link train stations to tourist and recreational sites, and to concentrations of employment.

Recreating the E & N Spine

The potential benefits of a transportation corridor running the length of southern Vancouver Island cannot be ignored. This report makes it clear that, while the remaining freight from the traditional industrial purposes of the railway will no longer support the capital expenditures necessary to operate an integrated freight and passenger line, the repurposing of the line to serve as a focus for the residential and commercial development of the growing communities of the south-Island can yield significant benefits in both convenience and quality of life. An incremental approach to achieving this is practical and reasonable. (Of the 700,000 current population of the study area, some 480,000 are in or near the E&N corridor.)

TOD principles anticipate that 'all residents are within a 5 or 10-minute walk of public transit, and can live, work, play, shop and learn in a pedestrian friendly environment—without the need of a car.' The study identifies 12 communities suitable for TOD. This would make the most of the E&N corridor, and ensure that the railway has a bright future. ✍

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