

Alberta falling behind on Trans-Canada Trail, cyclist says

Aunger's wife killed while riding on P.E.I. highway last year

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A man whose wife was killed while cycling on a Prince Edward Island highway says Alberta is falling behind on a cross-country trail that would save cyclists' lives.

"This trail is going to stop at Alberta's borders," said Edmund Aunger. "As an Albertan, I find that embarrassing."

Aunger says the province is ignoring its promise to help build the Trans-Canada Trail — nearly 24,000 kilometres of cycling and walking trails linking the Atlantic, Pacific and Arctic oceans.

The plan is to finish the trail by 2017, the 150th anniversary of Confederation.

Last summer, Aunger and his wife Elizabeth Sovis, both avid cyclists, were riding a completed section of the trail in P.E.I. When the trail ran out, the couple was forced to ride on the side of the highway.

It was there that Sovis was struck and killed by a driver who was three times over the legal alcohol limit.

Since then, Aunger says he has made it his mission to make sure the trail gets completed. On Sunday afternoon, the former university professor led dozens of cyclists to the steps of the legislature, calling on the province to create a plan to build the trail.

"I have taken up her cause, her dream is now my dream. I am working to promote the completion of the Trans-Canada Trail by 2017," he said.

Aunger says despite the province's stated support of the project, the trail in Alberta is a patchwork of cycling routes in cities and towns. With 1,200 kilometres still unbuilt in the province, he says it puts cyclists at risk by forcing them to take to the highways.

"But there's no way — it's not connected."

Aunger says the province has been dragging its feet on making a plan on how to get the project done, instead leaving the task to individual municipalities.

While that has produced good trail systems in larger centres like Edmonton, Calgary and Red Deer, he says it is too much for rural areas. Instead, he says the provincial government needs to have a hand.

"This is a project that is 21-years-old. So don't tell me, 'Oh, it's difficult right now and we don't have the dollars,'" he said.

"We've had more dollars than we know what to do with in this province. The government is indifferent."

Trail is important infrastructure, Aunger says

The provincial government says it is still committed to finishing its part of the Trans-Canada Trail. In an email to CBC News Sunday, Robert Starke, the province's parks and recreation minister, said the government has been funding a non-profit group called Alberta TrailNet to build the trail.

"I appreciate Mr. Aunger's dedication to having the Trans-Canada Trail completed. The Alberta government supports Alberta TrailNet and its many volunteers in its work to complete the Trans-Canada Trail in Alberta," Starke wrote.

"I look forward to continuing to work with both Alberta TrailNet and the Trans-Canada Trail Foundation on this significant project."

However, Aunger says the trail will not be built unless the government takes a direct hand in getting it done.

"Would you ask volunteers to build a highway in this province?" he said.

"This is more than recreation. We're also talking transportation.... I don't know how many billions dollars we spend on roads."

While he's not optimistic that the route will be done by 2017, he says at a time when the province is planning to pay money to build ATV trails, cyclists shouldn't be ignored. And he says he will continue bringing attention to the need for more biking infrastructure in Alberta.

"What I won't be able to accept ... is to say I never tried. To say to my children and grandchild that I didn't try."