

Opinion: Our leg of Trans Canada Trail hobbled

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Prime Minister Stephen Harper and his wife Laureen, right, join Deborah Apps, president and CEO of the Trans Canada Trail Management team, at the Historic Kinsol Trestle in North Saanich, B.C.

Photograph by: Chad Hipolito , THE CANADIAN PRESS/FILE

This Canada Day, I hope you observe a moment of silence or shed a tear for the fate of the Trans Canada Trail. First conceived in Alberta; now dying in Alberta. A slow death, lonely and painful, unnoticed and unmourned. A victim of cruel mistreatment and wilful neglect.

The seeds for the Trans Canada Trail's birth were sowed on July 29, 1985, on a stretch of highway near Calaway Park, just west of Calgary, when a motor vehicle veered into a group of 19 teens headed to Kananaskis Country on a four-day cycling and camping trip, killing three and injuring four.

Bill Pratt, president of the organizing committee for the 1988 Calgary Winter Olympics, lived on a nearby farm, and rushed to the scene immediately. Many years later, he recalled: "It's something that doesn't go away. You don't forget the pools of blood and the kids' mangled bodies." In 1992, as general manager of Canada's 125th anniversary celebrations, he

responded by laying the foundation for a national trail connecting Canadian communities from coast to coast.

Widely hailed as our “New National Dream,” the Trans Canada Trail rapidly captured the Canadian imagination. An early survey revealed not only that 80 per cent favoured the idea, but that 30 per cent would donate money for its construction. The present-day objective is an 18,000-km land trail and a 5,000-km water route, a fitting centrepiece for Canada’s 150th anniversary celebrations on July 1, 2017.

Like its glorious predecessors — the transcontinental railway and the Trans-Canada Highway — the proposed Trans Canada Trail would be a nation-building project, connecting communities, promoting tourism and stimulating growth. But, in keeping with our times, it would also be a greenway for active transportation, contributing to physical health and respecting natural environments. And it would be safe. To protect users from contact with motor vehicles, Bill Pratt insisted that the trail be located far from roadways.

Unfortunately, in Alberta, the provincial government offered only lip service, frequently declaring its full commitment, but always withholding essential support. It made no land development plans, adopted no legislative provisions and provided few financial resources. The results were predictable.

After all these years, Alberta is still in a tight race for last place with Saskatchewan — the only two Canadian provinces that have completed less than half their land-based Trans Canada Trail. And much of the so-called “completed” trail is either inaccessible or dangerous. The National Trail Coalition calculates that less than one quarter of Alberta’s Trans Canada Trail is located on non-motorized urban routes. The remainder is found, for the most part, either on roadways or on motorized rural trails.

My wife, Elizabeth Sovis, enjoyed walking and cycling on the Trans Canada Trail, but was utterly dismayed that, in Alberta, the many incomplete and impassable and motorized sections often forced her to detour onto roads and highways. She resolved that, during her upcoming retirement, she’d work for the construction of a safe and accessible trail.

She never lived to see her retirement. On July 14, 2012, the first day of our cycling holiday on Prince Edward Island, we were forced once again to leave the Trans Canada Trail. Ten minutes later, Elizabeth was struck by a full-sized van. The impact severed her brain stem and threw her body 50 metres.

Several weeks later, I met with Alberta’s tourism minister at the time, Christine Cusanelli. I explained Elizabeth’s concerns and presented her objectives. Although Cusanelli reiterated

that the Trans Canada Trail was targeted for completion in 2017, she also stated — in person and in writing — that Alberta was preparing a Recreation Trails Act, and that “the emphasis for the first few years will be on motorized recreation by off-highway vehicles as this is the greatest pressure on our trail system use.”

I was stunned. Studies conducted by Cusanelli’s own department showed Albertans were 5-2 against building any more trails for ATVs, and 9-2 in favour of developing the Trans Canada Trail. Moreover, in its recently announced “Active Alberta Policy,” the provincial government had given priority to building infrastructure for active transportation, mainly walking and cycling.

Since then, lobbyists have worked hard to win full access for motorized vehicles on public trails and in provincial parks. On March 20, 2013, Minister Richard Starke responded: “The use of motorized recreational vehicles, whether quads or trikes or bikes in the summer or snowmobiles in the winter, is huge business. We have been meeting with our Off-Highway Vehicle Association as well as our Snowmobile Association on ways of engaging our stakeholder groups and expanding opportunities in that regard.”

This Canada Day, complain loudly about the fate of the Trans Canada Trail. Fight for its survival. Sign a petition. Contact an MLA. Make a donation. And if you live in a major urban centre, take a trail walk or go for a bike ride. Don’t forget to breathe.

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