

Editorial: It's time to hit the trail

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These boots are made for walking – but in Alberta, they still can't walk on the Trans Canada Trail.

What a shame that the province where the trail was created has fallen so far behind the rest of the country in making this dream come true. Bill Pratt, former president of the 1988 Calgary Winter Olympics organizing committee, and later general manager of Canada's 125th birthday celebration in 1992, started the ball rolling for a cross-country trail uniting Canada coast to coast. The idea came to him after he rushed to the scene of an accident near Calaway Park 28 years ago where three teens lay dead and four were injured among a group of 19 on their way to cycle and camp in Kananaskis.

Sadly, although the idea for the trail was conceived in Alberta, nothing much has happened to make it come true. Alberta has finished less than half its land-based portion of the trail, and what's there is on motorized trails in rural areas or on roads – the latter being antithetical to the trail's purpose of providing a safe path for walkers, joggers, cyclists and horseback riders.

The goal was to create a land trail of 18,000 kilometres and a water route of 5,000 kilometres. So far, the province has talked up its supposed commitment to finishing the trail, but nothing ever comes of it. Saskatchewan, too, is lagging behind in trail construction. The money hasn't exactly been forthcoming, and neither has the necessary legislative action to get things going.

Trail enthusiast Edmund Aunger, an emeritus professor of political science at the University of Alberta's Campus Saint-Jean, wrote recently on these pages that former tourism minister Christine Cusanelli told him in 2012 that a Recreation Trails Act was in the works, but that it would focus on

“motorized recreation by offhighway vehicles.” This, in spite of the fact studies showed Albertans would rather see the Trans Canada Trail developed than create more trails for ATVs.

If the problem is pushback from landowners whose property the trail would cross, then there are ways and means to negotiate with them and provide fair compensation for the use of their land. This kind of obstacle is not insurmountable. If the roadblock is a lack of will, then provincial politicians need to be reminded of the nationwide importance of this trail, and of the physical health benefits it will provide for Albertans – when people are more physically fit, they are healthier, and that saves the healthcare system big bucks in the long run. It’s also good for the health of Alberta tourism.

The Trans Canada Trail project has languished too long. The next premier of Alberta needs to make a commitment to its completion.