

Yorkton This Week
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Cyclist slams state of Trans Canada Trail

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Edmund Aunger arrives in Yorkton August 5 during the second leg of a five-year effort to ride the Trans Canada Trail from BC to Prince Edward Island in memory of his wife Elizabeth Sovis, who was killed in a horrific accident riding the Trail in July 2012.



Submitted Photo

The story of Elizabeth Sovis involves the worst kind of irony imaginable. Sovis was an avid supporter of the Trans Canada Trail. She planned to spend her retirement promoting the completion of the 24,000-kilometre, coast to coast to coast recreational pathway for non-motorized travel.

On July 14, 2012, just about a year before Sovis's scheduled retirement she and her husband, Edmund Aunger, were travelling the Trail on Prince Edward Island.

"I wanted to go to New Brunswick," Aunger explained, "and she said, 'it's too dangerous, we're going to have to ride on the roads if we go to New Brunswick because the Trans Canada Trail's not finished, but it's just about finished in Prince Edward Island, it's safe, it will be safe for us, we won't have to go on the roads'."

Only it wasn't and they did.

Following the designated route to their accommodations, they were forced to divert to a two-lane highway with no shoulders where within 10 minutes Sovis was struck and killed by a drunk driver.

"The impact threw her body 50 metres," Aunger said.

Within days of his wife's death, Aunger himself retired, pledging to see through her vision of seeing the trail complete, accessible, passable and safe.

Last summer, Aunger embarked on a five-year campaign to raise awareness of and money for the Trail by riding his bike from Victoria, BC to Charlottetown, PEI in memory of his wife.

"I have to do it for her because this was her retirement project," he said, choking back tears. "But I have to do it for myself because I have to find some meaning in my life and do something for her, that's what it all boils down to."

The Trans Canada Trail website boasts that the trail is 75 per cent complete.

That has not been Aunger's experience. He arrived in Yorkton last week visibly angry at the state of the Trail, particularly in Saskatchewan.

As an example he cited his trip from Melville to Yorkton August 5. He stayed on Hwy 10 most of the way because, he said, "I just didn't want to fight any more gravel roads and it's killing my bike."

When he got to York Lake, though, he decided to try to get back on the Trail.

"It runs through that park, there are no signs, but it's on the website as being operational Trans Canada Trail," he said. "It is an overgrown nature trail, marshy, the grass is up to my chest, you can't see it. I wouldn't be able to walk it even if I had my hiking boots on. It's impossible with my bike.

"Some places it's like York Lake it's just kind of a narrow rut that's overrun with grass. Some places it's a rural gravel road with an 80 kilometre an hour speed limit, with huge grain-hauling trucks going back and forth and you're in clouds of dust and rocks. Sometimes it's completely fictitious, there is no trail there."

Arriving in Yorkton, though, was a pleasant surprise.

"As a designated Trans Canada Trail, it's really a credit to the City of Yorkton that this exists," he said, gesturing at the well-maintained pathway at Logan Green.

Aunger blames lack of political will at higher levels of government for the state of the Trail elsewhere, saying municipalities cannot be expected to carry the burden.

"Usually when there's a complete failure, as there is in Saskatchewan, for building the Trans Canada Trail, it's a failure I believe of the provincial government and there's a complete indifference if not outright hostility to the Trans Canada Trail on the part of the Saskatchewan government."

While in Yorkton, Aunger met with MLA Greg Ottenbreit. He said Ottenbreit was sympathetic, but told him the Province has other priorities.

"This is the first time someone has called me about this," Ottenbreit said. "People call me all the time about roads and schools and hospitals."

Ottenbreit said it would take a lot of public demand and leadership from the federal government to get the Trail done.

So far, Aunger's Elizabeth Sovis Memorial Fund has raised \$25,000. He has also started petitions in B.C., Alberta and Saskatchewan, an attempt to apply public pressure on the provincial governments.

He is also lobbying hard to get the Trail done in Prince Edward Island, where he plans to finish his five-year ride in 2017 on the fifth anniversary of Sovis's death at the spot she was killed, where he will hold a memorial service.

"I'm challenging the Prince Edward Island government, in particular, and I've challenged all the provincial governments, and I'm going to have to do something about the federal government

because it's not going to work in the provinces unless the federal government gets all the premiers together," he said. "But I'm challenging the Prince Edward Island government in particular for the sake of the people who live on the island and for the sake of the tourists who have no idea how dangerous it is, to do something, to get it off a two lane highway with no shoulders and stop talking about that as a cycling route."

Overall, he believes the Trail simply has not lived up to the vision presented in 1992 when the project was first announced and he and Sovis fell in love with the idea.

"You know, this was called the new national dream," he said. "The national dream was the building of the transcontinental railway, then afterwards in the '50s there was building the Trans Canada Highway, those were huge for establishing this country and bringing it together. And this dream, this part of the dream, is a nightmare.

"We're humiliating ourselves, we're boasting internationally about the longest greenway in the world and what a beautiful thing this is and it's going to be and it's not there."