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National trail beside roads is ‘perverse’

Cyclist who lost wife on highway upset with rush to finish pathway

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With thousands of kilometres still left to complete the Trans Canada Trail — a bold dream of connecting Canadians from coast to coast to coast with a continuous path for hikers, cyclists and other outdoor enthusiasts — portions of the route are being moved onto roads and highways to meet the project’s July 2017 deadline.

Alberta lags behind every other province and territory except Nova Scotia in completing its share of the route, but putting the recreational path alongside cars and trucks to meet the deadline is “perverse,” says one Edmontonian with intimate knowledge of the trail.

Driven by grief, Edmund Auger, a former University of Alberta political science professor, has spent the past three summers cycling the trail, from Victoria, B.C., to Sault Ste. Marie, Ont.

And the 66-year-old will spend the next two summers on his bicycle, ending his Ride the Trail trek in 2017 at the spot in Prince Edward Island where his wife, Elizabeth Sovis, was hit and killed by a drunk driver while cycling on July 14, 2012.



Edmund Auger and his wife, Elizabeth Sovis, in Port Elgin, N.B., on July 13, 2012, the day before she died in an accident.

Veterans of numerous cycling holidays, Sovis didn’t feel safe riding in traffic, so the duo specifically avoided highways.

But in P.E.I., the couple's guidebook led them off the Trans Canada Trail and onto a highway. Fifteen minutes later, Sovis was run down.

Before her death, incomplete and impassable sections of trail in Alberta pushed Sovis to vow to spend her retirement working for a safe and accessible route. Now Aunger is doggedly pursuing her cause.

"We had this dream for the trail and now we're back building trails on highways," Aunger said.



Edmund Aunger on the Trans Canada Trail in Edmonton. Alberta lags in completing its part of the trail.

Roadway connections are being explored in Alberta and specific approaches are expected to be identified this fall, said Jane Murphy, national director of trail for the Trans Canada Trail organization.

Linda Strong-Watson, executive director of Alberta TrailNet, the provincial council that

works with local organizations to build the trail, said such connections will be temporary in some spots, but making them permanent in others has not been ruled out.

“It’s hard to justify the kind of cost that’s involved in some cases in building a sustainable trail in an area where there’s very few people living,” she said.

A safe route was the inspiration for one of the trail’s founding fathers, Calgarian Bill Pratt.

On July 29, 1985, Pratt, who died in 1999, witnessed the aftermath of a deadly collision that killed three cyclists not far from his ranch west of Calgary. A motorist had reached for a dropped cigarette and his vehicle plowed into 19 teenagers cycling on a camping trip.

Seven years later, as general manager of Canada’s 125th anniversary celebrations, Pratt, alongside Pierre Camu, dreamed up an ambitious network of interconnected trails stretching across the country.

Wherever possible, the trail was to be built far enough from roads and highways to protect users.

The grand path was announced as a 15,000-kilometre project intended mainly for non-motorized use, such as cycling, hiking, walking, paddling, horseback riding, cross-country skiing and, in some areas, snowmobiling.

Initially scheduled for completion July 1, 2000, the new goal is July 1, 2017 — Canada’s 150th birthday.

The project is community-based, meaning various local organizations, provincial authorities, and municipalities across Canada own, operate and maintain trail sections, forming a “trail of trails,” Murphy said.

So far, 477 groups across Canada have been responsible for 432 independent trail segments.

The trail is 80-per-cent complete nationwide. The total land and water route, now expected to cover nearly 24,000 km across Canada, is just 59 per cent connected in Alberta.

Murphy said the organization uses the word “connected” rather than “complete,” because the trail will continue to evolve over time.

Excluding the 825-km Alberta water route stretching from Athabasca to the tiny community of Fitzgerald, near the Northwest Territories border, Alberta’s land trail is just 43 per cent joined, with 945 km of the 2,179 km trail finished.

Alberta has one of the largest sections of trail to build, said Strong-Watson.

“All sections of trail meet in Alberta, both the east-west land route, northern land route and northern water route,” she said.

“We’ve got substantial challenges just around the amount of trail we have to build and the distances involved.”

Still, Strong-Watson is confident Alberta will meet the 2017 deadline.

Beryl Cullum, spokeswoman for the Alberta government’s culture and tourism ministry, said the trail has the potential to be the largest outdoor recreation facility in the province.

Part of the government’s role, she said, will be to work with other ministries and organizations to ensure the safety of trail users, which could mean posting signage and “other safety considerations” for portions of the route on roads.

The Alberta trail is also expected to get a boost at a luncheon this September, when Edmontonians, led by Robert Westbury and Lyle Best, rally financial support for the cause.

“Citizens pick up the slack, they really do,” said Westbury, chief adviser of relations and innovation at Telus.

But the community approach has left gaps, some of which Aunger has documented during his cross-country cycling trek.

Photos from this summer’s trip show numerous issues that have left Aunger dejected, including trail on narrow road shoulders, overgrown routes that required detours to highways, misleading or absent route markers, and areas “destroyed” by ATVs.

Aunger recently cut his cycling trip short, opting for a two-day Greyhound bus ride from Kenora, Ont., to Sault Ste Marie because most of that section of the trail is a water route on Lake Superior. Aunger considered cycling along the Trans Canada Highway instead, but decided it was too dangerous.

“It was not in my plans to take the bus, but I thought, ‘What am I trying to prove?’ My wife was adamant that you should not ride your bike on the road ... I’m doing this to honour her, so how am I honouring her by riding on a highway?” Aunger said.

He is determined to ensure the route is safe.

“I loved her very much, and I want to do this for her.”



Edmund Aunger's bike on a rocky section of the Trans Canada Trail near Wasketenau, Alta.



Edmund Aunger took this photo of 'good trail' in Thunder Bay, Ont., earlier this summer, in Marina Park.



He also took this photo of 'bad trail' in Thunder Bay – an example of where the Trans Canada Trail utilizes a road.