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Editorial: Stay off the beaten path



Skiers enjoy the Trans Canada Trail in Kananaskis. The trail should not be rerouted to roads and highways, says the Herald editorial board. CALGARY HERALD

The Trans Canada Trail was intended to be a scenic path for walkers, hikers, cyclists, horseback riders, skiers and others wishing to enjoy the outdoors. It was never meant to run parallel to the Trans-Canada Highway, or be part of the highway and other roads. And just because Alberta has fallen behind in trail completion and needs to finish by July 2017, is not a reason to compromise that principle.

Basic safety is the issue here, and former University of Alberta political science professor Edmund Auger is someone whose voice should be listened to. Auger lost his wife, Elizabeth Sovis, three years ago during a cycling trip along the Trans Canada Trail in P.E.I.

Just minutes after a guidebook directed them onto a highway, Sovis was hit and killed by a drunk driver. Auger is justifiably upset at the talk of routing the trail along highways and roads. “We had this dream for the trail and now we’re back building trails on highways,” Auger said.

Linda Strong-Watson, executive director of Alberta TrailNet, said some of the transfers of trail to the road may be permanent because “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.” There seems to be little realization on Strong-Watson’s part that the trail is for people passing through; it’s not about who lives nearby.

Every year, in the mountain parks, a grisly toll is taken of wildlife by motorists who persistently ignore the 90 km/h posted speed limit. Yet, now the prospect of adding hikers, cyclists and equestrians to the traffic along the side of the road is being seriously considered. To deliberately put these people at risk of life and limb from passing vehicles is foolhardy and irresponsible.

When the entire trail is done — about 80 per cent is complete already across Canada — it will stretch about 24,000 kilometres. Only 59 per cent of the Alberta section is completed, however. Beryl Cullum, a spokeswoman for the provincial tourism ministry, said safety will be ensured on areas of the trail that are roads by putting signs up. We would point out to Cullum that there are already signs throughout the mountain parks warning of wildlife on the road and asking people to

slow down, but that hasn't stopped the carnage. Signs won't prevent human lives being lost along road sections of the trail.

It's understandable that officials want the trail to be finished in time to celebrate Canada's 150th birthday, but that's not a reason to take shortcuts with people's safety.