

Opinion: Road routes make a mockery of Trans Canada Trail

Original intent was safety from traffic, writes **Edmund Aunger**.

Born to great fanfare in 1992, the Trans Canada Trail was jubilantly celebrated as a safe and accessible cross-country corridor for travel by foot, bicycle, horseback, wheelchair and ski. The proud parent and founding president, Bill Pratt, promised that the trail would be built far enough from roads to mask traffic noise and to avoid deadly collisions.

Pratt had good reason for championing a non-motorized greenway. In 1985 he had witnessed a horrific accident near Calgary when a careless driver veered onto the shoulder of the Trans-Canada Highway and slammed into a group of teenage cyclists, killing three and injuring four. Four years later, while speaking at a trail-planning meeting, Pratt stated emphatically: "I don't want to see any more cars plowing into cyclists."

According to David Hargrave, then Alberta TrailNet co-ordinator, automobile accidents involving cyclists and pedestrians provided the motivation for many people to join the Trans Canada Trail movement. He told the Calgary Herald in 1994 that "we don't want it along a highway or in a ditch. We want the whole thing to be like a park." Safety-minded organizations, including the RCMP and the Canadian Truckers Association, quickly endorsed the project.

Since that time, however, the Trans Canada Trail has made a dishonest and dangerous mockery of its own widely-advertised objectives. As early as 1999, nearly 30 per cent of the trail was opened to use by all-terrain vehicles and motorized dirt bikes. When informed of this betrayal, shortly before his death from Lou Gehrig's disease, Bill Pratt pleaded in vain with the TCT Foundation to refuse official designation to any trail section used by motorized vehicles; otherwise the trail would be of no use.

Meanwhile, largely unnoticed by the general public, the Trans Canada Trail was also making a large-scale transition to roadways. In 2010, the National

Trails Coalition reported that 36 per cent of the land-based trail was on roads. (The “land-based” distinction is important; the so-called “trail” now includes 5,000 kilometres of waterway.) Five years later, this proportion had grown to 45 per cent. (These routes, often convoluted and unsigned, commonly follow dirt and gravel country roads, haphazardly selected to avoid the faster-moving traffic found on paved highways.)



Edmund Auger riding on a section of the Trans Canada Trail near Otter Lake, B.C. SUPPLIED

But there was worse still to come. In early 2015, with the July 1, 2017 target date looming large on the horizon, the TCT Foundation advised provincial associations to route the Trans Canada Trail along highway shoulders, where possible, to close the remaining gaps.

Alberta, like most provinces, has yet to publicly identify these highway trails, but with only 43 per cent of its land-based trail currently connected, the implications are obvious — and devastating. More than 30 years after

the horrific accident that gave birth to our dream of a cross-country greenway, pedestrians and cyclists will still be directed onto highways. But — in a life-threatening charade — these highways will now be called the Trans Canada Trail.

Shortly after my wife's cruel cycling death in 2012 — she was killed by a drunk driver — I asked the Alberta government to honour its commitments by building a safe and non-motorized Trans Canada Trail. Christine Cusanelli, then minister of Tourism, Parks and Recreation, assured me that the trail would be connected by 2017, but advised that the government's emphasis was on “motorized recreation by off-highway vehicles as this is the greatest pressure on our trail system use.”

This spring, I repeated my request. Ricardo Miranda, Alberta's newly-appointed Minister of Culture and Tourism, refused to meet with me, but he wrote that “we are working closely with Alberta Transportation to determine the safest temporary on-road routings as part of Trans Canada Trail's 2017 connection plan.”

In response, I asked him to impose “an immediate moratorium on the routing of the Trans Canada Trail along roads and highways.”

While I was struggling to make sense of Canada's much-vaunted trail-building dream, a long-suffering trails official bluntly confided: “Ed, the emperor has no clothes.” The time has come — is long past due — to expose this dangerous hoax. Lies cost lives.

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