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Cycling advocate calls on federal government to upgrade, finish Trans Canada Trail

'I've spent days where I've spent more time pushing my bike ... than I have actually riding it'

By Pat Martel



Edmund Aunger described this section of the trail in Saskatchewan as a roadside ditch. (Edmund Aunger)

The Trans Canada Trail needs a lot more work before it can be called a fully useable, safe, country-wide experience, says a cycling advocate from Alberta.

Edmund Aunger is calling on the federal government to do more to help make that happen.

For the past few summers Aunger has been cycling east from Victoria, B.C. on the Trans Canada Trail, in memory of his late wife.

Elizabeth Sovis died while cycling in PEI four years ago. She was not riding on the trail when it happened. She was hit by a drunk driver while cycling on a highway with no paved shoulders.

Promoting the trail



The Trans Canada Trail needs minimum standards, says Edmund Aunger.

Aunger said his wife always dreamed of a safe national trail.

That's why he decided to bike the Trans Canada Trail - to promote the trail and its completion.

The Trans Canada Trail includes land and water routes across urban, rural and wilderness areas. The trail organization is a non-profit, registered charity which promotes and helps develop and fund the trail in every province and territory.

But after biking thousands of kilometres along the trail in Western Canada, Aunger said many sections of the trail are almost impassable, especially in rural areas.

"I've had to make long detours, the dirt roads are so muddy, after the rain you can't pedal in them ... You can imagine in deep gravel, loose gravel and in mud

how difficult it is to pedal the bike," said Aunger.

"I've spent days where I've spent more time pushing my bike, walking my bike, than I have actually riding it."

Too many roadways says cyclist



This picture was taken just days before Elizabeth Sovis died while on a cycling trip on P.E.I. in 2012. (Edmund Aunger)

Aunger also said too much of the trail is on roads and highways.

"I know personally, having cycled a large distance and talked to many, many trail builders and people on the provincial associations, that there are a lot of people who are very angry about that, who have spent their lives trying to build a safe trail," he said.

Valerie Pringle co-chairs the non-profit Trans Canada Trail Foundation, which is responsible for raising funds to support the advancement of the trail.

She points out that the trail is a work in progress and a partnership.

"The Trans Canada Trail does not own any trail. It's all locally owned and operated by municipalities and communities. So we work with them and say, 'Where would we put the trail now?'" she said.

'A work in progress'

Roads and highways are not the first choice Pringle said.

"The roads are a linkage in communities that don't have the resources or the population to link up one part of trail with another. Would I rather have a green way trail? Absolutely."

Pringle said in addition to cycling routes parts of the trail are waterways for paddling, or trails for snowmobiles, cross-country skiing and horseback riding as well.

"So we're not saying, 'Oh man, it's a paved bike trail from coast to coast to coast.' That's not the case," said Pringle.

"Now maybe we should be doing a better job of communicating that still the trail is many things in many parts of the country, and it's a work in progress."

'A long project'

On its website the Trans Canada Trail organization says it hopes to connect the trail from coast to coast to coast by 2017.

Aunger feels that's rushing the process and giving the wrong impression that the trail is almost complete.

Pringle said the foundation remains committed to getting the trail connected. But she said being fully connected is not the same as being complete.

"It's a long project. We're only 24 years in. It took more than 60 to build the Appalachian Trail," she said.

"We're on the same page as Mr. Aunger. We would love to see it happen. And obviously we want safe trails but we're working with our partners to try and make that happen and move in that direction."

'Establish minimum standards'

Aunger suggests the federal government should step in and oversee the completion of the Trans Canada Trail as it did when the Trans-Canada Highway was built. He's lobbying federal officials to make that happen.

"Establish minimum standards and work with the provinces to ensure that those standards are respected." said Aunger.



This section of the Trans Canada Trail in Manitoba was completely overgrown, says Aunger. (Edmund Aunger)

But Ottawa says it has no plans to step in. Ed Jager, Parks Canada director of visitor experience, said the federal government has put millions into the project and will continue to do so.

But it's up to the Trans Canada Trail organization to decide how that money is spent, providing support and funding to local groups, which will establish and maintain the trails said Jager.

The last leg of Edmund Aunger's journey, next summer, will take him to Prince Edward Island to the spot where his wife died in 2012.