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Trans Canada Trail plans wander off path

Critics say quality and safety of path 25 years in making sacrificed to meet deadline

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Until about three years ago, an unused CN Rail track along the north shore of Lake Superior was to have been a showcase section of the Trans Canada Trail, a national dream aimed at connecting nature enthusiasts across the country.

The 111-kilometre “Lake Superior Terry Fox Courage Trail” — from Nipigon, Ont., to Thunder Bay — was an integral \$20-million link connecting the 24,000-kilometre Trans Canada Trail in time for the country’s 150th anniversary on July 1, 2017 — one year from now.

For tourists, it would be a chance to see where Fox’s 1980 cancer fundraiser, the Marathon of Hope, ended in Thunder Bay. For locals, it was a potential boost in business tax revenues and community pride.

“No question about it,” said Nipigon Mayor Richard Harvey. “It was doable.”

But those plans changed in an instant when Trans Canada Trail organizers decided around March 2013 that the route would instead go through the waters of Lake Superior. Instead of a land trail, there would be a launching point for kayaks and canoes — a quick, uncomplicated, less-expensive way to complete more than 1,000 kilometres of trail.

“We weren’t involved in any discussions. As we were continuing to work on it we were told that we’re not doing that any more,” said Harvey.

Trans Canada Trail officials said the decision was taken by its provincial partner, Trans Canada Trail Ontario, but a representative of that organization did not respond to a request for comment. Harvey is still hoping the Kinghorn project will form part of the national trail in the future.

“I was very upset at first but I recognized that in order to accomplish what we want to do in our area we need to work together with the Trans Canada Trail.”

After a quarter century of conception and construction, a route linking the Atlantic, Pacific and Arctic oceans will indeed be completed in time for the national celebrations next year, officials with the Montreal-based foundation have said.

But it will not have come without some creative solutions fashioned and some dreams dashed. Among them is the founding vision of a land-based trail stretching mainly across decommissioned railways.

“The idea of having a pure-trail experience on a greenway from coast-to-coast-to coast is difficult to achieve,” said Jane Murphy, Trans Canada Trail’s national director of trail responsible for coordinating the funding and the efforts of local and provincial trail organizations.

“Our goal is to get the trail completed by 2017 and we’re on track to do so. In doing so, we’ve had to come up with different solutions to ensure connection and we use the term ‘connection’ because the trail will never be complete and we’ll always be improving it and enhancing it.”

It is almost a wonder the dream of a Trans Canada Trail has made it this far, to where it is 86 per cent completed, with just 3,400 kilometres of trail left to be filled in.

The initial goal was to finish by the year 2000. With just half of it built, a cross-country relay to mark its opening set runners carrying water from Canada's three oceans on a course toward the nation's capital. They were to have poured the water into a million-dollar commemorative fountain. But deeper problems were hard to hide when even the symbolism was downsized due to lack of funds.

The public was on board, with many having donated \$36 to "buy" a metre of the trail. But actual construction costs were greater than expected and government and deep-pocketed private donors hadn't rallied to the cause, trail officials said at the time.

There were surges and setbacks in the ensuing years. A \$15-million federal grant in 2003 funded 33 different trail projects and 87 bilingual interpretation panels along the trail. But in 2005, the non-profit organization was forced to seek a new insurance policy after its principal insurer bowed out of the project, said John Cushing, president of the Canadian Trails Federation.

Construction continued steadily. By 2014, with a strong-enough likelihood of completing the trail, then-prime minister Stephen Harper and his wife, Laureen, the trail's honorary campaign chair, promised the federal government would match 50 per cent of all private funds raised to a maximum of \$25 million.

In 2015, the last year for which an annual report is publicly available, the Trans Canada Trail received about \$6.1 million in donations and another \$7.3 million in funding from the federal and provincial governments. It distributed \$8.4 million last year for trail construction.

But some critics say that the quality and safety of the trail is being sacrificed in the rush to meet an artificial deadline. Edmund Auger, a political science professor at the University of Alberta, is among the most vocal.



Edmund Auger with his wife, Elizabeth Sovis. She was killed by a drunk driver in 2012 in Prince Edward Island on a trip along the Trans Canada Trail.

In July 2012, his wife, Elizabeth Sovis, was struck and killed by a drunk driver while cycling the Trans Canada Trail in Prince Edward Island. On previous cycling trips, Sovis had been angered when the trail was routed along busy roads and highways.

Prince Edward Island's section of the trail was supposed to be among the safest, but despite the indications on an official trail map, Auger said they were forced to ride along a five-kilometre stretch of highway to reach their bed-and-breakfast near the town of Hunter River, P.E.I., where the accident occurred. The driver, Clarence Moase, pleaded guilty to a charge of impaired driving causing death and was sentenced to six years in prison.

After, Aunger began campaigning for trail safety. He set up a memorial fund in his wife's name that gave \$10,000 toward the trail's completion. But he stopped donating after seeing the conditions of the trail during one leg of a cross-Canada fundraising ride.

"I believe that this whole idea that we have to say it is completed by 2017 is delusional. I think we should say that we're only going to call the Trans Canada Trail something that meets certain minimum national standards," he said.

"It's not just some academic exercise. There are people who will trust them, who are going to go on a hiking trip and see that the trail runs along this route and find that they're on a very busy highway that's very dangerous."

Murphy said that trail safety "is paramount for us" and said that road-cycling routes are first approved by engineers as well as roadway managers and provincial transportation officials.

Cushing, who has developed trails in Alberta and Ottawa, said using roads and highways as connectors is a simple reality in a vast country like Canada.

"You're not going to have one continuous trail throughout the country that doesn't have connectors. I don't see anything wrong with that," he said.

Others worry that the trail's usability is being sacrificed in the rush to meet the 2017 deadline.

Tara McFadden, a town councillor in Cochrane, Alta., worries about a section of the trail that runs along a highway just south of the Calgary suburb.

"There's going to be lines on a map that won't really translate into usable trails and that's a concern, I guess," said McFadden, who described herself as an interested cyclist.

“I would do it if it was safe. I have young kids and this isn’t going to be a solution that I would take my family on, that’s for sure.”

In Nipigon, Mayor Harvey also said the trail along Lake Superior’s north shore is potentially treacherous for amateurs due to the cold water and the sudden weather changes.

“The Trans Canada Trail across Lake Superior is only for highly trained people. I trust that (they) will get that message out that unless you have a lot of training and a lot of experience you shouldn’t be out here.”

Saskatchewan’s section of the trail, which went from 34-per-cent completion in 2014 to 71-per-cent completion last year, took a practical approach to make up for a considerable gap. The trail was routed along secondary gravel roads and incorporating water ways west of Regina and south of Saskatoon.

The water route adds some charm to the trek through the prairie, said Sinclair Harrison, chair of the province’s Vision 2017 trail. And he won’t apologize to those who feel the trail has strayed from the ideal.

“I’m sure that some people feel we’ve rushed this. But in order to get things done ... sometimes you’ve just got to forge ahead,” he said. “If you try and take everybody’s interests into consideration you just don’t get anything done.”

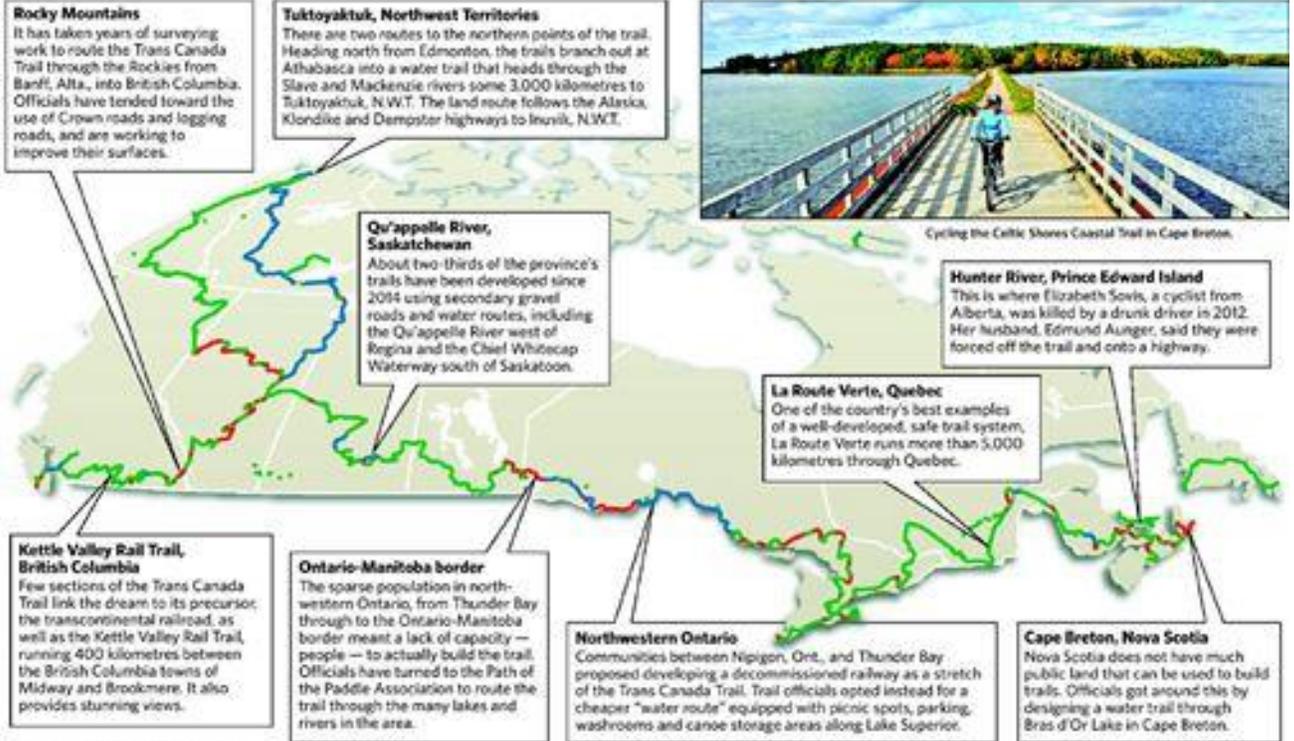
No one suggests that a national dream has morphed into a nightmare, but some fear a subtle shift to focus on delivering a “connected” trail rather than a “completed” trail means that a seemingly never-ending project will only impede other development.

“We’re supportive,” said Patrick Connor, executive director of the Ontario Trails Council. “But we also wish that they would get the job done because it would free up focus on the other 74,600 kilometres of trail in Ontario.”

Canada's cross-country trail

The rush is on to complete the Trans Canada Trail, a national goal set 25 years ago to connect the country from east to west and north to south. But some people are raising concerns about the route and the hurry to get it done in time for the country's 150th anniversary on July 1, 2017.

CONNECTED LAND TRAIL
 GAP IN TRAIL
 CONNECTED WATER TRAIL



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