

Senate Debates
Monday, June 20, 2016

Trans Canada Trail

History, Benefits and Challenges

Hon. Claudette Tardif rose pursuant to notice of May 10, 2016: That she will call the attention of the Senate to the Trans Canada Trail — its history, benefits and the challenges it is faced with as it approaches its 25th anniversary.

She said: Honourable senators, like all Canadians, I realize that we live in a very large country, which I am reminded of every week when I travel back and forth between Edmonton and Ottawa.

A country like Canada would be much less economically, socially and politically cohesive without its vast, accessible and effective transportation and communication networks, which bring us closer together and promote exchanges. This has been clear to generations upon generations of Canadians, and I think that this is now an integral part of our history and national identity.

In the 19th and 20th centuries, Canadian ingenuity gave us the Rideau Canal, the Pacific railway, the St. Lawrence Seaway, the Trans-Canada Highway and a vast network of airports, telephone lines and other telecommunication infrastructure that we would be hard-pressed to live without today.

We can be proud of our success in linking Canada's diverse regions together, despite the many challenges that may at times have seemed insurmountable. Building a vast and sparsely populated nation such as ours is an ongoing affair, a process that continues in the 21st century.

Today I would like to address another challenge, namely that of completing the Trans Canada Trail. The construction of a national trail system can cultivate our sense of collective imagination and national pride, much like the building of the Pacific railway in the 19th century or the Trans-Canada Highway in the 20th century.

Despite 24 years of passionate and sustained efforts from the proponent, the Trans Canada Trail is not yet complete. The idea of a national trail system first originated in the 1980s in the mind of Mr. Bill Pratt, an Alberta resident who was at the time the President of the Calgary Olympics organizing committee, after he witnessed a horrific accident near Calgary that left many young cyclists dead.

From that moment, Mr. Pratt dreamed of a trail that would link communities from coast to coast to coast, a green trail that would be safe and readily accessible to all Canadians.

A few years later, in conjunction with Canada's one hundred and twenty-fifth anniversary, the Trans Canada Trail was officially born, and a foundation and a board of directors were put in place to facilitate the coordination, development and promotion of the trail across the country. Since the project's inception, various levels of government — local, provincial and federal — have taken interest in the trail, committing funding and going so far as to pass legislation when required.

However, the trail has fundamentally remained a community- based project. The Trans Canada Trail is now made up of nearly 500 individual trails and is already one of the world's biggest networks of multi-use recreational trails.

As stated on the foundation's website, once fully connected, the Trans Canada Trail will stretch nearly 24,000 kilometres from the Atlantic to the Pacific to the Arctic Ocean, through every province and territory, linking Canadians in nearly 1,000 communities. In fact, four in five Canadians already live within 30 minutes of a completed section of the trail.

These early visionaries had a number of goals in mind, aside from accessibility and safety, when they decided to build such a trail from coast to coast. They wanted to encourage physical activity, showcase our history, preserve Canada's cultural and natural heritages, promote tourism and stimulate regional economies.

Funding for the trail comes from various private sources, in addition to public sources, which means that this initiative is developed and supported by a large number of local, regional, provincial and national volunteers, businesses and charities. In other words, the Trans Canada Trail is both a community initiative and a Canada-wide initiative.

First, there is an obvious lack of national coherence in the construction standards and access conditions for the Trans Canada Trail. According to many people, including my former colleague, Professor Edmund Aunger, a passionate cyclist, this is delaying the development of the trail and reducing safety for users and could make the trail less attractive to some. Essentially, this problem stems from the fact that the organization does not own the trail and is not responsible for any section of the trail.

In fact, the Trans Canada Trail is represented by provincial and territorial organizations that are responsible for promoting the trail and building it in accordance with the needs and aspirations of the communities. These provincial organizations and the local trail builders are then entrusted with its development and management.

This structure is key to the success of the Trans Canada Trail, but is also its Achilles heel, which has had certain consequences over the years, including trails and signage of varying quality, out- of-date access maps to trails, and occasional

misunderstandings between the users about portions that allow the use of motorized recreational vehicles. However, I believe that the most serious consequence of this lack of standardization is the reduced safety of users.

I am thinking in particular of the accident that took the life of Mr. Aunger's wife a few years ago when they were using the Trans Canada Trail on Prince Edward Island while on vacation.

Elizabeth Sovis was on a road without shoulders that linked two portions of the trail. She was hit head-on by a drunk driver. Just like those who started the Trans Canada Trail project, Mr. Aunger and his wife dreamed of a green, safe, national trail. That was why they decided to travel the trail section by section so that they could promote it.

Unfortunately, that tragic accident illustrates the quality- and safety-related challenges facing the development of the trail. According to Mr. Aunger, and I quote:

. . . 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,"

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

. . . 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,"

According to Mr. Aunger, the Trans Canada Trail is making a large-scale transition to roadways, with horrific accidents as a result. These highways will now be part of the Trans Canada Trail.

In early 2015, the Trans Canada Trail Foundation advised provincial associations to route the Trans Canada Trail along highway shoulders, where possible, to close the remaining gaps. The foundation is now saying that the trail will be connected. That's not the same as being completed, honourable senators.

Dozens of other examples have been brought to the public's attention in recent years, including some that were highlighted in an in-depth *Toronto Star* article published earlier this month. Here are a few excerpts from that article:

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. . . .

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. . . .

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. . . ."

The mayor believes that unless people have a lot of training and a lot of experience, they shouldn't be out there.

Like Mr. Auger and many other Trans Canada Trail users, I believe that the federal government has a role to play in making this trail a world-class network. It could set minimum standards for quality, including building, safety and access standards for the entire trail, by using every tool at its disposal to ensure consistency. In other words, funding attached to certain obligations probably remains the best way to ensure that minimum standards are met.

The second challenge facing the Trans Canada Trail is just that, funding. With just a bit of imagination or political will, especially as we are gearing up for the celebrations to commemorate Canada's 150th birthday, we could not only complete the trail in the next few years, but we could also enhance its quality, appeal and sustainability by developing national directives modeled on large-scale trans-Canada projects from the past, like the transcontinental railway or the Trans-Canada Highway.

Based on my research, the Government of Canada has already allocated over \$35 million to the Trans Canada Trail over the years, including \$15 million from Canadian Heritage towards construction activities and another \$10 million from Parks Canada several years ago now.

In addition, the Government of Canada is currently running a campaign to give 50 cents for every dollar donated to the Trans Canada Trail towards its completion. Could the government be doing more? Of course, I think so. For instance, British Columbia spent \$44 million in the 1990s to purchase an old rail line between the Okanagan Valley and Vancouver in order to convert it into a section of the trail, before spending millions more to complete other sections of the trail. Other provinces have also followed suit and made contributions that have been proportionally larger than what the federal government has contributed so far.

The federal government could certainly double its contribution per dollar donated. It could match private donations until the trail is complete and beyond that, because there will always be a need to pay for maintenance. Together with Canadian Heritage, the Government of Canada could also invest more resources in a joint fundraising campaign by promoting this initiative in national advertising campaigns.

The federal government could also encourage the provinces to contribute more to the project by creating agreements similar to federal-provincial agreements for other infrastructure projects. Funding could come from the new infrastructure money over the coming years, particularly for sections of the trail that cost more to build. I think that investing more resources in this project would be a fast, targeted, constructive and relatively inexpensive way for the Government of Canada to invest in our infrastructure at a time when our economy really needs it, particularly in regions where sections of the trail have yet to be built or need rehabilitating.

The trail could be part of the government's green agenda if construction standards are enforced and sensible access conditions restricting or even prohibiting motorized vehicles on sections funded by the federal government are in place.

I sincerely hope that we are prepared to put in the necessary effort because the Trans Canada Trail is an important part of our national heritage, and I believe that all Canadians have the right to a safe, high-quality trail.