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Widower on a mission to take Trans Canada Trail off-road

By Katrina Clarke Staff Reporter

Edmund Aunger, whose wife was killed cycling the Trans Canada Trail, is calling on the federal and provincial governments to take the trail off roadways and highways entirely.

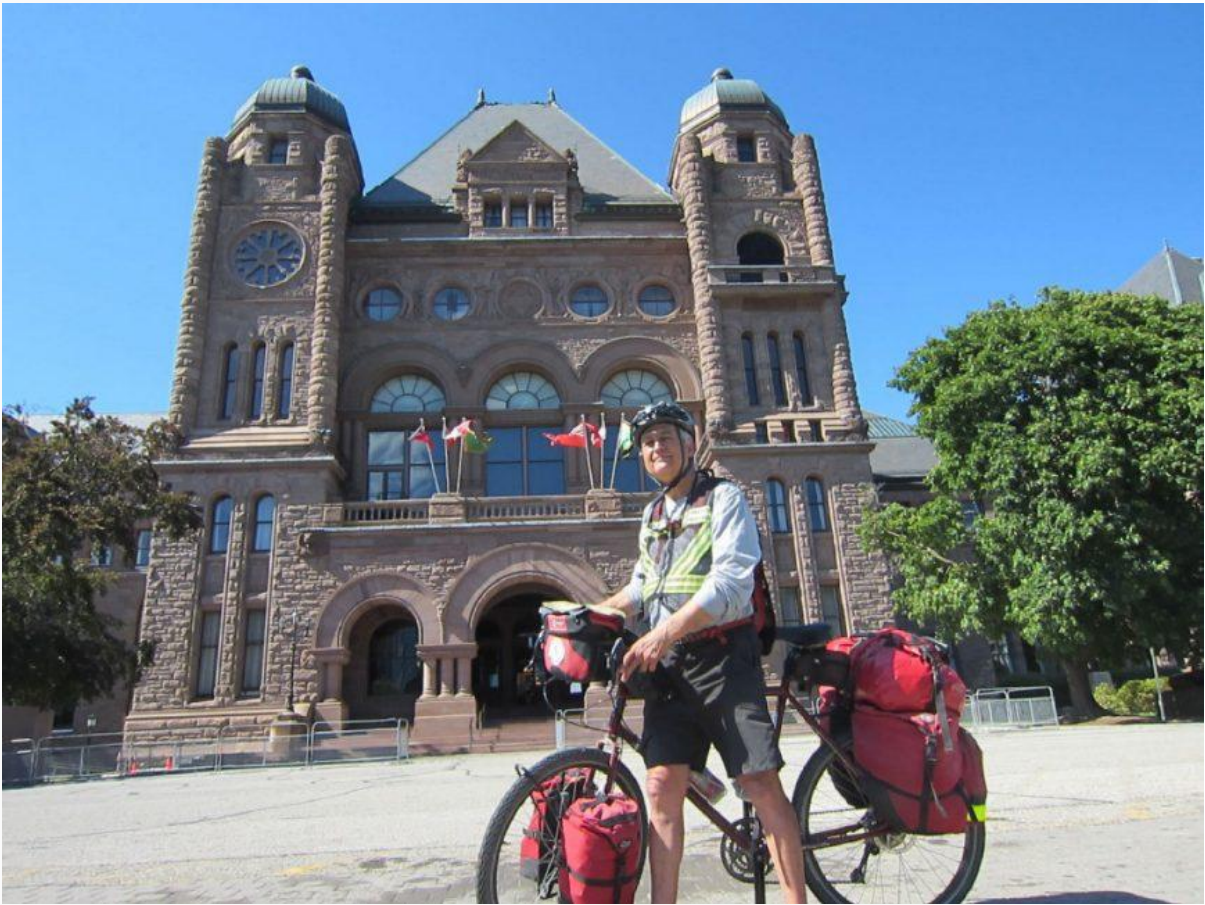
Elizabeth Sovis was vacationing with her husband on Prince Edward Island in 2012, looking forward to retirement, when a drunk driver hit her while she cycled the Trans Canada Trail, throwing her body 50 metres and severing her brain stem.

She died at the scene.

Now, her husband, Edmund Aunger, a professor emeritus of political science at the University of Alberta, is on a cross-Canada cycling campaign, taking up her cause to make the trail safer. He is calling on the federal and provincial governments as well as trail organizers to take the trail off roadways and highways entirely.

“How did this happen? How did our proud national dream become a shameful national nightmare?” said Aunger, 67, speaking to a handful of supporters during a stop in Toronto in front of Queen’s Park on Sunday. “How did our glorious plans for public safety become an odious means for public endangerment.”

The concept for a Trans Canada Trail, running from coast to coast to coast, was first proposed in 1992 as a project to celebrate the country’s 125th anniversary. The trail, running over 24,000 kilometres, is expected to be connected by Canada’s 150th anniversary on July 1, 2017.



Edmund Aunger wants to see the 24,000-kilometre Trans Canada Trail trimmed down to 8,000 kilometres, along a route that is “safe and accessible.” (KATRINA CLARKE/TORONTO STAR)

Aunger wants to see that plan scrapped, shrinking the trail down to an 8,000-kilometre cross-country route that is “safe and accessible,” even if that takes longer to complete. The trail as it stands is unsafe and an inaccessible maze, he said.

“The Trans Canada Trail was supposed to be for ordinary people, for families, people of all ages and abilities,” said Aunger. “Not for extreme sports types who want to take risks with their lives.”

The Trans Canada Trail Foundation, responsible for raising funds to support the advancement of the trail, insists the trail as it stands is safe, but say they too want the trail off roadways.

“I see our goals as very similar,” said Valerie Pringle, co-chair of the Trans Canada Trail foundation and a former television host and journalist, who said she has enormous sympathy for Auger. “We’re working on a long term project . . . let’s keep going and making this better as we go.”

Trail organizers anticipate that when connected, 35 per cent of the trail will be on roadways, of which 2,500 kilometres will include provincial highways.

Pringle could not provide an estimate of when the trail might be off roadways, saying it’s a complicated project that relies on volunteers and trail groups across the country to plan out the path.

“Our Trail is ever evolving and the TCT remains committed to supporting the development of greenway, where possible,” said Trans Canada Trail spokesperson Jessica Maga in an email to the Star. “In some areas, roadways are interim links until greenway can be developed; in others, they are the only feasible route of the Trail at this time. This is because country is large and our landscapes diverse.”

The Ministry of Transportation said it invested about \$130 million between 2009 and 2015 in building and maintaining safer trails in Ontario, and is allotting \$25 million to improving cycling infrastructure — which includes adding paved shoulders.

Increased fines for drivers who “door” cyclists — and cyclists who ride without the right reflectors or lights — have also improved road safety, the ministry said, along with the new “one-metre” rule requiring motorists to maintain that distance while passing cyclists.

“Keeping Ontario's roads safe for all road users is our highest priority and we have taken concrete steps to improve cyclist safety across Ontario,” said spokesperson Kwok Wong in an email.

Aunger, who met and fell in love with his wife when the two were 12-year-old students at Willowdale Middle School in North York, now lives in Edmonton. He has three sons and three grandchildren, whom his wife never met.

The drunk driver who killed his wife pleaded guilty to a charge of impaired driving causing death. He was sentenced to six years in prison.

For now, Aunger plans to continue his cross-Canada cycling campaign, Ride the Trail for Elizabeth, which he first embarked on in July 2013 and spends two months completing each summer.

Next summer, he'll arrive on Prince Edward Island in time to hold a memorial for Elizabeth on July 14, marking five years since her death.