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Cyclist continues fight to make Trans Canada Trail safer

Edmund Aunger is biking 12,500 km to raise awareness about safety issues in his late wife's memory

By Matthew Bingley



Edmund Aunger, seen here in Saint John, is biking the Trans Canada Trail to raise awareness about safety issues. (Matthew Bingley/CBC)

Edmund Aunger thinks about his wife Elizabeth every day, especially while he's cycling along the Trans Canada Trail.

Elizabeth Sovis was hit and killed by a drunk driver near Hunter River, P.E.I. while on a cycling vacation in 2012.

Now Aunger is making a 12,500-kilometre journey from Victoria to Charlottetown to highlight what he calls serious safety issues along the Trans Canada Trail.

For the past five summers he has been cycling east on the trail. This summer he's finishing the final leg in the spot where he lost his wife.

Aunger said Sovis had wanted to keep off the roads on their trip to P.E.I. but when the pair arrived she changed her mind. She was struck by a car on a stretch of highway without a shoulder. It wasn't part of the trail.

"We were in P.E.I. for less than four hours and she was hit," said Aunger.

8,500 km on roads, highways

A year away from retirement, Aunger said his wife had planned to spend time working to make the trail safer — a mission he has since taken up.

When the cross-country trail was first conceived, Aunger said the goal was to keep it away from roads where motorized vehicles travelled. Since then, he said the means in which it has been connected has forced those cycling it onto roads and highways.

"No sane person should call that the Trans Canada Trail," he said.

Cyclists, drivers can make mistakes

After reaching Saint John on Friday, Aunger said a cyclist can only travel through about a third of the Maritimes on an actual trail.

"From Oromocto, the trail goes into the St. John River and we can't ride that for 94 kilometres," he said.

The impassable portion forces cyclists onto roads and highways, where neither they nor motorized drivers want them, he said.

"You can say share the road all you like," Aunger said, noting two lane roads often don't have enough space to give cyclists room. "Not only do drivers make mistakes, cyclists make mistakes too."



While biking on P.E.I. five years ago, Edmund Aunger's wife Elizabeth Sovis was struck and killed by a drunk driver on a highway with no paved shoulders. (Edmund Aunger)

While he describes the portions of the Trans Canada Trail that live up to the correct safety standards as "wonderful," Aunger said change needs to come.

Petitioning for new standards

Aunger has also started an online petition, calling on the federal government to intervene to make the Trans Canada Trail safer.

He wants the trail signs taken off motorized routes and said the portions it includes should have minimum standards, which include servicing standards.

"I'd prefer not to see a Trans Canada Trail," he said, "than to put up signs on roads and highways and say that we have a Trans Canada Trail that's been connected."

Old railway beds would be far better suited for the trail, which was part of the trail's original vision, he said. But to do that, he said there needed to be more enforcement to keep ATVs off of it.



Edmund Aunger has described this section of the trail near Cote, Sask., as a roadside ditch. (Edmund Aunger)

Operated by municipalities, communities

The non-profit Trans Canada Trail Foundation is responsible for raising funds to support the advancement of the trail. In the past, its co-chair Valerie Pringle said the trail is a work in progress and its first preference isn't roads and highways.

While she said they would rather a green way trail, the roads are used for communities without the resources or population to link up to other portions of the trail.

But Pringle has also pointed out the portions of the trail are all locally owned and operated by municipalities and communities, not the foundation.

'I have to do it'

Crossing the route is a difficult task and Aunger said he know achieving the change he is campaigning for won't be easy. One thing he's retaining hope for is that a member of Parliament could introduce a private member's bill.

Though the end of his journey is growing closer, he said he's bound to keep trying to achieve his wife's dream.

"I can never do enough you know," he said, "but I have to do it."