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Ottawa urged to help make Trans Canada Trail safer

By Dylan Robertson

OTTAWA — Cyclists aspiring to cross the country on the Trans Canada Trail are encountering muddy paths, busy freeways and even shooting ranges when they travel through Manitoba, prompting thousands to ask Ottawa to step in.



The Trans Canada Trail near Meadow Lake, Manitoba. (Edmund Aunger photo)

The Trans Canada Trail started in 1992 as an ambitious, nation-building quest to give Canadians and tourists a means of crossing all provinces and territories on foot or by pedal power.

But jurisdictional disputes, a funding shortfall and a manic rush to open the trail for the Canada 150 celebrations has put swaths of the trail onto some of the country's busiest highways, and 7,000 kilometres onto rivers and lakes meant for canoeing.

"The idea of the Trans Canada Trail is brilliant, and the plan was that it would non-motorized, on abandoned rail beds. It would be a linear park that was feasible, and not expensive," said Edmund Auger. "And now we have a trail that's on roads or highways."

He was in Ottawa on Wednesday as Ontario MP Pam Damoff presented a 2,044-signature petition urging the federal government to legislate the trail, to make it a safe, non-motorized greenway. The petition has been supported by numerous groups, and included 86 Manitobans.

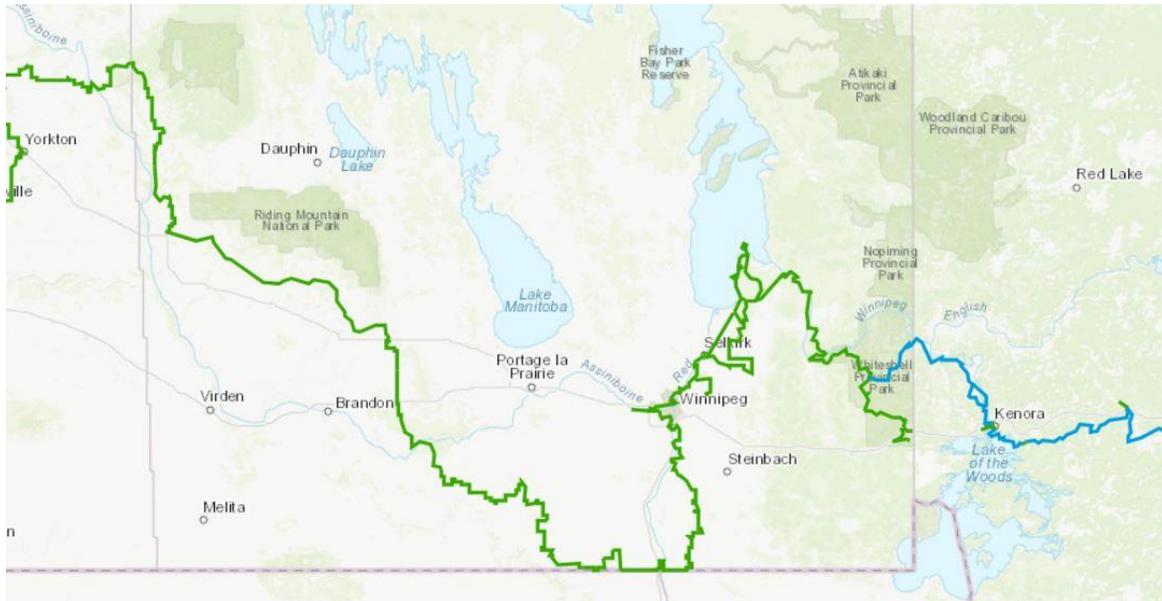
It's a deeply personal quest for Auger, whose wife, Elizabeth Sovis, was killed in 2012 by a drunk driver who hit her on the shoulder of a Prince Edward Island highway.

"It was a horrific and traumatizing incident for me," he said. "It was what she had feared most, and what she had tried most to avoid."

He recalls a 2010 ride with his wife in Winnipeg, when they'd planned a three-week trip on the trail. They got as far as Lockport on Day 1, and cancelled the rest because it was almost exclusively busy highways, except near Birds Hill Provincial Park (which he says hadn't changed by 2015).

Auger said the experience prompted his wife to plan on advocating for the Trans Canada Trail once she retired, despite him warning it would involve

politics, reluctant towns and opposition from all-terrain-vehicle enthusiasts. She died less than year before she was to retire.



The Manitoba portion of the Trans Canada Trail. (thegreattrail.ca)

That's when Auger retired from his job as a University of Alberta professor and took on her quest. He spent the five summers after her death riding the entire bicycle-designated parts of the route, going from Edmonton to Winnipeg in 2014 and onward to Sault Ste. Marie, Ont., in 2015.

Auger documents his travels meticulously on Twitter. In Manitoba, his photos show an uncomfortably narrow shoulder of Highway 204 near Selkirk, overgrown ditches close to Inglis, and even an area near a shooting range around Gretna.

Despite meticulously studying routes in advance, he still had to ride his 35 kilograms of gear through gravel paths.

"Even worse in Manitoba was all the very muddy roads, the dirt roads after it rained," said Auger, who frequently encountered locals bewildered that he was on an official, nationwide route.

While Manitoba didn't have as many freeway routes as other provinces, Auger said the province tied Saskatchewan for a sizable amount of purported trail located inside roadside drainage ditches, which frequently flood.

Governments and charities have spent millions on the project, but some have found railway owners seeking high prices for the out-of-service railbeds that lie on solid ground. Auger said the best province for cycling is Quebec, which has managed to attract European cyclists.

Dwayne Sandall, co-founder of Trail Run Manitoba, said he's heard about these issues for years.

Sandall, who organizes trips and occasionally uses parts of the trail, said Manitoba faces a patchwork where only areas with dedicated volunteers are easy for cyclists to manage.

"The trails are just not there in a few places, so it's a bit of a challenge," he said. "It's a jurisdictional issue."

Sandall said he's taken parts of the trail that are only roads, but hasn't seen vehicles for four hours. But other parts are extremely dangerous, especially when ATVs are around. He said such unreliability makes it impossible to gain popular momentum.

"The locals know that's the Trans Canada Trail, but there's not enough traffic to sort of enforce the fact that it's mixed-use, that's it's a trail area as well," he said.

"It's a chicken-and-egg scenario; if people perceive it to be unsafe and there's no usage, then it's a vicious circle."



[Edmund A Auger](#) @ridethetrail4

Is a bicycle helmet a hard hat? #TCTrail @TCTrail near White Lake MB is a sturdy little-used logging road. [Aug 11, 2014](#)



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Flooded segment of #TCTrail near Roblin is too deep and too wide to ford. Detouring. [Aug 14, 2014](#)



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Can't ride in the bushes on overgrown #TCTrail near Inglis MB. Detouring again.
[Aug 14, 2014](#)



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More washed-out #TCTrail near Birdtail MB. Needed 4 trips to carry bike and bags across.
[@TCTrail](#). [@TrailsManitoba](#) [Aug 17, 2014](#)



[Edmund A Auger @ridethetrail4](#) Aug 20.

Even when dry, #TCTrail near Carberry Jct MB is not user-friendly. When wet, it's impossible. @TCTrail [Aug 25, 2014](#)