

E & N rail service needs chance to succeed

Mark MacDonald Business Examiner August 2010

The provincial government's announcement that it will not spend millions of dollars to upgrade E&N Railway track and trains with an eye towards an expanded commuter rail service is no surprise.

Running the numbers, it is easy to see why Victoria has decided against funding the project to that extent. 41,000 riders per year not exactly Sky Train numbers. \$104 million to upgrade the track. At first glance, that kind of expenditure simply can't be justified.

But isn't this more of the "same old, same old" story of the unloved E&N? With the forest industry moving towards trucking logs as opposed to moving them by freight in recent years, the actual users of the railway tracks has continued to dwindle. A strong business case for upgrading the track would largely be based on "faith" that a revitalized railway would be frequented by forest companies moving their products, and possibly even a somewhere-on-the horizon return of functioning Vancouver Island coal mines.

Yet it is the prospect of commuter rail that is the great unknown in this never-ending debate. The Dayliner isn't exactly overflowing with riders now, so how many people would really utilize a commuter train to travel up and down Vancouver Island?

The answer to that question will probably never be known until someone decides to take a serious stab at bringing E&N passenger service into this century.

Has E&N passenger service ever really been given a chance to succeed? Other than for tourists, the Dayliner schedule really works for no-one. It's departure and arrival times in

Victoria, Nanaimo and Courtenay don't jive with anything connected to a working business day. Therefore, why would any business people consider commuter rail as a transportation option? They simply can't.

The recently-completed year-long study cost \$500,000, and made many good, predictable points. Wouldn't that money or further funding be more effective if it was used to conduct a real live survey of possible usage?



In other words, set a proper commuter-friendly train schedule - running on time - from Courtenay and Nanaimo each morning Monday to Friday, with a reasonably subsidized ticket price, that

would get business people into Greater Victoria and downtown by 8:30 or 9 a.m. The return trip could leave at 4:30 or 5, ensuring a return home for commuters by 6 or 6:30 p.m. A schedule like this would allow for a full day's work in Victoria, with travel time available for cell phone conversations and lap top use, interspersed with breathtaking views of the spectacular scenery along the route.

There are plenty of commuters who drive to Victoria daily for work. Just look at the traffic flow, starting at around 7 a.m. in the Central Island, and the ever-increasing Colwood Crawl to exit Victoria in the late afternoon.

How many of those drivers might decide to park their vehicle and take the train over the Malahat IF there were reliable transportation? A few? Plenty?

Enough to add more cars to the Dayliner?

The only way to find out, really, is to put together a proper commuter service on a trial basis, and see who comes along for the ride. Try it for six months. The results might be disappointing, but they might be startling promising as well.

Not to mention the fact it could take a lot of vehicles off the road.

Until a practical, real life survey like this, involving real customers taking advantage of commuter rail service that is quick, sensible, timely and affordable, we will never really know if the E&N is viable in this manner.

And the longer we wait to do a test like this, the sooner the track falls into an irreparable state of disrepair, leaving no option for rail service for commuters or companies on Vancouver Island.