

Healing road-paralysis — with rail

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What can you do for fun when you are stuck in clogged traffic?

Losing yourself in thought is one option. During 30 minutes trapped in a stationary automobile, I tried to make sense of the politicians' travel-improvement brainwaves while staring at the back of a flag-person's safety vest.

A mixed lot of projects were hastily contrived to qualify for federal "stimulus" money. I remember them for the frustration and mess they caused.

Stimulus-widened roads quickly fill and overflow as municipal councils encourage more and more traffic jams through the construction of condos with large parking lots and houses with three-car garages.

Stimulus projects aim to put people and money to work. Wouldn't it be more effective to hire people to dig holes and fill them in again? We would save millions in gasoline, tailpipe fumes and time wasted.

I pondered such fantasies while I waited in a lineup half-a-mile from Four Mile Hill on Island Highway. I had rashly decided to try that route once again.

As cars coming from the opposite direction trickled through two or three at a time, it occurred to me that the waste that arises from "shovel-ready" road projects probably exceeds their benefits.

A bus squeezed along. It had traversed an underpass below a railway which could carry passengers to Langford comfortably in 15 minutes.

As I continued to stare at the flag-person, I reflected on three traffic-clearing, shovel-ready projects: strengthen the railway track from Langford to Victoria, Langford to Duncan and Parksville to Port Alberni.

I remembered from the Internet that, more than a century ago, a crew working in Utah laid 10 miles of Central Pacific Railroad track in 12 hours. That's about the distance from downtown to Langford.

Our track is already laid; it needs only to be beefed-up for commuter service. The record-breaking Central Pacific performance scores low on job creation, but the Island rail update could create many long-term jobs.

As our line of automobiles crawled forward 36 inches, I remembered how Siemens Inc. had offered to lend a modern rail vehicle for a trial Langford-Victoria service — until a few fusspots in Esquimalt opposed and derailed the project.

The manufacture of rail vehicles, wind and tidal turbines from Kitimat, B.C., aluminum for export to Asia and Australasia through Port Alberni would be a neat fit for one of the trackside light-industrial and research parks that could be set up on the Island railway.

Railway-meshed industry or transit-oriented development (TOD) was the factor missing from the current B.C. government's muddle-headed decision not to invest in the Island railway. A competent new administration will make development happen, rather than waiting for it to happen by accident and with a measure of good luck.

Governments — in a blind, blundering way — developed airplanes and nuclear power to win wars. Smartened-up peacetime governments might do one better, it seemed to me as I scanned the unchanging roadside scene.

Freight is the traditional lifeblood of the railway; it pays for the losses incurred by passenger service. But as I nudged the car forward another 30 inches, I noted that roads also cost taxpayers a bundle; and rail as a people-moving system gives better value for money.

Pulling expandable trains on an unobstructed route with gentle grades, railways are far more energy-efficient than roads.

Today's B.C. government, being uninspired and unable to invent and co-ordinate, puts railway and road budgets in separate boxes, and says we can't afford rail.

But road and rail together are one people-moving system. Re-routing the crowded, dangerous Malahat and Alberni roads might cost \$3 billion plus destruction of forest.

For 10 percent of that sum, we could revitalize the whole Island railway and arguably chop big money off road costs as some drivers switch to rail.

gemort@pacificcoast.net

—G.E. Mortimore is a Langford-based writer. Think About It appears every second week in the Gazette.