



Better Island Transit
FREQUENT AND AFFORDABLE PUBLIC
TRANSPORTATION FOR VANCOUVER ISLAND

www.betterislandtransit.ca

contact@betterislandtransit.ca

Frequent and Affordable Vancouver Island Bus Service

*Why and How to Provide Convenient and Inexpensive Public Transit
Connecting Central and South Vancouver Island*

11 February 2024



The Island Highway between central and south Vancouver Island is a busy and often congested roadway, carrying about 30,000 daily travellers, yet it has minimal and expensive public transit service. As a result, transit currently serves a tiny portion of travel on this corridor.

This is unfair and inefficient. Non-drivers lack independent mobility and inadequate non-auto travel options increases total vehicle traffic, congestion, crashes and pollution.

Better Island Transit advocates for frequent (at least hourly) and affordable (fares no more than \$5 between major cities) bus service. This would provide many economic, social and environmental benefits, and cost far less than other proposed highway improvement options.

The Problem

The Island Highway between central and southern Vancouver Island is one of British Columbia's busiest and most critical roadways. It carries about 30,000 daily travellers. It is narrow and congested, and there are frequent demands for improvement. Surveys indicate that many Islanders want better travel options (Baker 2023; MNP 2023).

Public transit service on that corridor is currently infrequent and expensive. Between Duncan and Victoria there are only four daily trips departing early from Duncan and returning late afternoons; there are no off-peak or reverse commute trips, weekend service is minimal, and the \$10 fares cost four times as much as a local fare. Because it is inconvenient and expensive transit cannot meet most travellers' needs and serves only a small portion of trips.

In contrast, the #61 Sooke-Victoria bus has 43 daily trips with \$2.50 per trip fares, and carries more than 20% of peak-period trips on that corridor. Figure 1 compares these routes.

Figure 1 Current Central to South Vancouver Island Transit Services

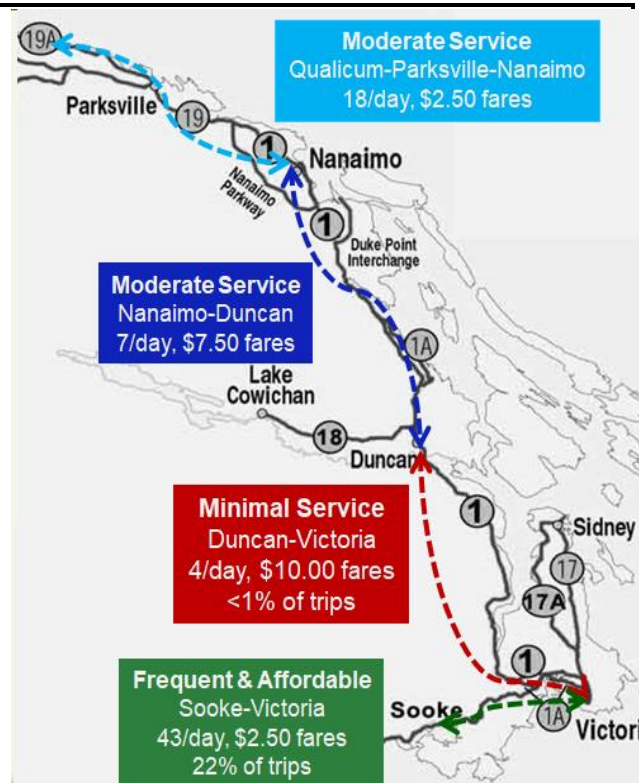
Transit service between central and southern Vancouver Island is currently infrequent and expensive, particularly between Duncan and Victoria.

Qualicum Beach-Parksville-Nanaimo (#91, 50 kms, 52 minutes), 18 daily trips with \$2.50 one-way fares. Transit serves less than 1% of trips on that corridor.

Nanaimo-Duncan (#70, 50 kms, 70 minutes), 7 daily trips with \$7.50 fares. Less than 1% transit mode share.

Duncan-Victoria (#66, 60 kms, 75 minutes), 4 daily trips with \$10 one-way fares. Less than 1% transit mode share.

Sooke-Victoria (#61, 40 kms, 70 minutes), 43 daily trips with \$2.50 fares. Over 20% peak-period transit mode share. Similarly, transit has 20-40% mode share between Fraser Valley towns such as Langley and Pitt Meadows and Vancouver.



Why Provide Frequent and Affordable Bus Service?

Many residents and visitors cannot, should not, or prefer not to drive, and will use public transport if it is convenient and affordable, particularly for longer and stressful trips. Inadequate transit harms everybody: it deprives non-drivers of independent mobility, it increases congestion, crashes and pollution, and forces drivers to chauffeur non-drivers.

Public Transit Serves:

- People with disabilities, including motorists who have difficulty driving at night or on busy highways.
- People who cannot afford a car, and motorists who want to reduce vehicle expenses and wear.
- Commuters who want to avoid the stress of driving on busy highways.
- Motorists whose vehicles are temporarily inoperable or must be left in another community.
- Non-drivers who must travel for specialized medical treatments or professional services.
- People travelling to other communities sport, cultural or social events.
- Tourists visiting Vancouver Island without a car.
- Law abiding drinkers.
- Students travelling to school and college.
- Motorists who want to avoid chauffeuring non-drivers.

The table below summarizes user and community benefits.

Table 1 **Frequent and Affordable Bus Service Benefits**

User Benefits	Community Benefits
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reduced driver stress. Many commuters want to avoid long-distance highway trips. • More independent mobility for non-drivers including people with disabilities, youths and healthcare patients. • Affordability (savings to lower-income households). • Rural economic development and tourism. • Reduced chauffeuring burdens. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reduced highway and surface street congestion. • Parking cost savings. • Increased traffic safety. • Affordable access to public services such as healthcare. • Energy conservation and emission reductions. • Rural economic development (tourism). • Reduces sprawl costs.

Frequent and affordable bus service can provide many benefits to users and communities.

The recent *Island Coastal Inter-Community Transportation Study* (MNP 2023) shows that many Vancouver Island residents want intercity transit services, but that study excluded the CRD. The Province is investing in some rural transit services but not between Victoria and Nanaimo (Baker 2023; MoTI 2023). Current demographic and economic trends (aging population, high fuel prices, health and environmental concerns) are increasing non-auto travel demands and the benefits of serving those demands.

Many jurisdictions have targets to reduce driving and increase non-auto travel as described in the box below. The provincial government is currently considering several high-cost Island Highway expansion projects although they contradict these goals by inducing more vehicle traffic and failing to improve non-auto modes. Currently, BC Transit and MoTI provide minimal support for intercity transit planning; they leave it to regional governments that have limited resources and only perceive a portion of the benefits. More provincial leadership is justified.

Transportation Goals and Targets

- [CRD](#) and [CVRD](#): at least double transit mode shares.
- [CleanBC Roadmap](#): reduce light duty vehicle travel 25%, and increase non-auto mode shares to 30% by 2030 and 50% by 2050.
- [2022 MoTI Mandate Letter](#): provide clean, fast, and efficient transportation in order to increase affordability, safety, and healthcare access. Specifically, it highlights these actions:
 - Make public transit a priority.
 - Ensure that rural, remote and Indigenous communities have safe and reliable transportation services.
 - Support communities to build and improve active transportation networks.
 - Build greener and more livable communities.
 - Work with cabinet colleagues, communities and regions to support the planning of transit projects.
 - Complete the Transit Oriented Development framework.
- [2021 BC Transit Mandate Letter](#): enhance the public services people rely on and make life more affordable and create a cleaner, lower-carbon economy.

The Proposal: Frequent and Affordable Bus Service

We propose that regional and provincial governments provide more frequent and affordable bus service between Victoria and Nanaimo. Below are estimated costs.

The #66 Duncan-Victoria and #70 Nanaimo-Duncan routes both take 70-80 minutes each way. With 40-50 minute layovers, this requires about four hours per round trip. BC Transit buses costs about \$147 per operating hour and recover about 20% of costs through fares (BC Transit 2024/2025 Service Plan) so each additional round trip costs about \$588 total or \$470 in subsidies. The table below estimates the costs of **basic** (18 daily trips, providing hourly service between 6:00 am and midnight) and **frequent** (43 daily trips, as on the Sooke-Victoria route) service. This indicates that the proposal would require \$3.6 to \$10.6 million additional annual subsidy. This represents 2-6% of existing transit funding in the CRD, CVRD and NRD. TDM incentives that increase load factors could increase revenues and cost efficiency.

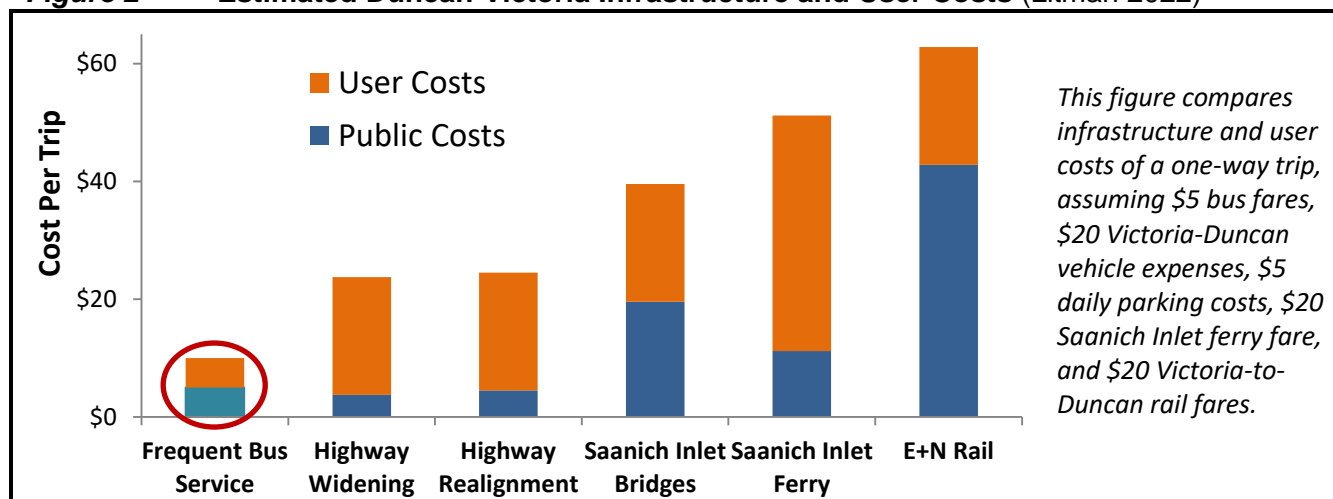
Table 2

	#66 Duncan-Victoria		#70 Nanaimo-Duncan	
	Basic	Frequent	Basic	Frequent
Current daily trips	4	4	7	7
Proposed daily trips	18	43	18	43
Increased trips	14	39	11	36
Cost per round trip (\$147 x 4 hours)	\$470			
Total annual cost (additional trips x \$470 x 365)	\$2,401,700	\$6,518,900	\$1,887,050	\$6,004,250
Fare revenue	\$360,255	\$977,835	\$283,058	\$900,638
Subsidy requirement	\$2,041,445	\$5,541,065	\$1,603,993	\$5,103,613

This proposal requires \$3.6 million additional annual subsidy for basic and \$10.6 million for frequent service.

Figure 2 compares frequent and affordable bus service with other potential highway improvements. It is by far the most cost effective overall. Highway improvements may seem cheaper considering just public costs but not if vehicle and parking costs are also considered.

Figure 2 Estimated Duncan-Victoria Infrastructure and User Costs (Litman 2022)



Conclusions

Vancouver Island currently has infrequent and expensive intercity public transit service that only satisfies a small portion of demands. More frequent and affordable bus service connecting Victoria with central Vancouver Island would provide significant user benefits including a low-stress alternative to driving in busy traffic, independent mobility for non-drivers and user savings. It would also help achieve local, regional and provincial goals to reduce vehicle traffic, increase transit trips, reduce congestion, crashes, and pollution emissions, and support rural economic development. It is more cost effective, faster to implement, and provides more total benefits than other highway improvement options. For these reasons, regional districts, BC Transit and MoTI should implement frequent and affordable bus service in 2024.

For More Information

Rochelle Baker (2023), "Vancouver Island Transportation Survey Highlights Key Connectivity Gaps for Communities," *National Observer* (www.nationalobserver.com); at <https://bit.ly/3Fpi28U>.

BC Government (2023), *New Funding Supports Rural Regional Transportation*, BC Government News (<https://news.gov.bc.ca>); at <https://news.gov.bc.ca/releases/2023MOTI0073-000832>.

BC Transit (2023), *Victoria Regional Transit System: Route Finder*, BC Transit (www.bctransit.com).

BC Transit (2023), *2023/24 – 2025/26 Service Plan*, BC Transit (www.bctransit.com); www.bctransit.com/documents/1529721617436.

Nicholas Dagen Bloom (2023), *Why the Humble City Bus is the Key to Improving US Public Transit*, The Conversation (<https://theconversation.com>); at <https://tinyurl.com/2mjn6utr>.

CVRD and NRD (2021), *Interregional Transit Service Discussion Document*, BC Transit (www.bctransit.com); at www.bctransit.com/documents/1529712254607.

Rob Fleming (2021), *BC Transit Mandate Letter*, Office of the Premier, at <http://tinyurl.com/3d6tw4jf>.

John Horgan (2022), *MoTH Mandate Letter*, Office of the Premier, at <http://tinyurl.com/2kdyv6vr>.

House of Commons (2023), *Improving Bus Connectivity in Canada*, Standing Committee on Transport, Infrastructure and Communities (www.ourcommons.ca); at <https://bit.ly/3MpV4T2>.

Todd Litman (2022), *Rethinking Malahat Solutions: Or, Why Spend a Billion Dollars If a Five-Million Dollar Solution is Better Overall?* Victoria Transport Policy Institute (www.vtpi.org); at www.vtpi.org/malahat.pdf.

Todd Litman and Alastair Craighead (2021), "An Unglamorous Malahat Congestion Solution: Frequent, Low-Cost Bus Service," *Times Colonist*; at <https://lnkd.in/gUBzBEFU>.

Todd Litman (2023), "Regardless of Rail Plans, Island Needs Frequent, Affordable Bus Service," *Times Colonist*; at <http://tinyurl.com/33xfe7r4>.

MNP (2023), *Island Coastal Inter-Community Transportation Study*, Island Coastal Trust (<https://islandcoastaltrust.ca>); at <https://bit.ly/403c2Mz>.

MoTI (2020), *South Island Transportation Strategy*, Ministry of Transportation and Highways (www.gov.bc.ca); at <https://bit.ly/3kDIQYt>. Includes *South Island Transportation Strategy; Technical Report No. 1* (<https://bit.ly/2Jqk3YJ>) and 2 (<https://bit.ly/387dJQq>).

<https://betterislandtransit.ca/report>