



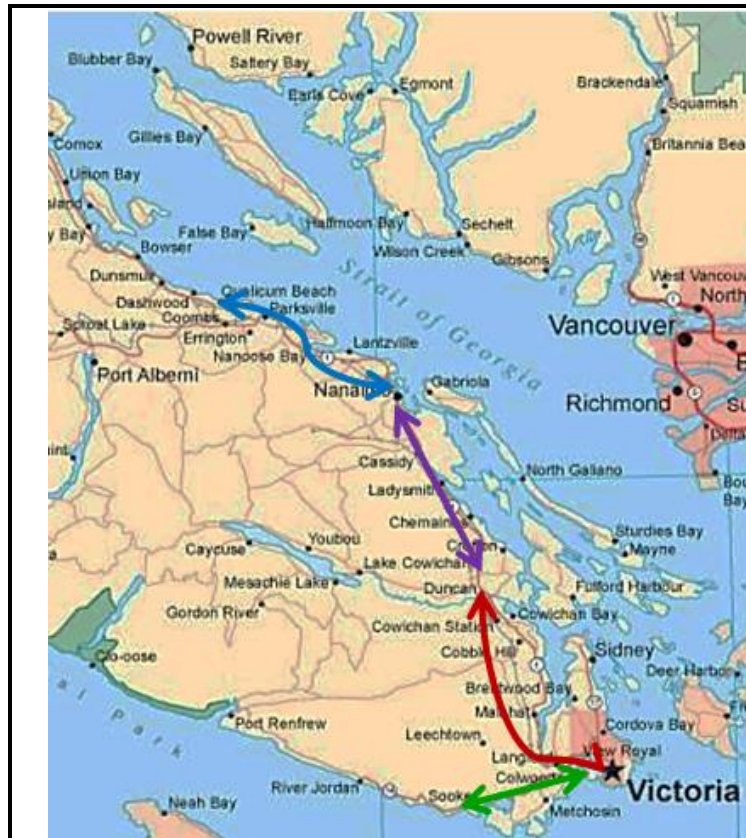
## BETTER ISLAND TRANSIT

ADVOCATING FOR CONVENIENT, AFFORDABLE TRANSIT  
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### Frequent and Affordable Vancouver Island Bus Service

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

15 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 Vancouver and Fraser Valley towns such as Langley and Pitt Meadows.



### Why Provide Frequent and Affordable Bus Service?

Many travellers 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 traffic problems, and forces drivers to chauffeur non-drivers. BC's inadequate transit was highlighted in the "Race Across the World" show (Chan 2023a). Island Coastal Trust (MNP 2023) and Canadian House of Commons (2023) studies recommend more government support for interregional bus services.

#### 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.
- 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. 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.

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

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

*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 it excluded the CRD. The Province is investing in some rural transit services and is investing \$18 million in rail system planning (Chan 2023b), but not Nanaimo-Victoria bus service (Baker 2023; MoTI 2023). BC Transit spent a decade planning the seven daily bus #70 Nanaimo-Duncan route.

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. We need more provincial leadership.

#### **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.

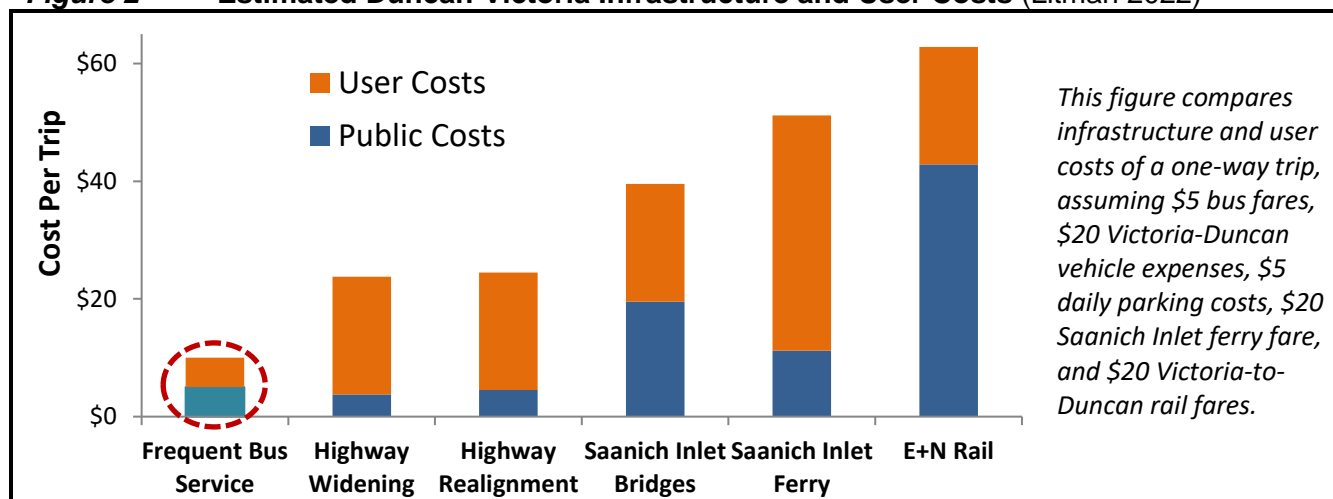
**Table 2 Nanaimo-Victoria Bus Service Cost Estimates**

	#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)	\$588	\$588	\$588	\$588
Total annual cost (additional trips x \$588 x 365)	\$3,004,680	\$8,155,560	\$2,360,820	\$7,511,700
Fare revenue	\$450,702	\$1,223,334	\$354,123	\$1,126,755
Subsidy requirement	\$2,553,978	\$6,932,226	\$2,006,697	\$6,384,945

*This proposal requires \$4.6 million additional annual subsidy for basic and \$13.3 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)**



## **An Action Plan**

Rural and interregional (long-distance) public transit receive little support in British Columbia. The province has no interregional transit service performance targets, planning programs or ongoing funding. Public transit planning is initiated by regional districts and local BC Transit boards which perceive only a small portion of the total benefits provided by long-distance transit services that operate outside their jurisdictions.

In 1979 the BC Ministry of Highways became the Ministry of Transportation and Highways (MoTI), which expanded its responsibilities to include all travel modes, including rural and interregional transit, but little actually changed. The Ministry still collects little data on non-auto travel demands or travel conditions, and devotes a tiny portion of its budget to non-auto modes. This is unfair and inefficient: it ignores the needs of travellers who cannot, should not or prefer not to drive, and fails to support cost-effective multimodal improvements, such as frequent and affordable transit to reduce Island Highway congestion and high crash problems.

To establish frequent and affordable bus service between central and south Vancouver Island by 2025 will require the following actions:

1. Service requests by regional districts and regional BC Transit boards (Spring 2024)
2. BC Transit develops a specific proposal with funding estimates (Summer 2024)
3. Region and BC Transit develop an operational and funding plan (Fall 2024)
4. Include that funding plan in the 2025 provincial budget (Winter 2025).

Advocates should lobby regional district and regional BC Transit board members to request this service, and provincial officials including MLAs and the Minister of Transportation to fund it. The MoTI has good reasons to finance frequent and affordable public transit service on this corridor as a fast and cost-effective way to reduce Malahat Highway traffic problems and achieve other provincial goals including fairness and affordability, traffic safety, emission reductions and rural economic development.

To establish more and better integrated transit service on other Vancouver Island roads and British Columbia highways, the provincial government should establish targets for interregional public transit services, create a department dedicated to interregional transit planning, integrate public transport services, and provide reliable funding, as in other jurisdictions.

## **Conclusions**

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



## For More Information

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