



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 South and Central Vancouver Island*

BACKGROUNDER

20 March 2024



The Island Highway between central and south Vancouver Island is busy and often congested, 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) public transit service. This would provide many economic, social and environmental benefits, and is far more cost-effective than other highway improvement options.*

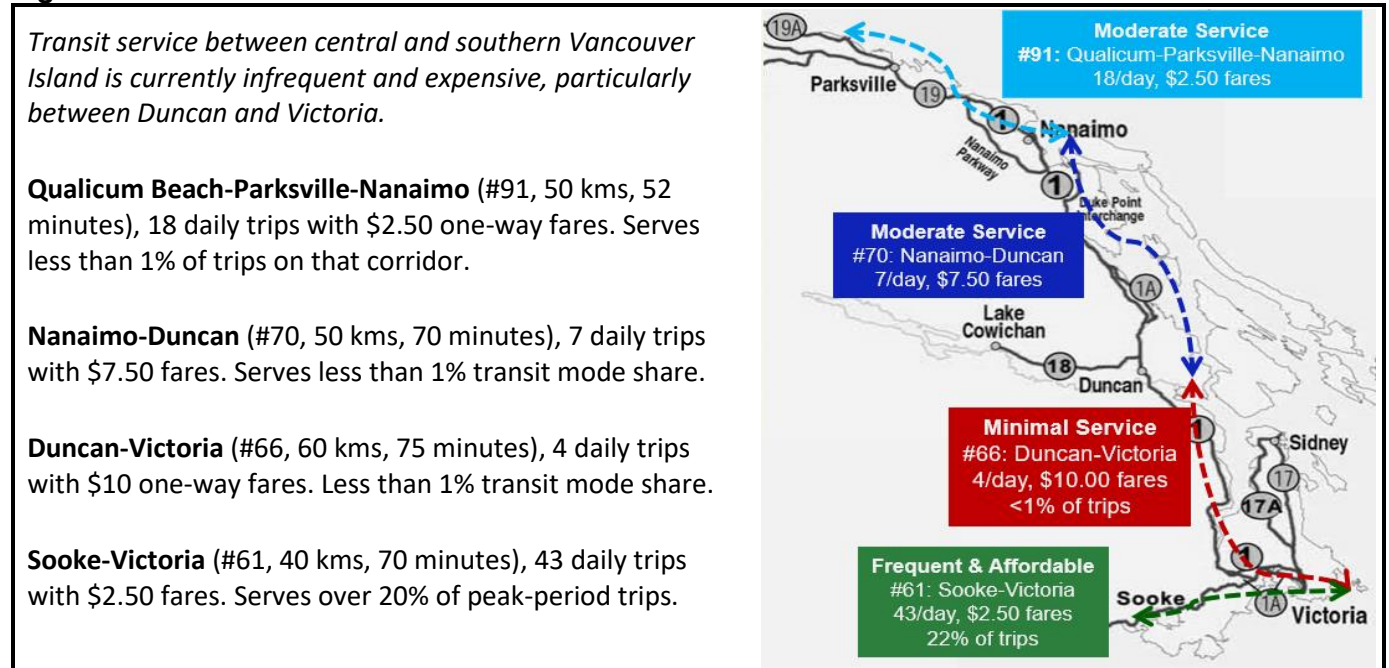
The Problem

A highway that lacks adequate public transit is incomplete: it does not serve the needs of people who cannot, should not or prefer not to drive, and it increases traffic problems. This harms everybody, including motorists.

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. Transit service on that corridor is currently infrequent and expensive. Between Victoria and Duncan there are only four daily trips designed for commuting; there are no off-peak or reverse commute trips, weekend service is minimal, and the \$10 fare is four times local fares. Service between Duncan and Nanaimo is little better. There are seven daily trips with a \$7.50 one-way fare. Because it is inconvenient and expensive public transit only carries a tiny portion of trips.

In contrast, the #61 Sooke-Victoria bus has 43 daily trips with \$2.50 per trip fares and carries 22% of peak-period trips. Figure 1 compares these routes.

Figure 1 Current Central to South Vancouver Island Transit Services



A transit user in Nanaimo who wants to visit Victoria must leave no later than 7:57 am and connect in Duncan to reach Victoria at 10:24. For the return trip they must leave Victoria by 5:15 to reach Nanaimo at 8:07. Their round-trip fares total \$35. From Victoria it is not possible to visit Nanaimo by transit and return the same day: they must leave Victoria in the afternoon, arrive in Nanaimo at night, and return early a future morning. This limited schedule is unsuitable for most trips, and the fares are comparable to vehicle operating costs so travellers have little incentive to take public transit rather than drive.

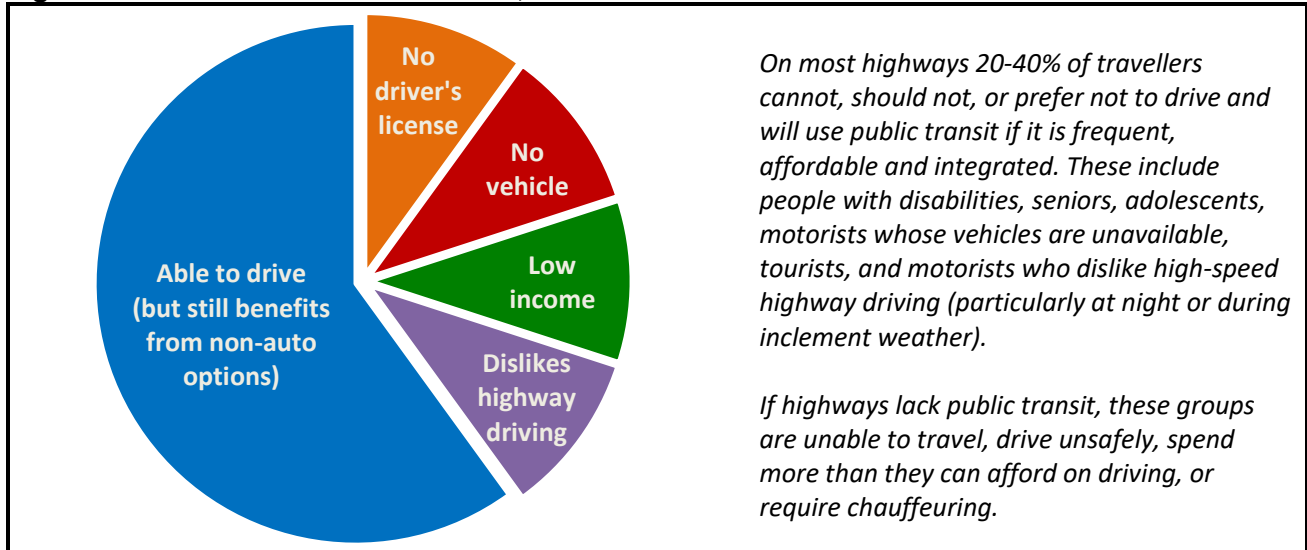
Inadequate public transport imposes many costs on users and communities. It deprives non-drivers of independent mobility, causes many motorists to bear the stress and expenses of driving on busy highways that they would prefer to avoid, forces drivers to chauffeur loved ones who cannot drive, and increases traffic problems.

The recent *Island Coastal Inter-Community Transportation Study* shows that many Vancouver Island residents want interregional transit services (Baker 2023). The MoTI is spending hundreds of millions of dollars to expand Island highways. In 2023, the provincial and federal governments announced a \$249 million new public transit funding in BC (IC 2023), and the province announced \$5 million to support Northern BC bus services plus an additional \$18 million for Vancouver Island rail planning (Chan 2023b). However, there are no current plans to improve interregional bus services on Vancouver Island.

Why Provide Frequent and Affordable Bus Service?

There are many good reasons to provide more convenient and affordable interregional bus services on Vancouver Island. 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. We know that because highways with frequent and affordable public transit service have 10-30% transit mode shares (portion of total trips made by that mode). For example, transit serves 13% of total trips and 22% of peak-period trips between Sooke and Victoria, and 20-40% of trips share between Vancouver and Fraser Valley towns such as Langley and Pitt Meadows.

Figure 2 Travellers Who Cannot, Should Not or Prefer Not to Drive



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 Interregional Transit Service Benefits

User Benefits	Community Benefits
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • More independent mobility for non-drivers including people with disabilities, youths and healthcare patients. • Reduced driver stress. Many motorists prefer to avoid driving long distances on busy highways. • User savings and affordability (savings to lower-income households). • Better access to rural areas and outdoor recreation. • Reduced chauffeuring burdens. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reduced highway and surface street congestion. • Increased traffic safety. • Affordable access to public services such as healthcare. • Parking cost savings. • Energy conservation and emission reductions. • Rural economic development (tourism). • Supports compact urban development.

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

Many jurisdictions have targets to reduce driving and increase non-auto travel as described below. Improving interregional transit helps achieve these targets, highway expansions contradict them.

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.
- [2021 BC Transit Mandate Letter](#): enhance the public services people rely on and make life more affordable and create a cleaner, lower-carbon economy.
- [BC Ferries Mode Shift Targets](#): Make interregional, multi-modal travel easier. Better integration will provide seamless travel and affordable transportation, and reduce emissions and congestion.
- [2022 MoTI Mandate Letter](#): provide clean, fast, and efficient transportation to increase affordability, safety, and healthcare access. Specifically, it requires that the Ministry:
 - Make public transit a priority.
 - Ensure that rural, remote and Indigenous communities have safe and reliable transportation services.
 - Build greener and more livable communities and improve active transportation networks.
 - Work with cabinet colleagues, communities and regions to support transit project planning.
 - Complete the Transit Oriented Development framework.

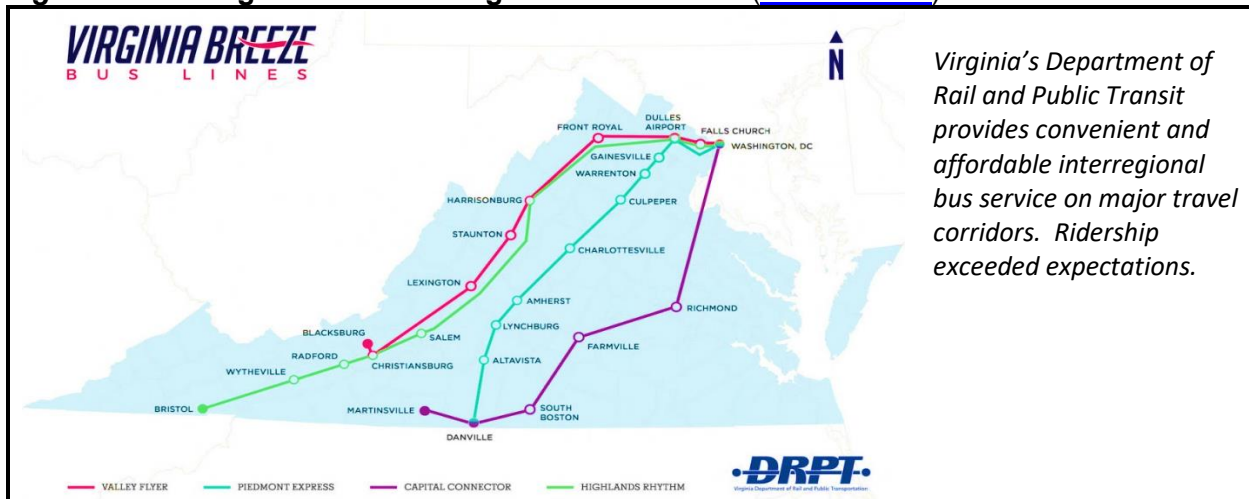
Examples from Elsewhere

Other jurisdictions do more to provide convenient and affordable interregional bus services.

Virginia Breeze

Virginia’s Department of Rail and Public Transit (DRPT) provides interregional bus services. The first route, the Valley Flyer, connects a handful of communities along the I-81 corridor with the Dulles International Airport. With fares as low as \$15, the Flyer quickly exceeded ridership expectations. With this proven success the DRPT expanded the program to include more routes. The state now supports four routes, as illustrated below.

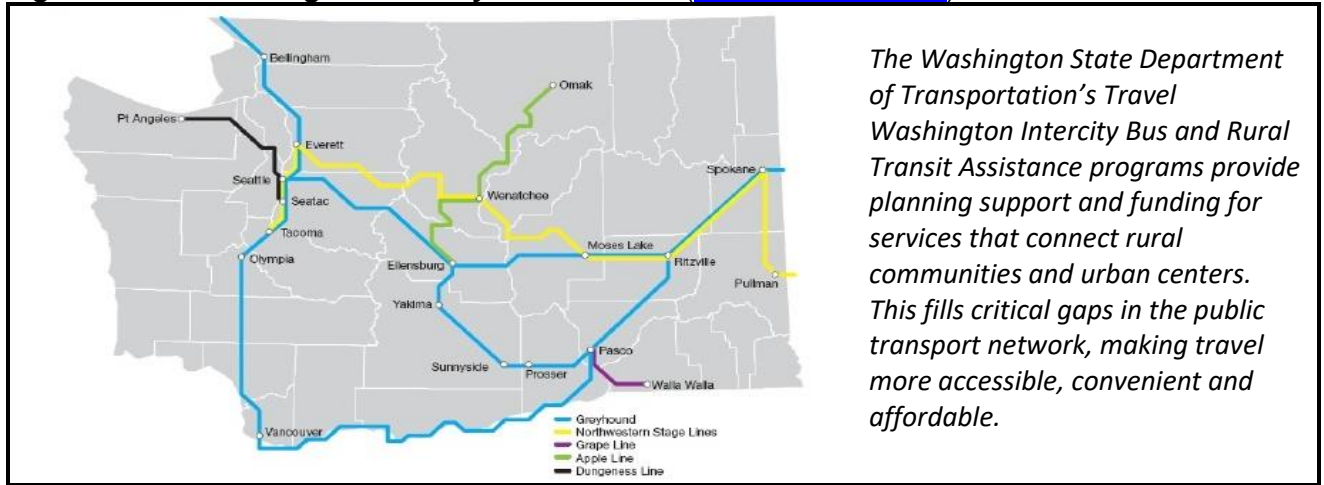
Figure 3 Virginia State Interregional Bus Routes ([Gordon 2022](#))



Travel Washington Intercity Bus and Rural Mobility Programs

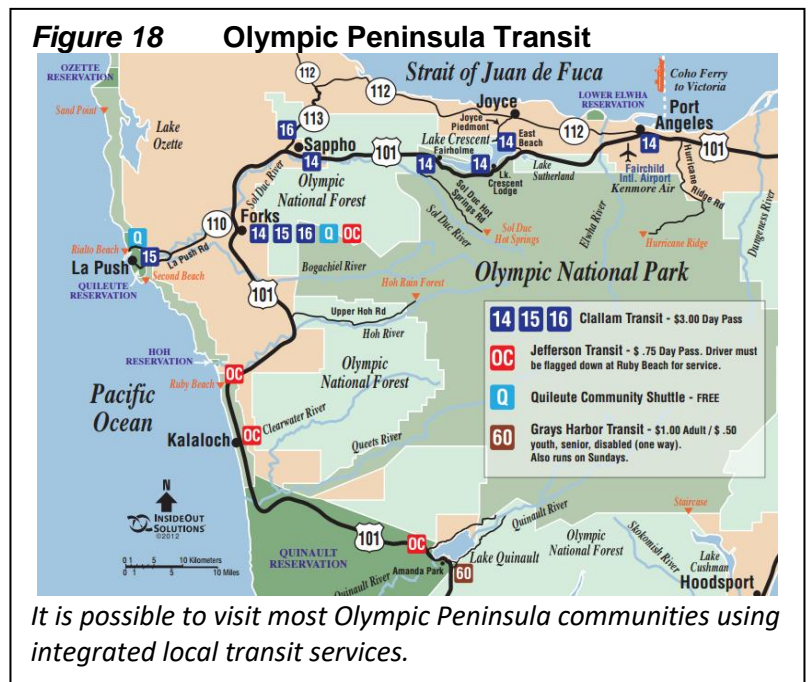
Washington State’s *Travel Washington Intercity Bus Program* provides transit services that connect many rural communities and urban centers.

Figure 4 Washington Intercity Bus Network (<https://bit.ly/3rJcl9n>)



These are catalysts for private investment. Homes, hotels and banks are being developed around transit centers, and their parking lots are used for farmers’ markets and concerts. Program Manager, Steve Abernathy describes the program as, “allowing people to stay where they want to live, yet still have the mobility, connections and access to the state, national and international transportation network. It allows older adults to stay in the communities where they have friends, where they raised their children and where they are part of a community.”

Washington State DOT also has a *Rural Mobility Grant Program* that provides administrative and technical assistance to regional transportation planning organizations and public transit service providers. As a result of these resources, most rural counties in Washington State have coordinated public transit services, which provide travel to and within most communities. For example, it is possible to travel around the Olympic Peninsula, visiting many small communities, Indian reservations and tourist destinations, using the Olympic Transit Loop, which consists of six coordinated local public transit agencies, as illustrated to the right.



Obstacles

Rural and interregional (long-distance) public transit currently receive little support in British Columbia. The province has no interregional transit service performance targets, planning programs or ongoing funding. In 1979 the BC Ministry of Highways became the Ministry of Transportation and Highways (MoTI) with expanded responsibilities to support non-auto modes, including rural and interregional transit, but the Ministry collects little non-auto travel data and devotes a tiny portion of its budget to non-auto programs.

Transit service improvements must be 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. Current interregional transit planning is slow and inefficient. For example, in 2012 the Cowichan Valley Regional District (CVRD) identified Duncan-Nanaimo as a priority transit route, but it took a decade to plan #70 service, which began in 2022. Similarly, developing Tofino-Ucluelet bus service took 15 years between 2009, when local officials first requested it, to 2024 when the service actually started.

The Proposal: Frequent and Affordable Bus Service

We propose that regional and provincial governments provide frequent and affordable bus service between Victoria and Nanaimo and develop a process to improve transit service on other provincial highways. *Basic* service, with hourly departures between 6:00 am and midnight, would provide convenient connections between South and Central Vancouver Island. *Frequent* service, with 43 daily trips as on the #61 Sooke-Victoria route, with affordable fares, would make transit travel more attractive than driving for many trips.

The table below estimates the costs of these improvements. Basic Service would require about \$4.6 million and Frequent Service about \$13.7 million additional annual subsidy. These are upper-bound estimates since they assume full service every day and current load factors; costs could be lower with less weekend service and TDM incentives that increase ridership.

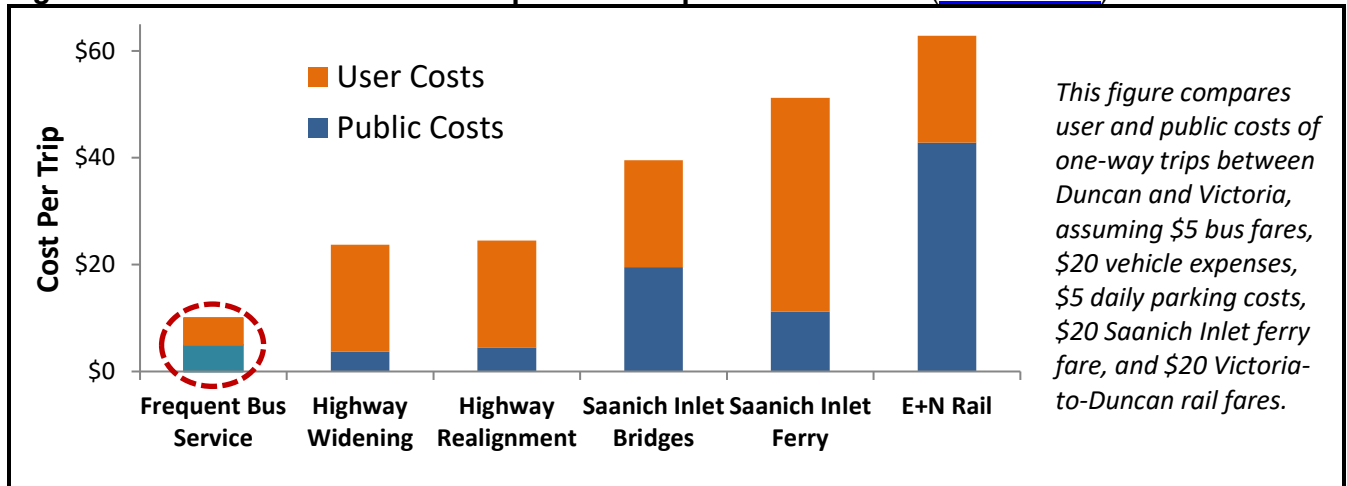
Table 2 Proposal Cost Estimates ([BC Transit 2024/2025 Service Plan](#))

	#66 Duncan-Victoria		#70 Nanaimo-Duncan		Totals	
	Basic	Frequent	Basic	Frequent	Basic	Frequent
Current daily trips	4	4	7	7	11	11
Proposed daily trips	18	43	18	43	36	86
Increased trips	14	39	11	36	25	75
Cost per round trip (\$147 x 4 hours per trip)	\$588	\$588	\$588	\$588	\$588	\$588
Total annual cost (additional trips x \$588 x 365)	\$3,004,680	\$8,370,180	\$2,360,820	\$7,726,320	\$5,365,500	\$16,096,500
Fare revenue	\$450,702	\$1,255,527	\$354,123	\$1,158,948	\$804,825	\$2,414,475
Subsidy requirement	\$2,553,978	\$7,114,653	\$2,006,697	\$6,567,372	\$4,560,675	\$13,682,025

Basic Service requires about \$4.6 million and Frequent Service about \$13.7 million additional annual subsidy.

The figure below compares the costs of various travel improvements on the Malahat Highway. Frequent and affordable bus service is most cost-effective. Highway improvements may seem cheaper considering just public costs but not if vehicle and parking costs are also considered.

Figure 5 Duncan-Victoria Transportation Improvement Costs (Litman 2022)



There is no standard process for interregional transit service improvements. They must be proposed by regional districts, planned by BC Transit, and funded in the provincial budget. Implementing the proposed improvements by 2025 will require the following actions:

1. Regional district and BC Transit boards request more service (Spring 2024)
2. BC Transit develops a specific proposal (Summer 2024)
3. Regional districts and BC Transit establish operational and funding agreements (Fall 2024)
4. Funding is included in the 2025 provincial budget (Winter 2025).

To support this plan community groups should lobby regional districts and BC Transit boards to request this service, and lobby provincial officials, including MLAs and the Minister of Transportation, to fund it. MoTI has good reasons to support these improvements as a fast and cost-effective way to reduce highway traffic problems and achieve other provincial goals including fairness, affordability, traffic safety, emission reductions and rural economic development. Advocates should also lobby the provincial government to create a department that plans and supports interregional and rural transit, with reliable funding.

Conclusions

Vancouver Island currently has infrequent and expensive interregional public transit service that only satisfies a small portion of needs. More frequent and affordable bus services connecting South and Central Vancouver Island would help many travellers and communities, is far 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 2025.

For More Information

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