



BETTER ISLAND TRANSIT

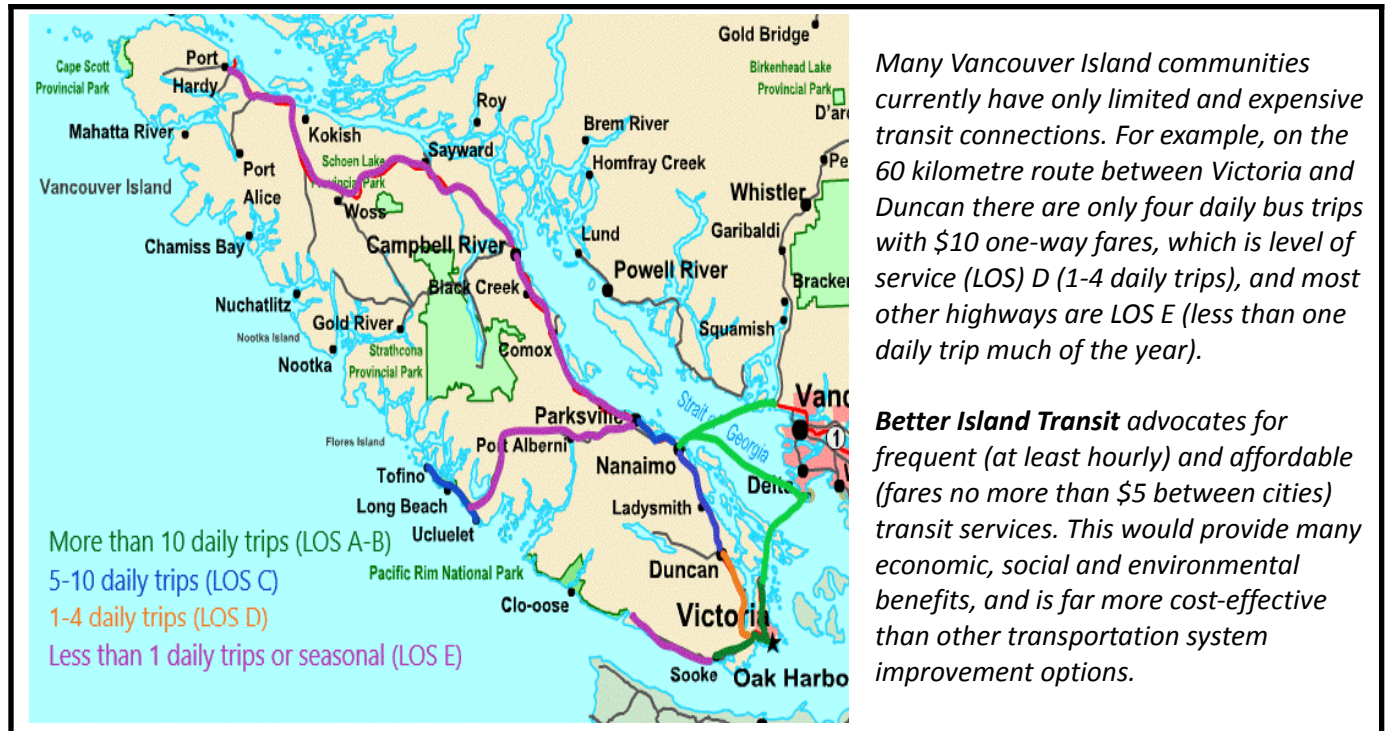
ADVOCATING FOR CONVENIENT, AFFORDABLE TRANSIT
www.betterislandtransit.ca

Frequent and Affordable Vancouver Island Bus Service

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

BACKGROUND

6 June 2024



Better Island Transit advocates for frequent and affordable interregional transit services on Vancouver Island and throughout British Columbia. This is an important and cost-effective way to improve residents' quality of life, increase fairness, support economic development and reduce traffic problems.

Most provincial highways currently have infrequent and expensive bus connections. This is unfair and inefficient. It deprives non-drivers of independence, reduces rural economic opportunities and increases traffic problems. The provincial government has goals to provide more equitable transportation, improve rural economic development, increase traffic safety, reduce pollution emissions and reduce public infrastructure costs; improving interregional bus services helps achieve all of these.

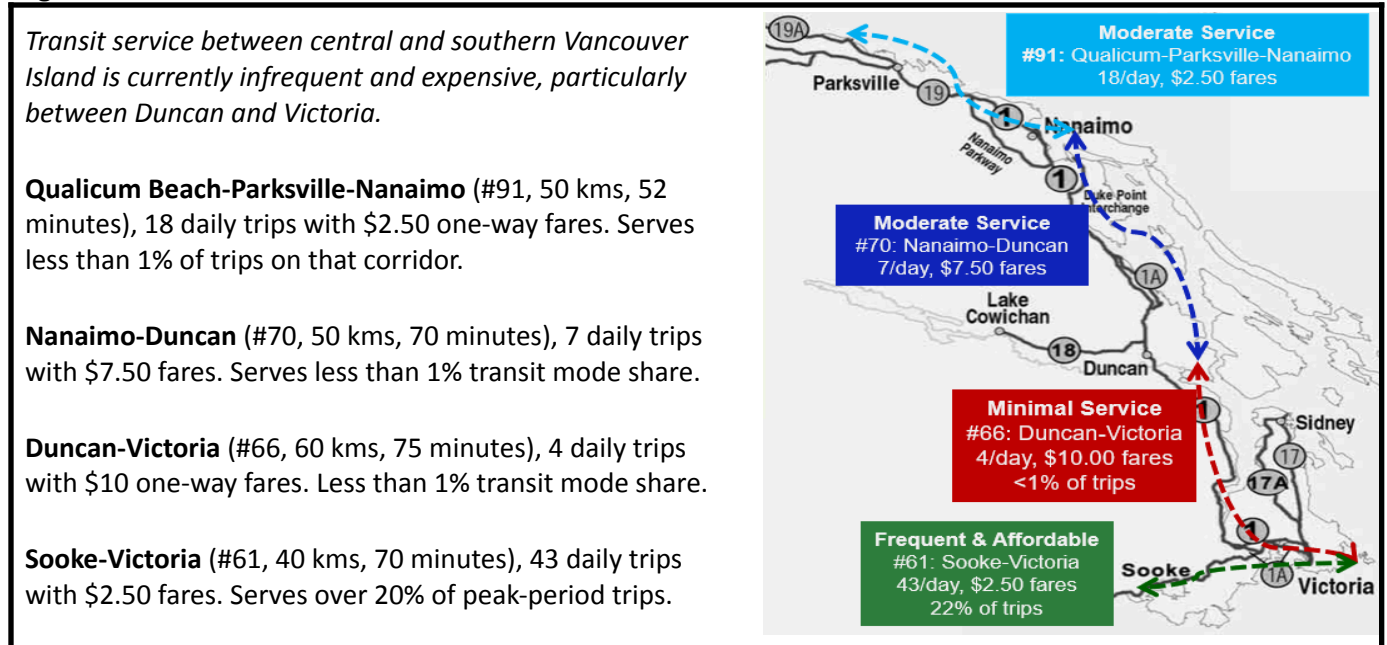
This backgrounder describes the business case for improving transit services connecting Vancouver Island communities.

The Severity of the Problem

Most BC highways have no, or infrequent and expensive, interregional public transit. This recently became the butt of jokes when contestants in the BBC's *Race Across the World* were required to travel with no car and limited funds from Victoria to Port Hardy, a corridor that lacks transit; they had to hitchhike (Chan 2023). However, this is no joke for countless non-drivers who lack convenient and affordable travel options. Inadequate bus services is recognized as a cause of missing and murdered women on the Yellowhead Highway between Prince Rupert and Prince George, called the "highway of tears" (CSFS 2006), and is a constraint on non-drivers' economic opportunities and rural economic development (MNP 2023).

Most BC highways lack adequate public transit. For example, the Island Highway between central and southern Vancouver Island is one of British Columbia's busiest roadways, carrying more than 25,000 daily travellers. Yet, it has only infrequent and expensive public transit. Between Victoria and Duncan there are only four daily commuter trips; there is no off-peak or reverse commute service, minimal weekend service, and the \$10 fare is four times a local bus trip. Between Duncan and Nanaimo there are seven daily trips with \$7.50 one-way fares. 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.

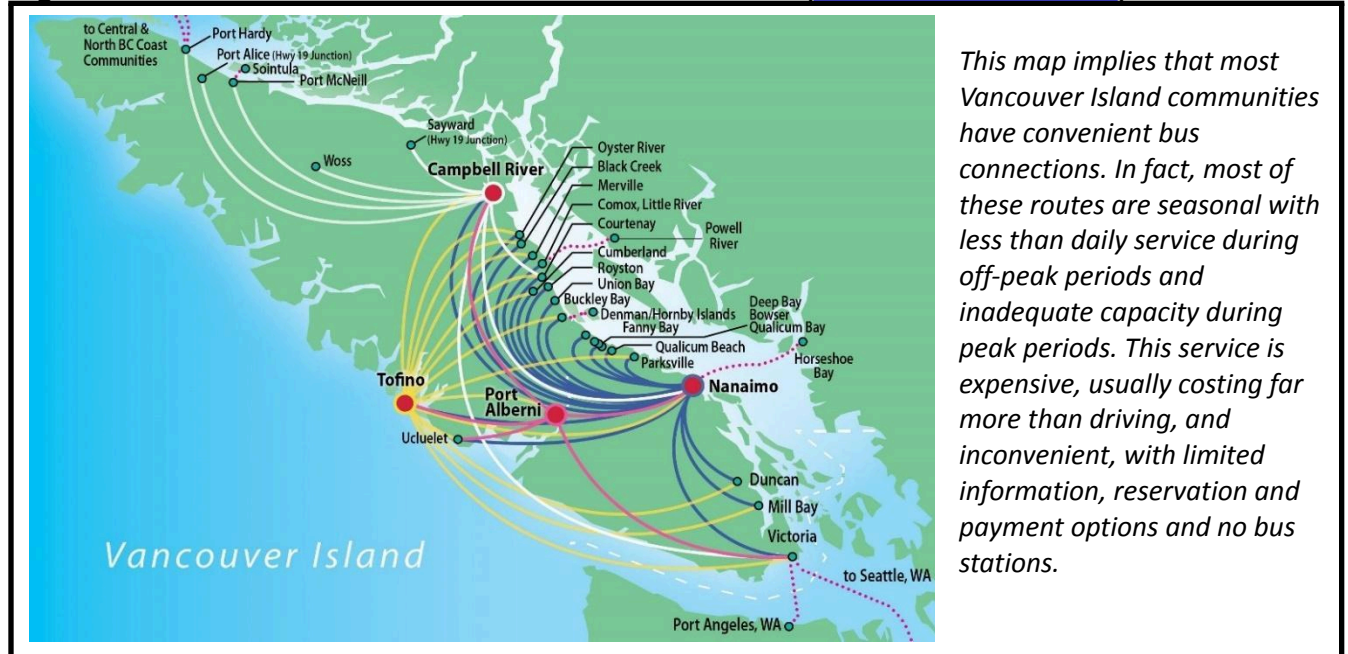
Figure 1 Current Central to South Vancouver Island Transit Services



From Victoria it is not possible to visit Nanaimo by transit and return the same day: travellers must leave Victoria in the afternoon, arrive in Nanaimo at night, and return early a future morning. A return fare is \$35. This limited schedule is unsuitable for most trips, and fares exceed vehicle fuel costs so motorists have little incentive to use transit rather than drive.

The map below implies that most Vancouver Island communities have convenient bus connections, but that is untrue. In fact, those routes are seasonal with less than daily service most of the year, they are expensive and limited in capacity, and they lack reliable information, convenient reservation and payment systems, or stations with washrooms. As a result, they are unsuitable for most trips. Most Vancouver Island communities lack reliable public transit.

Figure 2 Vancouver Island Commercial Bus Service (Island Link Bus Service)



This map implies that most Vancouver Island communities have convenient bus connections. In fact, most of these routes are seasonal with less than daily service during off-peak periods and inadequate capacity during peak periods. This service is expensive, usually costing far more than driving, and inconvenient, with limited information, reservation and payment options and no bus stations.

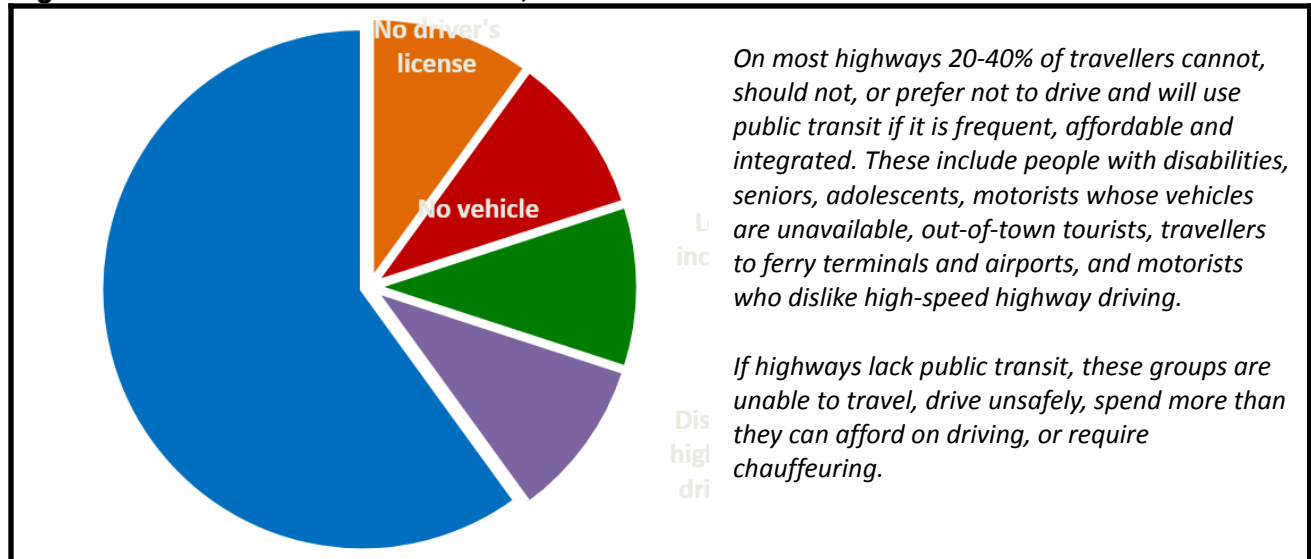
Inadequate transit services impose many costs on users and communities. It deprives non-drivers of independent mobility, causes many motorists to bear the stress and expenses of driving on busy highways that they would prefer to avoid, forces drivers to chauffeur loved ones who cannot drive, and increases traffic problems. It reduces access to ferry terminals and airports, and therefore to distant destinations.

This creates huge disparities between drivers and non-drivers, and between urban and rural communities. Many trips that are quick and easy by automobile become difficult, expensive or simply impossible without a car. It also prevents many businesses from attracting out-of-town customers and potential employees.

Why Provide Frequent and Affordable Public Transit Service?

There are many good reasons to improve interregional bus services. In a typical community, 20-40% of 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 (Translink 2011). If Victoria-Duncan could achieve the same transit mode share as Sooke-Victoria, there would be about 4,000 fewer vehicle trips over the Malahat, reducing traffic problems and costs.

Figure 3 Travellers Who Cannot, Should Not or Prefer Not to Drive



The table below lists some of the benefits that this could provide. 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.

The recent *Island Coastal Inter-Community Transportation Study* shows that many Island residents want better transit (Baker 2023). Many jurisdictions have targets to reduce driving and increase non-auto travel, described below. Transit improvements help achieve these goals.

Transportation Goals and Targets

- [CRD](#) and [CVRD](#): reduce automobile travel and 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. 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.

Frequent and affordable bus routes can provide downstream benefits by reducing traffic on other roads. For example, shifting 20% of Island Highway commuter trips to transit, as on Highway 14 between Sooke and Victoria, would reduce about 2,500 peak-period vehicle trips, reducing congestion on local streets and freeing up 2,500 urban parking spaces, providing millions of dollars in infrastructure cost savings and avoided crash costs.

Convenient and affordable transit can leveraging additional savings and benefits by allowing some households to own fewer vehicles. For example, a family might need two vehicles if both adults commute by car but only one if transit is convenient. Similarly, transit improvements may allow families to avoid owning vehicles needed for occasional interregional trips such as residents who frequently travel to ferry terminals or airports, seniors who travel for specialized medical treatments and university students who travel home on weekends and breaks.

Transit can provide large safety benefits by reducing congestion and higher-risk driving. For example, young men who pay high vehicle insurance premiums, seniors who dislike driving on busy highways, and alcohol drinkers are particularly likely to choose buses, if they are convenient and affordable, rather than drive. Safety strategies such as graduated driver's licenses, senior driver testing and anti-impaired driving campaigns become more effective and publicly acceptable if implemented with transit improvements that provide viable alternatives to driving. As a result, auto-to-transit mode shifts can leverage proportionately larger crash reductions. For example, if the Island Highway achieves Highway 14 transit mode shares (13%

total and 22% peak-period trips), crashes should decline at least 13% and probably much more due to reduced congestion and less driving by higher risk groups.

Better Interregional Bus Planning

British Columbia currently has no standard process for interregional bus planning (Litman 2024). In the past, private companies such as Greyhound and Trailways provided those services, which governments simply regulated for safety and reliability. However, during the last half-century, as our transportation system became more automobile dependent interregional transit demand declined, creating a “doom cycle” of declining ridership, reduced revenue and declining services (House of Commons 2023). Many of these routes stopped in 2018. Provincial governments have done little to address these gaps.

There are clear processes for planning and funding other modes. Local traffic agencies plan and fund sidewalks and bikeways, regional agencies and the Ministry of Transportation plan, build and operate roads and highways, BC Ferries plans ferry services, local authorities and federal agencies plan airports, Via Rail provides passenger train services on a few corridors, and BC Transit provides local bus services, but there is no standard process for planning and funding interregional bus services.

Table 2 Planning, Operating and Funding Responsibilities (Litman 2024)

	Active Modes	Automobile	Ferry	Airports	Rail	Bus
Local	Local Agencies	Local Agencies	BC Ferries	Local Airport	Transit agencies	Transit Agencies
Interregional	MoTI	MoTI	BC Ferries	Fed. Aviation	Via Rail	???

Planning, operating and funding responsibilities are clearly defined for active modes (walking and bicycling), automobile, ferry, airports, rail and local transit services, but interregional bus is an orphan.

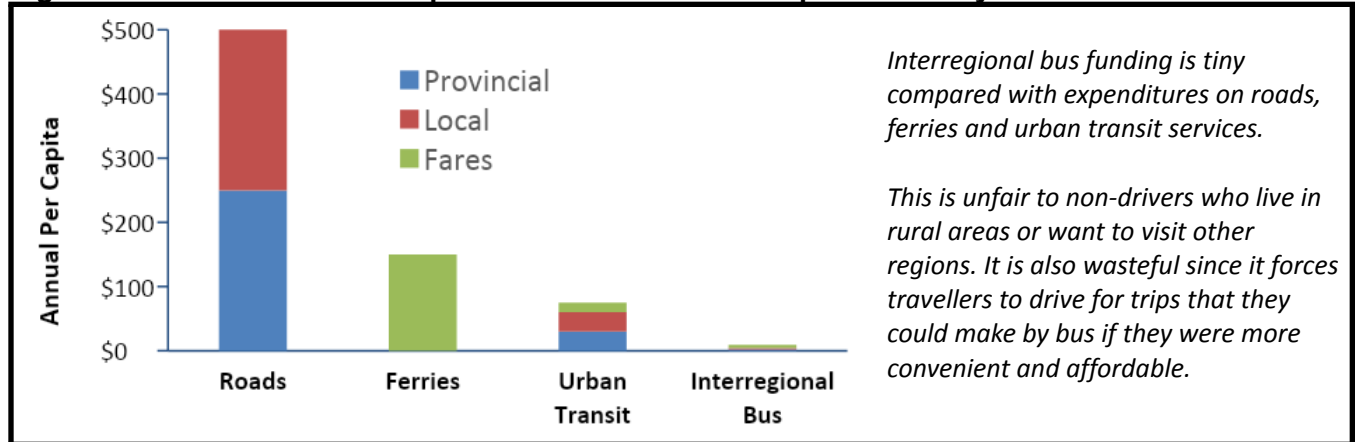
Interregional transit improvements must be initiated regional districts, which perceive only a small portion of their total benefits. For example, to increase #66 and #70 service the province would require the Cowichan Valley Regional District to provide millions of dollars in additional local funding, although much of the ridership would be through traffic by passengers who neither live or visit that community. Interregional bus services should be funded primarily by the province as part of the provincial transportation system.

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. Similarly, in 2006 the *Highway of Tears Symposium* investigated the high rate of missing and murdered women on the Yellowhead Highway between Prince Rupert to Prince George, and its first recommendation was to provide more frequent and affordable bus service on that corridor (CSFS 2006). However, that recommendation was not implemented. In 2016 the Canadian federal government launched a *National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls*, with \$54 million funding. The inquiry also concluded that

inadequate interregional transit is a major risk factor to low-income, isolated communities. In 2017 BC Transit started three new bus routes on that corridor, but that was treated as a special issue rather than a need for interregional bus planning.

There is a funding disparity between modes, and therefore between drivers and non-drivers. The province spends about \$250 annually per capita on highways, and local/regional governments probably spend similar amounts on local roads and traffic services (MoTI 2022). BC Ferries spends about \$150 annual per capita on ferry services. BC Transit spends about \$376 million on transit services or about \$75 annually per capita. Interregional bus funding is tiny, such as a \$5 million investment to support Northern BC buses (BC Government 2023). Total provincial interregional bus investments probably total less than \$20 million annually, approximately \$4 annually per capita or less than 0.1% of provincial transportation infrastructure expenditures. The figure below illustrates these expenditures.

Figure 4 Estimated Transportation Infrastructure Expenditures by Mode



This is unfair. When somebody purchases a vehicle they expect governments to provide roads and mandate that businesses provide off-street parking facilities for their use. Urban non-drivers benefit from sidewalk, bikeway and local transit investments. Non-drivers who live in rural communities or visit other regions receive less than their share.

Table 3 Transportation Infrastructure

	Drivers	Non-Drivers
Urban	Urban highways and streets, parking mandates	Sidewalks, bikeways and urban transit
Rural	Highways and rural roads	Interregional bus

Current transportation planning and funding provides large investments to benefit drivers and urban transit users, but rural non-drivers do not receive a fair share.

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 plan interregional bus services on other 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, and 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.

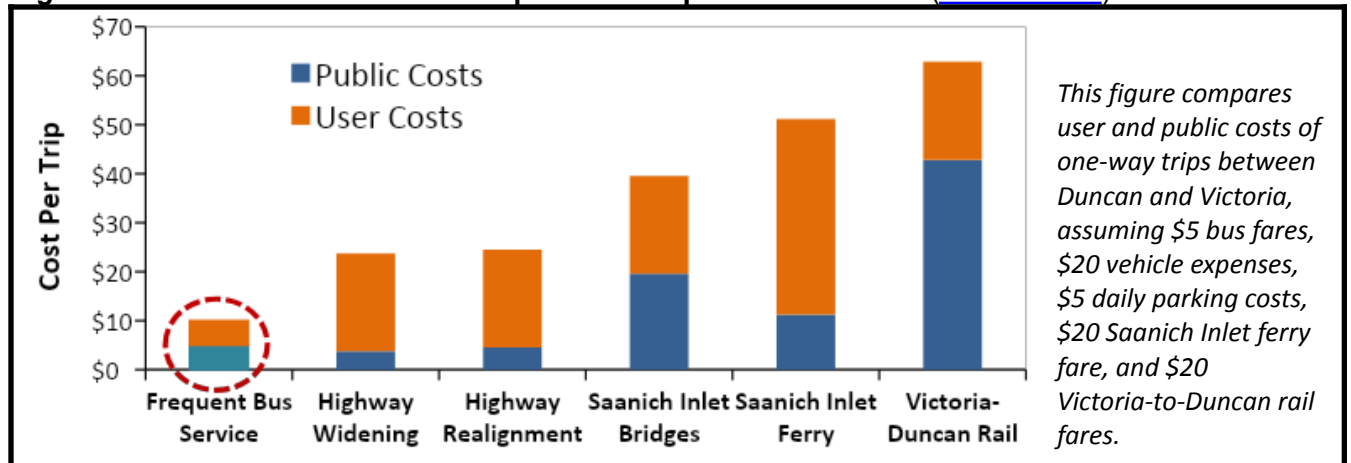
Table 4 Proposal Cost Estimates (BC Transit 2024/2025 Service Plan)

	#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:

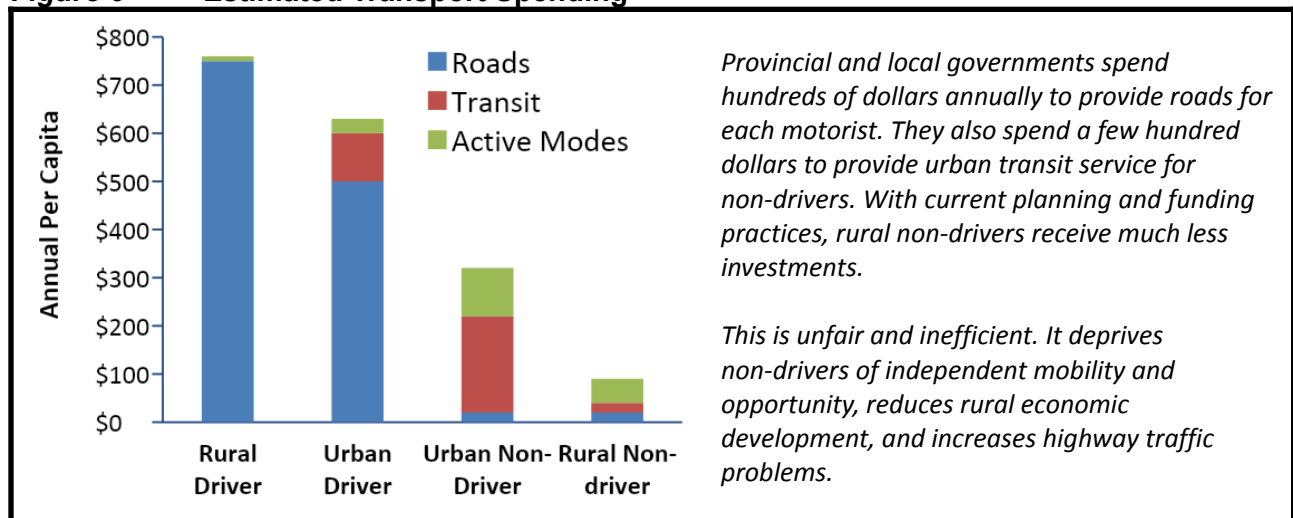
1. Regional district and BC Transit boards request more service (Spring 2024)
2. BC Transit develops a specific proposal (Summer 2024)
3. Regional districts and BC Transit establish operational and funding agreements (Fall 2024)
4. Funding is included in the 2025 provincial budget (Winter 2025).

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. Because this corridor carries consider through traffic, the additional costs of interregional bus services should be borne by the province to reduce Island Highway traffic problems. For these reasons, regional districts, BC Transit and MoTI should implement frequent and affordable bus service in 2025.

Figure 6 Estimated Transport Spending



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.
- CRD (2017), *Origin Destination Household Travel Survey*, Capital Regional District (www.crd.bc.ca); at www.crd.bc.ca/project/regional-transportation/origin-destination-household-travel-survey.
- CSFS (2006), *Highway of Tears Symposium*, Carrier Sekani Family Services; at <https://highwayoftears.org>.
- Kenneth Chan (2023), "BBC Reality Show Contestants Dumbfounded by British Columbia's Poor Public Transit," *Daily Hive* (<https://dailyhive.com>); at <http://tinyurl.com/3p2ajkd9>.
- 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>.
- Wyatt Gordon (2022), *Virginia Bucks Ridership Trends with Intercity Bus Routes*, Greater Greater Washington (<https://ggwash.org>); at <http://tinyurl.com/mrfy2z92>.
- House of Commons (2023), *Improving Bus Connectivity in Canada*, Standing Committee on Transport, Infrastructure and Communities (www.ourcommons.ca); at <https://bit.ly/3MpV4T2>.
- John Horgan (2022), *MoTH Mandate Letter*, Office of the Premier, at <http://tinyurl.com/2kdvy6vr>.
- House of Commons (2023), *Improving Bus Connectivity in Canada*, Standing Committee on Transport, Infrastructure and Communities (www.ourcommons.ca); at <https://bit.ly/3MpV4T2>.
- Marc Lee (2024), *Connecting BC: A 10-year Vision for Public Transit Throughout BC*, Policy Note (www.policynote.ca); at www.policynote.ca/connecting-bc.
- 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 (2024), *A Business Case for Raising Interregional Public Transport Service Quality*, presented at the 59th Canadian Transportation Research Forum, Kelowna, BC (<https://ctrf.ca>); at www.vtpi.org/bcit.pdf.
- Todd Litman and Alastair Craighead (2021), "An Unglamorous Malahat Congestion Solution: Frequent, Low-Cost Bus Service," *Times Colonist*; at <https://lnkd.in/gUBzBEFU>.
- 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*, MoTI (www.gov.bc.ca); at <https://bit.ly/3kDIQYt>. Includes *Technical Report No. 1* (<https://bit.ly/2Jqk3YJ>) and *2* (<https://bit.ly/387dJQq>).
- MoTI (2022), *Annual Service Plan Report*, MoTI (www.gov.bc.ca); at https://bcbudget.gov.bc.ca/annual_reports/2021_2022/pdf/ministry/tran.pdf.
- Translink (2011), *Metro Vancouver Regional Trip Diary Survey* (www.translink.ca); at <https://bit.ly/362LmkE>.