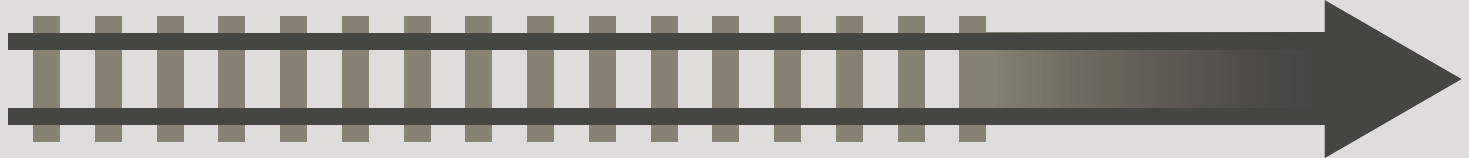
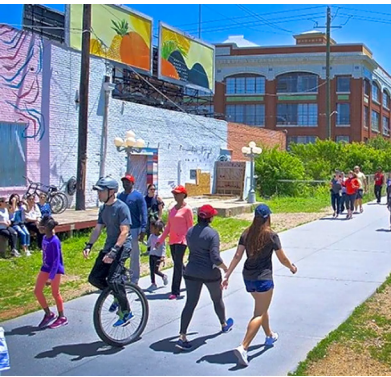


ALBERNI VALLEY



RAIL CORRIDOR STUDY



Alberni-Clayoquot Regional District Rail Corridor Study

Public Engagement – Values and Interest
Summary Report, Oct. 2024



ALBERNI-CLAYOQUOT
REGIONAL DISTRICT

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1.0 Executive Summary

The Alberni-Clayoquot Regional District, in partnership with Tseshaht and Hupacasath First Nations, are undertaking a Rail Corridor Study for the portion of the Island Rail Corridor found in the Alberni Valley, on the territories on local First Nations. The goal of the study is to identify a preferred use for the corridor moving forward which, along with studies currently underway in other regional districts, will help form a plan for the Rail Corridor into the future.

The working group guiding the study process is collecting information and input from a wide range of sources, including preliminary input from the community. In September 2024, the project team undertook an initial outreach, intended to invite input from the community about community values and priority uses for the corridor.

The goals of the outreach included:



Consult with the general public about their community values, and how transportation could support those values into the future.



Consult with the general public about potential uses for the corridor and gauge degrees of interest in the varying options.



Inform audiences about the study process, how to get involved, and opportunities for input into the process.

This outreach included an online survey and an informational booth at the Alberni Valley Fall Fair, which together resulted in input being collected from over 570 people. Key themes of the discussion included:

- A wide degree of interest in seeing the rail corridor in use: There was interest in freight and passenger rail, as well as heritage/tourist train activity. The common tone was that people hoped to see it used again.
- Questions about viability and affordability: Participants raised questions about how much repair, maintenance and operations would cost – with concern that the cost has become too much after years of disuse.

Overall, the feedback collected gives good insights the Rail Corridor Working Group and ACRD to consider as they look to next steps in their assessment of the corridor and its future potential. It provides background context, on which the project team can further assess and engage on First Nations benefit and opportunities and technical assessments of the varying options.

2.0 Introduction

The Alberni-Clayoquot Regional District in full collaboration with Tseshaht and Hupacasath First Nations, are seeking to develop a vision for the section of the Island Rail Corridor located in the Alberni Valley region. A Rail Corridor Study is under development, and includes a few stages of public consultation. Feedback from the community – to support the ongoing and active engagement with First Nations at the Working Group table - is a priority for the ACRD consideration of future options progresses/

This consultation summary provides an overview of the feedback received during public engagement held in September 2024, around goals and visions for the Rail Corridor in the Alberni Valley.

2.1 ENGAGEMENT OVERVIEW

The Rail Corridor Study process was launched in July 2024, introducing the community to the process to come and sharing an online information hub for following the project progress moving forward. In September 2024, engagement with the general public was undertaken. The plan for this engagement period reflected direction and feedback from the Working Group members.

The engagement included two key components.



IN-PERSON ENGAGEMENT: The project team hosted an engagement booth at the Alberni Valley Fall Fair – one of the most popular events in the community. Over the course of four days, people were invited to share their thoughts about how they’d like to see the rail corridor used, and share insights.



ONLINE SURVEY: The public was invited to respond to an online survey that echoed the in-person conversations held at the engagement booth. Along with basic demographic information, respondents were asked about how they felt the rail corridor could improve/support their community, and were introduced to a range of potential uses and asked to provide comment about level of interest

Between the two components, the project team heard from over 570 people who either stopped at the booth to share input, or submitted an online survey.

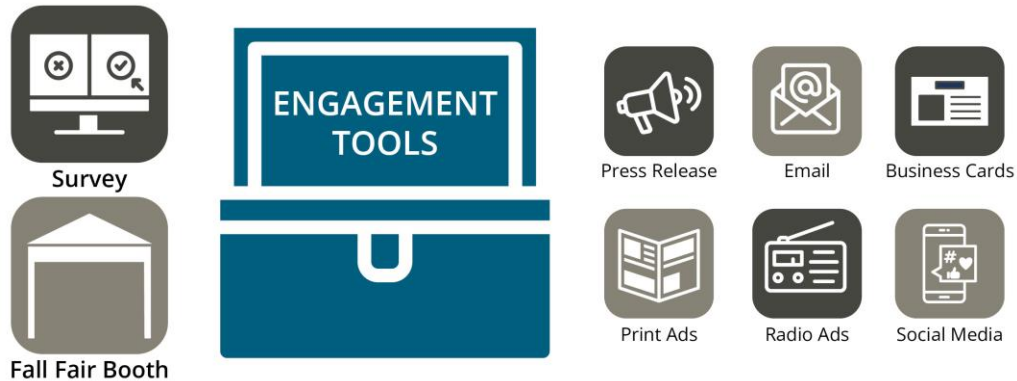
2.2 ENGAGEMENT OBJECTIVES

The primary goal of this stage of engagement was to **CONSULT** audiences about the needs and opportunities for the rail corridor, including First Nations

As engagement was earmarked for September, Working Group members identified the Alberni Valley Fall Fair as the preferred way for in-person engagement. Given the popularity of the fair, it was recommended as the best way to reach a large group of people from a range of backgrounds.

2.3 ENGAGEMENT STRATEGY AND TOOLS

To achieve the goal, a range of tools and materials were used to encourage as wide participation as possible, and generate constructive feedback from participants with a range of understanding and engagement in recreation.



SURVEY: The online survey asked demographic questions, questions about familiarity and vision for the rail corridor and introduced eight potential uses of the rail corridor, asking about level of interest in each. Respondents were then asked to identify their top three proposed uses.

FALL FAIR BOOTH: At the booth, display boards asked people to share what they feel the rail corridor could benefit/improve in their community and they were asked to add up to 3 dots beside proposed uses, to indicate which were of most interest. A map was displayed and insight about track condition and history were noted on. Booth hosts tracked the number of conversations.

These two key components were promoted using a range of tools, including:

- **Press release:** A news release promoting the engagement was distributed Aug. 29, 2024.
- **Print ads:** Published in the Alberni Valley News on Sept. 4, 2024.
- **Social media posts:** five posts ran between Aug. 29 and Sept. 24, 2024.
- **Invitation cards:** Business-card size invitations were provided with QR code and URL for online survey.
- **Newsletter and Email Updates:** Content was provided to communications staff for both Tseshaht and Hupacasath to help share and promote the engagement opportunities. Other interest groups, in particular groups interested in Island rail also promoted the survey and generated a fair amount of interest from outside the region.

3.0 Fall Fair Booth: Overview + Feedback

From Sept. 5-8, the HDR Project Team hosted a booth at the Alberni Valley Fall Fair, collecting input about the rail corridor from the community and sharing information about the Rail Corridor Study.

3.1 ABOUT THE BOOTH

It's estimated that between 230-250 people stopped to talk and share their input at the booth.

- The booth was hosted primarily by Jeff Simpson (HDR) and Colleen Dane (ZINC) with support from Fred Kramer (HDR) and Thomas Bevan, Anna Russell and Debbie Mann (Island Corridor Foundation).
- The booth had two display boards that requested input on community priorities and preferred uses. A map of the corridor in the Alberni Valley was also displayed.
- Kids colouring sheets were available.
- Business cards with the link to the online survey were shared.
- People who stopped to chat were invited to enter to win a \$150 gift certificate.
- The booth was promoted via press release, print and radio advertising and social media posts.



3.2 COMMENT THEMES

There were many passionate and interested people eager to share their comment and input and who had questions about the corridor and the potential future uses. There were many people interested in learning more about the study as well, and with questions about rail use.

- **Interest in Rail Activity:** People who stopped into the booth were largely supportive and enthusiastic about seeing rail activity renewed on the corridor. The interest was in both freight and passenger service – so long as there is movement and the rail lines are not being left unused. Motivations included the potential to reduce traffic on the highway (thereby improving safety and reducing infrastructure pressure), offer an alternate access during emergencies, increase business capacity in the region and generate tourism.
- **Community History:** Many comments reflected the historical significance of the corridor to the community and interest in seeing it preserved. There is a lot of nostalgia for connections to the rail, experiences from its operational periods, and stories about non-rail use along the corridor.

- **Cost Concerns:** There was concern and misunderstanding about the potential costs of getting trains running again. The booth offered an opportunity for some education about the potential to scale improvements, depending on the targeted use and regional improvements. The discussions highlighted a communications challenge for the rail corridor.

Overall, the discussions at the booth were positive and collaborative. There were many people who spent significant time with the team talking about the rail corridor, sharing local knowledge and stories and learning about the technical consideration of rail in the region.

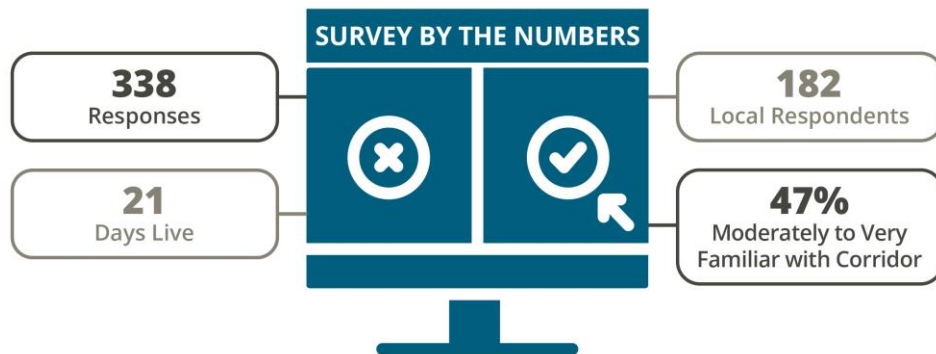
4.0 Online Survey: Results

The online survey was launched on Sept. 5, 2024, and included questions about demographics, community priorities and uses. Eight potential uses were presented and respondents were invited to rate their level of interest in further consideration. They were also asked to select their top three priorities, and to share any additional comments or thoughts.

In an effort to create some consistency with other rail corridor studies underway on Vancouver Island, some questions were included to follow those in the Cowichan Valley Regional District’s survey, which was published before the ACRDs.

To complete a survey, people had to share their email.

4.1 BY THE NUMBERS



4.2 RESULTS HIGHLIGHTS

The survey results help to map out the priorities and interests of respondents. Because the survey was open to all and promoted by Island-wide rail interests, the majority of respondents were from outside of the Alberni Valley. The data though can be filtered to show results from all respondents, and from Alberni Valley residents and workers. The below key highlights include both results for reference.

Community Needs: The rail corridor can support many community needs – and respondents were asked what the most important needs were to them (invited to select up to three). The top three responses were:

1. Improve transportation connections for people or goods
2. Economic development and tourism
3. Provide alternative emergency access routes



These priorities are the same when results are filtered to just Alberni Valley residents and workers– with 2 and 3 nearly tied in importance.

Transportation Modes: The survey asked what transportation mode(s) were the best match to respondents’ vision for the corridor. Passenger rail was selected the most as a match to respondents’ vision for future use of the corridor. Freight service was second.



This is the same when results are filtered to just Alberni Valley residents and workers.

Preferred Options: Respondents were asked to select their top three priorities of the potential options presented. The top three selected were:

1. Heavy Passenger Rail
2. Permanent Freight Rail Use
3. Light Rail Transit

These options received 206, 195 and 176 votes respectively. The next priority – multi-use pathway/rail trail – received 120.



When filtered to just Alberni Valley residents and workers, the top three priorities were:

1. Permanent Freight Rail Use
2. Heavy Passenger Rail
3. Light Rail Transit and Multi-Use Pathway (separated by 1 vote)

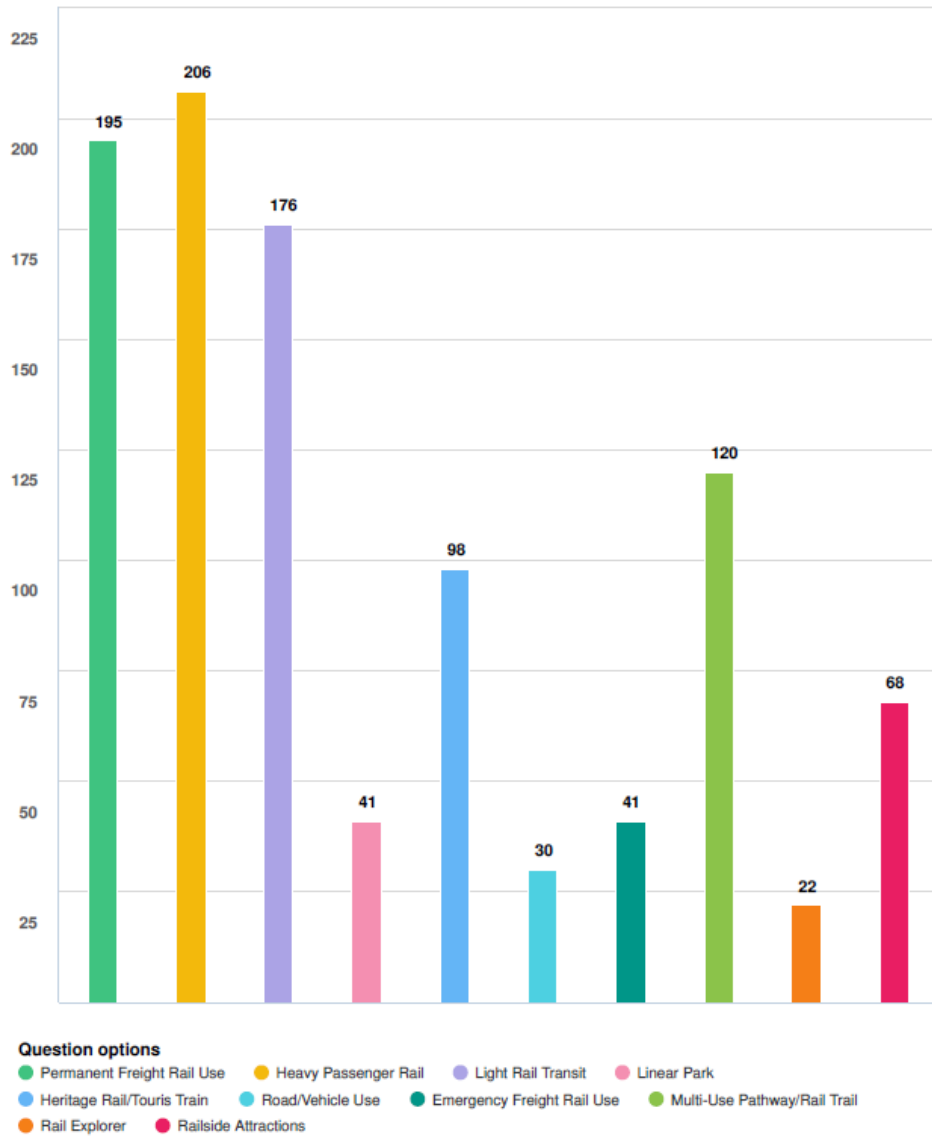
These options received 64, 56 and 47/46 respectively. Heritage Rail/Tourist Train came in close behind, with 41.

Level of Interest: For each of the eight potential uses, respondents were asked to rank their level of interest, from Very Interested on one end of the scale to Not Interested on the other. Neutral was also an option. Heavy Passenger generated the most “Very Interested” responses, followed by Permanent Freight and Light Rail. Railside Attractions came in a close fourth.



When filtered to responses from Alberni Valley residents and workers, Heavy Passenger still generated the most “Very Interested” responses, followed by Permanent Freight, RAILSIDE Attractions and Heritage/Tourist Train which were all within one point of each other.

Q16 Of the 10 options presented, please select your TOP THREE priorities.



SAMPLE SUMMARY RESULTS FOR ALL RESPONDENTS

4.3 COMMENT THEMES

Comments are wide ranging and were invited for each of the uses. While those are not all summarized here, the data could form useful background should any of the options be considered further.

Given that Permanent Freight Rail Use and Passenger Rail surfaced throughout the survey as the priorities of interest, themes of those comments are shared here.

Permanent Freight Rail:



Economic Viability: Many comments express skepticism about the economic feasibility of reintroducing freight rail. Those opposed argue there's insufficient demand to justify investment, while proponents see opportunities to increase freight movement in the community, in particular with connection to the Port.



Environmental and Safety Benefits: Supporters of freight rail argue it could reduce greenhouse gas emissions by taking trucks off the highways, and also reduce road congestion and wear. This also connected to comments suggest shifting freight from trucks to trains could enhance road safety by reducing the number of heavy vehicles on highways.



Historical Context and Future Planning: Many comments reference the historical significance of rail in the region, noting that it once played a vital role in local transport and industry. This historical perspective underscores a desire to revitalize a system that was previously integral to the community's economy. There is strong interest in seeing local stakeholders involved in the decision-making process moving forward so that future use aligns with community needs.

Heavy Passenger Rail:



Safety and Accessibility: Many comments suggest that rail could provide a safe alternative to cars, especially for populations such as the elderly and those without access to vehicles. The potential for rail to improve accessibility to essential services and emergency routes is also frequently mentioned. Rail is presented as a greener alternative to cars, and reducing congestion on the highway could also be a benefit.



Economic Viability and Sustainability: There are questions and doubt about the financial feasibility of heavy passenger rail, citing the high costs of construction, maintenance, operations (frequency, scheduling) and the current population density. The importance of integrating passenger and freight services to share costs is also highlighted. The tourism potential of rail though is highlighted as economic benefit.



Integration with Other Transport Modes: The need for connectivity with other forms of transportation—such as buses, ferries, and cycling routes—is emphasized. Interest in passenger rail is connected to interest in a larger, integrated network to improve overall mobility across the island. This intramodality is also raised in connection to freight rail service.

Many of these themes echo discussions held in person at the Fall Fair Booth.

5.0 Next Steps

The survey and Fall Fair booth hosted by the ACRD in September offered an introduction to the community about the discussions around use for the Island Rail Corridor, and what opportunities and options could be available. This was an early stage of the study overall and there is more work to be done both in technical assessment and consultation.

Further steps forward will include:

- **Engaging actively with Tseshaht and Hupacasath Members:** As more technical information becomes available; it is critical that the options and ideas be brought forward to First Nations in the region to ensure they are able to actively participate in development of direction for this infrastructure that is within their territory.
- **Post/Share Summary Report:** Share the summary report with the community by posting to the website, to recognize the participation of all who engaged.
- **Maintain consistent communications:** Ensure that information is up to date and available for the public about the process, the timing and opportunities for feedback. Continue to respond to questions/comments as they're submitted.

6.0 Conclusion

In conclusion, the community engagement booth, and online survey showed strong support for renewed rail activity, highlighting the benefits of both freight and passenger services for enhancing transportation options, reducing highway traffic, and benefiting local businesses and tourism. There is also a clear historical significance of the corridor to many both from within the Alberni Valley, and beyond.

That said, there were expressed concerns regarding the costs associated with reactivating rail services – including repairs, maintenance and operations.

The engagement was a good introduction to the community's level of interest in rail activity and what would be the preferred use of the corridor to meet values and hopes of respondents. The ACRD heard from people locally and from beyond the region, showing the level of interest there is in the rail corridor across Vancouver Island.

Overall, the engagement efforts showed the interest of community members in this topic. The project team saw construction and proactive discussions about the rail corridor's potential. This input will be helpful as the ACRD, Tseshaht and Hupacasath First Nations consider how best to leverage the corridor for the benefit of their members and residents.

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