



Rail to Trail and Rail with Trail Review

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1 Introduction

A **rail to trail**, also known as a rail-trail refers to land that is converted from a railway to a trail after rail services have been discontinued. A **rail with trail** refers to a trail constructed beside an active railway or rail transit corridor. There are many abandoned and discontinued rail corridors in Canada today, as the cost of providing passenger or freight rail services on these corridors is no longer economically viable.

Rail-to-trail and rail-with-trail constructions are a sustainable way to continue the use of these lands, and a large portion of Canada's old rail corridors have been converted already. This memo provides an overview of the steps to convert or incorporate trails beside railways by analyzing real-life examples of rails to trails and rails with trails, with a focus on projects within British Columbia and with First Nations involvement. Examples will contain information on the history and development of the trail, any environmental remediation necessary, the trail's usage, and its socio-economic benefits.

2 Examples

2.1 E&N Humpback Connector

The E&N Humpback connector is a rail with trail located on the Vancouver Island Rail Corridor, between Victoria and the West Shore. This recent addition to the Trans Canada Trail touches Esquimalt, View Royal and Langford, and runs with the Galloping Goose Trail for approximately 2 kilometres. Started in 2009, the work on this trail has been slow. It is being completed in phases and runs through the Lekwungen Nations – Esquimalt Nation (Kosapsum) and Songhees Nation. In 2019, the first two phases of the rail-with-trail project were completed, and the 12-kilometre trail was opened to the public. Since 2021, 1.5 kilometres were added, nearing the goal of a total 17 km. The final segment, planned to be built between Jacklin Road to Humpback Road, has no official timeline for completion.

In order to protect the environment, the Capital Regional District (CRD) hired environmental consultants and engineers in the planning stage of the project. The environmental consultant identified areas that were most sensitive and important to protect, and the CRD mitigated these areas accordingly. Some environmental mitigation strategies that were recommended included the use of bird nesting boxes, designing the route to minimize tree loss, working with municipalities on tree replacement, obtaining permits for working in and around streams, replanting native plants on the trail, removing invasive plants, and construction monitoring. During the CRD open houses, the public also had the opportunity to bring up any concerns before construction. To protect the safety of users, there is a fence between the rail and the trail. This is because the railway is officially active and could be used occasionally for operational purposes. Even when rail is not operating on the corridor, a fence between the trail and rail facilities supports safety between the two facilities. Furthermore, in order to meet Transport Canada's Canadian Railway-Roadway Grade Crossings Standards, the trail undergoes regular safety updates at the rail crossings.

The trail is used by pedestrians and cyclists and is rated only 1/5 for difficulty by Rail Trails British Columbia. There are amenities along the pathway, including information kiosks, food vendors, parking, and access to public transit. The trail is also wheelchair accessible and dog-friendly, making it suitable to a wider range of users.

Although there is no regular passenger or freight rail service today on the corridor, a recent Memorandum of Understanding was signed by the Esquimalt Nation, Songhees Nation and local governments to explore the future of the Island Rail Corridor in the Victoria Region. This agreement, known as the Reconciliation Corridor Initiative, commits the partners to investigate passenger rail feasibility, realignment options to return lands to the Esquimalt Nation, and opportunities for transit-oriented and economic development along the route. A technical study will be commissioned to assess alignment, financial viability, and connectivity benefits for fast-growing communities such as Langford, Colwood, and Esquimalt, with results expected in 12 to 16 months. It is unclear what, if any, effect this initiative will have on the E&N Humpback Connector trail.

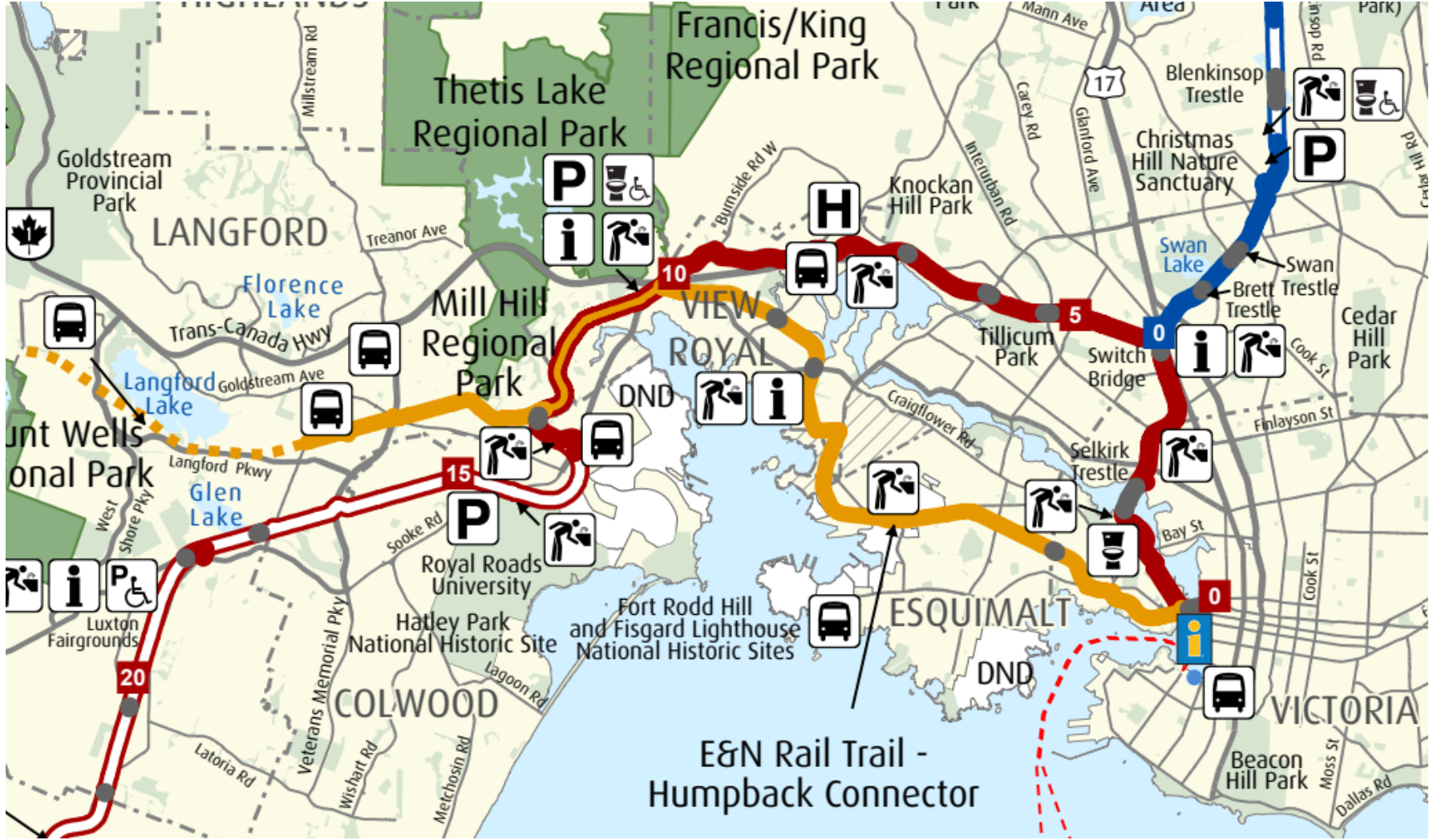
The E&N Humpback Connector is a 13.5 km rail with trail that travels between Victoria and West Shore. To provide a safe crossing for trail users at existing at-grade crossings along the trail, a mix of traffic control exists based on the street type. On neighborhood streets, stop signs for vehicles have been installed to provide the right of way to cyclists and pedestrians. At other more heavily trafficked locations, dedicated signals to stop cars and provide controlled crossings for pedestrians and cyclists were installed. There are also various crossings where a yield sign has been installed on the trail along with a pedestrian/cyclist warning sign for drivers.

At locations with existing grade-separated railway crossings, a new trail overpass was constructed alongside the railway overpass

Throughout most of the E&N Humpback Connector, the existing rail centerline is located 5 metres from the center of the trail. The trail is primarily separated from the rail line by a black chain link fence that is an estimated 1.5 metre high.

Approximately 4 metres of previous railroad right of way were used to construct the E&N Humpback Connector.

Figure 1. E & N Rail Trail



Source: Capital Regional District

2.2 Coombs to Parksville Rail Trail

The Coombs to Parksville rail trail is approximately 7 kilometres long and 3 metres wide. It is visible from the Alberni Highway near Coombs and, although a small section is adjacent to the Island Rail Corridor, it is primarily a rail-to-trail conversion. In 2009, the Regional District of Nanaimo (RDN) started a rail-with-trail feasibility study and partnered with other districts to create rail-with-trail guidelines that all parties could use. Planning for the Coombs to Parksville Rail Trail began in 2013. Construction began three years later, in May 2016, and the trail was opened that same year in December.

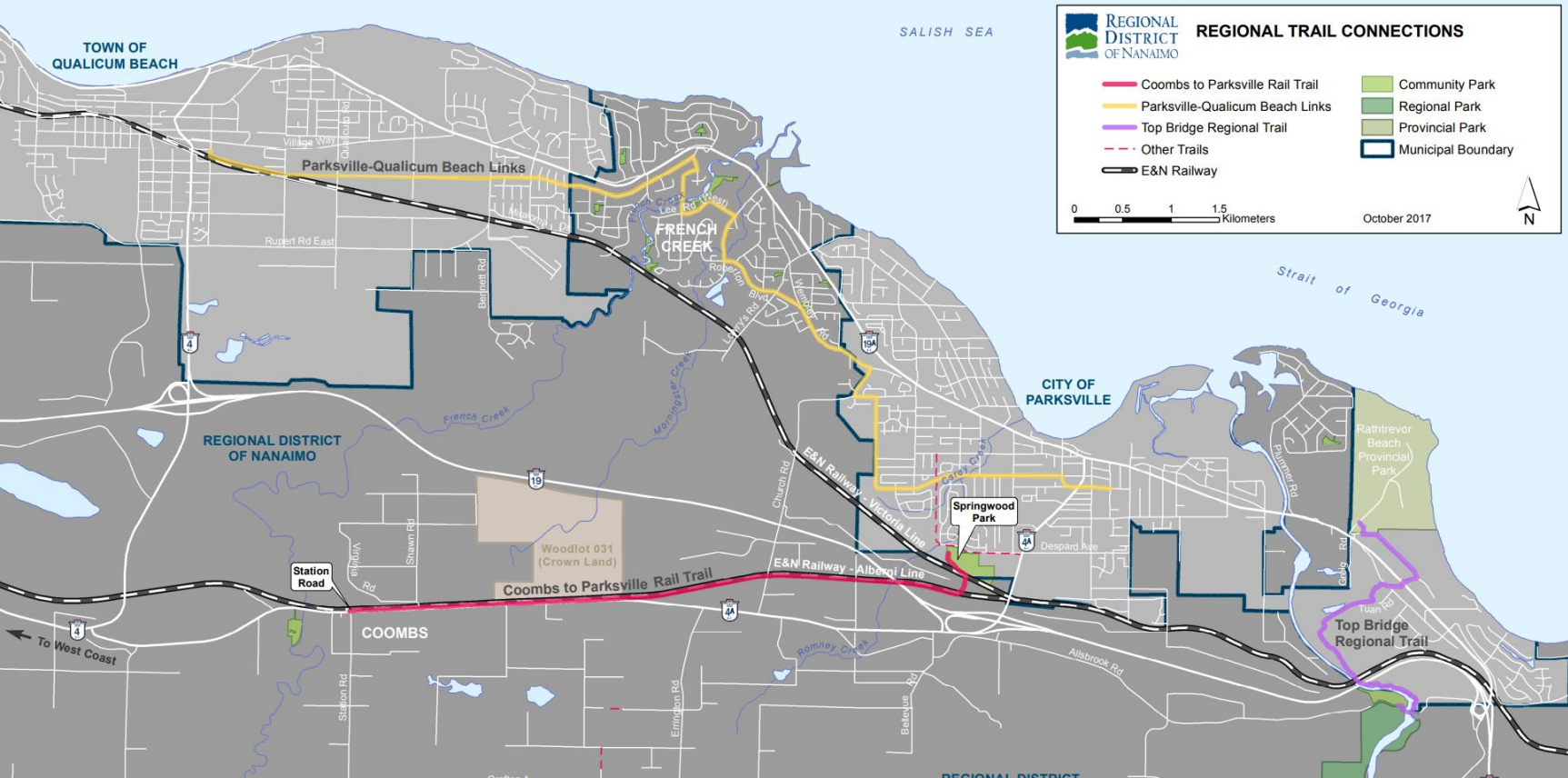
The trail supports a variety of non-motorized modes of transport, including walking, cycling, running and horse-back riding. There are food, parking, and other amenities nearby and leashed dogs are allowed. The trail is also wheelchair accessible, except for 200 metres within Springwood Park (where the grade reaches 8%). Rail Trails British Columbia rates the trail 3/5 for difficulty, as conditions can vary and there may be some rough sections. Popular activities on the trail include fishing, seeing the Oceanside street art, and watching the bald eagles in the trees. Nearby attractions are Shelly Parks, Top Bridge Regional Trail, Englishman River Regional Park, and Parksville-Qualicum Beach links.

The Coombs to Parksville Rail Trail spans 7 kilometres and crosses one arterial, Church Road. To facilitate a safe crossing for cyclists and pedestrians, a crosswalk with pedestrian/cyclist controlled flashing lights to warn drivers was installed. In addition, devices to block ATVs and dirt bikes were placed, which also reduces the risks of collisions between cyclists and vehicles.

In the small section that where the trail is parallel to the Island Rail Corridor, the centerline of the trail is located 6.5 metres from the center of the rail line. Currently, there is no protective fencing along the trail.

Approximately 7 metres of former railway right of way were used to construct the portion of trail that runs parallel to the rail line.

Figure 2. Coombs to Parksville Rail Trail



Source: Regional District of Nanaimo

2.3 Cowichan Valley Rail Trail

The Cowichan Valley Rail Trail was developed through the conversion of two previous railway corridors: Canadian National Railway (CN) and Esquimalt & Nanaimo (E&N). Following the decommissioning of the CN in the Cowichan Valley, some of the overpasses and railway tracks on the Island Rail Corridor were removed, while the rail bed remained. In 2011, the former E&N corridor from Lake Cowichan to Sherman Road was completed for trail use. The west section of the railway was converted into the Cowichan Valley Trail (CVT) over a number of years. Different sections were completed in 2010 and 2011, but efforts to connect this trail to neighbouring ones were ongoing until 2017. In 2017, work on the CRD's Sooke Hills Wilderness Trail and the CVT allowed the trails to connect and complete that section of the Trans Canada trail. Today, the 122-kilometre trail stretches from the south end of Shawnigan Lake, west to the town of Lake Cowichan and north towards the RDN.

The development of the Cowichan Valley Trail and on-going maintenance was supported by local First Nations, environmental consulting and restoration services. In 2014, the Cowichan Valley Trail team began work to collaborate with the Malahat Nation for the planning and construction of the section connecting to the Galloping Goose Trail. Together, the Cowichan Valley Regional District (CVRD), Recreation Sites and Trails BC (RSTBC), the Malahat Nation, and the CRD, achieved this in 2017. The CVRD and Malahat Nation developed a plan and a letter of understanding as a formal agreement with guiding principles. They met every month to discuss various aspects of the trail, including construction and signage. The Malahat Nation also considered employing its people for long-term maintenance of the trail as a job opportunity. In 2022, CVRD undertook an assessment with Stantec, identifying past and potential landslides in the coastal areas to inform decisions about new development. They continued to have assessments done in different areas of the land to identify a variety of hazards. This type of testing is crucial in deciding where to build a new trail and how to mitigate the environmental risks. In November 2021, British Columbia faced extreme rain, which led to flooding damage to the trail. Most areas affected were repaired by the next year and opened for use again. However, a 40-meter section of the trail suffered major losses due to the land under it collapsing. The CVRD received confirmation of funding in 2023 through the British Columbia Provincial Disaster Financial Assistance Program, and later employed a local contractor to repair the trail. Reparations have begun; however, this part of the trail remains closed.

In a recently published report (2025) for the CVRD outlined the framework for repurposing the Island Rail Corridor. The report included cost estimates for converting a rail corridor into a trail, including environmental remediation costs.

The report noted that since the Island Rail Corridor was previously used for rail operations, an environmental investigation would be required to determine contamination levels. For the 72-kilometre corridor, the estimated cost to complete Phase I ESA / Stage 1 PSIO, Phase II ESA / Stage 2 PSIO, and DSI ranged from \$3,515,000 to \$6,685,000. The study also indicated that remediation costs for a rail corridor could range from \$260,000 to \$470,000 per 100-metre section for both Physical Remediation and Risk Assessment. Furthermore, the study highlighted that if the rail corridor was converted to a recreational or commercial trail, costs would likely fall at the higher end of the estimate. In total, it was estimated to convert the previous 72-kilometre

rail line to a trail would be around \$55 million, but if soil remediation was needed, the costs could range from \$76M to \$225M in addition to the \$55M.¹ This high cost can make corridor re-purposing not financially viable in many instances.

The CVT is a popular spot for many hikers, cyclists, equestrians, and picnickers. Thanks to the low grade of the railway, the trail is built on a mostly flat and wide gravel path, making it accessible for and highly suitable to cycling. A few sections are on road or have steep hills, so users are advised to plan accordingly. The trail is pet-friendly (although dogs must remain on leash), open from dawn to dusk, and has many amenities along its path. Rated 2/5 for difficulty by Rail Trails British Columbia, it is a good trail for families. The trail features the Kinsol, Holt Creek, Marie Canyon, and McGee Creek Trestles along with beautiful scenery.

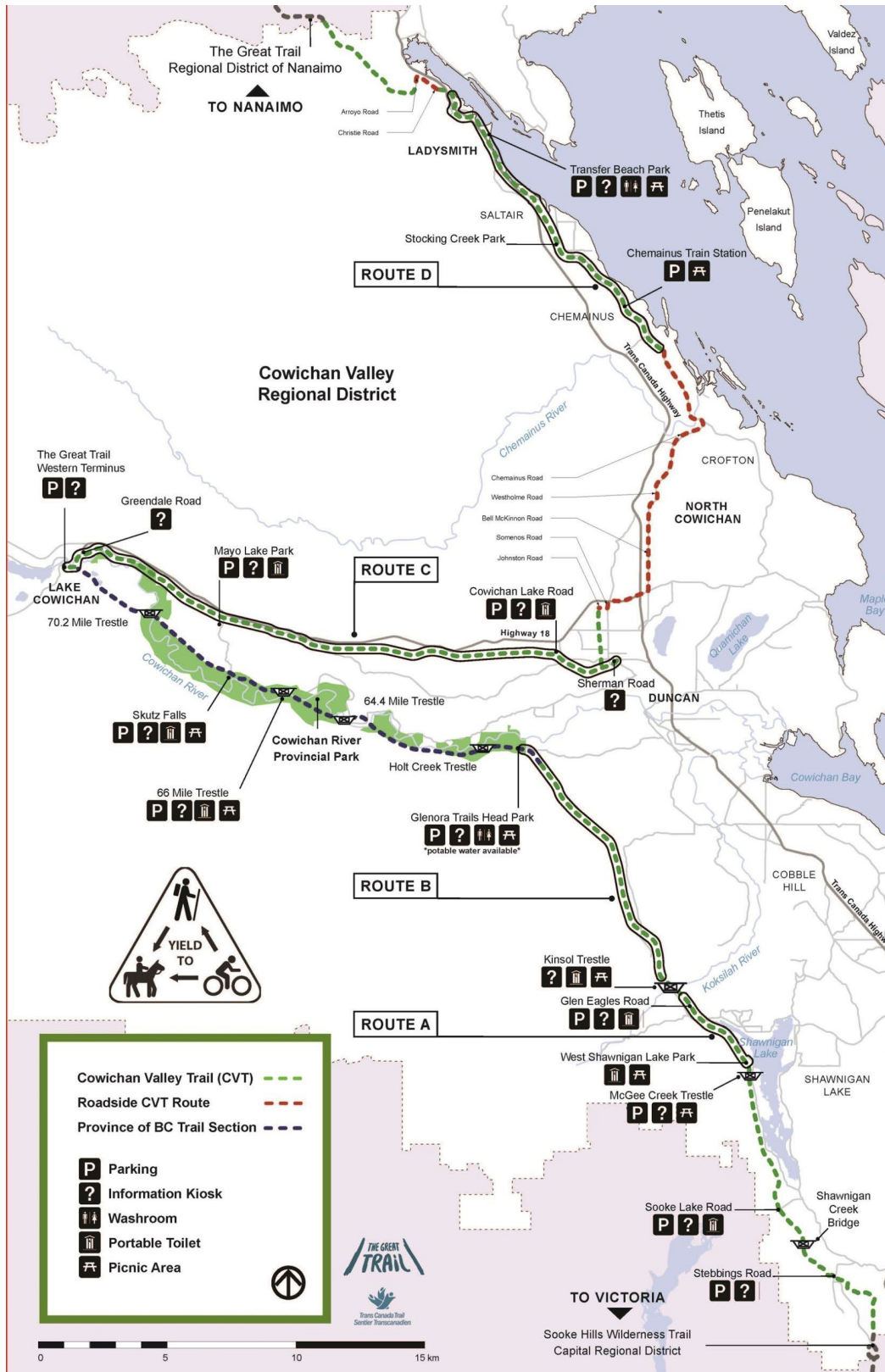
The recently rehabilitated Kinsol Trestle is reportedly the highest wooden rail trestle in Canada and known for its incredible structure. The CVT also includes several bridges, parks and murals in the town of Chemainus. Users can plan their trip using the Tourism Cowichan website, which includes information about food, transportation, lodging, upcoming events and entertainment. BC Transit provides transit connections and parking is available nearby. The trail is maintained by the CVRD except for the section through the Cowichan River Provincial Park, which is maintained by the Ministry of Transportation and Transportation. Closures and trail conditions are updated on their respective websites.

The Cowichan Valley Rail Trail uses previous CN and E&N right of way and much of the trail alignment passes through densely forested areas, where previous rail trestles and bridges have been converted to allow access to cyclists, pedestrians, and equestrians. In segments where the trail passes through a more urban setting, grade crossings are primarily on low-traffic streets and uncontrolled marked crosswalks have been periodically installed.

In locations where the trail is parallel to the rail line, the trail centerline is approximately 9.5 metres from the rail centerline. Currently, there is no protective fencing along the trail.

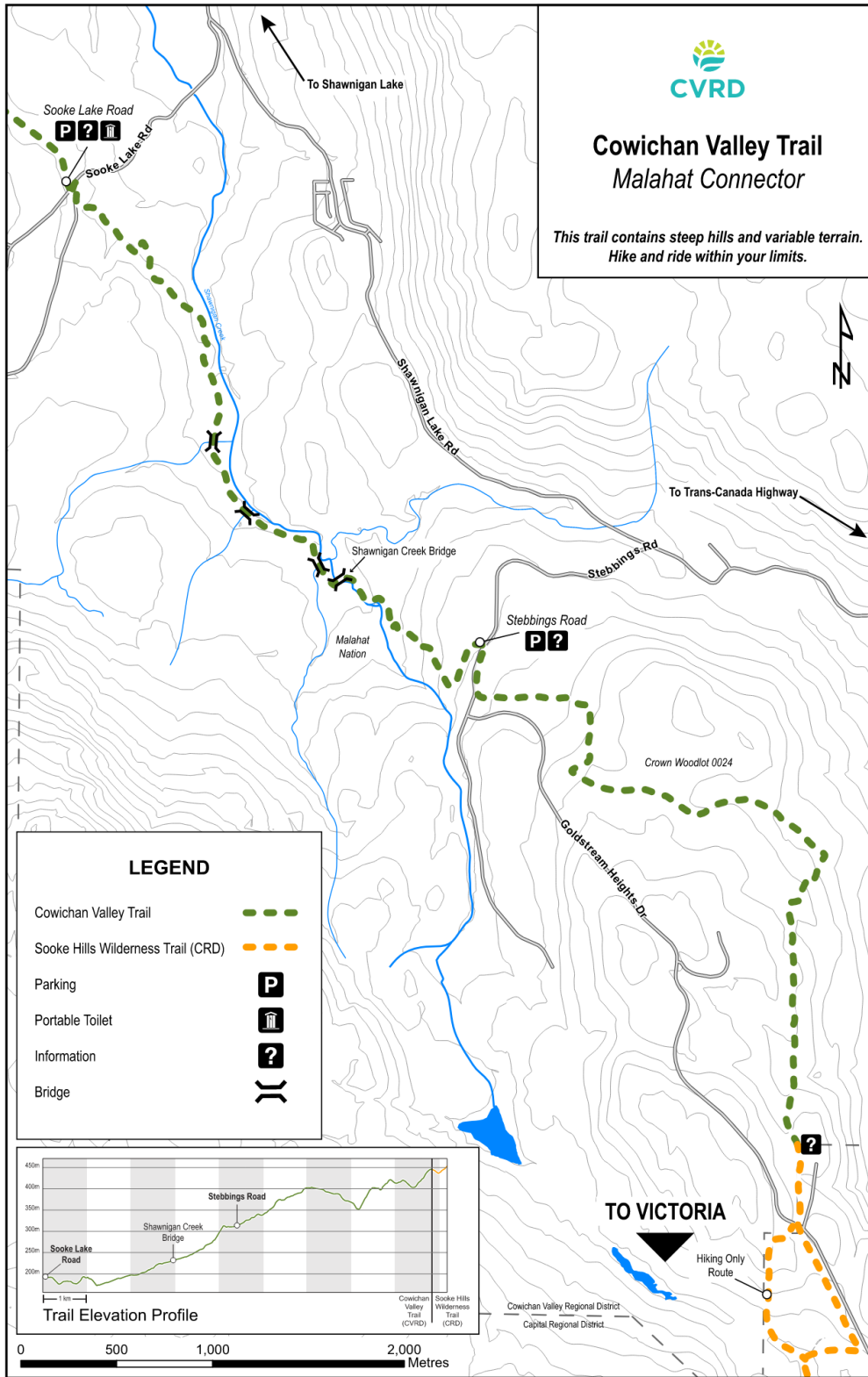
¹ Cowichan Valley Regional District, *Island Rail Corridor Towards a Shared Vision Report*. Retrieved from: <https://fortvi.ca/wp-content/uploads/2025/02/Cowichan-Valley-RD-Towards-a-Shared-Vision-Report.pdf?utm>

Figure 3. Cowichan Valley Rail Trail



Source: Cowichan Valley Regional District

Figure 4. Cowichan Valley Trail – Malahat Connector



Source: Cowichan Valley Regional District

2.4 Okanagan Rail Trail

Due to high operating costs and low revenues, the Kelowna Pacific Railway (KPR) shortline began winding down rail service in the Okanagan in 2013. Local governments including the City of Kelowna, the District of Lake Country, the Regional District of North Okanagan and the Province of BC wanted the land to be used in a valuable way and planned to buy it from CN (who had been leasing it to KPR for local rail operations). Through negotiations and donations, they were able to negotiate down the cost of the corridor lands from \$50 million to \$22 million and completed the purchase in 2015. A charitable donation receipt was issued to CN in return. All four parties contributed to the cost, while aiming to minimize tax increases for local residents. They gathered input and fundraising for the early stages of trail development in 2016, and held information sessions (plans, timeline, etc.) for the public in 2017.

Key aspects that the public were interested in were safety and comfort for trail users, environmental protection, accessibility, and durability with minimal maintenance. The feedback collected in 2016 and 2017 was crucial to the trail's construction, which was finished in 2018, and can inform future development of the trail as well. Today, the trail spans 50 kilometres between Vernon and Kelowna. It is not part of the Trans Canada Trail.

The completion of the trail faced challenges within the boundaries of an Okanagan Indian Band (OKIB) reserve. The OKIB requested that the federal government buy the section of the rail instead of allowing municipal governments to do so in 2014, and took legal action the following year after failing to receive a response. This injunction application was denied by the BC Supreme Court in 2015 on the grounds that the injunction criteria were not all met, so the land could be sold freely by CN to anyone. In 2016, the OKIB became a member of the Inter-jurisdictional Development Team (IDT), officially joining the rails with trails project. This allowed them to own 2.5 kilometres of the trail, while also having more say in the development process, including environmental preservation. As the completion of the Addition to Reserve process and the OKIB's approval for public use of the trail are pending, the OKIB's land remains closed today with no expected opening date.

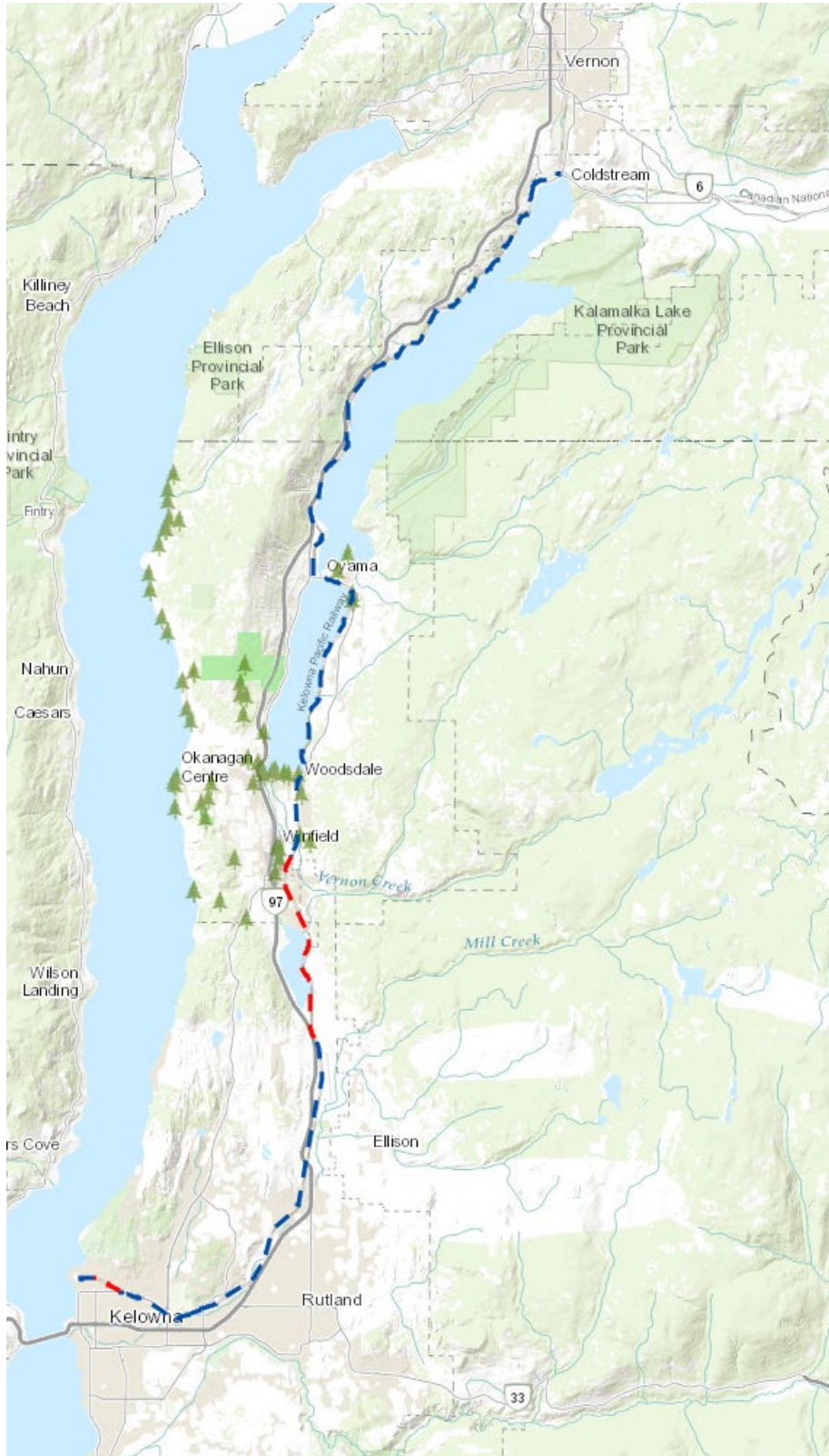
The Okanagan Rail Trail is scenic thanks in part to the number of lakes on the path and near it, including Okanagan Lake and Kalamalka Lake, the two ends of the trail. According to Tourism Kelowna, 24 of the 50 kilometres of trail are on lakefronts, creeks and natural habitats. The Okanagan Rail Trail can be split into a few different sections: The Cold Stream – Kekuli Bay, Kekuli Bay – Lake Country, Wood Lake circle route, Lake Country – Kelowna Airport (YLW), YLW – Downtown Kelowna. Each of these sections is rated 1 or 2/5 for difficulty by Rail Trails British Columbia and along the routes, there are several amenities including parking, washrooms, wheelchair accessibility, and interpretive sites. Motorized wheelchairs, mobility scooters, electric bikes and electric scooters are allowed on the trail as well as dogs on a leash. The trail is a popular spot for tourism year-round and allows for various forms of non-motorized transport, including hiking, snowshoeing, skiing, cycling, and rollerblading, although some amenities may not be maintained during the winter. Popular activities on the trail are swimming at one of the beaches, visiting nearby distilleries, wineries or restaurants, birdwatching, fishing, and learning about the Indigenous culture and history of the land. Maintenance of the trail,

safety and compliance of trail users is handled by Friends of the Okanagan Trail. Users can plan their trip using the Tourism Kelowna and Tourism Vernon websites.

The Okanagan Rail Trail utilizes the former right of way of the KPR and many of the at-grade crossings have been upgraded to improve safety for trail users. At arterial road crossings, dedicated signals have been installed to stop vehicular traffic and provide controlled crossings for pedestrians and cyclists. Crossings with lower vehicle traffic include marked crosswalks or, in some cases, no traffic control.

The trail is approximately 5 metres wide.

Figure 5. Okanagan Rail Trail



Source: Okanagan Rail Trail

2.5 Galloping Goose Regional Trail

The Galloping Goose was the name of the motorized railway car that used to carry mail and passengers between Victoria and Leechtown on this railway from 1922 to 1931. In 1987, the local government began a rail-to-trail conversion which opened to the public two years later. The generally flat trail comprises a variety of different land types, including urban and farmland. Today, the 55-kilometre multi-use trail spans from Victoria to an old mining town near Sooke and is an integral part of the Trans Canada Trail.

The trail is well-suited for multiple uses, as it is wide enough for two bicycle lanes, dog-friendly, and wheelchair accessible. Methods of transport on the trail include cycling, hiking, horseback riding and inline skating. Rail Trails British Columbia rates the difficulty of this trail as 1/5 for good condition with a light grade, and with several amenities down the path, it is perfect for families. On the trail, users may choose to birdwatch, visit the nearby parks throughout the path or continue from either end of the trail to start a new one. The gallopinggoosetrail.com website includes links to area-specific attraction websites. It also lists several recommended living accommodations on or near the trail.

The Galloping Goose Regional Trail utilizes the previous CN right of way in both urban and wilderness settings. Previous rail trestles and bridges have been repurposed to allow safe access for cyclists and pedestrians. On neighborhood streets, stop signs for vehicles, along with marked crosswalks, have been installed to provide trail users the right of way. In certain locations, traffic islands with object marker warning signs have been installed to provide added safety to trail users. In addition, flashing beacons triggered by trail users have been installed at marked crosswalks.

Due to the lack of a safe crossing at Island Highway, an overpass is being constructed for the Galloping Goose Trail. The trail is approximately 4 metres in width throughout much of its length.

Figure 6. Galloping Goose Regional Trail



Source: Vancouver Island Bucket List

3 Key Learnings

The continuous linear and wide right of way, and typically low grade of railway corridors allows for relatively easy trail conversions. This supports accessibility for a variety of users and modes of transport. Conversely, because railways often cross roadways, extra safety measures and signage are required at crossings to enable trail crossings. In addition, since the original railway corridors were built decades ago, and have often been under-monitored and maintained, significant re-habilitation and environmental remediation is often required to repurpose or use the corridor for non-rail use.

A 2025 report for the CVRD outlined the framework and costs associated with repurposing the 72-kilometre Island Rail Corridor. While the trail conversion was estimated at \$55 million, additional soil remediation could add between \$76 million to \$225 million to the costs, making re-purposing financially challenging in many cases.

That said, there are significant benefits to rail-to-trail and rail-with-trail conversions. First, they create and protect economic opportunities. Trails generate increased tourism and revenue for local businesses. However, the conversions also preserve the corridor for future transportation use rather than leave it vulnerable to purchase and development by private owners.

Secondly, they reduce risks of injuries as trails create safer porous transportation paths for pedestrians and cyclists, compared to active railways.

Some of the challenges that they can bring includes concerns around littering, loitering and vandalism. The USDOT's *Rails with Trails: Best practices and Lessons Learned* guide found evidence that crime reduced in areas that were converted to rail-with-trails.

Finally, they expand transportation options, with indirect benefits on air quality, health, and access to more destinations. Trails allow for and encourage active transportation for recreation purposes and beyond, and can replace auto trips.

The *Rails-with-Trails: Best Practices and Lessons Learned* report (USDOT/FRA, 2021) summarizes over two decades of experience providing guidance on planning, designing, constructing, and operating shared railroad and trail corridors. The report emphasizes that successful rails-with-trails projects depend on early and ongoing coordination with railroads, careful corridor feasibility analysis, clear agreements addressing liability and maintenance, and context-sensitive design that provides appropriate separation, barriers, and safe crossing treatments. When these best practices are applied, trails can coexist with active rail lines without compromising rail operations, while delivering significant transportation, recreation, and community connectivity benefits and, in some cases, reducing unauthorized trespassing along rail corridors.

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