

ALBERNI VALLEY RAIL CORRIDOR STUDY

FINAL REPORT



ALBERNI-CLAYOQUOT
REGIONAL DISTRICT



hupacasath
First Nation

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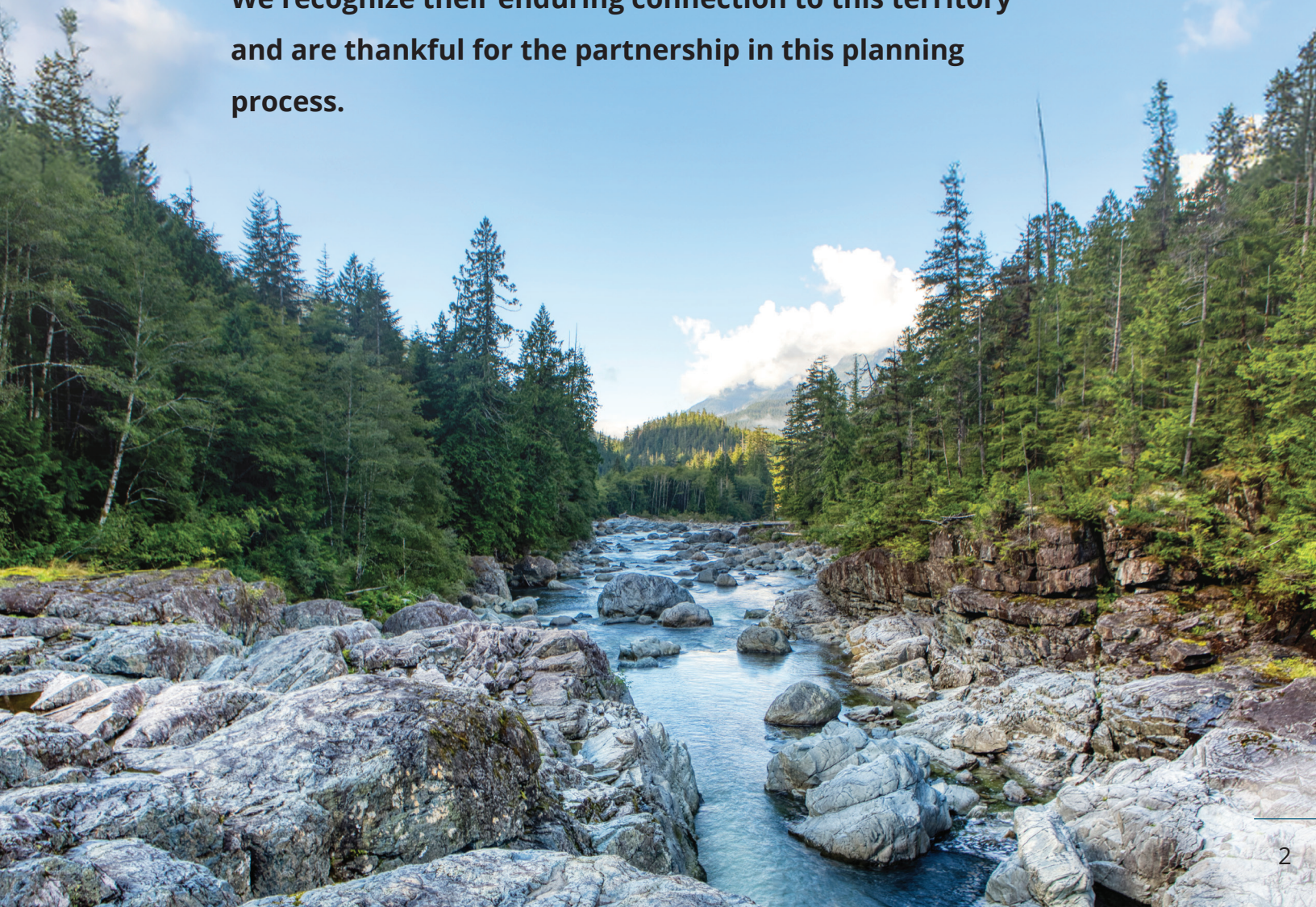
Front cover photo credit: Mike Bankowski

LAND ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

The Alberni-Clayoquot Regional District is located within the territories of ten First Nations and this work took place in the territories of the Tseshaht and Hupačasath First Nations whose peoples have been the stewards of this land since time immemorial.

We respectfully acknowledge the importance of this topic and the lands it impacts to their history, current environment and future opportunities.

We recognize their enduring connection to this territory and are thankful for the partnership in this planning process.





EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Alberni-Clayoquot Regional District (ACRD), in collaboration with a multi-party Working Group consisting of the Hupačasath and Tseshaht First Nations and the City of Port Alberni, undertook a study of the Island Rail Corridor within the Alberni Valley to explore both near and long-term potential uses.

Originally constructed in the late 1800s as part of the Esquimalt & Nanaimo Railway, the Island Rail Corridor played a foundational role in Vancouver Island's development.

For decades, it served as a critical link for passenger and freight movement, supporting forestry, industrial and community growth. However, service declined over time, with passenger operations ceasing in 2011, and freight activity now limited to a small geographical area in Nanaimo.

The corridor's creation came at significant cost to First Nations, involving land transfers without consultation or compensation. In 2022 the province provided First Nations and Regional Districts funding to develop a shared vision for the Island Rail Corridor.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY *(continued)*

The study included frequent engagement with the Working Group and the corridors owner, the Island Corridor Foundation, and was also informed by discussions between Alberni-Clayoquot Regional District (ACRD), Hupačasath and Tseshaht First Nations, as well as other Vancouver Island Regional Districts and First Nations.

Public engagement was held in 2024 to understand the public's interest and ideas for re-purposing the corridor. This included an online survey and a pop-up booth at the Alberni Valley Fall Fair. Priorities for participants included improving transportation connections for people and goods, economic development and tourism, and providing alternative emergency routes to the region.

Throughout the study a range of potential uses for the corridor were identified and assessed by the Working Group. These include freight rail, passenger rail, use an emergency bypass of Highway 4, expanding heritage tourist train services and tourism related uses (such as hybrid electric / pedal cars), and multi-use pathways. While freight and passenger rail were initially considered priorities, the summer 2025 Wesley Ridge wildfire, and destruction of four wooden trestles near Cameron Lake, make passenger and freight rail reinstatement beyond the valley prohibitively expensive in the near term.

The study concludes with next steps for further advancement and consideration – extending the Port Alberni Heritage train back to McLean Mill, exploring the tourism potential and business case of Rail Pedal Carts, and considering potential locations for multi-use pathways for recreation and tourism.

The Island Rail Corridor is an important piece of linear infrastructure and provides an opportunity for Alberni Valley communities to further tourism, economic development, community resilience and reconciliation.

INTRODUCTION

The Island Rail Corridor is the primary existing rail infrastructure asset on Vancouver Island, and it has largely fallen into disuse over the past 20 years. The corridor is currently owned by the Island Corridor Foundation (ICF), a non-profit agency responsible for management of the property.

The Southern Railway of Vancouver Island (SRVI) is the only operating railroad on Vancouver Island and works with the Southern Railway of British Columbia (SRY) to provide freight rail service to a handful of customers on Vancouver Island via Wellcox Yard.

The figure below shows the extent of the Island Rail Corridor, network including the rail barge connections to the Lower Mainland.



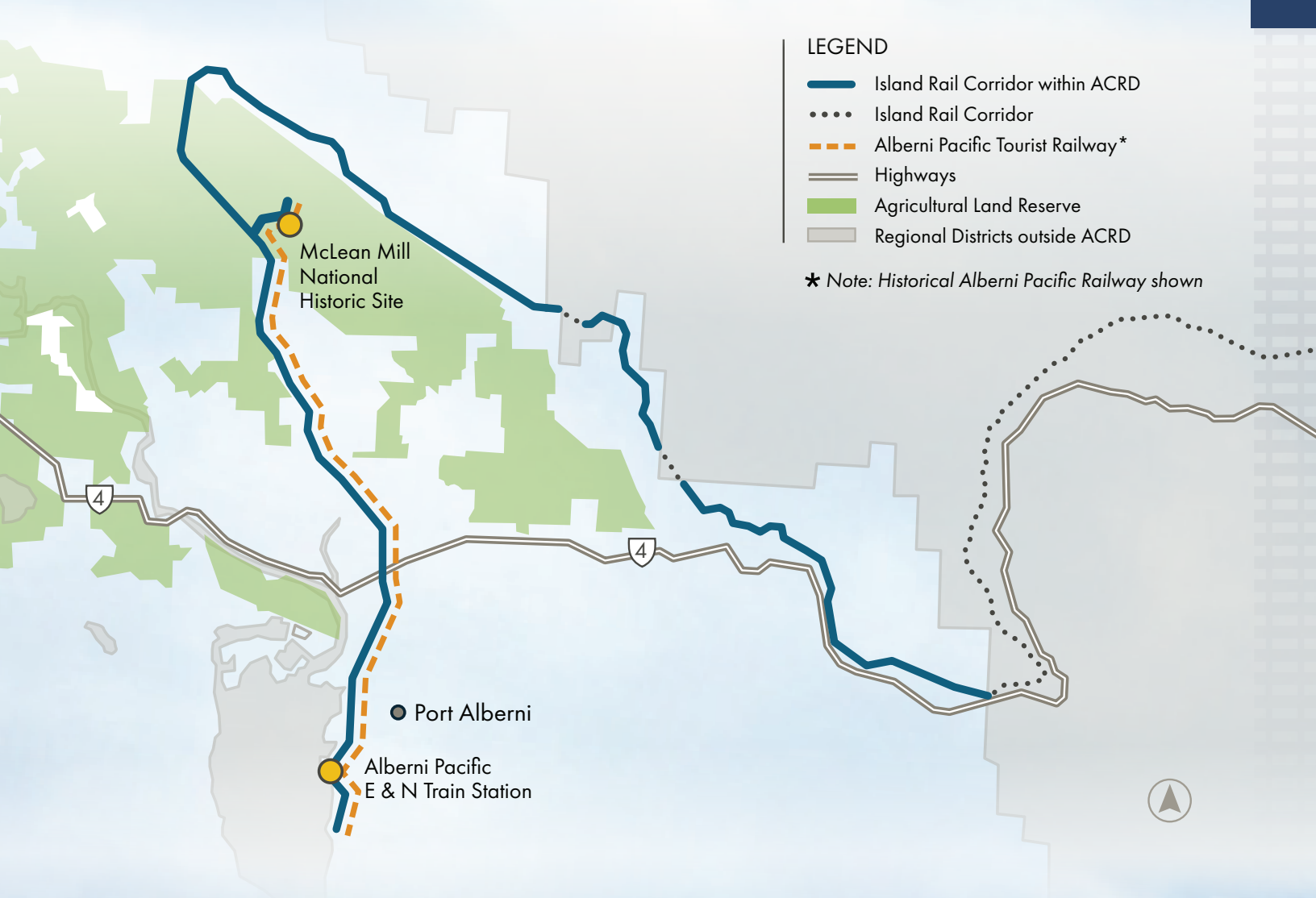
STUDY AREA

The corridor within the ACRD was a core focus of the study. However, as some potential corridor uses, such as the reinstatement of passenger or freight rail service, require a longer corridor to be viable, a broader study area, between Port Alberni and Nanaimo, was also considered.

Outside of this study area, the Island Rail Corridor extends further south to Victoria and north to Courtenay.

Within the ACRD

The portion of the rail corridor within the ACRD is a 18 mile stretch of the Port Alberni subdivision, from Mile Post (MP) 39 in Port Alberni to MP 21 at the ACRD boundary with the Regional District of Nanaimo (RDN)¹.

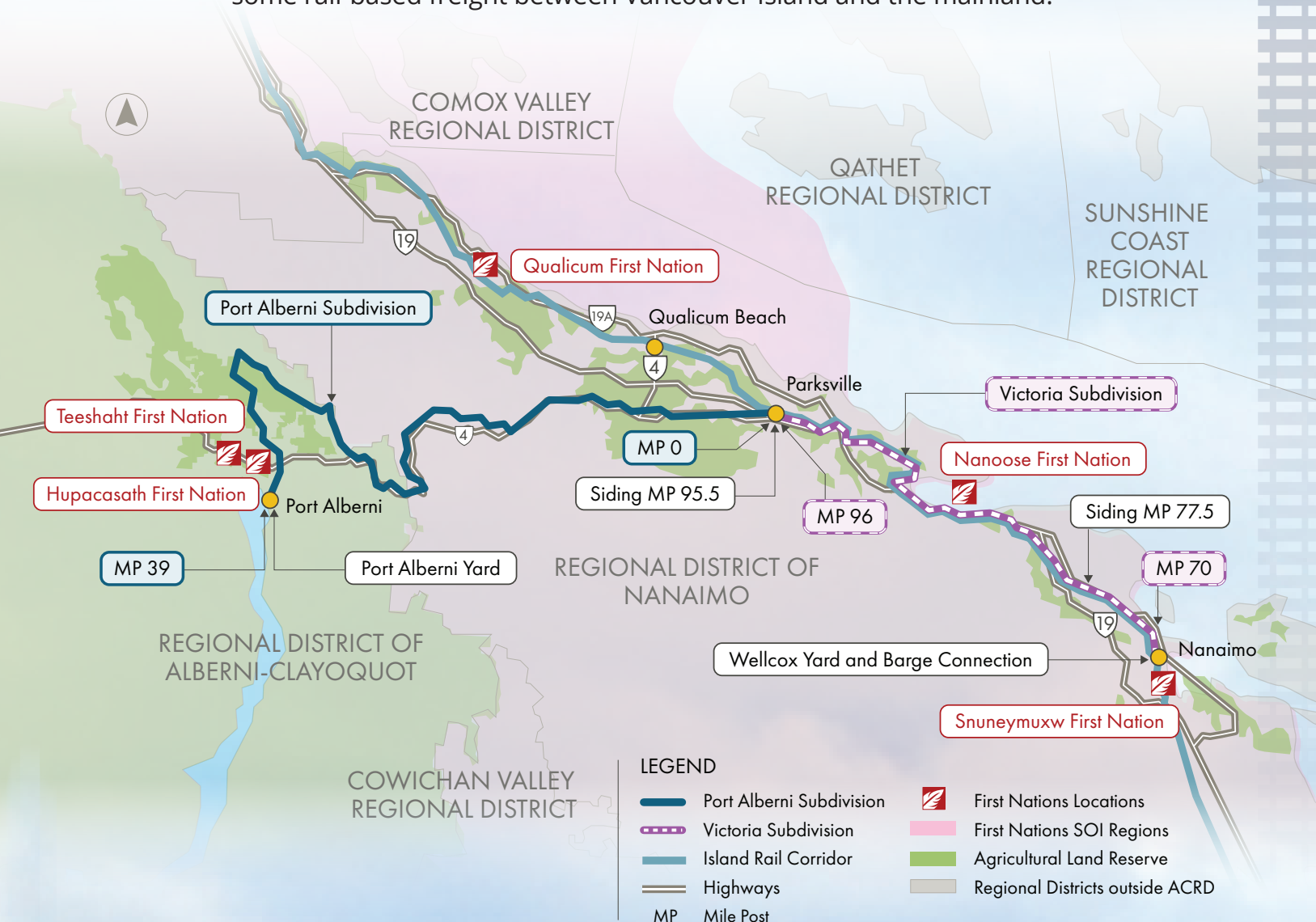


¹ Railway practice in Canada and the United States is to use imperial units exclusively. All measurements hereafter referring to railway infrastructure or operations are provided in imperial units only.

Port Alberni to Nanaimo

The full study area included the Port Alberni subdivision and the portion of the Victoria subdivision between Nanaimo and Parksville. Although outside of the ACRD, these segments were included as Nanaimo and the existing freight rail and barge services would likely be the nearest termini for any future passenger and freight rail services originating from Port Alberni.

The Island Rail Corridor is connected to the mainland rail network by rail barge. A Seaspan rail barge service connects SVI operations at Wellcox Yard in Nanaimo with SRY at its Annacis Rail Marine Terminal along the Fraser River. SRY interchanges directly with three North American Class I railways, including BNSF Railway (BNSF), Canadian National Railway (CN), and Canadian Pacific Kansas City Railway (CPKC). SRY also interchanges with Union Pacific Railroad (UP) via a haulage agreement with BNSF. These railways provide service across North America and this connection provides a commercially viable route for some rail-based freight between Vancouver Island and the mainland.



HISTORY

The inception of the freight and passenger rail service on Vancouver Island (now known as the Island Rail Corridor) was intertwined with British Columbia joining the Dominion of Canada. The colony joined Canada on July 20th, 1871, with the promise of a railway linking BC to the rest of Canada as a primary condition of confederation. With the Canadian Pacific Railway terminus set at Port Moody, Robert Dunsmuir, then a member of the BC legislature, submitted a proposal to the federal government and was granted the rights to construct the railway between Nanaimo and Esquimalt in 1883, then known as the Esquimalt and Nanaimo (E&N) Railway.

Construction began on April 30th, 1884 and was completed on August 13, 1886 with Prime Minister Sir John A. MacDonald driving the last railway spike near Shawnigan Lake.

The creation of the E&N Railway resulted in the transfer of more than two million acres of land to the E&N Railway Company, without consultation or compensation to affected First Nations whose traditional territory the Island Rail Corridor passes. Further, the corridor right-of-way severs the reserve lands of numerous First Nation communities on Vancouver Island.

Photo credit: Mike Bonkowski



RAIL SERVICE EXPANSION



Photo credit: Mike Bonkowski

Rail expansion soon followed the opening of the original ~71-mile Nanaimo–Esquimalt route. The E&N company extended the corridor to Victoria in 1888, then sold the railway and remaining 1.44 million acres, with timber rights of the unsold portion of the land grant to the Canadian Pacific Railway (CPR) in 1905. CPR subsequently extended the rail line to Lake Cowichan, Port Alberni, Parksville, Qualicum Beach and eventually Courtenay. Passenger service ran network-wide with 8 stations on the Port Alberni Subdivision and 45 stations on the Victoria subdivision between Victoria and Courtenay.

The Port Alberni subdivision was constructed between January 1908 and December 1911 with the first passenger train arriving in Port Alberni on Dec 12, 1911. CPR recognized the potential for forest product traffic originating from the Alberni Valley when they built the branch line, and in short order, carloads of lumber from operations such as Bainbridge Lumber and McLean Mill, started to move along the line. In 1919 construction began on the Great Central subdivision linking the Port Alberni subdivision to numerous mills, most notably at Sprout Lake and Great Central Lake. This subdivision operated from 1925 to 1953 and was an important branch line supplying lumber for export and logs to Port Alberni for milling.

At the height of E&N rail service, there were 20 trains per day operating from various terminals along the line. Barge service linked the E&N to the mainland originally at Ladysmith and Esquimalt. However, with traffic volumes increasing from Port Alberni and Courtney, an additional barge slip at Nanoose Bay was constructed (termed the Jayem terminal) and opened in June 1921. This provided a more efficient route to the mainland and avoided additional rail miles required to reach Ladysmith.

PASSENGER RAIL SERVICE TO/FROM PORT ALBERNI

Passenger rail service to Port Alberni pre-WWII was daily-except-Sunday. The train left Port Alberni at 10:45 AM and then made its two-hour run to Parksville where it interchanged with the southbound train from Courtney. The return trip left Parksville soon after, arriving in Port Alberni at 4:30 PM.

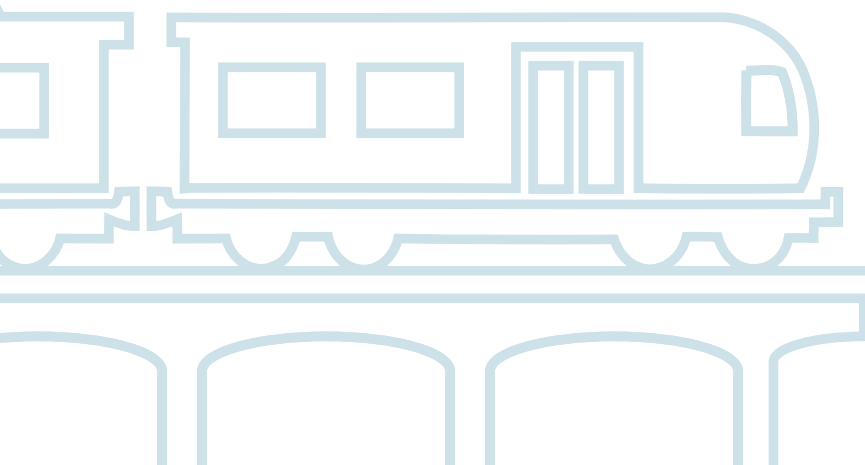
By 1928, passenger traffic was in decline mainly due to growing automobile ownership, road improvements and competition from bus services, primarily Vancouver Island Coach Lines. Passenger rail service to Port Alberni ceased in 1953 and was replaced by a mixed freight/passenger train until August 1957, when it too was abolished, ending 45 years of passenger rail service to Port Alberni.

Passenger rail service between Victoria and Courtney continued with Dayliner service, which was implemented in 1955 and operated by CPR until 2011, and then by VIA / RailAmerica in its final years. Track condition and lower ridership were cited as reasons for discontinuance.

FREIGHT RAIL SERVICE TO/FROM PORT ALBERNI

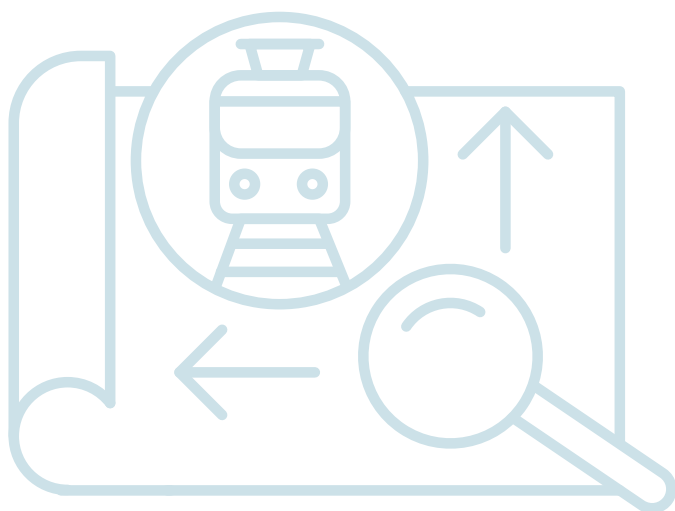
Freight rail service along the Port Alberni subdivision was inextricably tied to the prosperity of the logging, lumber, and pulp and paper industries located in the Alberni Valley. More specifically, E&N's prosperity was ultimately tied to the railway land grant properties which included some of the highest value timber stands on the Island. Once sold, these timber stands provided revenue carloads to the railway moving from harvest to market.

A key E&N customer, MacMillan Bloedel and its Port Alberni operations (plywood, sawmills and a paper mill) sustained traffic over the Port Alberni subdivision for many decades. Over time, however, corporate restructuring, sales of assets, changing market conditions and a general shift to trucking all contributed to declining volumes. In January 1999, RailAmerica formally took over operations on the E&N, purchasing the Nanaimo to Port Alberni section and leased the remaining sections of track from Victoria to Courtney. However, in 2001, service on the Port Alberni subdivision was discontinued after negotiations over freight volumes between Norske Skog (now owner of Pacifica Papers) and RailAmerica broke down with Norske shifting volumes to truck.



ISLAND CORRIDOR FOUNDATION

With RailAmerica announcing the discontinuance of service to Port Alberni and VIA Rail, operations, various public and political movements were organized to save the railway which ultimately culminated in the creation of the Island Corridor Foundation (ICF), a federally registered charity composed of 14 First Nations and 5 Regional Districts. Incorporated in 2004, the ICF successfully negotiated the donation of most of E&N assets from CPR and RailAmerica. In June 2006, the ICF announced that SRY was chosen to operate the railway. Operating as SRVI, rail service today is now limited to transload operations at Wellcox Yard (serviced by Seaspan Marine rail barge via Annacis Island) and small volumes in Nanaimo.



FIRST NATIONS LAND REVERSION

Since the discontinuation of rail service on Vancouver Island, several First Nations have initiated legal actions seeking the reversion of Island Rail Corridor lands. In 2015, the Snaw-Naw-As First Nation filed a claim against Canada and the ICF, arguing the corridor was no longer used for railway purposes. Similar claims followed in 2016 from the Cowichan Tribes and Halalt First Nation, though only the Snaw-Naw-As case has proceeded.

In September 2021, the BC Court of Appeal gave Canada until March 14, 2023, to determine whether restoring the corridor was in the public interest and if it would provide funding. If no decision or funding was provided, the Snaw-Naw-As First Nation could return to court to seek reversion of the land as Reserve territory.

On March 14, 2023, Transport Canada and the Province of BC announced that land reversion through the Snaw-Naw-As reserve would be the first step toward a shared vision for the corridor's future.

As part of this process, the province committed \$18 million to support First Nations and Regional Districts in studying their portions of the corridor and identifying future use opportunities. This study was carried out through a grant to the ACRD.

EXISTING CONDITIONS

RAIL CORRIDOR

Ownership

Since 2006 ICF has been responsible for managing the railway assets along the historic E&N line. ICF is guided by a twelve-person board of directors, with five members representing regional districts, five representing First Nations, and two serving as members at large. In 2023, Transport Canada and the Province of British Columbia initiated a land reversion process, returning a ~1.2-mile portion of the corridor to the Snaw-Naw-As First Nation.

A portion of the corridor (between MP 37.9 and MP 39.4) within the municipality of Port Alberni is owned by the City of Port Alberni. Domtar also owns a small section of track at its Port Alberni Mill.

General Conditions

The Island Rail Corridor includes a mix of track conditions, reflecting many years without regular service. In 2020, the BC Ministry of Transportation and Infrastructure (now the Ministry of Transportation and Transit) assessed the rail line from Nanaimo to Port Alberni and parts of the Victoria Subdivision. This condition assessment used a simple scale — good (minor repairs),

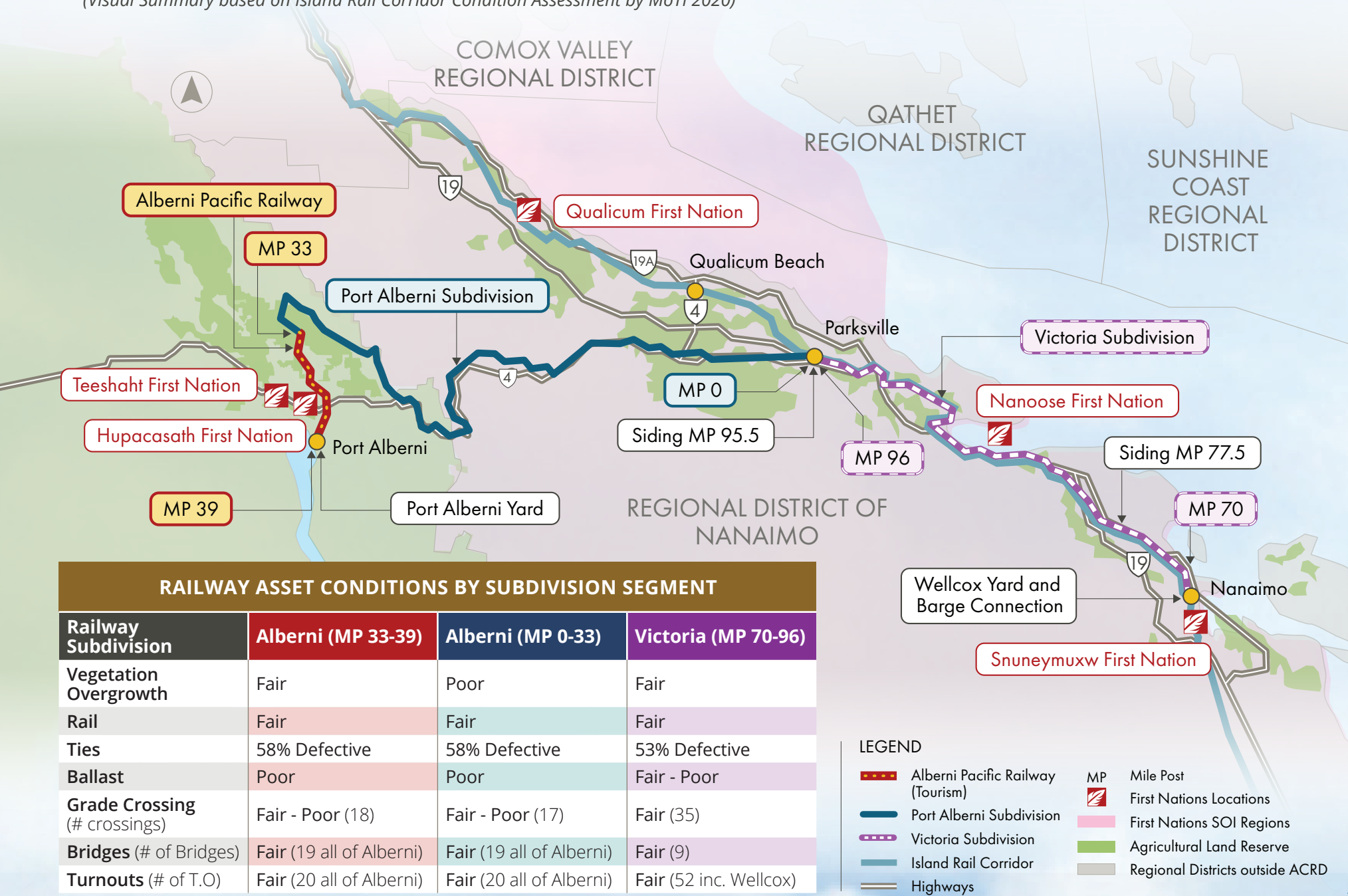
fair (some risk, may need major work), and poor (significant rehabilitation needed). Generally speaking, the Victoria Subdivision between Nanaimo and Parksville (MP 70 – MP 96) was rated fair but would still require major investment to bring back safe and reliable service. On the Port Alberni Subdivision, the section from Parksville to the McLean Mill turnoff (MP 0–33) hasn't seen active service for two decades and is rated poor, with vegetation grown over the tracks, rockslides, and worn track².

The summer 2025 Wesley Ridge wildfire resulted in the loss (or significant damage) of 4 trestle bridges on the north side of Cameron Lake. In addition, slope stability issues have been observed rendering this section of track fully inoperable without a full rebuilding of track and bridge infrastructure. The final stretch into Port Alberni (MP 33 – MP 39), once used by the Alberni Pacific Railway (APR), a steam tourist railway to McLean Mill, is in fair condition but would still need significant upgrades before regular freight rail operations could return. However, reinstatement of APR service to McLean Mill would require much less rehabilitation and associated cost.

² www2.gov.bc.ca/assets/gov/driving-and-transportation/reports-and-reference/reports-and-studies/vancouver-is-land-south-coast/en-railway/ircca-report-2020/appendix_a_-_track_condition_assessment-smaller.pdf

Rail Infrastructure Conditions on Alberni and Victoria Subdivision Rail Corridors

(Visual Summary based on Island Rail Corridor Condition Assessment by MoTI 2020)



RAILWAY ASSET CONDITIONS BY SUBDIVISION SEGMENT

Railway Subdivision	Alberni (MP 33-39)	Alberni (MP 0-33)	Victoria (MP 70-96)
Vegetation Overgrowth	Fair	Poor	Fair
Rail	Fair	Fair	Fair
Ties	58% Defective	58% Defective	53% Defective
Ballast	Poor	Poor	Fair - Poor
Grade Crossing (# crossings)	Fair - Poor (18)	Fair - Poor (17)	Fair (35)
Bridges (# of Bridges)	Fair (19 all of Alberni)	Fair (19 all of Alberni)	Fair (9)
Turnouts (# of T.O)	Fair (20 all of Alberni)	Fair (20 all of Alberni)	Fair (52 inc. Wellcox)

LEGEND

- - - Alberni Pacific Railway (Tourism)
- Port Alberni Subdivision
- - - Victoria Subdivision
- Island Rail Corridor
- Highways
- First Nations Locations
- First Nations SOI Regions
- Agricultural Land Reserve
- Regional Districts outside ACRD
- MP** Mile Post

Corridor ROW and Encroachments

Although the standard right-of-way (ROW) width for the Island Rail Corridor is 100 feet, in some areas the ROW is significantly narrower, including in Port Alberni, sections along the Nanoose waterfront, and through downtown Nanaimo. In many locations encroaching developed has resulted in rail ROW being less than 50 feet. Even with these limitations, the current ROW is not expected to be a barrier to future use(s).



Photo credit: HDR

Bridges

The Wesley Ridge wildfire destroyed 4 trestle bridges on the north side of Cameron Lake. Detailed structural assessments have not been completed and the load capacity of the remaining 15 bridges is unknown. On the Victoria Subdivision leading to Nanaimo, nine bridges are believed to be sufficient for standard passenger use, but more detailed assessment is required to confirm suitable for both passenger and freight rail use³.

Track Assets and Conditions

Although the Island Rail Corridor Condition Assessment found most track elements in fair condition, several areas need attention if service is to return. Track turnouts were rated fair as cross-ties needed replacement. There are about 70 grade crossings between Nanaimo and Port Alberni, plus 22 on spur lines, many rated fair or poor. Ballast has filled in with sediment and vegetation, reducing drainage. A washout at MP 84.4 on the Victoria Subdivision currently blocks train passage. Defective ties would need replacement, and other hardware upgrades – such as switching single shoulder tie plates to double shoulder ones and replacing joint bars – may also be required.

3 Vancouver Island Rail Corridor - Province of British Columbia

OTHER CONSIDERATIONS

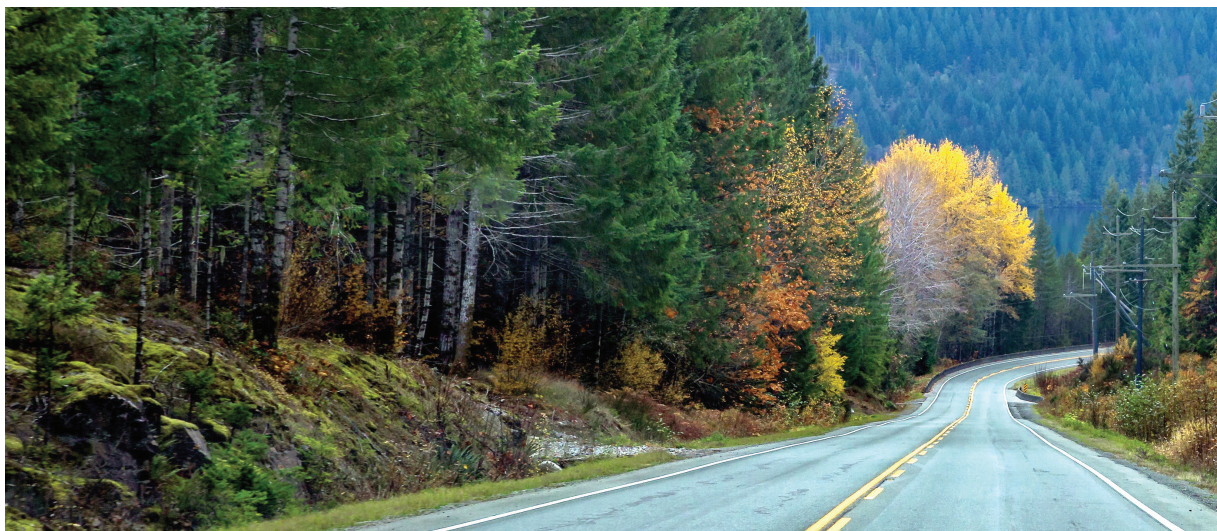
Highway 4

Highway 4, also known as the Alberni Highway / Pacific Rim Highway, is the longest east-west provincial highway on Vancouver Island. The 2-lane road runs roughly parallel to the Port Alberni subdivision, connecting Parksville and Port Alberni, with a western terminus at Tofino. Approximately 10,000 vehicles use the highway each day, with higher volumes near Parksville and in the summer.

Highway 4 is the only major road connection between the ACRD and the communities to the west with the rest of Vancouver Island, leaving these communities vulnerable to disruption events that close the highway (accidents, fires, floods, earthquakes, etc.) There have been nearly 30 road closures in the past 7 years, with causes including vehicle incidents, road maintenance, falling rock/debris, and wildfires. The average road closure

duration is approximately 20.5 hours, with the longest road closure being ~17 days in June 2023 at Cameron Lake Road (near Koen Road) due to wildfires. There may be a long-term opportunity for the rail corridor and/or rail service to provide an alternative mode to move people and goods to the region during times when Highway 4 is closed. It is also noted that the province is currently exploring other potential emergency road access routes to the Alberni Valley.

Highway 4 travels through Cathedral Grove, officially known as MacMillan Provincial Park, an area known for its massive old growth Douglas Fir trees. While beautiful, the geographic constraints along Highway 4 result in a winding, slow speed highway, that is challenging to bypass when disruptions (collisions, fires, etc.) occur which impacts.



Alberni Pacific Railway

The APR is a heritage tourist railway located in Port Alberni. Its primary purpose is to restore and operate historic locomotives and rolling stock, providing an interpretive experience of the region's industrial and rail history. APR is operated by the Western Vancouver Island Industrial Heritage Society (WVIIHS), a non-profit organization mandated to restore, maintain, display, and operate vintage railway and industrial equipment originating from the Alberni Valley. The route has been reactivated in recent years for seasonal tourist operations and special events, operating over a small portion of the Port Alberni subdivision within the City of Port Alberni.



Photo credit: Mike Bonkowski

Rolling Stock and Equipment

The APR collection includes multiple historic locomotives and over 20 pieces of rolling stock. Notable assets include a 1929 Baldwin 2-8-2T Steam Locomotive that is utilized for select heritage runs, and number of vintage diesel locomotives which are used for regular operations. Converted Canadian National transfer cabooses are used as passenger cars.

Route and Operations

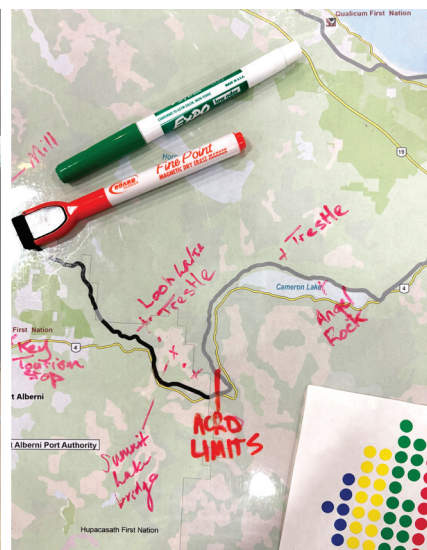
Recent passenger services originate from the restored CPR Port Alberni station. The route follows a scenic corridor along the waterfront and adjacent industrial areas, north, but generally stays within Port Alberni. Typical trip durations range from 20 to 35 minutes. Operations are typically seasonal, with multiple departures scheduled on operating days. Special event services, such as the "Santa Train," are also offered during the operating season.

The WVIIHS is exploring expanding service north beyond Port Alberni, including to McLean Mill. The McLean Mill National Historic Site is a preserved early-20th-century steam-powered sawmill complex near Port Alberni, which showcases Vancouver Island's forestry heritage.

STUDY ENGAGEMENT

The study included stakeholder engagement so that diverse perspectives, local knowledge, and community priorities informed the study.

A public engagement plan was drafted, and the level of engagement included inform, consult and collaborate, as defined by the International Association of Public Participation. The degrees of engagement varied based on the phase of the project.



Community Priorities

What are your top priorities for your community? Place a dot by your top 3.

SAFETY	ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT	COMMUNITY	HEALTH & WELLNESS	ENVIRONMENTAL PROTECTION
RESILIENCE	JOBS	HERITAGE	ACTIVE LIFESTYLE	NATURE
SUSTAINABILITY	TOURISM	LIVABILITY	OTHER	
			<div style="display: flex; justify-content: space-around;"> <div style="border: 1px solid black; padding: 5px; background-color: #add8e6;">Corridor Protection</div> <div style="font-size: 2em;">?</div> </div>	

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OUR APPROACH

To achieve the engagement goals, ACRD and the project team were committed to an approach that focused on offering a range of ways to participate, delivering accurate information and showing authenticity by clearly articulating the level of public influence that was available.

Engagement work began in May 2024 with the development of the engagement plan and introductory tools (including the project website). The key engagement opportunity for the general public was held in fall 2024. Key audiences were also engaged throughout the process through the Working Group.

COLLABORATION AT THE TABLE

The study Working Group included representatives from Tseshaht First Nation, Hupačasath First Nation, City of Port Alberni and the ACRD. At times, representatives of the Island Corridor Foundation also attended Working Group meetings.

The collaboration at this table was ongoing throughout the entire process, with over 20 meetings held. Committee members discussed each step and provided feedback and direction that guided development of the study.



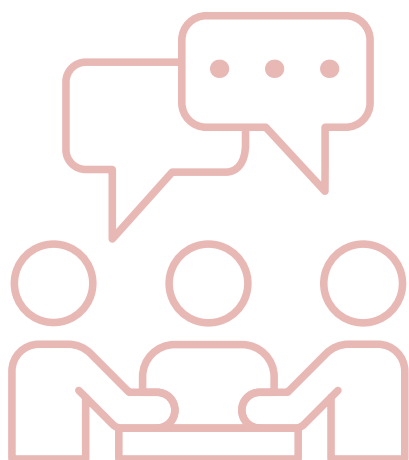
WIDER COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

In summer/fall of 2024, the wider community was invited to share their input on community values and the role of transportation, potential uses for the corridor and their support for different use options. An online survey was available and promoted widely. A booth was hosted at the popular Alberni Valley Fall Fair to promote the survey and collect further feedback.

Through both the online survey and the in-person information booth, we heard that there was a wide degree of interest in seeing the rail corridor in use, with interest in freight and passenger rail, as well as heritage/tourist train activity. There were questions about viability and affordability, and concern that cost for repairs had become too much after years of disuse.

It is noted that the public engagement was held before the Wesley Ridge wildfires and the loss of trestle rail bridges.

RESULTS AT A GLANCE



575

NUMBER OF INTERACTIONS
(online/in-person)



PERMANENT FREIGHT RAIL USE

Top priority identified by
Alberni Valley survey respondents*

** Survey was completed before the 2025 Wesley Ridge fires.*



TOP COMMUNITY NEEDS IDENTIFIED:

- Improve transportation connections for people and goods
- Economic development and tourism
- Provide alternative emergency access routes
- Corridor protection

ADDITIONAL CONTEXT & RECENT CHANGES

RECENT WILDFIRES

Recent wildfires have caused significant damage along the Port Alberni Subdivision of the Island Rail Corridor. The Wesley Ridge wildfire in summer 2025 burned four trestles between MP 12 and MP 17 on the Port Alberni subdivision. In addition, slope stability issues have been observed, rendering this section of track fully inoperable without a full rebuilding of track and bridge infrastructure. This hampers the business case and opportunity for freight and passenger rail re-instatement in the near term over this section (and between Port Alberni and Nanaimo).



Photo credit: Benjamin Hazel

FORESTRY INDUSTRY DECLINE

Historically, the Island Rail Corridor was an important link for the forestry industry, enabling the efficient shipment of logs, lumber, pulp and paper, and process inputs from inland mills to port. However, a decline in the forestry sector, including the closure of Western Forest Products' Mill in Port Alberni in 2022, has had negative impacts for workers, and reduces the near-term freight rail opportunity and business case for the corridor.

NATIONAL INTEREST IN TRADE CORRIDORS

In the past few years there has been renewed national interest in strengthening trade corridors to support economic growth and improve the resiliency of our supply chains. While not directly connected to international trade routes, at the Island Rail Corridor could provide a longer-term opportunity to support transportation and trade on Vancouver Island, and economic development for communities and First Nations. The new Trade Diversification Corridor Fund could be explored to support corridor protection or re-use in the long term.

POTENTIAL RAIL CORRIDOR USE OPPORTUNITIES

A number of potential uses have been identified for the Island Rail Corridor. These ideas were explored through technical analysis and community and Working Group engagement throughout the study.

The symbols below indicate core benefits / aspects of each potential use concept.



People Movement

Enhancing mobility for residents and visitors along the corridor.



Goods Movement

Supporting efficient freight and supply chain connections.



Livability & Tourism

Contributing to local quality of life and visitor experience.



Community Resilience

Strengthening emergency access, redundancy, and long-term adaptability.

A summary of each idea is provided below, including advantages, challenges, next steps and recommendations. It is noted that some of these ideas could be intermixed with other uses, and/or cover a small segment of the study corridor.

The uses have been organized into near-term, and long-term opportunities.

Photo credit: Mike Bonkowski



NEAR-TERM OPPORTUNITIES

The opportunities are seen as being viable on the Island Rail Corridor within the ACRD in the near term.

They can be further explored and advanced by the Working Group, its members, and other partner organizations.



Tourist Train



Multi-Use
Pathway / Rail Trail



Rail Pedal Cart



TOURIST TRAIN

The Alberni Pacific Railway is an important service that currently operates seasonally on a small segment of the Island Rail Corridor within Port Alberni. The service showcases the community's heritage and provides tourist based economic development opportunities, as well as corridor preservation.

Opportunities for this service included extending it further, such as to McLean Mill (or potentially even further), and this would require track maintenance and potentially the upgrading of existing at-grade rail crossing within Port Alberni. There may also be opportunities to incorporate First Nations programming and partnerships as part of the train service and McLean Mill.

A hi-rail bus connection between downtown Port Alberni and McLean Mill could also be implemented to maintain people's movement along the corridor when required.

Advantages

- Builds on an existing, successful operation.
- Supports heritage preservation and tourism.
- Opportunity for First Nation leadership in creating authentic tourism experiences.
- Fully within the jurisdiction of the Working Group members.

Challenges

- Financial feasibility, including capital upgrade required - requires further assessment.
- Potential Right of Way and grade crossing considerations in Port Alberni.

Recommendation

- Working with WIIHS, further explore opportunities to expand and enhance the Port Alberni Railway and Tourist Train. This could include extensions, new service offerings, and new partnerships, such as with First Nation communities and Indigenous Tourism BC.



MULTI-USE PATHWAY / RAIL TRAIL



The corridor right of way is typically 100 ft, although it narrows considerably in some urban locations, including within Port Alberni. However, in many locations there is sufficient room on either side of the tracks to support additional transportation facilities, such as walking, cycling, and hiking pathways.

Rails to Trails is a popular method of re-purposing abandoned rail corridors to pathways, and can protect a corridor from other development, or even be the long term planned use of a corridor. For the Island Rail corridor within the ACRD, segments of pathway could be developed to support local walking and cycling, such as within the City of Port Alberni. Ideal segments would not include bridges, as significant upgrades would be required to provide pedestrian crossings adjacent to the bridges, so that they could remain available for tourist train operations.

Advantages

- It would provide a safe and comfortable place for people to walk and cycle and could support local tourism.
- Within the jurisdiction of the Working Group members.

Challenges

- Potential environmental remediation costs if corridor use changes.
- Potential liability considerations if official pathways are designated, which could be especially true for trestle bridges, or if pathways are implemented in tandem with any of the other improvement opportunities.

Recommendation

- Explore the potential for active transportation pathways with other stakeholders (First Nations, City of Port Alberni) and identify priority locations for further investigation / feasibility analysis.



Appendix C provides a summary of similar rail to trail conversions projects for reference.



RAIL PEDAL CART

Pedal rail carts (or rail bikes) are lightweight, human (and/or electric) powered vehicles that run on standard rail tracks, offering a unique tourism and recreation experience. This concept would likely be best operated over short, rural segments of the rail corridor, with a potential route being between McLean Mill and Cathedral Grove (a location which currently experiences high tourism demand but has limited transportation options and parking). Tours typically include a team of carts and a tour leader, and the carts can be turned around without specific infrastructure, enabling convenient there-and-back trips without rail loops or sidings at the ends of a route.



Advantages

- Low capital cost compared to freight or passenger rail.
- Promotes active, sustainable recreation and tourism.
- Opportunity for First Nations partnerships and cultural programming.
- Maintains corridor integrity and deters encroachment.

Challenges

- Requires track inspection and likely track upgrades.
- Liability and insurance considerations.
- Requires operating rules and seasonal scheduling.

Recommendation

- Explore the creation of a pilot pedal rail cart service, ideally in partnership with the Island Corridor Foundation and First Nations. This would include developing an initial business case and conducting feasibility and safety reviews.

LONG-TERM OPPORTUNITIES

The following opportunities are not expected to be viable in the near-term but have potential as long-term opportunities for the Island Rail Corridor, including portions beyond the ACRD. It is recommended that the Working Group, its members, and other partner organizations protect for these options in the long term.



Freight Rail



Passenger Rail



Emergency Hi-Rail Access



Autonomous Railcar Technology



FREIGHT RAIL

As the original and primary historic use, freight rail service could be re-instated over the corridor. The minimal viable extent of such a re-instated rail service would be between Port Alberni and tidewater, either at Wellcox Yard in Nanaimo, or potentially at a new location on the east side of Vancouver Island.⁴

With the forestry sector historically being the primary demand for freight rail transportation, the recent decline in the forestry industry means that there is likely not a major shipper or customer today that could support a freight rail service (and the capital and maintenance expenditures required to upgrade and maintain the line).

⁴ A potential location at Nanoose Bay (the former Jayem barge slip location) has been identified at a high level.

Advantages

- Up to 4x more energy efficient than trucking.
- Typically, a lower priced alternative to truck.
- Could remove trucks from highway, improving highway safety and wear and tear.
- Supports future industrial development.

Challenges

- Freight demand / volumes uncertain given recent mill curtailment / forest products market.
- Reconnection of the Victoria subdivision would be required to access Wellcox Yard in Nanaimo as the connection is severed through Snaw-Naw-As First Nation reserve lands. Alternatively, a new barge slip could be constructed north of this area to provide tidewater access.
- It would require the re-construction of four bridges around Cameron Lake with associated costs for track, tie and slope stabilization.

Recommendation

- With minimal existing freight demand, there are significant challenges in re-instating a contiguous route between Port Alberni and Nanaimo, and there is no near-term business case for freight rail.
- It is recommended that the rail corridor is protected so that it could potentially be used for freight rail in the future if current conditions change.



PASSENGER RAIL

Passenger rail service, which was discontinued to Port Alberni in 1957, could be re-instated to Nanaimo to support regional travel. It would also support community resiliency by serving as a bypass route to Highway 4, which is the only direction connection between the Alberni Valley and the east side of Vancouver Island.

The relatively short length of the route, quick driving time between Port Alberni and Nanaimo (just over 1 hour), and gaps in the rail corridor mean that passenger rail service would have lower demand and be prohibitively costly to re-instate and operate.

It is noted that there are a few examples of small passenger rail services in British Columbia, such as the Tsal'alh Seton Train, which provides a daily service on a short route (between Lillooet and Seton Portage in this case).

Advantages

- If sufficient demand exists, it can provide sustainable and cost-effective people movement.
- Provides alternative people movement route to Highway 4.
- Legacy Budd Car type service could be a cost-effective option.

Challenges

- Typically requires high population density to support regular scheduled service, similar to VIA intercity passenger rail across Canada.
- Most feasible for longer routes where driving is less attractive, or where rail is faster than driving.
- Reconnection of the Victoria subdivision would be required as the connection is severed through Snaw-Naw-As First Nation reserve lands.
- It would require the re-construction of four bridges around Cameron Lake with associated costs for track, tie and slope stabilization.

Recommendation

- Due to the short route and significant challenges in re-instating a contiguous route between Port Alberni and Nanaimo, there is no near-term business case for passenger rail.
- It is recommended that the rail corridor is protected so that it could potentially be used for passenger rail in the future if current conditions change.



EMERGENCY HI-RAIL ACCESS

With Highway 4 being the only major road connection between Port Alberni and the east side of Vancouver Island, there may be a long-term opportunity for the island corridor to support emergency access to the region. The simplest way to provide such a service would be through a Hi-rail vehicle, which is a truck or bus that can drive on both roadways and rail track, and could provide both emergency freight and people movement.



Advantages

- Could provide an alternate route in times of Highway 4 closure.
- Requires lower weight track rating than full freight or passenger rail service, and therefore likely lower capital costs to upgrade existing track to enable such a service.

Challenges

- Would require the re-construction of four bridges around Cameron Lake with associated costs for track, tie and slope stabilization.

Recommendation

- With the loss of the Cameron Lake trestles, the remaining segments of the rail corridor do not provide a useful bypass route to Highway 4.
- It is recommended that the rail corridor is protected so that it could potentially be used for emergency hi-rail access in the future if current conditions change.



AUTONOMOUS RAILCAR TECHNOLOGY

Autonomous railcar technology is an emerging innovation that could change how freight rail operates in the long term. These systems typically use smaller, self-propelled, battery-electric units that can operate individually or in coordinated groups without conventional locomotives, and often they can transfer seamlessly between roadway and tracks.

While these technologies are still in development, they offer potential benefits for the Island Rail Corridor by potentially reducing infrastructure requirements and improving operational flexibility. Examples of companies advancing this technology include Glid Technologies (developing dual-mode vehicles that operate on both road and rail), Intramotev Rail Technologies (producing autonomous,

zero-emission railcars for short-haul applications), and Parallel Systems (designing battery-electric railcars managed through centralized digital control systems).

Advantages

- Smaller, lighter vehicles could reduce the extent of infrastructure upgrades required.
- Dual mode (road / rail compatibility) reduces the need for support transload infrastructure at both trip ends.
- Autonomous operation could enable efficient, flexible freight service even at lower volumes.

Challenges

- Technology is still in early development and not yet proven in real-world conditions.
- Requires reliable digital control systems and regulatory approvals.
- Uncertain timelines for commercial availability and cost-effectiveness.

Recommendation

- It is recommended that the rail corridor be protected and that the ACRD monitor advancements in autonomous railcar technology. These options should be reconsidered once the technology is proven and commercially viable.

NEXT STEPS

The Island Rail Corridor was an important catalyst for the development of the Alberni Valley, and there is a new opportunity to re-imagine how this historical connection can support reconciliation, economic development, and the communities along it. In addition to the next steps identified for each use concept, the following next steps are recommended to further advance work on the Island Rail Corridor.

Photo credit: Benjamin Hazel



TOURIST TRAIN EXPANSION

Working with the WVIHS, explore opportunities to expand the Alberni Pacific Railway Tourist Train, both geographically (to McLean Mill), and seasonally, through the introduction of more services.

RAIL PEDAL CART

Explore the creation of a pilot rail cart service, ideally in partnership with the Alberni Pacific Railway and First Nations. Locations such as Cathedral Grove are major tourism draws today, but the limited available parking, and sensitive nature of this area, makes a Rail Pedal Cart a potential method of leveraging the corridor to support sustainable tourism.

RAIL TRAIL

Explore the potential for active transportation pathways with other stakeholders (First Nations, City of Port Alberni) and identify priority locations for further investigation / feasibility analysis.

CORRIDOR PROTECTION

Protecting an abandoned rail corridor is crucial because it preserves a rare, contiguous linear route that can be repurposed for future transportation needs. Developing new corridors is often prohibitively expensive and typically face significant challenges, including land acquisition, environmental approvals, and community opposition. Maintaining existing corridors ensures long-term flexibility for infrastructure projects and supports efficient regional connectivity.

Railbanking preserves rail corridors for future use while allowing interim public or utility uses. By maintaining the ROW in public ownership and protecting it from redevelopment, the corridor remains intact and available for reinstatement. This approach supports long-term planning flexibility, ensuring the corridor can accommodate future transportation needs or new rail technologies as they emerge.

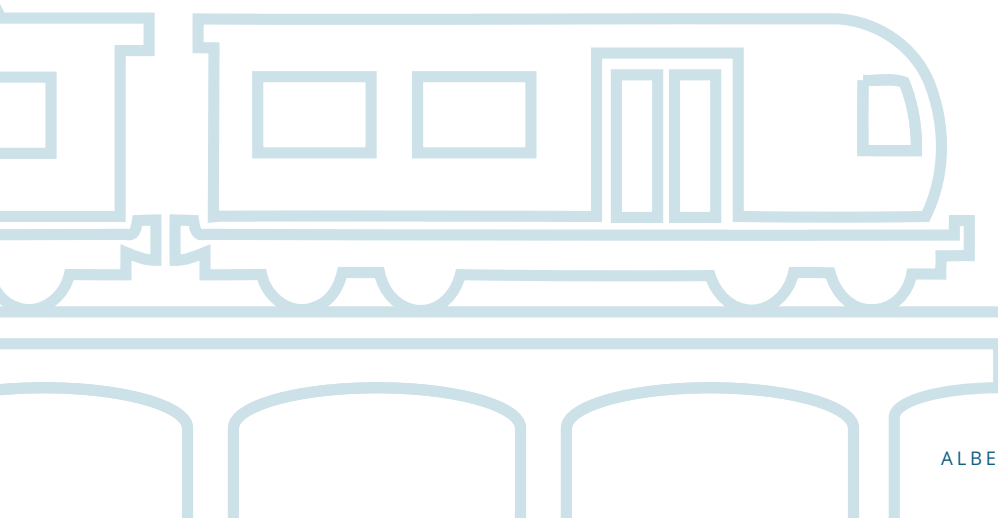




Photo credit: Benjamin Hazel

TRACK AND TRESTLE RE-HABILITATION COST ESTIMATE

To develop a better understanding of the costs required to expand the Alberni Pacific Railway or implement Rail Pedal Carts, more detailed inspection of the corridor is required, as well as a cost estimate to rehabilitate segments of the corridor needed to support these services. It is recommended that this work follow the needs of the specific use option that is being assessed, so that the geographic extents, and level of upgrade required (as well as cost estimate) is consistent with the desired use, track / corridor requirements, and location.

SNAW-NAW-AS CONNECTION

There is currently a gap in the Island Rail Corridor between Port Alberni and Nanaimo due to reversion of the ~1.2 mile long section within the Snaw-Naw-As First Nation. With Nanaimo being the northern activity hub on Vancouver Island, any future passenger or freight rail service from Port Alberni likely requires a connection to Nanaimo. Therefore, a future task includes engaging with Snaw-Naw-As First Nation, and others, to identify potential alternate connections around or through their lands to enable corridor-wide uses in the long-term.



ALBERNI-CLAYOQUOT
REGIONAL DISTRICT

