

## **Howe Sound Trail – Biosphere Forum Report [DRAFT 240419]**

Hello Howe Sound Trail Supporters; following is a summary of the Apr 12 Howe Sound Biosphere Forum conversations regarding a Howe Sound multi-purpose trail. The Forum was attended by the Biosphere Executive and elected representatives of the Squamish Nation and all the municipalities of the Howe Sound watershed, together with serving MLAs and the MP for Sea-to-Sky and Sunshine Coast, Patrick Weiler, as well as numerous staff and observers representing various stakeholders.

BC Minister of Tourism, Arts and Culture, Lana Popham (a self-described cycling enthusiast) addressed the Forum to present her ideas and seek feedback on the concept of a long-distance (100km+) multi-use trail between Vancouver and Pemberton (and perhaps beyond) for hikers and cyclists, including international visitors. Such a trail could form part of a province-wide network including the Okanagan Trails and the Island Spine Trail (Lochside, Galloping Goose and E&N Trails). She emphasized the role her Department could play in coordinating the various Provincial Ministries and local jurisdictions concerned, and her Ministry's potential ability to mobilize Provincial resources in support of a suitable project.

The Minister requested feedback as to the objectives such a project could meet and the facilities it would need in the Howe Sound context. She set a goal of compiling options and issues for discussion in July 2024. The participants separated into several round table groups to consider the proposal options and raise questions.

The Minister's proposal was generally well received by the meeting participants, both as a low carbon tourism initiative and for its economic benefits. It was reported that 50% of visitors to Whistler stay just one night but mountain biking enthusiasts averaged six nights. Several speakers however expressed concern at visitor growth and overuse impacts on indigenous and natural assets, and suggested management of intrusive behaviours. Responsible usage and respect for sacred spaces would be essential (a Tourism Code?).

It was unclear as to responsibility for the trail; would it be a designated public highway? The Tsawwassen First Nation's Great Blue Heron Trail initiative aiming to connect the Salish Sea and Fraser River communities was mentioned as a possible component of the proposed trail, which would double its length. Questions were raised as to trail accessibility and usage. Would such a trail be useful to residents for local commuting and utility purposes? Would ATVs and horses be permitted, as in the Bowen Island case?

The possible trail routes and their likely costs and possible public and private funding sources were discussed. Noting the costs entailed in establishing not only the trail but also food and accommodation facilities including possible camp sites, and future maintenance of the facilities, it was suggested that building trail infrastructure in stages would be a more feasible approach, but some opposition to a fragmented trail was raised, noting the still incomplete Spirit Trail after many years.

There was discussion of the feasibility of using or paralleling the CN Rail Right of Way (RoW) as a route. A speaker stated that widening of the Rail RoW was not feasible, and a question of trail accessibility at intermediate points along the RoW was raised. Several speakers noted the challenges in negotiating with Crown Corporations such as CN Rail. MP Weiler opined that an approach to CN Rail, which leases the RoW from the Province, would be a Federal-level intervention. The Mayor of Squamish Municipality, Armand Hurford, drew the Minister's attention to the advanced work already in place for a trail between Pemberton and Squamish, and the planning ongoing for a link between Squamish and Lions Bay. Between Squamish and Lions Bay it appears some widening of the Sea to Sky highway may be necessary

to accommodate a protected trail. This trail route would not impinge on the CN Rail RoW, the operation of which Squamish Municipality hope to see revived as an element of its future economic growth prospects in conjunction with expected population growth. In any event, improvement of regional transit along the Sea-to-Sky corridor would be a top priority.

It was suggested that a follow up seminar be arranged to further explore the possibilities and issues, and that international experience should be sought to help resolve the many issues raised. It was noted that several provinces, notably Quebec and Ontario have extensive long-distance trail networks, not to mention the 28,000km Trans-Canada Trail stewarded in BC by Trails BC. Due to time constraints an action plan to meet the Minister's proposed timetable could not be formulated before the close of the Forum. The next steps remain to be decided.

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