

## **Backgrounder – Reconciliation Corridor Initiative**

### **The Island Corridor:**

The Island Corridor is a 289km rail corridor that runs from Victoria to Courtenay and from Parksville to Port Alberni on Vancouver Island. Much of the line has not hosted rail traffic since 2015, although a short line freight service operates in the Nanaimo area today and basic maintenance and clearing is ongoing.

The Corridor was built by private interests between 1886 and 1914 under the name Esquimalt and Nanaimo Railway (E&N). The project was made possible with federal funding and a federal-provincial land grant, mandated by the Act of Union by which BC entered Confederation. The land grant alienated almost 2 million acres of unceded First Nations traditional territories, including some sections of the Corridor that were taken out of existing First Nations reserve lands. Recently, there have been court decisions upholding the Nation's rights based on the original Crown grants of reserve land.

As the historic spine of Vancouver Island's settlement patterns from colonial to modern times, the Corridor runs within a few kilometres of 70% of the Island's population and is a land base for critical infrastructure such as water, sewer, gas, fibre optic and electricity.

The Island Corridor Foundation (ICF) now holds the Corridor lands and assets in common on behalf of its members: 14 First Nations and 5 Regional Districts. The ICF is a non-profit and a federal registered charity.

### **The Shared Vision project:**

In March 2023, and in response to the 2021 Snaw-Naw-As court case decision in the BC Court of Appeal, the Federal and Provincial governments made public statements outlining the strategic importance of the rail Corridor for the province.

At the same time, the Province [provided \\$18million in funding](#) to bring parties together to develop a "shared vision" for the Corridor within a reconciliation-based approach. The goal was to determine the best use for the Island rail corridor while supporting First Nations' rights, jurisdiction and interests in the discussions. A [joint federal-provincial statement](#) noted that "a partnership-driven approach represents the best way for moving forward together and achieving a collective vision for the corridor that benefits everyone."

Shared Vision funding was distributed to all of ICF's members – the 14 First Nations and 5 Regional Districts along the Corridor. Regional Districts have provided portions of their funds to the ICF to support the coordination of the shared vision process. That funding has been made available until March 31, 2026, and supported the work of this Initiative.

Major Shared Vision events coordinated so far have included All Nations Dialogue sessions and an All Parties' Meeting in June 2025. Several of the funding recipients are also conducting independent studies into their own priorities for future use of the Corridor and regional collaborations and consultations. Many of the ideas and opportunities identified so far have been local in nature. In the CRD, the parties specifically determined that the best approach would be to focus on just our region, to address the very distinct needs and objectives of this area of the Island.

## Corridor Studies

The Corridor has been extensively studied throughout the years. Some of the highlights:

- The [2010 IBI Technical Report: Commuter Rail Analysis](#) noted that potential ridership on the Corridor would be highly influenced by considerations such as travel time, connections and frequency. The report concluded that higher population and greater density would better support commuter rail.
- The [2011 Victoria Regional Transit Future Plan](#) supported the preservation of the E&N corridor for transportation purposes, acknowledging that it is one of few transportation corridors directly connecting the West Shore, DND and Downtown. The Corridor was seen as well suited to commuter (peak) travel, particularly to support travel to and from CFB Esquimalt as a major employer in the region. The report found commuter service was not yet justified based on 2010 density and travel patterns.
- A [WSP 2020 condition assessment report](#) noted Island Corridor bridges were in Good condition and crossings were in Fair condition, with Fair to Poor condition for ties, rail, ballast and shoulder in the CRD.
- The report also noted that projected ridership would increase with track speed and train frequency. Basing ridership projections only on the immediate catchment area around stations, WSP suggested that demand for commuter rail would have a limit without transit-oriented development along the Corridor.

The technical feasibility study the Reconciliation Corridor Initiative partners are initiating is different from previous studies in a few critical ways.

- One of the more recent changes to the policy environment has been the adoption of federal and provincial policies (including UNDRIP) that require reconciliation with First Nations on major projects.
- In this context, the Reconciliation Corridor Initiative makes the promise of the Shared Vision conversation real, with parties working together to address the transportation issues of the region with First Nations leadership and within a framework of reconciliation and mutual benefit. Previous analyses of the Corridor have never taken this approach. The partnership between First Nations and local governments in addressing regional transportation issues and exploring the Corridor's future is entirely new.

- The ridership context has changed since the 2010 IBI report. Between 2011 and 2024, the population of Colwood and Langford increased by 72%. Travel time by private vehicle between Westhills and CFB Esquimalt can now take an hour during peak times, with the same or longer time needed to travel between Westhills and Douglas at Johnston. (*Source: Province of BC Population Statistics; Google Maps travel estimates*)
- Previous reports agreed that ridership would be affected by the size of the catchment area around future stations. Given a new emphasis provincially and federally on transit-oriented development, as well as multiple policies to support affordable housing close to transit, the Reconciliation Corridor Initiative will assess the potential for transit-oriented development along the Corridor during the technical analysis of the feasibility and relevance of the Corridor.
- The WSP 2020 condition assessment report assumed a “heavy rail” use, including freight. The Reconciliation Corridor Initiative is not focussed on heavy rail or full-speed freight, both of which can increase costs, and is instead likely to focus on some version of lighter rail for passenger use, depending on where the evidence leads.
- The technical feasibility study will provide due diligence on the emerging vision being discussed at the shared vision table in the CRD, providing future decision makers with information for their plans for the Corridor based on the principles of reconciliation and mutual benefit.

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