

**DATE:** December 14, 2021**FILE:** 8500-01**TO:** Chair and Directors  
Regional District Board**FROM:** Russell Dyson  
Chief Administrative OfficerSupported by Russell Dyson  
Chief Administrative Officer*R. Dyson***RE: Inter-regional Transit**

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**Purpose**

The purpose of this report is to update the Comox Valley Regional District (CVRD) Board on the concept of inter-regional public transit.

**Recommendation from the Chief Administrative Officer:**

THAT an inter-regional connection with Nanaimo be considered as part of the upcoming Comox Valley Transit Future Action Plan;

AND FURTHER THAT the Comox Valley Regional District Board send a letter to the Minister of Transportation and Infrastructure, with copies sent to all Vancouver Island regional districts and BC Transit, supporting the development of a Vancouver Island Transportation Plan and provincial intercity ground transportation plan, to be led by the province.

**Executive Summary**

At their July 27, 2021 meeting, the CVRD Board passed a resolution directing staff to initiate discussion with the Regional District of Nanaimo (RDN), the Strathcona Regional District (SRD) and BC Transit (BCT) regarding connecting the three bus systems. As the CVRD and SRD are already connected by transit (at the Oyster River), staff have focused their discussions on RDN and BC Transit (BCT).

- While the Comox Valley Regional Transit system connects with the Strathcona region, it does not connect with the Nanaimo region.
- To initiate service planning towards establishing this connection, the CVRD and RDN boards would need to formally identify this as a service priority to BC Transit.
- Other relevant initiatives are ongoing such as the development of a possible Vancouver Island Transportation Plan and the provincial inter-city ground transportation plan.
- These provincial initiatives may identify alternative cost sharing arrangements which could see a higher proportion of funding coming from senior levels of government.

The concept of inter-regional transit service with Nanaimo will be considered in the transit future action plan which is commencing in January. This approach will help the board understand the community interest and implications of this service.

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Concurrence:

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**Government Partners and Stakeholder Distribution (Upon Agenda Publication)**

TMAC	✓
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**Background/Current Situation**

In 2019, meetings and discussions took place, led by RDN and involving the island regional districts, BCT and the Ministry of Transportation and Infrastructure (MOTI) to look at development of a Vancouver Island Transportation Plan. This initiative was subsequently brought to Union of BC Municipalities and the Association of Vancouver Island and Coastal Communities. The latter has agreed to work with RDN to develop a terms of reference and framework for a committee to work with MOTI to prepare a Vancouver Island Transportation Plan. The ongoing pandemic has delayed this initiative but RDN have had recent meetings with MOTI to discuss this further and will be considering it for their 2022 work plan.

A Vancouver Island Transportation Plan would include a focus on inter-regional ground transportation and consideration of improved opportunities to travel on the island without a private automobile. Currently there is public transit systems operated by BCT in many island communities, however the connectivity of these systems is limited. The Cowichan Valley connects to the Capital Region and the Comox Valley connects to the Strathcona region. RDN and Cowichan Valley Regional District are working to connect their systems in 2022. This was the only connection that was identified as having sufficient ridership potential as part of a Vancouver Island market research study conducted by SNC Lavalin in 2015.

There are also private bus operators, such as Wilsons Transportation (includes Vancouver Island Connector and Tofino Bus) and IslandLink Bus Services operating regular scheduled trips from Campbell River to Victoria and across to Tofino. During the pandemic the viability of privately operated inter-regional bus transportation has been identified as a concern with reduced ridership and revenue threatening operators across the province. In April 2021 the province provided \$6.2 million to a number of private inter-city bus operators across the province, including on the island, to help them continue operation until March 2022.

It should also be noted that according to a recent report by the Auditor General, the province, through MOTI, had been working on an intercity ground transportation plan for northern BC, but has now expanded the scope to the entire province. Further information on this plan has been sought by staff.

At their July 27, 2021 meeting, the CVRD Board passed a resolution directing staff to initiate discussion with the RDN, SRD and BCT regarding connecting the three bus systems. As the CVRD and SRD are already connected by transit (at the Oyster River), staff have focused their discussions on RDN and BCT.

Results of these discussions indicate an interest by RDN and BCT to explore a connection. Under the current framework with BCT this could be accomplished by each regional district formally identifying the connection as a priority service improvement (e.g. in our transit future plan update) which would trigger further analysis and planning led by BC Transit to identify demand,

routing/scheduling options and other logistics of operating an inter-regional transit. Subsequently an agreement would need to be developed between all parties and the additional service hours/costs would need to be approved as part of the annual Transit Improvement Program (TIP) process.

An approximate timeline for implementation of a connection to RDN could be as follows:

- Identify service priority through Transit Future Action Plan - 2022
- BCT led planning/analysis - 2023
- Formalized agreements and TIPS – 2024
- Implementation of new service – 2025+

At this point the concept of a public transit connection between CVRD and RDN will be included in the Transit Future Action Plan. This will help the board understand the community interest and implications of this service. Staff will continue to monitor progress of larger initiatives such as a possible Vancouver Island Transportation Plan and the provincial inter-city ground transportation plan.

### Options

The board has the following options:

1. Review the concept of inter-regional transit connections to RDN as part of the transit future action plan to be led by BC Transit.
2. Identify this inter-regional connection as a board priority outside of the transit future action plan and request BCT to initiate service planning and related actions required to establish this service.

The transit future action plan is identified on the board's Strategic Plan and will be commencing in January 2022 with a targeted completion in June. Utilizing this established process, which includes public consultation, is the recommended method of considering transit service priorities and as such, Option 1 is recommended at this time.

### Financial Factors

The transit future action plan, and subsequent detailed service planning, are required to identify possible costs of an inter-regional transit connection to RDN. The local government cost sharing of this would be included as part of the TIP process for CVRD Board approval and also in an agreement with RDN. The conventional cost sharing arrangement with BCT includes the province contributing 46.69 per cent with 53.31 per cent coming from local government. It should be noted that there are inter-regional public transit services established by BCT elsewhere in the province that receive higher levels of provincial funding (e.g. health connections, BC Bus North). Should a higher proportion of provincial funding be sought, other work would be required to advocate for this, possibly as part of a Vancouver Island Transportation Plan or provincial intercity ground transportation plan.

### Strategic Considerations: Strategic Drivers and Regional Growth Strategy

CVRD Board Strategic Drivers:						
Fiscal Responsibility		Climate Crisis and Environmental Stewardship and Protection	✓	Community Partnerships		Indigenous Relations

The provision of an affordable and effective public transit connection to RDN may make it more feasible for residents to reduce their dependence on the private automobile. On-road transportation is the community's largest source of greenhouse gas emission.

CVRD Regional Growth Strategy Goals:							
Housing		Ecosystems, Natural Areas and Parks	✓	Local economic development		Transportation	✓
Infrastructure		Food Systems	✓	Public Health & Safety		Climate Change	✓

As mentioned above, reducing dependence on private automobiles is an important part of taking action on climate change. This in turn mitigates the impact on ecosystems and food systems which are being impacted by such things as increased severity of storms in winter and droughts in summer.

### **Intergovernmental Factors**

Inter-regional transit has been reviewed at the transit management advisory committee and it was agreed that the transit future action plan was the best way to consider this service further.

This issue is being considered at the provincial level, and by other regional districts, as part of a possible Vancouver Island Transportation Plan and inter-city ground transportation plan.

### **Citizen/Public Relations**

The demand for this connection is uncertain with staff receiving very few requests for it. The transit future action plan will include public engagement and will help explore public interest and service priorities further.