

Editorial: A new idea for mass transit

An innovative proposal for commuter service on the E&N line is a good test to determine if there's any hope that the rail line will ever be used again. BYD Canada has suggested using electric buses on the 15-kilometre line between Langford and Victoria. It's a concept at this point, but the company says the right-of-way could be adapted to handle commuter buses, without ripping up the rails and at a lower cost than restoring train service.

BYD deserves to be taken seriously. It's Chinese-based, and sells more electric vehicles than Tesla globally. U.S. investment sage Warren Buffett owns 10 per cent of the company, which has sold electric buses to transit systems around the world and in September opened a monorail transit system in northwestern China.

As many as 10 electric buses could operate on the right-of-way, offering a fast commute and easing congestion, the company says.

The idea is worth serious exploration. It has been more than six years since a train travelled those tracks, with no reasonable hope of restored service — even the inadequate daily Dayliner run.

It's far too early to say if the idea makes sense, though it has many appealing aspects. (Not least the opportunity to strike a good deal with BYD, which is keen to expand its presence in Canada.)

But it offers a real test to determine if this region is capable of making any informed long-term decisions about transportation.

We have shown a tremendous ability to talk about potential solutions, from bus lanes to light rail on the E&N to private service. If words could move people, we would have North America's best transportation system.

But we are hopeless at getting things done. It's been almost a year since

developer Ken Mariash announced a proposal to create a commuter rail service, which he hoped would be operating by the end of 2017.

Unsurprisingly, the trains aren't running, and no real progress has been made. The process of engaging all the affected municipalities, the Capital Regional District, B.C. Transit and the province — and getting agreement on funding and ongoing subsidies — almost guarantees death by exhaustion for any proposal. That's not even factoring in the need to win support from the Island Corridor Foundation and its member municipalities and First Nations.

BYD's concept faces the same challenges.

The solution is clear — the region needs an adequately funded transportation authority, like Greater Vancouver's TransLink, to plan and manage roads and transit. And the only way that will happen is with provincial government leadership.

The alternative is more years of inaction and missed opportunities, and more of the traffic congestion that increasingly undermines our quality of life and harms the region's economy.