

Editorial: Sooke Road proves need for regional transportation authority

Nicole Navarrete is right. The winding road between Sooke and Victoria is dangerous. In an average week, at least one crash results in injuries or death.

Like the one that claimed Navarrete's 17-year-old son Carter last year, prompting her to launch a campaign for safety improvements.

The problems are easy to understand. Highway 14 was opened in 1953, when about 2,500 people lived in Sooke. It wasn't extended to Port Renfrew until 1975.

The population has steadily increased since then, with more than 13,000 people in Sooke today, and even more living along the corridor. The daily commute to Victoria or Langford is a reality for thousands of drivers.

Despite improvements, the highway has not been updated to keep pace with traffic volumes. Faded lines make staying in a lane challenging; tight curves, narrow shoulders, steep embankments and driveways lining the highway add to danger.

So do drivers, as Navarrete acknowledges. She is suing those responsible for road safety in connection with her son's death, and also the young driver her son was riding with, alleging he was speeding that night.

That is, of course, one way to increase safety: Ensure police have the resources to enforce speed limits and other driving laws.

But that does not address the fundamental questions about the road's design and maintenance. ICBC statistics identify 1,275 crashes on Highway 14 between Veterans Memorial Parkway in Colwood and the entrance to

Sooke from 2006 to the end of 2015. Of those, 575 resulted in injury or fatality.

That's 128 crashes a year — 20 per cent more than the most dangerous intersection in the region at McKenzie Avenue and the Trans-Canada, currently being upgraded with an \$85-million overpass.

And each crash can result in a closure of the only road route for thousands of people. Premier John Horgan has said the highway's problems are a "high priority."

But why is it a high priority? Why are improvements to the road to Sooke more important than fixes to the Malahat or better bus service or the many other projects on the region's wish list?

Nicole Navarrete's greatest contribution could be making governments answer those questions, and produce a clear, fact-based, multi-year plan for improving transportation in the region.

There is, today, no list of priority projects for this region of 370,000 people. The provincial government's recent notes say a "high level of co-ordination at the regional level is required to advance many of the required regional transportation initiatives," then adds that does not exist. "Local governments, the CRD and the province co-ordinate with each other on an ad-hoc basis."

Which helps explain how \$24 million was spent on the McTavish interchange near Victoria's airport, with no obvious justification. And why a provincial government study of Highway 14, announced in May 2016 and promised for this spring, is still not complete 16 months later.

These are hard decisions, balancing safety and moving people efficiently to reduce time-wasting and polluting congestion.

Which makes it all the more important that they are made transparently and

with a clear set of criteria, balancing all the needs — and co-ordinated by a regional transportation authority.