

October 30, 2023

**RE: Letter of Support for *Connect the Coast* - All Ages and Abilities Active Travel Corridor for the Sunshine Coast**

To whom it may concern,

As Vancouver Coastal Health's Medical Health Officer for Coastal Rural (an area that includes the Sunshine Coast), I write to express my unwavering support for the proposed "Connect the Coast" active travel initiative. Vancouver Coastal Health is a regional health authority providing health programs and services to 1.25 million residents of southwestern British Columbia, including First Nations, Métis and Inuit peoples living in the region. My office works in collaboration with health and community partners to address various factors that impact the health of the population. This includes supporting programs and initiatives that foster and enhance access to health promoting amenities and infrastructure, reduce inequities, and enhance quality of life for residents living with the area.

*Connect the Coast* aims to connect the diverse communities within the Sunshine Coast by establishing vital cycling and pedestrian infrastructure. This All Ages and Abilities (AAA) initiative is being spearheaded by Transportation Choices Sunshine Coast (TraC), and holds remarkable potential to bring notable benefits that will enhance the health and well-being of our coastal region's residents and visitors.

The Sunshine Coast is renowned for its natural assets, vibrant communities, and recreational opportunities. However, similar to other rural communities, access to safe, active transportation routes remains limited. Transportation networks and infrastructure are a critical component in the development of healthy communities. They offer safe, affordable, accessible transportation to all ages and abilities, and enable prioritization of sustainable, active transportation options. Existing cycle and pedestrian routes on the proposed *Connect the Coast* multi-use path are not well connected, resulting in a patchwork of isolated pathways and trails. Highway 101 is the main travel route between communities for vehicles, cyclists and pedestrians, yet there are very few safe highway crossings, and busy roadways are shared with heavy industry vehicles, causing very unsafe conditions for active modes of travel.

From 2018-2022 there were over 40 crashes documented between vehicles and pedestrians or cyclists between Gibsons and Sechelt (ICBC, 2023a; ICBC, 2023b). In addition, the latest census data for these two largest communities on the coast indicate that the majority of commuter trips are under 15 minutes in length, yet over 70% of commuters travel by vehicle each day (Townfolio, 2022a; Townfolio, 2022b). Given the safety issues facing cyclists and pedestrians, this reliance on motorized vehicles for short distance travel is not surprising, but has negative impacts on the health of the population, on the surrounding environment, and the connectivity of the region as a whole.

The *Connect the Coast* initiative will play an important role in addressing these issues and contributing to healthier Sunshine Coast communities by providing a much-needed corridor for active travel (including walking and cycling), which has tremendous benefits for the health of the public including:

- **Promoting physical activity:** Encouraging people to engage in regular physical activity is one of the most effective ways to combat chronic diseases such as heart disease, diabetes and obesity, and to support independent mobility for children and seniors (WHO, 2022). The corridor will provide residents and visitors with a safe and accessible route for walking and cycling, facilitating increased physical activity, and supporting chronic disease prevention and better overall health.
- **Improved mental well-being:** Access to natural environments and active transportation can have a positive impact on mental health. The corridor will allow the population to connect with nature and enjoy stress-reducing outdoor activities, contributing to reduced anxiety and depression, and improved mental well-being (WHO, 2022).
- **Air Quality and other environmental benefits:** The Sunshine Coast remains highly vulnerable to climate change effects, including extreme heat, drought and wildfire smoke. By encouraging active transportation, we can reduce the number of motorized vehicles on the road, leading to improved air quality and reduced greenhouse gas emissions. Cleaner air has a direct impact on respiratory health and reduces the risk of respiratory diseases, and reducing emissions supports climate change mitigation priorities (Infrastructure Canada, 2021).
- **Community cohesion:** Active travel corridors foster a sense of community by bringing people together and creating opportunities for social interaction. This strengthens social bonds and supports mental health, especially for those most in need of social connection - including seniors and youth (Infrastructure Canada, 2021).
- **Road safety:** Establishing dedicated and connected AAA infrastructure for active travel enhances safety for pedestrians and cyclists, reducing the risk of accidents and injuries on our roads.

TraC is a highly credible community organization, with a proven track record of effective collaboration and partnerships. They have continued to demonstrate this through engagement and consultation with community and local and provincial governments throughout the initial planning phases of the *Connect the Coast* initiative. I strongly recommend investment in and support for this initiative which provides a timely opportunity to impact population health outcomes, and to make progress towards a more vibrant and sustainable future for our region.

Sincerely,



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Medical Health Officer

Vancouver Coastal Health

## References

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