

Beleaguered E&N still alive

Many options for the route, according to Via's Hagen

There's hope for the E&N Railway, whether the Supreme Court of Canada decides the federal government has a constitutional mandate to preserve it or not, says Via Rail director Stan Hagen, of Courtenay.

"There are any number of options," Hagen said.

If Via Rail is allowed to pull out of the operation, private contractors may want to pick it up, he said.

"I've always felt there were great ideas and people on Vancouver Island," he said.

The federal government is appealing a Supreme Court of B.C. decision which said maintaining the railway was a proviso of the province's coming in to Confederation.

If Via Rail continues to operate the service, Hagen said the company may want to look at getting new units to replace the aging Budd cars now making the daily trek up and down Island.

Repairing the Budd cars is becoming more difficult as parts become increasingly scarce, Hagen said.

Meanwhile, Via Rail is looking for ways to increase ridership, he said.

Innovations like the altered ski train schedule have proved very successful,

he said.

Ridership has doubled over last winter, despite a slow start to the ski season and some well-publicized train accidents.

Norm McLaren, economic development officer for the Comox Valley, said there were a number of other ways to get ridership up during the rest of the year as well.

Preparing tourism packages focussed around nature tours, golfing and shopping could also boost ridership, McLaren said.

The railway could also prove a gateway to and from the Commonwealth Games in Victoria this summer, he said.

McLaren says the object is to get people going both up and down on the railway.

"We're not just interested in one-way traffic," he said.

Joe Volk, Via Rail's director of marketing, said the railway is already working on various projects.

A 40 per cent discount is offered to people who book tickets seven days in advance.

Via has also arranged an exchange with a few radio stations on the Island where promotional train tickets are given away in return for advertising.