

Via Rail won't go without a fight

by Sharon Carmichael

We will fight any attempt to shut down or reduce the rail service between Courtenay and Victoria, says local Economic Development Commissioner Walt Lengerke.

"This is a game railroads play," he told the Record. "They cut the service back to a minimum, people complain and stop using the service, and then the railway has every reason to eliminate the service."

Lengerke was responding to a report that the federal government may eliminate Via Rail's federally-financed rail passenger service.

Via currently receives a \$600-million annual federal subsidy and a 'Toronto Globe

and Mail' report says the government's spending committee has asked for an estimate of the cost of ending passenger service.

"We should keep and maintain the infrastructure," said Lengerke, adding that private enterprise could take over the railway. "We've got enough retired railroaders and people interested in the railway on the Island to operate the service."

According to Lengerke, a good transportation network is critical to the Comox Valley making the most of its economic opportunities.

Dupont Canada was interested in opening a small operation in the Comox Valley



Walt Lengerke

but, decided against it because there was no guaranteed train service, said the economic development officer.

"The attitude of the railway leaves something to be desired," Lengerke noted.

Meanwhile, Comox Mayor George Piercy says the E&N received a huge land grant from the Crown when it took over the railway in the lower third of the Island. One condition of the deal was that the company keep the railroad going in perpetuity.

"My own feeling is that the commitment made to keep the railroad going should be honored," said Piercy.

Former Victoria alderman John Cooper, who has been at the forefront of the battle for

better rail service on Vancouver Island for years, says Premier Vander Zalm should insist that the federal government and CP Rail honor a century-old agreement to provide passenger rail service in the province.

Cooper said Via Rail should be brought into the 20th century before it ends. He compared the rolling stock to 1949 buses and DC-3 aircraft.

Minister of State Terry Huberts agrees that the rail service should be maintained.

Ending the E&N service "would have a very negative impact" on tourism, he said, and Island residents have stated they want the E&N expanded, not cut back.

Record March 31/89.