

La Route verte: A Cycling Challenge, A Planning Challenge

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1.0 Historic background

La Route verte was inaugurated by Vélo Québec in 1995 and its development has been a collaborative effort of the Quebec Ministry of Transport, several government agencies and numerous local and regional partners. The idea for an extensive Quebec bicycle network to encourage tourism dates back to the late 1980s when Vélo Québec proposed several strategies for creating a province-wide bicycle network. Vélo Québec, a cycling association founded in 1967, used the 1992 Vélo Mondiale conference to announce its vision of a Quebec bicycle network inspired, in part, by the classic bike routes in Europe and the United States.

In June 1995, several days after the Quebec Ministry of Transport adopted a bicycle policy, La Route verte was officially launched. It was agreed that \$88.5 million would be invested over 10 years to build the 4,000-km bicycle route. At the same time, the government gave Vélo Québec the mandate to manage the project.

2.0 Progress report

Inspired by the world's major cycling routes, La Route verte was originally designed to link and unify most of the existing cycling facilities in Quebec.

In its sixth year of development, all the regional plans have been drawn up and submitted for final approval to the government committee overseeing the project. Most of these plans have been already integrated into regional and municipal planning processes. Some studies are still needed to investigate alternate routes, solve safety problems and minimize the cost of facilities.



Figure 1 : Official Sign of La Route verte, photo by Mathieu Lamarre

In the year 2000, La Route verte has made the following progress.

- When completed, it should boast a total of 4,149 kilometres of linked bike routes:
- 1,146 kilometres have already been marked with the official sign;
- Another 859 kilometres are being used;
- 1,572 kilometres are under development;
- An additional 572 kilometres are projected (financing to be determined).

Once the entire route is completed, it will link 16 different regions and more than 300 municipalities, reaching a population of 4 million people.

A special Ministry of Transport financing program was created in 1999. The government earmarked \$18 million over five years to provide 25% in matching funds to supplement local and regional funding for the construction of La Route verte. At the present time, an investment of \$75.5 million is required to complete the Route.

3.0 A partnership between a cycling organization and the government

One of the novel aspects of La Route verte's evolution since 1995 is the fact that although the project received the green light from the Premier of Quebec and his Cabinet, it was also decreed that it be developed outside the government. The Ministry of Transport, which oversees the planning and development of network segments on roads under its jurisdiction, acts as a link between on-site activities developed by the project manager (Vélo Québec) and government activities like funding or regional development. At the government level, the Ministry of Transport also co-ordinates the other government agencies and departments that sit on La Route verte inter-departmental committee and have some connection with its planning, construction or development: Tourism, Municipal Affairs, Recreation, Employment, Culture, Regions, Youth. For the past five years, Vélo Québec has had an annual contract with the Ministry of Transport. Renewed each year, this contract is based on an action plan submitted at the beginning of the year by Vélo Québec to the Ministry of Transport and the government committee overseeing the project. This annual action plan includes various activities related to regional development, technical assistance and communications.

4.0 The challenges

Five years into its development, La Route verte has retained its initial momentum. Indeed, its fame and profile have increased, despite the relatively modest resources assigned to communications. The co-operative mechanism between the Ministry of Transport, the government as a whole and the project manager has proved effective. In less popular tourism regions, La Route verte is creating high expectations. However, as with any successful project of this size, challenges remain:

- How do we develop a province-wide bicycle network across regions that do not always share the same attitudes towards cycling?
- How do we preserve the original concept and number of kilometres and still finish the project within ten years?
- How do we work together and still respect local and regional identities?
- How do we implement a financing formula for infrastructure maintenance?

4.1 Developing a long-distance bike route over a vast area

Without going into too much geographical detail, it is important to note that Quebec is Canada's second most populous province. And yet, in an area five times the size of France, Quebec has a population of only 7 million. The most densely populated region follows the St. Lawrence River between the province of Ontario, to the west, and Quebec City, to the east. Halfway along this corridor, metropolitan Montreal is home to nearly 50% of the entire population of Quebec. In light of these facts and the distances required to cover the entire province, one can easily understand why, for purely technical and economic reasons, La Route verte must sometimes use the road network. The Route takes many different forms, depending on a region's distinctive features and potential:

- existing public utilities (e.g.: abandoned rail corridors, old towpaths, hydro-electric corridors, etc.);
- existing roads with a paved shoulder;
- clearly marked country roads with light traffic.

The road sections of the Route (designated shared roads or the paved shoulder of regional roads) provide some of the links between cities and towns and connect outlying regions to the main bike network. The longest road sections are on the road network managed by the Ministry of Transport. These roads are being improved not only to encourage cycling tours but also as part of a general policy adopted by the Ministry of Transport in 1995 to improve regional road safety by paving the shoulder.

4.2 Stick to the concept: a key issue

While garbage may inspire a "Not in my backyard" attitude, La Route verte is so popular it elicits the reaction, "We want it. . . at our front door!" This is why, from the very beginning, we have stuck firmly to the original concept and stressed the importance of constructing the network within a pre-set time frame. The preliminary framework used to calculate the project's initial costs and economic benefits has changed very little since 1995. This approach, wholeheartedly endorsed by the Ministry of Transport and the provincial government, has proved effective to date. It maintains the project's focus and value and abandoning it would mean conceding that the original network would only be built in the very long term, or perhaps even never. Such a concession would also be the end of any orchestrated plan to create a Quebec-wide bike route.

4.3 A national bike route that respects local identity

When La Route verte was launched in June 1995, Quebec had just under 400 kilometres of regional bike trails that could become part of a province-wide network. Local and municipal bike paths accounted for another thousand kilometres or so. The aim of La Route verte was to use existing trails to create a network criss-crossing the province, and encourage cities, towns and regions to take part. It was therefore necessary to involve the various regions in the planning. This was accomplished by creating regional La Route verte committees and signing agreements to provide technical support and start-up funds for these committees. The planning stage is completed and, in addition to pinpointing the exact route for La Route verte in each region, it often helped regional promoters begin planning local routes. For this reason, the various communication tools produced (diagrams, maps, guidebooks, videos, etc.) identify the regional segments of La Route verte, the local names of these routes and any local bikeways.

4.4 Maintenance and operation: a matter of money

Like any cycling infrastructure, La Route verte has to be built and maintained, and funding these operations is key to its longevity. When the project was launched, one of Vélo Québec's first tasks was to research the various ways of financing its construction. This study and subsequent studies have had a happy outcome: the creation of an \$18 million, five-year shared-financing program to finish La Route verte. These funds are in addition to the \$2 to 3 million per year already earmarked by the Ministry of Transport to update its road network.

Now that financial support has been found for construction, there is another challenge: maintenance. From the beginning of La Route verte in 1995, maintenance and its cost were already an issue for existing network segments. Despite the popularity of cycling and the high profile of this type of infrastructure, many places still consider cycling infrastructures mere accessories and therefore do not include them in the maintenance budgets already in place for other tourism or transportation facilities. As a consequence, since no funds have been earmarked for infrastructure maintenance, in 1998 trail managers formed an association and initiated a rate system on certain marked segments of La Route verte. The measures in place on nearly 800 kilometres of off-road trails have generated a lot of controversy. Although the formula can generate significant revenues on some trails, it may not easily lend itself to La Route verte as a whole, which includes major segments in urban areas, along roads (these segments will make up nearly 60% of the completed route) and on less-frequented trails that also require maintenance.

For this reason, last January Vélo Québec began a research and inventory project to develop a financing strategy for maintaining La Route verte and its various components. Supported by the Minister Responsible for Transportation and La Route verte, this initiative is a major challenge to be met in the coming years. The work begun will help define the issues related

to maintaining and operating La Route verte and regional bike trails, assess the advantages and disadvantages of the various measures employed to date and propose a viable scenario to all the partners involved. The solution eventually found must take into account the very nature of La Route verte as a whole (trails, roads, paved shoulder), the various authorities involved, urban/rural dynamics and the expectations of local and tourist users.

5.0 Connecting with neighbours: le rendez-vous!

It was at the 1992 Vélo Mondiale conference in Montreal that the idea of establishing "green" cycling links between Quebec and the United States was first proposed. The following year, Vélo Québec and the East Coast Greenway Alliance worked together to organize the North American Greenway Tour, a bike tour from Hartford, Connecticut, to Montreal. The purpose of the tour was to make Canadians, Americans and decision-makers more aware of the importance of creating trails and networks to encourage cycling tours.

On June 4, 1997, at the 22nd Conference of New England Governors and Eastern Canadian Premiers in Newport, Rhode Island, the participants adopted a resolution designed to promote the development of cross-border cycling links and green corridors. This joint initiative of the East Coast Greenway Alliance (Connecticut) and Vélo Québec was supported by Lake Champlain Bikeways (Vermont and New York) and the New Brunswick Trail. The support of the premiers and governors for this initiative allowed the provinces and states to immediately rally around a single idea and pool their expertise with regard to the planning of cycling routes and green corridors, as well as to develop joint projects to market the routes of northeastern North America.

A year later, the Conference met in Fredericton, New Brunswick, and cyclists made further progress. At this meeting, a new resolution was adopted stipulating that the marking of routes between Quebec and its neighbouring provinces and states would be completed and that the project would be extended to all of the Eastern Canadian provinces and New England states. It was also agreed that the agencies and departments with a stake in this process (such as transport and tourism) would be called upon to contribute.

On July 8, 1998, the first cross-border signage was done between Quebec and the province of New Brunswick, linking La Route verte and the Sentier NB Trail. The concept involves the posting of two signs on each cross-border route: one, in the neighbouring province, indicating the name of the route across the border and another, on the route itself, welcoming visitors.



**Figure 2: Press Conference September 28th, 1999;
Mr. Ron Ofner, Chairman, Lake Champlain Bikeways;
Clyde M. Rabideau, Mayor, Plattsburgh;
Jean-François Pronovost, Executive Directeur, Vélo Québec.**

The idea has caught on further south. On October 19, 1998, an event jointly organized by the East Coast Greenway Alliance and the Rails-To-Trails Conservancy marked the inauguration of a 24-mile interstate trail linking Rhode Island and Connecticut. The ceremony was conducted

in the presence of the Governor of Connecticut, Mr. John Rowland. Plans are being made to hold a similar event on the border of New Brunswick and Maine.

Lastly, since 1998, Vélo Québec has been working with Lake Champlain Bikeways and the states of Vermont and New York to mark the border in the Richelieu Valley and Lake Champlain region. An initial series of signs was posted between Quebec and New York State (Bike Route 9) in August of 1999.

Eventually, these co-operative efforts will allow bike routes and linear parks to transcend political borders. They will lead to the sharing of expertise about how to develop cycling infrastructures. Lastly, they will also lead to development of joint marketing initiatives to promote tourism throughout northeastern North America. Eventually, 6,000 miles of interconnected bike routes will cut across northeastern North America from Connecticut to Newfoundland. From one country to the other, from one network to the next, a synergy will be created that will encourage cyclists to explore some of the most beautiful biking areas in North America.