

# Executive Summary: Navigating Rural: Place Based Transit Solutions for Rural Canada

## ABOUT THE PROJECT

Transit and mobility are fundamental to rural community resilience. However, despite the importance of transit and the increase in available options, rural communities can struggle to initiate and maintain sustainable transit services. While there is some understanding of rural barriers, the utility of this information is hampered by the lack of understanding of how barriers are influenced by place-based differences across rural communities. The lack of understanding of place-based influences on rural transit systems is a critical challenge to informed decision making.

The goal of this project was to use place as a lens to identify, synthesize, and assess existing rural transit literature to identify rural barriers and understand how barriers vary by place. The objectives were:

- 1) Compile a database of existing rural transit and mobility literature, identifying gaps within our knowledge;
- 2) Create a typology of barriers impacting rural communities;
- 3) Explore existing transit support programs to understand gaps and challenges;
- 4) Identify and explore innovative rural solutions;
- 5) Clearly identify the gaps within our knowledge base, data, and existing support programs; and
- 6) Conduct a place-based analysis to understanding how barriers are influenced by the economic, socio-cultural, and environmental dimensions of place.

## KEY FINDINGS

### Rural Transit Literature

- Overarching themes: treating rural as a singular or uniform concept; uneven regional knowledge and understanding; understanding who is (and is not) served; challenges of rural transit; feasibility and rationale of rural transit; growing transit opportunities; and identified transit solutions.
- Gaps: little peer reviewed research – particularly on development of rural transit systems; little understanding or differentiation between places; dominance of examples from certain regions (British Columbia, Ontario) and community types (large, urban adjacent); minimal representation of remote communities.

### Barriers to Rural Transit

There are seven categories of barriers to sustainable rural transit systems, each with multiple specific barriers:

- Demographic factors and ridership
- Socio-cultural aspects of transit
- Natural and built environment
- Local cost of operation and potential sources of revenue
- Local governance
- Local economic structure
- External funding

Barriers differ by place, but the extent of this is unknown due to gaps in the literature

## Existing Support Programs

There are six categories of gaps and challenges related to rural access to existing transit support programs:

- Challenges with access to information surrounding programs
- The extent to which programs account for unique rural considerations
- Exclusionary criteria
- Expenses that are deemed to be eligible under the funding framework
- Consideration for the human resource capacity of the funding recipient
- Consideration for the financial resource capacity of the funding recipient

## Innovative Rural Examples

- A publicly accessible web map of existing innovative rural examples can be found at: <https://selkirk.maps.arcgis.com/apps/webappviewer/index.html?id=17c858b73a014fbfa55d712141847a73>.
- Most examples are from urban-adjacent communities, and are often larger communities. There are very few examples identified from remote communities.
- The most common type of innovation related to changes and improvements within organizational methods.
- Most of the examples can be found in southern Ontario or British Columbia, demonstrating the influence of larger population centres, as well as the impact of collaboration between multiple communities.
- The examples demonstrate a contrast between smaller, volunteer run systems that are innovative, but also highly precarious; and larger, government run systems that are more stable, but less innovative.

## Influence of Place

The influence of place can be seen on three levels:

- 1) **Macro Rural Trends** apply to all rural areas, limited influence of place beyond separating rural characteristics from urban ones. For example, low population density and long distances.
- 2) **Meso Rural Trends** apply over large areas based on a common place-based characteristic. For example, commuter patterns in urban adjacent communities or the characteristics of specific demographic groups.
- 3) **Micro Rural Trends** apply to specific places based on unique or near unique place-based characteristics. For example, specific economic structure – single industry, seasonality, unique demographic conditions, remoteness.

## POLICY IMPLICATIONS

### For Rural Communities and Regions

- Recognize what unique place-based barriers exist locally.
- Recognize and leverage existing assets and resources.
- Recognize unique local characteristics and needs.
- Establish a transit service that makes the most sense based on the above. For many rural communities this means something other than a traditional fixed-route system.

### For Policies and Programs

- Recognize that policies and programs based on the existing knowledge base are limited and unable to account for the diversity of rural contexts.
- Recognize that the dominance of specific regions, community types, and transit system types leaves out experiences, considerations, and opportunities relevant to other types of rural communities.
- Applying a rural lens (rural considerations) can help in development of program and policy, but should recognize the impact of data and information gaps.
- Flexibility is required in rural transportation policies and program to ensure diverse rural transit types are supported, both within a community and between communities.

## Across the Board

- Change perceptions of existing or potential users, making transit a viable and socially desirable option.
- Recognize the full benefits of transit, going beyond the simple cost to operate and return on investment to the inclusion of the impact to measures of wellbeing and social, economic, and environmental co-benefits.
- Enabling sustainable rural transit requires changes to support and increase factors of success. This includes the perspectives of users and decision makers, but also in supporting programs and policy. To do so requires a better understanding of the diversity of rural and the influence of place.

## FURTHER INFORMATION

### Contact Information

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