

Local Government 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

• What is there?

- o Innovative solutions – but need more primary research
- o Barriers to rural transit
- o Expanding opportunities for what rural transit can look like

• What is not there?

- o Lack of primary research conducted that would otherwise elucidate the knowledge that municipalities have regarding rural transit
- o The multiplicity of “rural” is not well understood – again, largely due to the dearth of primary literature/in-depth case studies
- o How barriers vary by place

Barriers to Rural Transit

We identified seven barriers to rural transit systems:

- **Demographic factors and ridership:** Rural transit may be cost-prohibitive for some riders due to the low-density settlement patterns and greater distances travelled by rural transit services that generally drive up the cost of rural transit for riders.
- **Socio-cultural aspects of transit:** Although many rural dwellers do own private vehicles, not all rural dwellers do. Certain subsets of the population, such as the elderly, youth, women, individuals living in low-income households, individuals with cognitive and/or physical disabilities, marginalized groups, and recent immigrants may not have access to a car, cannot drive, or otherwise experience barriers to using public transit.
 - o The overall convenience of a transit system (e.g. the distance from one’s home to a transit stop) may impact their perception of transit as being a viable mobility option.
- **The natural and built environment:** Dispersed land use planning challenges rural transit in that it necessitates longer and therefore more costly trips. Rural areas that lack transit-oriented development may catch themselves in the “first and last mile problem,” where riders are challenged to get to and/or from a transit stop.
- **Local costs of operation and potential sources of revenue:** Taxation is one strategy to recuperate the high costs incurred by municipally provided services such as transit; however, rural areas tend to have smaller tax bases. The high service costs strain rural municipalities.

- **Local governance:** In rural municipalities where resources (such as time, human, and financial) are maxed out, it may be difficult for the municipality to develop a rural transit system. Further complications may arise when there is local competition amongst which services receive funding and staffing.
- **Local economic structure:** Rural areas tend to harbour smaller pools of available labour to work in the transit industry due to the fact that most rural areas have aging populations and a greater proportion of retirees. The local economic structure also influences the type of transit service needs, whether they be late night service, weekend service, inter-community service, or fly-in-fly-out service; again, these service types have associated costs.
- **External funding programs:** Funding oftentimes is difficult to obtain due to certain criteria that must be met, but even when funding is obtained, the funding type may not match local needs. This points to the importance of coordinating funding to ensure for the efficient use of funds.

Support Programs

We identified 6 barriers to accessing support programs targeted toward rural transit:

- Access to information regarding the program
- Extent to which programs account for unique rural considerations
- Exclusionary program criteria
- Expenses that are deemed eligible under the funding framework
- Consideration that a program gives to the human resources capacity of the funding recipient
- Consideration that a program gives to 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>.

Generally, the innovative examples can be defined in the following ways:

- By size of the community served
 - o The majority of the examples represented larger communities

- o There was less representation of small rural communities
- By the distance of the community from an urban centre
 - o The majority of the examples represented communities that are closer to urban centres
 - o There was less representation of rural remote communities (give examples?)

The availability of examples in the literature impact the diversity of resources for rural municipalities to rely on when designing or maintaining their own transit service.

Influence of Place

The influence of place on rural transit plays out on three levels:

- How to describe macro, meso and micro?

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.

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

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