

# Provincial/Territorial/Federal Government Summary

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

### ABOUT THE PROJECT

Transit and mobility are fundamental to all communities. 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 why this is generally, the existing information lacks an understanding of the influence of place – the unique combinations of economic, socio-cultural, and environmental factors - on rural transit systems. This knowledge gap is a critical challenge to policy and program design and decision making.

The goal of this project was to use place to assess and better understand what we know about rural transit. The project's objectives were to:

- 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 understand how barriers are influenced by place.

### KEY FINDINGS

#### Rural Transit Literature

- **What do we know?** There are high level and general guiding documents that discuss rural generally, largely treating it uniformly. There are also case studies primarily from Ontario and British Columbia, with an emphasis on larger rural communities that are urban-adjacent.

- **Where are the gaps?** There is a lack of understanding of differences across rural communities. There is an uneven understanding of different regions across Canada. There is a lack of peer-reviewed literature and granular case studies. Little is known about transit in remote communities.

#### Barriers to Rural Transit

We identified seven barriers:

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

It is critical that upper levels of government understand that these barriers do not impact all places in the same way. Although details of the impact of place are minimal, developing flexible policy and programs can help respond to the range of local settings and needs.

#### Making Support Programs Accessible

We identified overarching challenges that rural communities face in accessing existing support programs:

- **Accessing program information:** The funding landscape is complex. There is a lack of easily accessible information with respect to active programs, eligibility criteria, and deadlines. This is a challenge for rural local governments with limited capacity and may discourage pursuit of rural transit funding.

- **Rural considerations within program design:** Of the existing transit funding programs, there is a lack of explicit consideration for rural realities and needs. As the majority of funding programs are aimed at supporting traditional urban transit systems, rural areas face a disadvantage in terms of equal access to transit funding that responds to the unique realities and needs of rural areas.
- **Eligible expenses:** What is needed locally should match what is being offered via funding programs. Rural municipalities have cited operational costs as being the most imperative for operating a sustainable transit service, even though capital funding is more common.
- **Capacity of the applicant:** Oftentimes, rural local governments have fewer human and financial resources. Funding programs typically do not account for the fact that rural planners – if a planner exists at all - are typically responsible for all planning, not just transit, and may lack subject specific expertise.

Recommendation: make funding for rural transit more locally-responsive. This can include: making information more accessible; allowing for operational expenses to be eligible; and rural focused client services to assist lower capacity communities in planning and applications.

### What is the Influence of Place?

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

- 1) **Macro:** barriers experienced generally and uniformly by all rural communities. This level is the most well understood in the literature, including factors like low population density and long distances.
- 2) **Meso:** barriers experienced over large regions or types of communities based on select characteristics of place. This level is unevenly understood in the literature, with certain trends better understood than others, such as the influence of commuter patterns on transit systems in urban adjacent communities.
- 3) **Micro:** barriers experienced by rural communities that based on a unique combination of place characteristics. This level is the most challenging to understand due to the range of factors. Factors can include economic structure (single industry, seasonality), demographics, and remoteness.

It is critical to understand the influences of place in order to create flexible policy and programs to target and support the range of rural needs and contexts.

## POLICY IMPLICATIONS

### For Policies and Programs

- Recognize existing blind spots. Policies and programs based on the existing knowledge base are limited and unable to account for rural diversity, particularly remote communities. 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 systems, going beyond the cost to operate and return on investment and recognizing the impact to measures of wellbeing and social, economic, and environmental co-benefits.
- Enabling sustainable rural transit requires changing supports and increasing factors that drive success. To do so requires a better understanding of the diversity of rural and the influence of place.

### Looking for 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>

## FURTHER INFORMATION

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