

Rural Considerations Influencing Inter-City Transportation

Presentation to the Standing Committee on Transport, Infrastructure and Communities

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This submission was presented to the House of Commons Standing Committee on Transport, Infrastructure and Communities by Dr. Sarah-Patricia Breen (Selkirk Innovates).

The content of this submission draws on the results of the research project *Navigating Rural: Place Based Transit Solutions for Rural Canada*. Contributions to this research came from: Courtney Sutherland (University of Guelph), Mark Trueman (Selkirk College), Dr. Ryan Gibson (University of Guelph), Dr. Sean Markey (Simon Fraser University), and the Canadian Rural Revitalization Foundation.

Introduction

Good morning. Thank you for the invitation to speak to the committee as you study inter-city transport by bus in Canada. I appreciate the opportunity to speak on this important topic. I am honoured to join you today from the traditional territories of the Sinixt, Syilx, Ktunaxa, and Secwépemc peoples.

Today I would like to provide some rural considerations to inform your study. I will summarize the relationship between rural communities and transit and the current state of rural transit in Canada, ending with three key messages for the committee.

The Relationship Between Rural and Transit

Transportation between rural communities in Canada is a challenge and an opportunity. Discussions of rural transit are often challenge focused, such as the loss of Greyhound Canada. However, while examples like Greyhound are prominent, it is important to note that they are not necessarily representative of the range of inter-community rural transit services that exist across Canada.¹ Transportation between communities includes long and short trips, as well as occasional and regular trips. In my presentation I will pay particular attention to the need for inter-community transit that serves those shorter, regular trips. I aim to highlight both challenges and opportunities.

Individual mobility is critically important in order to access basic services – like health care and education, as well as the ability of individuals to participate in their communities and in the economy – for work, as well as for shopping. From a business and community perspective, transit systems have a range of direct, indirect, and induced impacts, including job creation, resident attraction, workforce attraction, market accessibility and more.²

It is a mistake to assume all people living in rural areas have access to personal vehicles. It is equally a mistake to assume that regular, shorter trips occur within a single community. It is increasingly more common that an individual's regularly used services, places of employment, and home are in different communities. This challenge is particularly acute in communities where there is a shortage of affordable housing, but where there is also a workforce shortage. The people needed to fill these workforce shortages can live in outlying areas or neighboring communities – making transit a necessity.

In rural places, the lack of inter-community transit can impact the ability of people to go to school, to see a doctor, or hold a job. This disproportionately impacts certain parts of our society, including youth, seniors, people with physical or cognitive impairments, low income individuals, Indigenous peoples, and newcomers. This has a direct impact not only on these individuals, but on businesses and communities.

The creation of sustainable inter-community transit systems offers an opportunity for improved social, economic, and environmental outcomes in rural communities.

Current State of Rural Transit in Canada

As part of the *Navigating Rural* project, we analyzed literature related to rural transit in Canada from the last 10 years, analyzed existing transit support programs, and mapped over 100 examples of rural transit systems.^{2,3} Based on the results of this research, I offer the following summary of key findings:

- “Rural” is often treated as if it is a single homogenous group, with rural solutions and strategies discussed generally. This generalization fails to consider how different rural communities are and the influence of place specific factors.
- There are several categories of barriers to sustainable rural transit, demonstrating both general rural challenges (e.g., costs of operation) and place specific challenges (e.g., travel patterns and economic structure).
- Related to funding and support programs, two substantive barriers are the lack of rural specific funding and the lack of funding for operational costs.
- The current state of knowledge is geographically uneven, dominated by experiences and observations from larger, urban-adjacent rural communities in southern Ontario, southern Quebec, and British Columbia.
- The examples we identified demonstrate different patterns across Canada:
 - In Southern Ontario there are multiple commuter focused systems running from urban adjacent to urban communities.
 - The presence of BC Transit in British Columbia has resulted in a large number of public, regional, inter-community, rural transit systems. This number of public, rural, fixed route bus systems is in contrast to the examples found in Atlantic Canada, which are dominated by volunteer run services.
 - Few examples were identified from the prairie provinces, perhaps owing in part to the vacuum left from the closure of the Saskatchewan Transit Company.
- There are a growing number of available transit options that include, but extend beyond traditional fixed route bus services. The majority of the existing examples we identified are inter-community services. This includes fixed route bus services, as well as innovative approaches, such as on-demand services, flexible routes, car shares, and more.

Key Messages

Based on our findings, I would like to offer the following three considerations to the committee.

Consideration #1: There is a need to address knowledge gaps, particularly in underrepresented regions and community types.

- Gaps in our understanding related to rural transit remain. Available data is particularly limited in smaller, more remote communities and Indigenous communities.
- These knowledge gaps limit the ability for communities, businesses, and all levels of government to undertake evidence-based decision-making.
- The Federal Government should continue to support efforts to address these gaps, both through academic research, as well as through funding for communities and regions to assess needs and evaluate potential solutions.
- In the interim, decision makers should be conscious of the biases that are present within the existing knowledge base.

Consideration #2: Differences in place mean that there is no single solution and rural places require particular consideration in the design and implementation of solutions.

- Needs, challenges, and opportunities vary by place, highlighting a need for solutions to be flexible to place-specific considerations.

- There is a particular need to include rural considerations in development of government policy and programs, so as to avoid unintentionally leaving out or otherwise negatively impacting rural places. The Federal Rural Transit Solution Fund is one example of a rural specific program.
- While solutions may look different across Canada, there is also a clear need for collaboration and connection across jurisdictions. The Federal Government can play an important role in ensuring continuity and connections between systems.

Consideration #3: Acknowledge and account for the difference between where the benefits of transit accrue versus where the costs are borne.

- Transit services, including inter-community transportation, is recognized for a range of social, environmental, and economic benefits. However, a fundamental challenge is that the benefits of transit are dispersed among individuals, businesses, communities, and society, while the costs are borne by the service provider. Profit generation from rural transit systems is recognized as a significant challenge, particularly as standard measures of return on investment fail to account for the dispersal of benefits.
- The Federal Government can play an important role in addressing this challenge not only through publicly funded transit systems, but in what is eligible to be funded. For example, the Federal Rural Transit Solutions Fund could be greatly improved if it allowed for operational funding.

Thank you for the invitation to participate and for your consideration of this input.

References

1. Sutherland, C. & Breen, S.-P. Not In Service: A Typology of Barriers Facing Rural Transit Systems. *Can. Plan. Policy* **2022**, 172–190 (2023).
2. Breen, S.-P., Sutherland, C., Trueman, M., Gibson, R. & Markey, S. *Navigating Rural - Place Based Solutions for Rural Canada*. <https://sc.arcabc.ca/islandora/object/sc%3A5510> (2021).
3. Trueman, M. & Breen, S.-P. Innovative Examples of Rural Transit. <https://selkirk.maps.arcgis.com/apps/webappviewer/index.html?id=17c858b73a014fbfa55d712141847a73> (2021).

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Selkirk Innovates

Selkirk Innovates at Selkirk College is a leader in applied research and innovation. The goal of Selkirk Innovates is to support and enable communities to adapt and thrive in the face of change while also enhancing the student learning experience and fostering a sustainable and inclusive organizational climate. The Rural Resilience research team is focused on human capacity, technology and innovation, and infrastructure and services, helping rural places stay vibrant and deal with increased rapid change while holding on to local values (<https://selkirk.ca/rural-resilience>).

Canadian Rural Revitalization Foundation

The Canadian Rural Revitalization Foundation (www.crrf.ca) is a national charity that contributes to the revitalization and sustainability of rural Canada through collaborative research for rural leaders in the community, private sector, and in all levels of government. CRRF works to create credible insights and to improve our understanding of issues and opportunities that are of common interest to rural residents across Canada. Knowledge and better understanding are the fundamental pillars for the welfare of rural communities and environments.