



## SMALL TOWN TRANSIT

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**Small town transit  
challenges:  
Limited demand,  
financial and  
technical  
constraints**

### Transit facilities in small towns

The degree of mobility directly influences the overall wellbeing of the population in several ways. Approximately 4.7 million population of Canada (15% of total population) lives in small towns (Canadian Urban Transit Association (CUTA), 2005). The provisions for transit in these communities is very limited, primarily because of the narrow demand base, financial constraints and less scope for the implementation of innovative transit options through research (Northern Alberta Development Council (NADC), 2013). However, ensuring the availability of minimum transit options is necessary taking account of the population who does not own private vehicles and those who are affected by factors such as age and health related issues. The growing population in small towns and their continuously growing share of senior population confirms the need to improve transit options in these towns (Statistics Canada, 2013). Apart from making these towns more 'age-friendly', any improvement in the available transit options will have positive reflections on community satisfaction and local economic activities.

### Major transit options available in small towns

Small communities primarily depend on 'para-transit' and 'custom transit' options while the 'conventional' transit options are unviable (Fraser Basin Council, 2009). There are several successful precedents of transit options in small towns which can be considered for implementation by other small towns in Canada. However, not all the options are 'age-friendly' primarily because of the differences in their functioning strategies.

#### Carsharing

It is an important strategy for travel in small communities. Those who do not own a car pay a small amount to the Car share Co-op. Members use the car according to their needs of travel. Nelson Carshare Co-op in Revelstoke which successfully runs a Co-op with 22 members and 3 vehicles proves the relevance of carsharing concept in small communities (Fraser Basin Council, 2009). However, it is of limited importance in case of seniors and disabled people, mainly due to health reasons.



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Figure 1: Advertisement of Car sharing Co-op in Kootenay, BC



Figure 2: Carpool promotion in Vernon, BC



Figure 3: A handyDART cutsomer

## Carpooling and Vanpooling

Car and vanpooling are two kinds of 'ride-sharing'. At present, many local governments have joined the online carpool matching services like 'Trans Canada Carpool' or 'Jack Bell Ride-share'. Cities like Kamloops have successfully implemented carpooling while Jack Bell Foundation in BC has the longest standing vanpool program (Fraser Basin Council, 2009). These options are very helpful for seniors and those who have health issues.

## Dial-a-ride and handyDART services

'Dial-a-ride' is the taxi service available in many of the small towns such as Portage la Prairie and Medicine Hat, Alberta (CUTA, 2005). The user can make a call to the service provider's number to avail the facility. HandyDART is another highly flexible transit mode used in small towns. It is usually meant for those who cannot use other modes of transit for health related reasons. Many communities in British Columbia successfully use this service (CUTA, 2005). These options are very useful to meet the transit needs of the senior population living the small towns.

## Mini-buses

Some small towns use mini-bus as an option of public transit. However, financial viability is a serious challenge. The bus may provide service throughout the week or on limited days depending on the demand. A mini-bus service with 16 seats was initiated in Peace River, Alberta in 2005 and was discontinued due to wide gap between revenue and expenses (NADC, 2013). However, with the provisions for wheel chair accessibility, it is an age-friendly transit mode in small towns.

## Taxi-buses

It is a highly flexible mode of transit implementable in small towns. The drivers wait at the scheduled points till all the seats are occupied. With a large number of vehicles servicing in different parts of the town and covering over 300 destinations, the taxi-bus system has been very successful in Rimouski, Quebec. The time taken for a taxi-bus travel in Rimouski is less than fifteen minutes and the service is available on all week days (NADC, 2013). As the provisions for wheel chair accessibility is limited in taxi-buses, it is less age-friendly as compared to other transit options such as handy DART.

**Dial-a-ride and handyDART are flexible and age-friendly transit options in small towns**



Figure 4: View of a taxi-bus in Rimouski, Quebec

**CUTA has 36 smaller conventional systems for inter-community transit.**



Figure 5: A dial-a-ride vehicle



Figure 6: People sharing a van

## Options for inter-community transit

Movement of people from one town to another is also a challenge in small communities. The long distance does not permit the use of many of the transit options available within the small towns. Many small communities depend either on conventional transit options or para-transit options such as mini-buses to meet their need for inter-community travel. They serve over 1 million people living in small communities (CUTA, 2005).

-**Whistler and Valley Express (WAVE)** is a highly successful example for inter-community transit in small towns. It was introduced in British Columbia in 1992 and operates between the Whistler and Pemberton Valley of BC. The service has high demand and contributes substantially to promote tourism in the area (CUTA, 2005).

-The **mini-bus service** that British Columbia has with various communities like Penticton, Hazelton, Kelowna are examples for para-transit options available between communities (NADC, 2013). Few other successful examples in this category are North Bay Transit in Ontario and Kootenay Boundary Transit in BC (CUTA, 2005).

-**'Vanpooling'** and **'taxi-buses'** are used by many small communities which are not covered under the CUTA's conventional transit systems for small communities. These demand driven transit options are more flexible as compared to the conventional transit options.



Figure 7: A WAVE bus in Whistler

## Final thoughts

Small towns face challenges in meeting inter-community and local travel needs. Many of the available options are highly flexible and hence time taking. Besides, making these options more age-friendly is another challenge ahead in these communities. Those small towns such which are able to attract tourists, have better inter-community and local transit services as compared to the rest. Thus, it is mainly those small towns without major tourist destinations where the transit related problems are acute. These towns can learn from the successful precedents discussed above. Encouraging **'active transportation'** and **'home delivery'** options for purchase can help these communities to overcome this challenge to some extent. As the options for inter-community transit is also limited in these communities, the local government can also encourage **'ride-sharing'** and promote alternatives such as **'online shopping'** and **'telecommuting'** (doing office works from home).

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