



Rural Transit

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*How can
we improve
transportation
between
rural towns in
Canada?*

Transportation that is available and affordable for older adults is an important factor for maintaining independence and allowing people to age in place (World Health Organization, 2007). Many adults living in rural towns must travel to the closest cities for medical appointments, to access amenities not available in their towns, and also for leisure and entertainment. While many people rely on their own personal vehicles for transport, this can change as adults age and health may decline. Access to safe, reliable and affordable transportation is important to allow individuals to carry out the tasks of their daily lives with ease.

Barriers to rural transportation in Canada

There are a few barriers specific to rural towns that inhibit consistent transportation between towns. The primary barrier is that rural towns often don't have the human or financial capacity to support transportation between towns. With few riders, transit service cannot rely on fares to support service and must rely on other revenue sources (Sutherland & Breen, 2022). Some towns have created co-operative or not-for profit transit services that rely on donations or membership fees from transit riders (Levesque, 2022). While this is an innovative way to create revenue, it can be inconsistent and ultimately impacts service if donations or memberships decrease. Direct funding from municipalities, or higher level of government, is the best way to ensure consistent funding for rural transit, but as mentioned before, this is not always a realistic option.

Despite these challenges, multiple rural towns in Canada are making transportation work for their residents. Below are three examples from Colchester County in Nova Scotia, Peace River, Alberta, and Northern rural towns in BC; all of which show innovative ways to address the issue of transportation between rural towns.

Colchester Transportation Cooperative Ltd: Nova Scotia

The Colchester Transportation Cooperative provides transportation services to the residents of Colchester County in Nova Scotia. The municipality is roughly 3600km2 with about 51,000 residents. CTCL has a fleet of six



CTCL was established in 1999 with only one driver and one bus. Now they have nine employees and six vehicles.



Figure #1: Part of the fleet of vehicles that CTCL provides for passengers. All are equipped to be accessible for individuals in wheelchairs.

accessible vehicles, providing rides to residents of any age, however they say that roughly 70% of their passengers are seniors. With Colchester Transportation, passengers can “Dial-a-Ride”, meaning they can call 24-48hrs ahead of time to book a ride with rates dependent on how far they need to travel. Individuals may also charter one of the 18 passenger busses for events or special shopping trips. A bus may also be booked in advance for regular service if an individual has an appointment that is reoccurring. While drivers are not able to assist individuals once they exit the bus, anyone helping a senior or individual with extra needs can ride the bus for free. CTCL is a non-profit organization and relies on funding from a few sponsors as well as individual donations. Being a co-operative, they have six board members that make decisions about the future of the organization and have seven paid drivers. The organization has been growing over the last two decades and is an important asset for the community.

A co-operative approach relies on sponsors as well as individual donations.

Peace River Taxi Pass Program - Alberta

The taxi pass program in Peace River provides subsidized taxi ride passes to eligible residents. Each month, individuals can buy a 20 ticket booklet costing \$15 each. Each ticket has a cash value of \$5 and can be used in combination with other tickets or cash to pay for a taxi ride with participating services in town.

There is a process that individuals must complete in order to be able to purchase these tickets. The Peace River Taxi Pass program has an application and renewal form that individuals must complete before purchasing their tickets. To be eligible, individuals must be either:

- Seniors over the age of 65 with an annual income less than \$28,785
- Have a physical or mental disability
- Low-income individuals or families
- Students at Northern Lakes College

While this service is currently only being used within the town of Peace River, this framework could be expanded to be used between small towns within a municipality. In the context of rural Manitoba, many small towns are within 20-30 minutes of each other. Taxi service could be provided within town and also between small towns to provide accessible and safe transportation both for residents using the taxi pass program and those paying full price.



Photo Credit: Town of Peace River Taxi Pass program website

Figure #2: Driver, Jeff Waters, has lots of experience driving for Northern Health Connections



Photo Credit: NH stories



Figure #3: The custom built coaches are spacious inside, have storage underneath for luggage, and some have accessible washrooms on board.

Photo Credit: NH Connections website

NH Connections provides service to multiple rural towns in British Columbia, connecting these regions to larger cities.

Northern Health Connections

Northern Health Connections is an accessible coach bus service that connects individuals between northern rural towns in British Columbia to larger cities such as Vancouver, Fort St John, Kamloops and Prince George, while also providing service between small towns. The transportation service is subsidized by the Ministry of Health, keeping fares relatively low (between \$10-\$40 for one way trips).

The NH Transportation service is eligible to:

- Seniors aged 60 and over
- Anyone under the age of 60 with proof of medical appointment outside of their town
- Health care workers (either travelling with a patient or on their own for work)
- Family members supporting those travelling for medical appointments

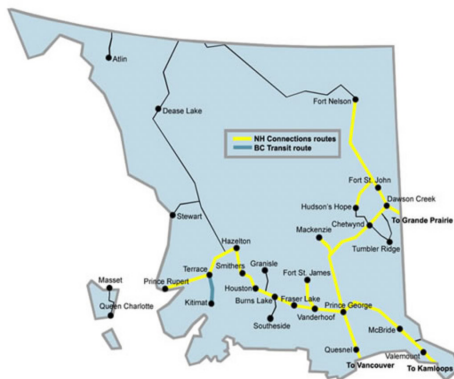


Figure #4: Northern Health connections route.

These busses are spacious and have plenty of room for luggage. Some of the busses are even equipped with accessible washrooms for longer trips. This is an excellent example of a comprehensive transportation system operating through multiple jurisdictions to provide flexible transportation options for seniors or those with medical needs.

Final Thoughts

Reliable, safe, and affordable transportation between rural towns is an integral component in allowing seniors to continue living healthy and fulfilled lives as they age. While providing this service remains challenging for small towns, the three organizations outlined above showcase different ways to provide service to residents. All three have different funding structures and provide service at different scales. In order to implement rural transportation in Manitoba, organizations and municipalities can build off the work already being done to create a unique service that meets the needs of the residents living and travelling here.

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