

# Public Transit and Small Communities

Public transit's quality-of-life benefits are well known in Canada's larger cities, where congestion and air pollution are major issues. But the important role of public transit in Canada's smaller communities (those with fewer than 50,000 people) is a less familiar story. Very few small transit systems make the national news, and their modest battles and quiet victories may seem to be of only local interest. But their collective story is much bigger than that, and worthy of exploration.

Public transit makes several contributions to the quality of life in smaller communities:

- **Economy.** They support local businesses by helping commuters get to work, bringing shoppers to stores, supporting dynamic downtown cores, and meeting the needs of festivals and other events.
- **Opportunity.** They offer independence and mobility to people who are non-drivers by choice or necessity — seniors, children, students, workers, low-income families, and even tourists. Persons with disabilities, who may have very limited mobility options, are primary beneficiaries.
- **Environment.** They reduce local air pollution, and contribute to local climate change strategies.

Even as they pursue transit's very real benefits, smaller communities face significant challenges:

- **Ridership development.** Building ridership can be difficult when trip distances are short, parking is inexpensive, and there is no traffic congestion. In addition, land use patterns are often not transit-supportive.
- **Funding constraints.** Municipal funding sources are limited, and transit must compete with other basic community needs for funds. Tight budgets also mean fewer staff training opportunities like conferences, where smaller systems can exchange information and learn about best practices.
- **Organizational capacity.** The ability of smaller systems generally to research and develop innovative solutions is often limited because of very lean management structures.

But despite these and other issues, transit systems in smaller communities across Canada are succeeding through persistence, flexibility and creativity. This issue paper highlights the position of smaller systems within the Canadian transit industry, their performance, some best practices, and several system profiles that provide some insight into key success factors.



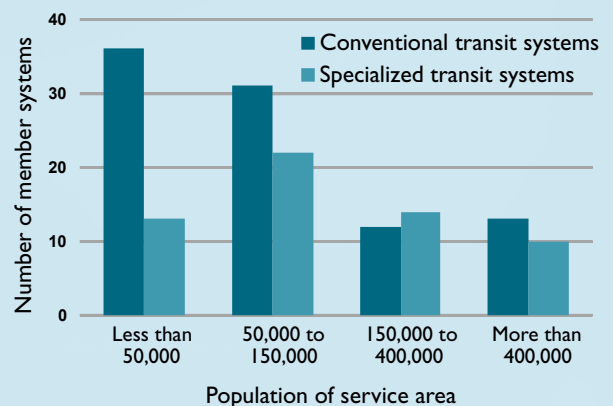
Children greet the McGruff safety mascot next to a bus belonging to WAVE Transit, one of the systems profiled in this issue paper

## Overview of transit systems in small communities

**Number of systems.** The membership of the Canadian Urban Transit Association (CUTA) includes 36 conventional transit systems and 13 specialized transit systems for people with disabilities that serve areas with fewer than 50,000 people. These smaller systems represent a significant proportion of CUTA's operating members, as shown in Figure 1.

**Population served.** Canada has over 300 communities of 10,000 to 50,000 residents outside its metropolitan areas, with a collective population of 4.7 million people or 15% of the nation<sup>a</sup>. CUTA's 36 smaller conventional systems serve over 20% of this marketplace — a total of almost 1 million people and an average of 27,200<sup>b</sup>.

Figure 1 CUTA operating system members by population served



Resort Municipality of Whistler, British Columbia

### Visitors and locals catch the same WAVE

Whistler and Valley Express (WAVE) Transit is one of Canada's least-known transit success stories. The system opened in 1992, and has supported the community's spectacular growth over the last decade.

WAVE's 25 buses serve two main client groups: area visitors travelling between their accommodations and the mountains, and regular year-round riders. All told, the system carries almost 3 million rides annually — equivalent to about 300 rides for each of the area's 10,000 permanent residents.

One reason for WAVE's success is the convenience it offers area visitors, who can avoid the hassles of driving to and parking at ski hills. These visitors make up more than one-third of the system's ridership during ski season, and about one-quarter of ridership in the off-season.

Another success factor is the valley community's linear form of development, which enables a high level of service — five-minute frequencies in peak periods — between key origins and destinations. Many residents either don't have a car or only need one per family, a situation that's also supported by the area's youthful, environmentally-aware and cost-conscious population.

The system does little marketing because its buses are so obvious to visitors, but hotels help promote the service. The municipality has a full-time transportation demand management coordinator who works to support the use of transit and other travel options. The system distributes the local newspaper for free on-board its buses, and in exchange receives a free quarter-page advertisement each week. WAVE also offers free chocolates on Valentine's Day and candy on Halloween, and free service on Clean Air Day. The system actively supports a two-week Commuter Challenge each year, and has seen many event participants become regular riders afterward.

Despite its success, WAVE faces some key challenges. Ridership growth is outpacing the system's ability to add capacity, particularly in light of funding constraints and the high cost of doing business in Whistler. Daily ridership that is spread out over 23 hours of scheduled service each day (to help hotel, restaurant and bar staff commute by transit) can vary from 3,500 to 27,000 riders daily, depending on the season. And — not least — regular storms that drop more than 25 centimetres of snow are just another fact of life!



Whistler and Valley Express Transit

Whistler Valley provides a scenic backdrop for WAVE services

**Riders carried.** In 2003, CUTA's smaller conventional systems carried almost 17 million riders or an average of over 17 rides per capita served. The smaller systems with the highest per-capita ridership in 2003 were:

- **Whistler and Valley Express Transit** (Resort Municipality of Whistler, B.C.) — 301 rides per capita, a figure partly due to use by tourists who can outnumber residents four-to-one at peak times (*see profile, inset*)
- **North Bay Transit** (City of North Bay, Ont.) — 45 rides per capita (*see profile, inset*)
- **Cornwall Transit** (City of Cornwall, Ont.) — 29 rides per capita
- **Kootenay Boundary Transit** (Kootenay Boundary Regional District, B.C.) — 27 rides per capita

**Financial performance.** Because of their fiscal pressures, smaller systems see the efficient use and recovery of operating funds as a key to sustainability. In fact, smaller conventional systems deliver service very cost-effectively. In 2003, their average cost per transit service hour was \$61, substantially less than the \$96 average cost of systems in communities over 400,000 people. Smaller systems also recovered an average of 39% of their operating costs from fares, about the same as the average of all American transit systems<sup>c</sup>. The smaller systems with the highest rate of operating cost recovery in 2003 were:

- **Kings Transit** (County of Kings and towns of Berwick, Kentville and Wolfville, N.S.) — 67% (*see profile, inset*)
- **Sunshine Coast Transit** (Sunshine Coast Regional District, B.C.) — 66% (*see profile, inset*)
- **North Bay Transit** (City of North Bay, Ontario) — 57% (*see profile, inset*)
- **Belleville Transit** (City of Belleville, Ont.) and **Prince Rupert Transit** (City of Prince Rupert, B.C.) — 53%

### Meeting the challenge

The following paragraphs highlight some of the ways that Canada's smaller transit systems are managing to overcome common issues related to ridership development, constrained funding and organizational capacity.

**Intermunicipal partnerships.** One way that communities can overcome the hurdles associated with starting a new transit system is simply to purchase services from established systems. The transit system in the County of Kings, Nova Scotia, provides transit service to two neighbouring counties under contract (*see profile, inset*), while a similar arrangement sees the Town of Milton, Ont. purchasing service from nearby Oakville Transit. Around Montreal, several outlying small communities initiated transit services (known as *conseils intermunicipaux de transport*) by contracting with one of the larger urban transit systems in the area.



**Provincial partnerships.** Through its Municipal Systems Program, BC Transit partners with communities across the province (outside Greater Vancouver) to coordinate the delivery of 70 conventional and specialized public transit systems. Municipalities approve service levels and set fares and, in a few cases, operate the service. In most cases, BC Transit contracts for service delivery with a private company or non-profit society. BC Transit capitalizes on specialized skills and economies of scale to provide planning, marketing and contract administration services, and arranges province-wide contracts for vehicle and fuel purchases. About half of each system's operating and amortized capital costs are funded by BC Transit, with the other half funded through fares and local governments.

**Market-oriented service planning.** One way that smaller communities maximize ridership and stay ahead of rising costs is to focus on understanding and serving key market segments. Examples include secondary school services that are planned around class hours, or workplace services that meet the needs of shift workers (*see profile of Brandon Transit, inset*).

**Flexible delivery — conventional services.** In smaller communities, lower demands may mean that fixed routes and standard 12-metre buses are neither effective nor efficient. More flexible, demand-responsive approaches including dial-a-ride are used by some systems (like Medicine Hat Transit, Alta.) to provide service during off-peak hours, or to serve low-density or rural areas. Other communities partner with taxi companies to provide feeder services in outlying areas (e.g. Welland Transit, Ont.). In Rimouski, Quebec, the entire public transit service (known as Taxibus) is delivered using taxis operating on both fixed and variable routes.

**Flexible delivery — specialized services.** Rising operating costs for specialized transit services have led many communities to explore taxis as a means of serving customers with disabilities. In British Columbia, where many smaller communities operate accessible handyDART services in partnership with BC Transit, specialized transit trips can be served using taxis when it is more efficient or effective. Another BC Transit program gives eligible handyDART clients the freedom to call their own taxi, with a 50% fare subsidy.

**Marketing.** Most smaller transit systems lack the specialized expertise and resources needed to deliver comprehensive marketing strategies. Despite these limitations, many systems are finding ways to effectively communicate with key segments of the transit market. For example, U-Pass programs, which are still most common in large and medium-sized communities, have found a foothold in the small city of North Bay, Ont. (*see profile, inset*). In British Columbia, BC Transit actively lends its marketing knowledge to smaller communities. It has produced an extensive community outreach toolkit, and its centralized production of printed and Web-based public information (e.g. [www.busonline.ca](http://www.busonline.ca)) yields higher-quality materials at more affordable prices.

City of Brandon, Manitoba

## **Brandon Transit's workplace partnership aids the local economy**

In many ways, Brandon Transit is typical of smaller systems. Despite support from the city's 40,000 residents and their elected officials, it struggles to attract choice riders in an urban environment with little traffic congestion and plentiful, cheap parking. It relies heavily on the ridership of secondary and post-secondary students. And it has faced a decade of rising costs without equivalent growth in financial support from the provincial government.

In response, Brandon Transit has worked to make its service relevant and vital to the local population. It has created an off-peak pass to increase mobility for non-commuters. Through the province, it provides low-cost passes to people on social assistance (the only Manitoba community to do so). And it actively markets its services in print and on local TV and radio stations.

But perhaps the most notable aspect of Brandon Transit is its partnership with a local workplace to meet the needs of its employees and help the community's economic development. In 1999, when a division of Maple Leaf Foods opened a new plant several kilometres outside the urban area, the company knew that quality transit service would be key to attracting and retaining the more than 1,400 workers it needed to operate almost around the clock, many of whom would not have access to a car. So the company worked with Brandon Transit to develop effective services that support the plant's shift operations.

Maple Leaf workers can buy transit passes by payroll deduction, and Brandon Transit adjusts schedules as needed (even daily) to meet unexpected variations in shift times. By working hard to create a successful partnership, they have benefited not only themselves, but also their employees, customers and the community at large.



*A Brandon Transit bus arrives to pick up Maple Leaf employees at the end of their shift*

## **References**

- a) Information provided by Statistics Canada, December 2004
- b) All transit operating statistics in this issue paper are from CUTA's 2003 *Canadian Transit Fact Book*
- c) U.S. National Transit Database at [www.ntdprogram.com](http://www.ntdprogram.com)

County of Kings, Nova Scotia

### **Kings Transit takes an entrepreneurial path to success**

In the rural Annapolis Valley along Nova Scotia's north shore, Kings Transit has spent two decades developing into what *Metro Magazine* named in 1999 as one of North America's best small transit systems. It has also become one of Canada's most efficient small systems, recovering 67% of its operating costs from fares in 2003.

Kings Transit provides service directly to the County of Kings and the towns of Berwick, Kentville and Wolfville, as well as to neighbouring Annapolis County and Digby County under contract. Its primary service corridor runs 175 kilometres along Highway 1, and it offers service six days a week using 10 buses. As many as 1,700 riders are carried daily, with many travelling to and from Acadia University, three community colleges and various shopping centres. Almost 30% of customers are seniors, a market that the system has built slowly through outreach and awareness-building. Over the last 10 years, Kings Transit has increased ridership by 43% and revenues by 50%.

The system takes pride in its practical and businesslike approach. New ideas are tested on the ground rather than studied extensively, and are given up to one year to prove themselves. Safety is also a priority, and Kings Transit buses have now run 10 million kilometres without a major collision. One major challenge has been funding, although the costs of repairing and maintaining older buses recently led the system to its first-ever purchase of five new low-floor vehicles.

Kings Transit's experience in building a lean but successful service has led to speaking invitations in other parts of Nova Scotia, and to consulting for communities as far away as Prince Edward Island and the Northwest Territories.

*Buses await their scheduled departure from Kings Transit's headquarters, located in a former train station*



Kings Transit

City of North Bay, Ontario

### **North Bay Transit's U-Pass program makes the grade**

North Bay Transit has a service area that is home to almost 50,000 people, making it one of the larger systems addressed in this issue paper. It stands above most others in terms of effectiveness with more than 45 rides per capita carried in 2003, and also ranks among the top half-dozen in efficiency with a 57% cost-recovery ratio.

The system's planners work carefully to minimize operating expenses, and plan routes to avoid layovers and make maximum use of operators' time. They also offer a flexible dial-a-cab service in some parts of North Bay where fixed-schedule routes don't make financial sense.

One of North Bay Transit's biggest challenges is funding and maintaining its aging fleet, in which the average bus is 16 years old. In 2005, however, the situation will improve with the delivery of four new buses. The system is also pleased with Ontario's recent dedication of gas tax revenues to public transit, and will consider using some of the new revenue to launch its first-ever aggressive marketing campaign to build ridership.

One factor that helps sustain North Bay's high ridership is the U-Pass program in place at Nipissing University and Canadore College, with a combined population of 3,600 students. The university administration proposed the U-Pass program to improve mobility and security for occupants of a new residence complex at the edge of campus, and to relieve pressure on campus parking lots. Student groups have recently worked with North Bay Transit to modify and add routes that better suit their travel needs. An unexpected benefit of the U-Pass program has been its effectiveness as a recruitment tool, reassuring parents who are concerned about their children's safety while away at school.



North Bay Transit

*North Bay Transit bus pauses by the city's famous arch, built in 1928 to mark the gateway between north and south Ontario*

Sunshine Coast Regional District, British Columbia

### **Small is beautiful for Sunshine Coast Transit**

Sunshine Coast is a community of almost 25,000 people on the B.C. coast just north of Vancouver, including the towns of Gibsons and Sechelt. Because there are no roads linking Sunshine Coast to the nearby city, the many residents who commute to jobs in Vancouver have to make the trip by water.

Helping residents get to and from the BC Ferries terminal makes up almost one-third of Sunshine Coast Transit's business. To avoid stranding customers, bus operators stay in contact with the ferries and can adjust their departure times for vessels that are behind schedule.

Sunshine Coast Transit makes considered use of its four low-floor buses. Careful planning of routes and frequencies has made it one of the most efficient and effective smaller systems in Canada. Routes are concentrated in areas that offer reliable ridership, and by connecting the community's main activity centres they make transit as practical as possible. In 2003 the system carried over 21 rides per capita and recovered 66% of its operating costs — putting it among the top half-dozen smaller systems in Canada in both respects.

The Canadian Urban Transit Association (CUTA) is the voice of Canada's public transit industry. For additional information, including research reports, industry updates, news bulletins and more, please contact us or visit our website.

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