

# Connecting Communities

**Strengthening public transportation  
options in rural Manitoba**

**Hannah Muhajarine**  
October 2024





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transportation options in rural  
Manitoba

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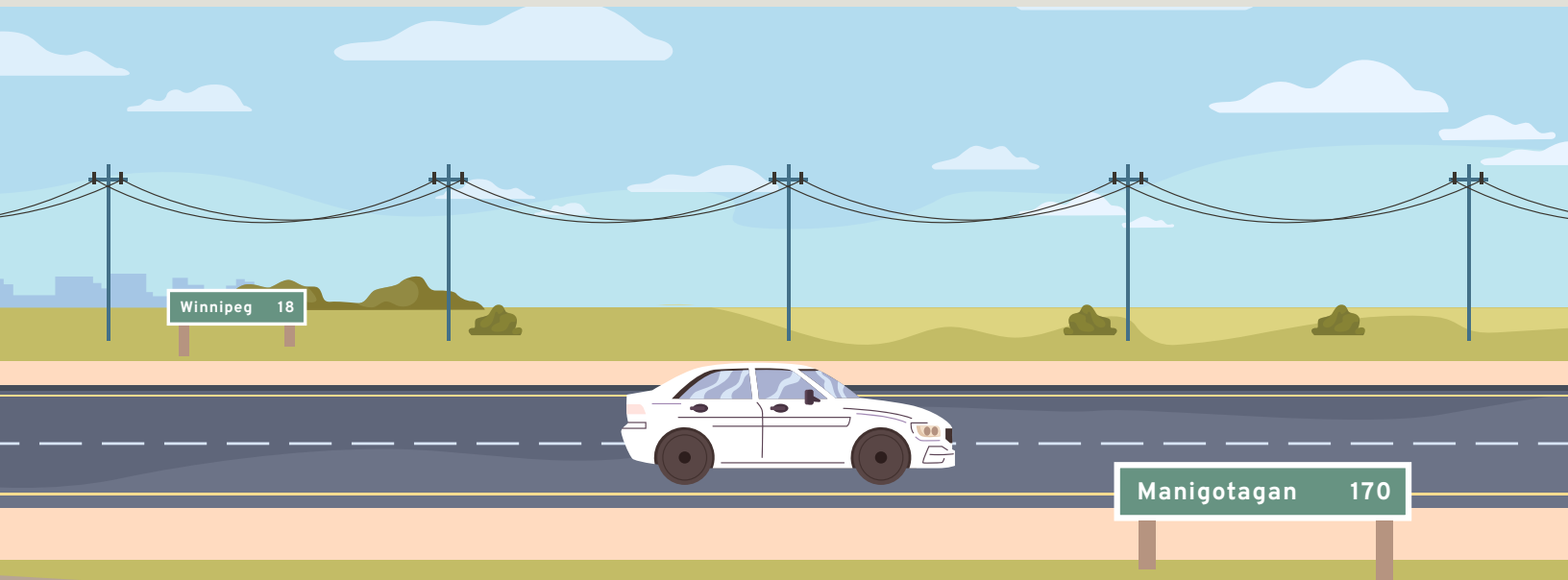
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# Introduction

Personal transportation in rural Manitoba is associated strongly with the car, which we associate with freedom, independence, and efficiency.

However, this overlooks the fact that there are many people living in rural communities (including seniors, individuals living with disabilities, low-income individuals, youth, newcomers, women, and Indigenous peoples) who are less likely to be able to drive or access a car, and who require other affordable transportation options. There is a need for a more diverse rural transportation system that matches rural community members' diverse situations and needs.

Building a more diverse transportation system, that shifts away from individual car use, should also be seen as a climate solution. While much of climate policy is currently focused on electrification, the goal of climate policymakers should not be limited to electrification and greenhouse gas emissions reduction while maintaining the problems and inequities of the status quo.

Rural transit can reduce transportation emissions while also increasing transportation equity, strengthening rural economies and communities, providing a safe transportation option for Indigenous women, girls, and 2-Spirit people, and increasing transportation safety.

Policymakers should look for climate solutions that offer an opportunity to achieve multiple interlinked goals around climate, social policy, and health with the same investment.

Low-density, long distances, and the fact that many public transit riders or potential riders are lower-income means that it can be challenging to create a business case for inter-community transit. The history of Greyhound demonstrates the challenges of running an inter-community

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**Policymakers should [aim to] achieve multiple interlinked goals around climate, social policy, and health with the same investment.**

service for profit. This is why, just as urban transit, public investment and leadership is required. This is not to discount the technical and economic challenges involved in designing a sustainable inter-community transit system. But it should be recognized that the decision to invest or not invest in inter-community transit is not just a technical or economic choice, but a political one. Inter-community transit is crucial to create equitable access, especially between urban and rural communities, to services that are considered a public good, such as education and healthcare, as well as employment and economic participation. When transportation is recognized as a public good and a human right in itself, public investment is justified.

Towns, rural municipalities, and smaller cities have an important role to play in designing and delivering inter-community transit services that suit their local context and needs. However, responsibility cannot be totally downgraded to local governments. Municipalities and other local partners face funding constraints; limited staff capacity, knowledge, and expertise; a lack of data; and few structures for coordination and communication. These barriers require provincial support to overcome. Inter-community transit touches on many specific provincial responsibilities, including healthcare, seniors, immigration, economic development, and of course, provincial transportation infrastructure. Provincial leadership and support are critical for building an inter-community transit system that is sustainable and efficient and achieves a baseline level of transportation access across the province.

This paper examines how the province can better support inter-community transit solutions in rural and remote Manitoba. The term “inter-community” refers to travel between municipalities, rural areas, Indigenous communities, and other settlements. While there are many forms of inter-community transit including ride-shares, car-shares, or rail travel, this paper focuses mostly on inter-community transit using buses and vans. For the purposes of this paper “rural and remote Manitoba” is defined as outside the City of Winnipeg, but including the Winnipeg Metropolitan Region as well as smaller urban centres like Brandon and Thompson.

The purpose of this research project was to identify the need for additional inter-community transportation options in rural Manitoba; the impact caused by a lack of adequate options; and especially, the desired solutions. A few key questions guided the exploration of solutions:

Why is inter-community transit important?

What is the role of the public versus private sector in delivering inter-community transit?

What is the role of the province versus municipalities and local organizations in delivering inter-community transit?

This paper includes an exploration of the positive outcomes of inter-community transportation demonstrated in Manitoba and in other jurisdictions; an overview of current Manitoba provincial policy, programs, and regulatory structures relating to inter-community transportation; case studies from Ontario and Nova Scotia; and the findings from a public consultation with rural Manitobans. The paper concludes with a set of recommendations targeted at the provincial government.

## SECTION 1

# Why inter-community public transit?

Inter-community public transit has multiple interconnected benefits, including creating prosperous and equitable rural communities; supporting transportation equity across different groups of people; and reducing transportation emissions. The following section explores evidence on the positive outcomes associated with inter-community transit with examples from beyond as well as within Manitoba. The impact of inter-community transit is explored in terms of positive outcomes where inter-community service is present, as well as negative outcomes stemming from its absence.

## Rural communities, services, and economies

Rural communities suffer from underinvestment in public infrastructure and services compared to urban centres, including healthcare and transportation, and private internet and cell coverage. These gaps interconnect and reinforce each other. The absence of public infrastructure means rural residents must rely on themselves or friends and family—while most urban residents benefit from publicly owned and subsidized transit, rural residents must drive their own vehicle or find a ride. This translates into disadvantages between rural and urban community members, even when other factors (age, gender, race, income) are accounted for.<sup>1</sup> Cindy Hanson argues that the transportation disadvantage rural residents face “is more a result of political decisions than

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[Gaps in rural public transit] negatively impact rural economies and translate into economic disadvantage for Manitoban rural communities.

1 Hanson et al. “Here Today, Gone Tomorrow.” University of Regina. 2021. <https://ourspace.uregina.ca/server/api/core/bitstreams/4f9df7a5-48ab-4d70-acc7-0c5a11439f38/content>

technical constraints”<sup>2</sup>, indicative of an austerity decision to withdraw public funds from communities.

Gaps in healthcare services are being keenly felt in rural Manitoba, as facilities across the province face staffing shortages leading to inadequate emergency and primary care. While part of the solution must be increasing incentives to recruit rural healthcare providers so residents can access care within their own community, it is also important to recognize the critical role transportation plays within the rural healthcare system. Hanson et al (2021) find that the relationship of transportation to healthcare access and health outcomes for rural communities in Canada is vastly under-researched. The health impacts of the rural “transportation deficit” include missed appointments,<sup>3</sup> missed or less frequent treatments,<sup>4</sup> and longer and more dangerous emergency trips.<sup>5</sup> Lack of transportation also negatively contributes to broader health determinants such as loneliness and isolation, especially among seniors.<sup>6</sup> Transportation should be understood as a primary structural determinant of health,<sup>7</sup> which means investments in rural public transportation are an investment in rural healthcare.

## **Rural Economies**

Transportation also plays an important role in rural economies, connecting residents to jobs, goods and services. In Minnesota, an analysis found that rural transit systems had an average 2.2 economic benefit-cost ratio.<sup>8</sup> Godavarthy, Mattson, and Ndembe (2014) identify three categories of economic benefits flowing from rural transit. These include: economic impacts (economic activity resulting from the existence of transit operations, including direct and indirect job creation); low-cost mobility benefits (benefits of trips made that would otherwise be foregone in the absence of transit, for example medical trips); and transportation cost savings (savings earned by an individual choosing to use transit instead of driving).<sup>9</sup>

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- 2 Hanson et al. “Here Today, Gone Tomorrow: Public Transportation and Vulnerabilities in Rural and Remote Canada.” University of Regina. 2021. <https://ourspace.uregina.ca/server/api/core/bitstreams/4f9df7a5-48ab-4d70-acc7-0c5a11439f38/content>
  - 3 Del Rio M, et al. “Transportation matters: A health impact assessment in rural New Mexico.” *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health* 2017; 629(14). Available from: <https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph14060629>
  - 4 Kamboj N, et al. “An exploration of how persons receiving in-center hemodialysis describe how access to transportation for treatment influences their overall health.” *Nephrology Nursing Journal* 2021; 48(2)137–145. Available from: <https://doi.org/10.37526/1526-744X.2021.48.2.137>
  - 5 Hamadani F. “Demographic and ecologic analysis of traumatic injury transport outcomes and health care infrastructure in northern Quebec’s rural communities.” [master’s thesis]. Quebec: McGill University; 2013
  - 6 Lutz H. “Transportation solutions for rural seniors: A literature review.” Report for the Age-Friendly Community Initiative. June 2014. British Columbia: Nelson CARES Society.
  - 7 Hanson et al. “Here Today, Gone Tomorrow: Public Transportation and Vulnerabilities in Rural and Remote Canada.” University of Regina. 2021. <https://ourspace.uregina.ca/server/api/core/bitstreams/4f9df7a5-48ab-4d70-acc7-0c5a11439f38/content>
  - 8 Mattson, Jeremy. “Measuring the Economic Benefits of Rural and Small Urban Transit Services in Greater Minnesota.” 2020. Small Urban and Rural Centre on Mobility. <https://www.ugpti.org/resources/reports/details.php?id=997&program=surcom>
  - 9 Godavarthy, Ranjit, Jeremy Mattson, and Elvis Ndembe. “Cost-Benefit Analysis of Rural and Small Urban Transit.” Small Urban and Rural Center on Mobility (SURCOM), Upper Great Plains Transportation Institute. 2014. <https://www.ugpti.org/resources/reports/downloads/2014-07-cost-benefit-analysis.pdf>

In a 2011 provincial consultation, rural Manitobans identified some of the benefits Greyhound provided in terms of this last category of economic impacts, including freight services (especially the transport of reasonably-priced goods to northern communities) and the transport of visitors into rural communities to spend money at local businesses.<sup>10</sup> The loss of Greyhound and the resulting gap in inter-community public transportation infrastructure negatively impact rural economies and translate into economic disadvantage for Manitoban rural communities.<sup>11</sup>

## **Road safety**

Intercommunity public transit can also increase road safety for rural and remote communities. The risk of collision increases in cases where seniors, medical patients, or others who are not in good condition to drive are forced to do so because of a lack of other options. Driving in rural and remote areas is already more dangerous due to weather, poor road conditions, and the risk of hitting an animal. Gaps in amenities and cell phone coverage can also leave drivers stranded should they be involved in a collision.<sup>12</sup> Rates of accidents for busses are lower than for private vehicles, and bus passengers involved in collisions are less likely to suffer fatalities.<sup>13</sup>

Many rural roads in Manitoba are gravel, so paving more rural highways would facilitate bus transportation while increasing road safety for all modes of travel. Access to an inter-community public transit option would increase road safety for many rural drivers.

People value living in rural communities for the social and familial connections, their work, and lifestyle. But when healthcare, economic goods and services, and jobs become too inaccessible for them or their families, people may be forced to move into the city. Public transportation is necessary for the continuing vitality and viability of rural communities.

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**Rates of accidents for busses are lower than for private vehicles, and bus passengers involved in collisions are less likely to suffer fatalities.**

## **Transportation equity**

Rural transportation also produces positive equity outcomes for marginalized groups living in rural communities, including seniors, newcomers, disabled people, low-income, youth, women, and Indigenous people. These are groups that may be less likely to have a drivers' licence; less

10 Council of Deputy Ministers, "Intercity Bus Services Task Force Final Report." 2010. <https://comt.ca/Reports/Intercity%20Bus%20Services%20Task%20Force%20Report%202010.pdf>

11 Hanson et al. Here Today, Gone Tomorrow," 2021. <https://ourspace.uregina.ca/server/api/core/bitstreams/4f9df7a5-48ab-4d70-acc7-0c5a11439f38/content>

12 Jaffee et al. "Transportation as Infrastructure in Rural and Remote Canada," 2021. <https://www.criaw-icref.ca/wp-content/uploads/2022/08/Transportation-as-Infrastructure-in-Rural-Remote-Canada-FS-2-EN.pdf>

13 Schiefke, Peter. "Improving Bus Connectivity in Canada: Report of the Standing Committee on Transport, Infrastructure, and Communities." Standing Committee on Transport, Infrastructure, and Communities. May 2023. [https://www.ourcommons.ca/content/Committee/441/TRAN/Reports/RP12444313/441\\_TRAN\\_Rpt13\\_PDF/441\\_TRAN\\_Rpt13-e.pdf](https://www.ourcommons.ca/content/Committee/441/TRAN/Reports/RP12444313/441_TRAN_Rpt13_PDF/441_TRAN_Rpt13-e.pdf)

likely to be able to afford or access a vehicle; and less likely to be able to drive for physical, cognitive, or financial reasons. Like other parts of rural Canada,<sup>14</sup> rural Manitoba communities tend to have relatively higher populations of these marginalized groups compared to urban areas, especially low-income, seniors, and Indigenous people.<sup>15</sup>

A study in the US shows that transportation-disadvantaged groups are even more likely to rely on public transportation (where it is available) in rural and small communities.<sup>16</sup> Surveys of rural transit systems in North Dakota,<sup>17</sup> Minnesota,<sup>18</sup> and Saskatchewan<sup>19</sup> show that marginalized groups, including women, people with disabilities, low-income, seniors and youth, and Indigenous people make up a large percentage of ridership. Research by Alhassan (2021) found that since the loss of the Saskatchewan Transportation Company, one disabled participant had not been able to access essential medical treatment in two years, while others described the financial strain of being forced to purchase a vehicle.<sup>20</sup> As touched on above, where rural transit does exist, a significant portion of the economic benefits flow from providing medical and work trips to transit-dependent individuals who would otherwise not be able to make the trip.<sup>21</sup> Rural transit plays an important role in enabling equity-seeking groups access to transportation, which translates into important medical, well-being, safety, and social outcomes for those groups as well as positive economic and social outcomes for communities as a whole.

### **Safe transportation for Indigenous women, girls, and Two-Spirit people**

One of the most important equity-related roles rural transportation can play is providing a safe way of travel for Indigenous women, girls, and Two-Spirit plus people. When Greyhound announced its withdrawal from Western Canada, political leaders and commentators such as Bernadette Smith, Pam Palmater, and the Native Women's Association of Canada expressed concerns that it could lead to another "Highway of Tears" in Manitoba, as more Indigenous women and girls would be made vulnerable as they would be forced to hitchhike to travel

14 Hanson et al. "Here Today, Gone Tomorrow." 2021. <https://ourspace.uregina.ca/server/api/core/bitstreams/4f9df7a5-48ab-4d70-acc7-0c5a11439f38/content>

15 Government of Manitoba. "Rural Manitoba Economic Profile." 2021. [https://www.gov.mb.ca/jec/lmi/pdfs/ecprofiles/rural\\_mb\\_ep\\_2021.pdf](https://www.gov.mb.ca/jec/lmi/pdfs/ecprofiles/rural_mb_ep_2021.pdf)

16 Mattson, Jeremy and Antonio Molina. Travel Behavior of Transportation-Disadvantaged Populations: Trends and Geographic Disparities. 2022. Small Urban and Rural Centre on Mobility. <https://www.ugpti.org/resources/reports/details.php?id=1057&program=surcom>

17 Mattson, Jeremy, Dilip Mistry, and Jill Hough. "Assessment of North Dakota Mobility Options, Transit Needs, and Characteristics of Users." 2020. Small Urban and Rural Center on Mobility (SURCOM), Upper Great Plains Transportation Institute. <https://www.ugpti.org/resources/reports/downloads/dp-307.pdf>

18 Mattson, Jeremy. "Measuring the Economic Benefits of Rural and Small Urban Transit Services in Greater Minnesota." 2020. Upper Great Plains Transportation Institute. North Dakota State University. <https://mdl.mndot.gov/items/202010>

19 Saskatchewan Transportation Company. "2016-17 Annual Report," Crown Investments Corporation of Saskatchewan. 2017. <https://www.cicorp.sk.ca/pub/Reports/STC%20Reports/2016-17-stc-annual-report.pdf>

20 Alhassan, Jacob et al. "It feels like somebody cut my legs off": Austerity, transportation and the 'web of dispossession' in Saskatchewan, Canada." Social Science & Medicine, Volume 282, 2021, 114147, ISSN 0277-9536, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.socscimed.2021.114147>

21 Godavarthy, et al. "Cost-Benefit Analysis of Rural and Small Urban Transit." 2014. <https://www.ugpti.org/resources/reports/downloads/2014-07-cost-benefit-analysis.pdf>



between communities.<sup>22,23</sup> A recent study by Adele Perry, Jocelyn Thorpe, and Karine Duhamel at the University of Manitoba confirms the connection between diminishing public transit options in Western Canada and the exposure of Indigenous women and Two-Spirit plus people to violence.<sup>24</sup> The authors take care to emphasize that violence against Indigenous women, girls and Two-Spirit peoples is not somehow “inevitable,” but is tied to specific structures which can be changed—including the transportation system. The National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls called for “safe and affordable transit and transportation services and infrastructure for Indigenous women, girls, and Two-Spirit people living in remote or rural communities.”<sup>25</sup> Providing public transportation to people who have few other options would be a choice to build safer and more equitable rural and Indigenous communities.

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Violence against Indigenous women, girls and Two-Spirit peoples is not somehow “inevitable,” but is tied to specific structures which can be changed—including the transportation system.

## Climate action

Transportation produces 39% of Manitoba’s greenhouse gas emissions, with light-duty (cars, vans and trucks) vehicle travel accounting for over a third of that amount. Reducing transportation emissions is, therefore, critical to meeting provincial and national climate targets.

Much climate policy tends to focus on electrification as the main strategy for reducing transportation emissions.<sup>26</sup> However, modelling for multiple jurisdictions (BC,<sup>27</sup> the US,<sup>28</sup> and Australia<sup>29</sup> respectively) demonstrates that relying on electric vehicles (EVs) as a “silver bullet” is insufficient for meeting shared climate targets limiting warming to 1.5 degrees. Research on EV uptake projects that many vehicles on the road will still be burning gasoline by 2045—

22 Palmater, Pam. “Greyhound Canada’s cuts are a public safety crisis for Indigenous people,” MacLean’s magazine, July 11 2021. <https://macleans.ca/opinion/greyhound-canadas-cuts-are-a-public-safety-crisis-for-indigenous-people/>

23 Macintosh, Maggie, and Larry Kusch. “Fallout from Greyhound Departure.” Winnipeg Free Press, July 10 2018. <https://www.winnipegfreepress.com/breakingnews/2018/07/10/greyhound-exit>

24 Perry, Adele et al. “Missing the Bus.” December 2021. <https://www.winnipegfreepress.com/breakingnews/2018/07/10/greyhound-exit>

25 “Calls for Justice, 4.8” Reclaiming Power and Place: Final Report of the National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls. (2019). [https://www.mmiwg-ffada.ca/wp-content/uploads/2019/06/Calls\\_for\\_Justice.pdf](https://www.mmiwg-ffada.ca/wp-content/uploads/2019/06/Calls_for_Justice.pdf)

26 Litman, Todd. “Comprehensive Transportation Emission Reduction Planning: Guidelines for Evaluating Transportation Emission Reduction Strategies.” Victoria Transport Policy Institute. 2024. <https://www.vtpi.org/cterp.pdf>

27 Mohammad Saeid Atabaki, et al. (2023). “Exploring the role of electrification and modal shift in decarbonizing the road passenger transport in British Columbia, Sustainable Energy Technologies and Assessments, Volume 56, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.seta.2023.103070>

28 Milovanoff, Alexandre, et al. “Electrification of light-duty vehicle fleet alone will not meet mitigation targets.” 2020. <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41558-020-00921-7>

29 Cheung, Hollie, et al. (2023). “Shifting Gear: The Path to Cleaner Transport.” Climate Council. [https://www.climatecouncil.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2023/08/CC\\_MVSA0354-CC-Report-Road-to-Personal-Transport\\_V6-FA-Screen-Single.pdf](https://www.climatecouncil.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2023/08/CC_MVSA0354-CC-Report-Road-to-Personal-Transport_V6-FA-Screen-Single.pdf)

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**Mode-shift away from individual vehicle use should, therefore, also be a climate policy goal, in addition to electrification.**

only a few years before we must be at net zero.<sup>30</sup> Replacing every gas-powered vehicle currently on the road with an electric one also increases global critical mineral demand to a potentially unsustainable degree.<sup>31,32,33</sup>

Mode-shift away from individual vehicle use should, therefore, also be a climate policy goal, in addition to electrification. Provincial climate and transportation plans should include mode-shift targets and reduction targets for vehicle kilometres travelled (VKT). BC’s CleanBC Roadmap, for example, aims to increase sustainable mode share to 30% for 2030, 40% by 2040, and 50% by 2050; and to reduce VKT

by 25% by 2030.<sup>34</sup> Policymakers and planners should also consider Litman’s “transportation hierarchy” framework, under which the first goal is for as many trips as possible to be made using active transportation, followed by public transit, followed by electric vehicles.<sup>35</sup> Mode-shift can be achieved through a combination of policies that internalize the true costs of driving (such as efficient road and parking pricing, fuel taxes, and carbon pricing),<sup>36</sup> as well as investment in efficient and comfortable public transit service and active transportation.

While the greatest vehicle reduction potential exists in an urban context, where higher-density development can make active transportation and public transit highly efficient options, it is still an achievable goal in a rural setting. Individual vehicle travel can be reduced by ensuring essential services like healthcare are distributed and accessible throughout rural Manitoba, reducing the need for long-distance travel in the first place.

Rural bus service may not be able to out-perform private vehicles consistently in terms of efficiency and convenience, but research shows that individual’s transportation choices are influenced by additional factors such as cost, comfort, and safety.<sup>37</sup> A reasonably efficient bus service would still be a desirable option for those with other values like saving on gas and parking costs, avoiding driving during bad weather or in a busy city, or relaxing during their commute. Rural families may have many reasons for not buying an EV yet, including waiting

30 MacLean, Heather L., et al. “We Need More than Just Electric Vehicles.” IEEE Spectrum, IEEE Spectrum, 2023, <https://spectrum.ieee.org/electric-cars-2657880896>

31 Niri, Anahita Jannesar et al. (2024). “Sustainability challenges throughout the electric vehicle battery value chain.” Renewable and Sustainable Energy Reviews, Volume 191. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.rser.2023.114176>

32 Valero, Alicia et al. (2018). “Material bottlenecks in the future development of green technologies,” Renewable and Sustainable Energy Reviews, Volume 93. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.rser.2018.05.041>

33 Harvey, L.D. Danny. (2018). “Resource implications of alternative strategies for achieving zero greenhouse gas emissions from light-duty vehicles by 2060,” Applied Energy, Volume 212. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.apenergy.2017.11.074>

34 CleanBC Roadmap to 2030. Province of British Columbia. [https://www2.gov.bc.ca/assets/gov/environment/climate-change/action/cleanbc/cleanbc\\_roadmap\\_2030.pdf](https://www2.gov.bc.ca/assets/gov/environment/climate-change/action/cleanbc/cleanbc_roadmap_2030.pdf)

35 Litman, Todd. (2024). “Fair Share Transportation Planning: Estimating Non-Auto Travel Demands and Optimal Infrastructure Investments.” Victoria Transport Policy Institute. <https://www.vtppi.org/fstp.pdf>

36 Litman, Todd. (2022). “Socially Optimal Transport Prices and Markets: Principles, Strategies and Impacts.” Victoria Transport Policy Institute. <https://www.vtppi.org/sotpm.pdf>

37 Litman, Todd. (2021). “Evaluating Public Transit as an Energy Conservation and Emission Reduction Strategy.” Victoria Transport Policy Institute. [https://www.vtppi.org/tran\\_climate.pdf](https://www.vtppi.org/tran_climate.pdf)

for their current vehicle to wear out; for EV prices to drop; or for charging infrastructure, along with supporting internet and cell service networks, to become more available. The option of using a rural transit service could enable these families to start reducing vehicle use in the immediate term, including by alleviating the need to purchase a second vehicle.<sup>38</sup> The energy efficiency of buses compared to vehicles depends on how full the transit vehicle is, so rural transit vehicles should be “right-sized” to smaller, rural populations, with services perhaps targeted towards the most frequently travelled routes.

On top of reducing greenhouse gas emissions, rural transit should be valued for its potential to achieve multiple interlinked outcomes for the same investment. “Multi-solving,” is a concept originally coined by Dr. Elizabeth Sawin that formulates an approach to climate action where investments that address multiple issues are prioritized.<sup>39</sup> It has been cited by institutions that include the Federation of Canadian Municipalities’ Green Municipal Fund,<sup>40</sup> Low Carbon Cities Canada,<sup>41</sup> and the World Economic Forum.<sup>42</sup>

Reducing emissions at the scale and time required, while also minimizing environmental and social impacts, requires more than simply electrifying every vehicle. We must also transform our transportation systems to reduce individual vehicle use. Even in a rural context, transit is an important part of an emissions reduction strategy that combines multiple beneficial outcomes.

Inter-community public transit produces multiple inter-linked benefits, many of which are connected to provincial areas of responsibility. These include ensuring access to healthcare and other basic services for rural communities, and especially for seniors, newcomers, Indigenous peoples, and other equity-seeking groups; investing in rural economies; and addressing climate change.

Even if inter-community transit services are only used by some Manitobans, these benefits can ripple across the province in the form of reduced emissions, savings on healthcare and welfare spending, and prosperous, healthy, and safe rural communities. These benefits justify public spending and intervention on the part of all levels of government to create a strong inter-community transit system. The following section examines the province of Manitoba’s current approach to inter-community transit, identifying key gaps when it comes to coordination, funding, and regulation.

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**Rural transit service could enable [families] to start reducing vehicle use in the immediate term, including by alleviating the need to purchase a second vehicle.**

38 Litman, Todd. (2021). “Evaluating Public Transit as an Energy Conservation and Emission Reduction Strategy.” Victoria Transport Policy Institute. [https://www.vtpi.org/tran\\_climate.pdf](https://www.vtpi.org/tran_climate.pdf)

39 Sawin, E. (2018). The Magic of “Multisolving.” Stanford Social Innovation Review. <https://doi.org/10.48558/W5D4-6430>

40 “Three-year Plan: 2023-2026.” Green Municipal Fund. [https://greenmunicipalfund.ca/sites/default/files/2023-07/FCM\\_23-024\\_GMF\\_Strategic\\_Plan\\_E\\_ACC.pdf](https://greenmunicipalfund.ca/sites/default/files/2023-07/FCM_23-024_GMF_Strategic_Plan_E_ACC.pdf)

41 Pickering, Mary and Stefan Hostetter. (2022). “Scaling up climate action through multi-solving.” Low Carbon Cities Canada. <https://lc3.ca/article-multisolving/>

42 Scott, Mike. (2023). “How ‘multi-solve’ measures could make climate action more effective.” World Economic Forum. <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2023/05/multi-solve-climate-action-more-effective/>

## SECTION 2

# Inter-community transportation in Manitoba

## Manitoba's inter-community transportation system

The province of Manitoba is 552,371 square kilometres, spanning the southern Arctic to the boreal shield to the prairies.<sup>43</sup> A total population of 1.3 million means there is an average of only 2.3 people per square kilometre. Just under half of all Manitobans live outside the main metropolitan region of Winnipeg—in smaller cities like Brandon or Thompson, towns, villages, hamlets, First Nations communities, or rural municipalities.<sup>44</sup> Rural and remote communities are not hegemonic—their character varies greatly depending on population, density, and proximity to an urban centre and other communities.

Manitoba's rural population has grown faster than the overall population over the past thirty years, though this growth is concentrated in areas adjacent to urban centres and northern Manitoba.<sup>45</sup>

As a largely rural province with only a single major urban centre, Manitoba needs a robust inter-community transit system to link the province together and deliver multi-faceted benefits to rural communities.

The rural Manitoba transportation system consists of automobile travel, handi-vans, limited bus service, rail,

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Rural and northern households have greater obstacles to reducing transportation emissions than urban households due to longer travel distances [in daily life].

43 Statistics Canada, “Province of Manitoba,” Focus on Geography Series, 2016 Census. 2017. <https://www12.statcan.gc.ca/census-recensement/2016/as-sa/fogs-spg/Facts-pr-eng.cfm?Lang=eng&GK=PR&GC=46&TOPIC=1>

44 Ashton, Bill et al. “Manitoba,” State of Rural Canada Report. 2015. <https://sorc.crrf.ca/manitoba/>

45 Ashton, Bill et al. “Manitoba,” <https://sorc.crrf.ca/manitoba/>

and air.<sup>46</sup> Via Rail offers passenger rail service between Winnipeg, the Pas, Thompson, and Churchill, as well as between Winnipeg and neighbouring provinces. Air transport may be used for medical transport for residents in northern communities, with passenger services provided by private companies Calm Air and Perimeter Aviation. Taxis and bus companies provide some service in certain areas. Volunteer driver programs provide some service to seniors coordinated by municipalities and local non-profits.

The provincial government offers a few programs limited to specific populations and needs, including the Mobility Disadvantaged Transportation Program and the Northern Manitoba Patient Transportation Program, which are delivered at the local level in partnership with municipalities and the Northern Health Region, respectively.

On the private sector side, Greyhound Canada was a major provider of inter-community bus service until the company cancelled all its Manitoban routes in 2018. In its absence, a handful of smaller carriers have sprung up mostly in the northern region, where the business case for service is more viable. But the province's deregulation of the industry over the past 15 years has created a challenging environment for northern carriers and their passengers alike.

## Provincial policies and programs

There are few provincial plans related to inter-community transportation. The Manitoba Climate and Green Plan created by the previous Progressive Conservative government includes the line: "Rural and northern households have greater obstacles to reducing transportation emissions than urban households due to longer travel distances that are part of daily life and less flexibility to shift to lower carbon transportation. Policy approaches need to account for this." However, despite representing Manitoba's largest source of carbon pollution, transportation is not among the four key pillars included in the plan, and it offers no specific targets or indicators related to reducing transportation emissions.

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**Little has changed for the [Mobility Disadvantaged Transportation Program] over the last ten years, and provincial funding has not increased in over ten years.**

A 2021 report from the expert advisory council to the Minister of Environment and Climate Change (then called Conservation and Climate) recommended that the province develop a Green Transportation Strategy by the end of 2022, which did not happen. While much of the report's focus was on electrification, it does list "intra-provincial transit" as one of the top economic opportunities identified by stakeholders. It also includes a recommendation to develop regional transit plans around urban centres.<sup>47</sup> The Manitoba Capital Region Transportation Master Plan (2014) also recommends a feasibility study on regional transit service within the

46 Government of Manitoba. "Look North: Transportation." <https://www.gov.mb.ca/looknorth/invest/transportation.html>

47 "Report of the Expert Advisory Council to the Minister of Conservation & Climate: Recommendations for a Green Transportation Strategy for Manitoba." 2021. [https://manitoba.ca/asset\\_library/en/eac/green\\_transportation.pdf](https://manitoba.ca/asset_library/en/eac/green_transportation.pdf)

Capital Region, which may be included in the upcoming Transportation Master Plan.

Locally-led inter-community transportation services are eligible for funding programs delivered by Municipal and Northern Relations (MNR) and Environment and Climate Change (ECC), as well as at the federal level.

MNR's Mobility Disadvantaged Transportation Program funds handi-vans services in 69 municipalities. These handi-vans provide local medical, shopping, and recreational transportation to nearby communities for residents with mobility-challenges. The MDTP provides a start-up grant of \$6000; one-time capital grants for the purchase of new capital assets (50% of the cost, up to a maximum \$10,000) and annual operating funding (37.5% of the gross operating expenses, up to a maximum of \$20,000 per year for one vehicle or \$30,000 per year for two vehicles).<sup>48</sup> Municipalities must contribute the remaining operating expenses, including through passenger fares. Municipalities may choose whether to contract a provider or to operate the service themselves. Depending on funding levels, drivers might be volunteers or might be professionally hired. Handi-van services must offer door-to-door service, and require booking a day in advance. According to Manitoba Municipal Relations, the province spent \$1.7 million on the MDTP in 2022 and supported handi-van services in 69 communities.<sup>49</sup>

Research conducted by Dr. Gina Sylvestre in 2006<sup>50</sup> found that handi-van services faced a range of challenges, particularly around operational costs as well as a lack of coordination among services within the same area. Recommendations to address the first issue included better calculation of the actual yearly operating costs, as well as assessing what users can afford to pay, and increasing government funding to avoid costs being passed on to users alone. Greater coordination of operations was also identified as a solution, along with establishing stronger systems for sharing information about challenges and best-practices among handi-van operators. An additional recommendation was for the MDTP guidelines to be revised to permit handi-vans to be used as community vans that can offer services to other types of passengers (non-mobility challenged) during off-hours. This would provide handi-vans with an additional way to generate revenue while expanding the range of transportation services available to rural community members. Despite these recommendations, little has changed for the MDTP program over the last ten years, and provincial funding has not increased in over ten years.

Two climate programs from ECC—the former Community Led Emissions Reduction program, and the current Conservation and Climate Fund—may also include community transportation projects, although transportation is not the focus.

48 Municipal Relations, "Mobility Disadvantaged Transportation Program Guidelines." Government of Manitoba. [https://www.gov.mb.ca/mr/mfpp/pubs/mdtp\\_program\\_guidelines.pdf](https://www.gov.mb.ca/mr/mfpp/pubs/mdtp_program_guidelines.pdf)

49 Municipal Relations, "Annual Report 2021-2022." Government of Manitoba. 2022. [https://www.manitoba.ca/mr/reports/annualreports/pubs/mr\\_annual\\_report\\_2021-22.pdf](https://www.manitoba.ca/mr/reports/annualreports/pubs/mr_annual_report_2021-22.pdf)

50 Sylvestre, G, et al. 2006. "The Mobility Needs and Transportation Issues of the Aging Population in Rural Manitoba." Prepared for the Manitoba Seniors and Healthy Aging Secretariat. Institute of Urban Studies. <https://core.ac.uk/download/144470191.pdf>

The provincial government also funds the Northern Manitoba Patient Transportation (NMPT) program.<sup>51</sup> Administered through the Northern Health Region, the NMPT program subsidizes medical transportation costs for Manitoba residents living north of the 53rd parallel who are required to travel outside their community to access medical care. Patients pay up front and are reimbursed for part of their expenses—it does not cover all the costs associated with travel. The program covers all modes of transportation: private vehicle, air, bus, or train, with the mode of transportation recommended by the health care provider. The program also covers partial costs for patient escorts, so long as the escort is required for medical reasons. In 2022, the Northern Health Region spent \$22 million on this program.<sup>52</sup>

The federal Rural Transit Solutions Fund (RTSF) is currently the only funding program available to communities in Manitoba focused directly on general rural transportation. Municipalities, non-profits, and Indigenous governments have been able to apply for funding for planning and design as well as capital investments for rural transportation projects since 2021. However, the RTSF does not provide operational funding, or support longer-distance regional initiatives.<sup>53</sup> In July 2024, the federal government announced the Canada Public Transit Fund, which will launch in 2026, as the RTSF closes. The fund includes a targeted funding stream which will support rural transit projects, but still does not cover operating costs.<sup>54</sup>

The Green Municipal Fund, offered by the Federation of Canadian Municipalities, also provides municipalities and project partners funding for planning, studies, and capital projects related to sustainability. However, transportation projects are limited to electrification only. Smaller municipalities may also not be able to make use of capital funding if it is primarily loan-based.

Though inter-community transit is not a focus area in many provincial plans, the province does help fund some inter-community services where a business case is not viable or services may be expensive. Programs are focused on supporting northern medical travel as well as helping seniors and those with higher mobility needs to access transportation. Only the federal RTSF program is explicitly focused on rural transit, allowing local partners to design services targeted at the specific needs of their community—though still not allowing long distance inter-community travel. Considered all together, there remains a gap in public funding for rural inter-community transit initiatives that provide regional and long-distance, inclusive services.

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51 Northern Health Region, “Northern Manitoba Patient Transportation Program.” <https://northernhealthregion.com/programs-and-services/northern-patient-transportation-program-nptp/>

52 Northern Health Region, “Annual Report 2021-2022.” 2022. <https://northernhealthregion.com/wp-content/uploads/2022/09/NHR-Annual-Report-2021-22.pdf>

53 Government of Canada, “Rural Transit Solutions Fund: Overview,” <https://housing-infrastructure.canada.ca/rural-trans-rural/index-eng.html>

54 Government of Canada, “Targeted Funding Stream, “ Canada Public Transit Fund <https://housing-infrastructure.canada.ca/cptf-ftcc/tf-fc/index-eng.html>

## Greyhound and the deregulation of the inter-community bus industry

Greyhound Canada was once the main provider of long-distance inter-community bus service within Manitoba and beyond. Along with passenger service, Greyhound provided parcel and freight services to individuals, businesses, and government departments. In 2018—the year the company announced it was withdrawing from Western Canada—Greyhound’s Manitoba network connected 114 communities and served 92,000 passengers a year.<sup>55</sup> This included Thompson, Gillam, Cross Lake, Flin Flon, and Winnipeg, as well as interprovincial connections to Calgary, Regina, and Thunder Bay.

The company canceled services because it claimed it was no longer able to make a profit from its Western routes, citing declining ridership as well as competition from publicly owned, subsidized services such as Via Rail.<sup>56</sup> Though the federal government offered to provide \$10 million among the provinces to subsidize affected routes for a transitional period,<sup>57</sup> only BC accepted, using the money to establish the Crown Corporation BC Bus North. In 2021, Greyhound canceled its remaining Canadian routes.

Greyhound’s withdrawal from Manitoba had been preceded by a spiral of decreasing regulation and declining service. Prior to 2012, the province had allowed Greyhound to operate with essentially a “regulated monopoly” on certain routes.<sup>58</sup> Under this regulatory regime, the Motor Transport Board assigned routes to specific carriers. New carriers, or carriers seeking to start up new routes, would have to apply to the Motor Transport Board and prove that the services were necessary before a public hearing. Carriers also had to seek approval from the Board in order to make changes to fares or scheduling, or to cancel routes. This model meant that Greyhound was able to subsidize the more remote routes it was assigned using the higher profits it earned from more densely-populated routes, without having to worry about competition.

However, faced with declining profits, Greyhound began to pressure all the Canadian provinces to lessen regulations and allow it more freedom to establish or cut routes. Manitoba moved to lift regulations on the inter-community bus industry with the passage of Bill 5 in 2012. The new regulatory framework, which came into effect on July 1, 2012, “provided carriers with freedom to establish routes, schedules, and fares at their discretion, subject to safety and insurance requirements.”<sup>59</sup> It also ended subsidies to private carriers. Soon after, Greyhound gave the newly

55 CBC News. “Pending end to Greyhound service a shock to Manitoba customers,” July 9, 2018. <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/manitoba/greyhound-amc-bus-cancellation-1.4739787>

56 Schiefke, Peter. “Improving Bus Connectivity in Canada,” [https://www.ourcommons.ca/content/Committee/441/TRAN/Reports/RP12444313/441\\_TRAN\\_Rpt13\\_PDF/441\\_TRAN\\_Rpt13-e.pdf](https://www.ourcommons.ca/content/Committee/441/TRAN/Reports/RP12444313/441_TRAN_Rpt13_PDF/441_TRAN_Rpt13-e.pdf)

57 Transport Canada. “The Government of Canada addresses Greyhound Canada’s discontinuation of bus routes.” Government of Canada. October 31, 2018. <https://www.canada.ca/en/transport-canada/news/2018/10/the-government-of-canada-addresses-greyhound-canadas-discontinuation-of-bus-routes.html>

58 Pauls, Karen. “Small-town Canada mourns the loss of Greyhound bus service in the West,” CBC News. October 30, 2018. <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/manitoba/small-town-canada-mourns-the-loss-of-greyhound-bus-service-in-the-west-1.4883900>

59 “MB Announces Deregulation of Scheduled Intercity Bus Services,” BC Trucking Association, March 22, 2010. <https://www.bctrucking.com/bulletin/2012/03/22/mb-announces-deregulation-scheduled-intercity-bus-services>



required 90 days notice that it was ending service for twelve less profitable routes, affecting Pine Falls, Gimli, Russell, Carman, and Steinbach, as well as reducing service to Brandon.<sup>60</sup>

The provincial government implemented a second round of deregulation in June 2018, with the passage of the *Traffic and Transportation Modernization Act*, which eliminated the Motor Transport Board and public hearings altogether.<sup>61</sup> By the time this round of regulatory changes came into effect in March of 2019, Greyhound had already withdrawn completely, leaving inter-community bus services to a handful of smaller carriers.

No formal research studies have been conducted on the loss of Greyhound in Manitoba. Media coverage, however, included testimonies from rural residents and political leaders on the impacts the loss of inter-community transit service would have on themselves and their communities, especially in the north. News stories covered feelings of isolation, and the disconnection between family and friends in different communities; the importance of the bus for medical travel; the economic impacts on riders who were now forced to purchase more expensive plane tickets if they wanted or needed to leave their community; and the renewed risk to Indigenous women, girls, and Two-Spirit plus people left without a safe transportation option.<sup>62,63,64,65,66</sup> Dennis Fenske, the Mayor of Thompson at the time, decried “transportation in the north being driven by the bottom line.”<sup>67</sup>

A national survey conducted soon after the loss of Greyhound from Western Canada found that the majority of Canadians, including a majority of Manitobans, believed that the government (either provincial or federal) should step in to provide services, rather than relying on the

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[Media coverage on the loss of Greyhound included] testimonies from rural residents and political leaders on the impacts the loss of inter-community transit service would have on themselves and their communities, especially in the north.

60 Lambert, Steve, “Greyhound Canada announces service cuts across Manitoba this summer,” The Canadian Press, Global News, April 5, 2012. <https://globalnews.ca/news/231045/greyhound-canada-announces-service-cuts-across-manitoba-this-summer-3/>

61 “Traffic and Transportation Modernization Act,” Bill 14, 3rd Session, 41st Legislature, Legislative Assembly of Manitoba. 2017-2018. <https://web2.gov.mb.ca/bills/41-3/b014e.php>

62 Palmater, Pam, “Greyhound Canada’s cuts are a public safety crisis for Indigenous people,” July 11 2021. <https://macleans.ca/opinion/greyhound-canadas-cuts-are-a-public-safety-crisis-for-indigenous-people/>

63 Lambert, Steve & Bill Graveland, “Loss of Greyhound bus service makes some rural areas feel ‘cut off’” The Canadian Press, Global News, July 10, 2018. <https://globalnews.ca/news/4323209/greyhound-bus-service-cuts-western-canada-rural-areas/>

64 Coubrough, Jill, “End of Greyhound service will have ‘huge impact’ on Manitoba’s north, leaders say,” CBC News, July 10, 2018. <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/manitoba/greyhound-northern-manitoba-1.4741300>

65 Martens, Kathleen, “Feds should be doing something about loss of Greyhound bus service: MMIWG advocates,” APTN News, May 20, 2021. <https://www.aptnnews.ca/national-news/feds-should-be-doing-something-about-loss-of-greyhound-bus-service-mmiwg-advocates/>

66 CBC News, “Pending end to Greyhound service a shock to customers,” July 9, 2018. <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/manitoba/greyhound-amc-bus-cancellation-1.4739787>

67 Dacey, Elisha, “‘Shock but not surprised’: Manitobans react to Greyhound Bus shutdown,” Global News, July 9, 2018. <https://globalnews.ca/news/4321313/shock-but-not-surprised-manitobans-react-to-greyhound-bus-shutdown/>

private market. An even higher majority (64%) of Manitobans surveyed supported “a rural bus service funded by the provincial government.”<sup>68</sup>

Instead, the province has continued to leave bus service up to the private sector, now left without the subsidies or regulatory monopoly which Greyhound benefitted from. In the years following Greyhound’s exit, companies such as Kasper Transportation expanded their services and some new, smaller companies emerged. Five years later, the scheduled inter-community bus network consists of:

### **Provincial**

**Mahihkan Bus Lines** (formerly Kelsey Bus Lines): operates scheduled motorcoach service multiple days a week between Winnipeg and Flin Flon, and Winnipeg and Thompson.

**NCN Thompson Bus Lines:** operates daily scheduled motorcoach service between Thompson and Winnipeg, and multiple days a week routes between Thompson and Cross Lake, and Thompson and Split Lake.

**Maple Bus Lines:** operates scheduled motorcoach service six days a week between Winnipeg and Thompson.

**Brandon Air Shuttle:** operates daily scheduled service with 10-person passenger vans between Dauphin and Brandon, and Brandon and Winnipeg airport.

**Southeast Shuttle:** operates on-demand service using a 10-person passenger van between La Broquerie, Lorette, Landmark, Niverville, and Winnipeg, with informal door-to-door service within Steinbach.

### **Inter-provincial**

**Rider Express:** operates weekly scheduled motorcoach service between Winnipeg and Regina, providing connections to cities in the rest of Western Canada.

**Kasper Transportation:** operates daily scheduled motorcoach service between Winnipeg and Thunder Bay.

**Ontario Northland:** operates scheduled motorcoach service six days a week between Winnipeg and Thunder Bay, with connections to Ottawa and Toronto.

Gaps remain, especially in southern and southeastern Manitoba, where various companies have tried and failed to establish a route between Selkirk and Winnipeg or Steinbach and Winnipeg.<sup>69</sup> In the north, the lack of routes between Gillam and Thompson represent a significant gap.

Without public subsidies, carriers struggle to establish themselves without any financial support except for what they can make off of rural passengers. Representatives of companies

68 “Most residents of Western Canada have used a Greyhound Bus at least once in their lives,” Angus Reid Institute, July 27, 2018. <https://angusreid.org/greyhound-bus/> Additional data: <http://angusreid.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/07/2018.07.24-Greyhound-ReleaseTables.pdf>

69 Vanderhart, Tessa, “Routes of Isolation,” Winnipeg Free Press, August 30, 2019. <https://www.winnipegfreepress.com/featured/2019/08/30/routes-of-isolationforecast-bleak-with-a-chance-of-bus-service>

Rider Express and Kasper Transportation have both spoken publicly about the need for provincial and federal subsidies to maintain services. Without the Motor Transport Board preventing competition and ensuring a balance of service between more and less densely-populated routes, carriers also need to keep prices lower than competitors vying for the same routes. In an interview in the Winnipeg Free Press, the owner of Brandon Air Shuttle Reg Hickmott claims that a company must be prepared to suffer five years of losses on a new route in order to build up a consistent customer base.<sup>70</sup> This uncertainty translates into transportation precarity for rural community members, who cannot count on how long a particular route or company will last.

The deregulation process has also led to significant safety concerns. The competitive environment encourages carriers to find ways to keep costs down, which can lead to cutting corners and inadequate service. Several stories in the Winnipeg Free Press between 2019 and 2023 have reported on safety issues pertaining to northern bus carriers.<sup>71,72,73,74</sup> A recent story in spring 2023 covered the launch of a provincial investigation into claims made by passengers and former drivers that NCN Thompson Bus Lines's motorcoaches were subject to frequent breakdowns, and sometimes ran without heat.<sup>75</sup> The Free Press found that the company had formerly operated under the name "Thompson Bus and Freight," but had re-incorporated with a different name to avoid addressing safety concerns. The province responded by passing legislation in May 2023 where so-called "chameleon carriers" would be assigned a conditional safety rating, and could be denied a safety fitness certificate.<sup>76,77</sup>

Stories about breakdowns and lack of heat raise additional questions about the adequacy of existing safety regulations and oversight. Since the dissolution of the Motor Transport Board, the responsibility for regulatory oversight belongs to the Manitoba Motor Carrier Enforcement agency.<sup>78</sup> The agency's role deals with the issuance of safety certificates, and

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- 70 Vanderhart, Tessa, "Routes of Isolation," 2019. <https://www.winnipegfreepress.com/featured/2019/08/30/routes-of-isolationforecast-bleak-with-a-chance-of-bus-service>
- 71 Piche, Gabrielle, "Province turns eye to Thompson in hunt for 'chameleon carriers.'" Winnipeg Free Press, March 17, 2023. <https://www.winnipegfreepress.com/business/2023/03/17/province-turns-eye-to-thompson-in-hunt-for-chameleon-carriers>
- 72 Piche, Gabrielle, "Passenger safety allegations chase northern bus lines," Winnipeg Free Press, March 3, 2023. <https://www.winnipegfreepress.com/business/2023/03/03/passenger-safety-allegations-chase-northern-bus-lines>
- 73 Paul, Alexandra, "Bus ride to Thompson became 'nightmare in an icebox,' passenger says," Winnipeg Free Press, January 28, 2019. <https://www.winnipegfreepress.com/breakingnews/2019/01/28/bus-ride-to-thompson-became-nightmare-in-an-icebox-passengers-say>
- 74 Robertson, Dylan. "Passengers complain about lack of regulation for intercity bus routes." Winnipeg Free Press, February 28, 2019. <https://www.winnipegfreepress.com/breakingnews/2019/02/28/passengers-complain-about-lack-of-regulation-for-intercity-bus-routes>
- 75 Paul, Alexandra, "Bus ride to Thompson became 'nightmare in an icebox,' passenger says," January 28, 2019. <https://www.winnipegfreepress.com/breakingnews/2019/01/28/bus-ride-to-thompson-became-nightmare-in-an-icebox-passengers-say>
- 76 "Manitoba government moves to enhance road safety, target unsafe commercial motor carriers," Province of Manitoba, March 8, 2023. <https://news.gov.mb.ca/news/?archive=&item=58417>
- 77 "The Highway Traffic Amendment Act," Bill 21, 5th Session, 42nd Legislature, Legislative Assembly of Manitoba, May 8, 2023. [https://www.manitoba.ca/legislature/hansard/42nd\\_5th/hansardpdf/la5.pdf](https://www.manitoba.ca/legislature/hansard/42nd_5th/hansardpdf/la5.pdf)
- 78 "Traffic and Transportation Modernization Act," Bill 14, 3rd Session, 41st Legislature, Legislative Assembly of Manitoba. 2017-2018. <https://web2.gov.mb.ca/bills/41-3/b014e.php>

ensuring compliance with insurance and driver's license requirements. Current regulations require buses to be inspected only every six months, and a broken heater is considered a 'minor defect'---a much lower standard compared to other Prairie provinces.<sup>79</sup> A former bus driver for NCN interviewed in the Free Press described how Motor Carrier Enforcement officers conduct random roadside inspections, but these happen rarely and are limited to paperwork inspection.<sup>80</sup>

While deregulation was supposed to free the industry and unleash healthy competition, the last six years show it has instead only decreased the stability, coverage and safety of private inter-community bus services in Manitoba.

The province of Manitoba's current approach to inter-community transit includes public programs that provide subsidized inter-community transportation for specific populations on the one hand and a largely deregulated and unsubsidized northern bus industry on the other. Overall, a scarcity of provincial funding, coordination, and regulation results in a system characterized by gaps and precarity. Without greater invention on the part of the province to create a robust, well-connected, efficient, and accessible system, the full potential of inter-community transit cannot be realized.

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The last six years [of transit de-regulation] show it has instead only decreased the stability, coverage and safety of private inter-community bus services in Manitoba.

79 Robertson, Dylan. "Passengers complain about lack of regulation for intercity bus routes." <https://www.winnipegfreepress.com/breakingnews/2019/02/28/passengers-complain-about-lack-of-regulation-for-intercity-bus-routes>

80 Piche, Gabrielle, "Passenger safety allegations chase northern bus lines," Winnipeg Free Press, March 3, 2023 <https://www.winnipegfreepress.com/business/2023/03/03/passenger-safety-allegations-chase-northern-bus-lines>

## SECTION 3

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# Case studies

## Northern Ontario

### Key Metrics:

- Population: 789,519 (2021)
- Total area: 806,708 km<sup>2</sup>
- Population density: 0.98 / km<sup>2</sup>

### Key provincial programs and initiatives:

- Ontario Northland (Ontario Northland Transportation Commission)
- Community Transportation Grant Program

The region of northern Ontario, similarly to Manitoba, is a large geographical region with a low-density population. Inter-community transportation is supported through two main provincial initiatives from the Ministry of Transportation: the crown corporation Ontario Northland and the Community Transportation Grant Program

### Ontario Northland

Founded in 1902 under the ONTC Act, the Ontario Northland Transportation Commission operates inter-community bus service (Ontario Northland) along with passenger rail.<sup>81</sup> While other companies operate in the region too, the Ontario Highway Transport Board oversees licensing so as to prevent competition between Ontario Northland and other carriers. ONTC is described as “provid[ing] services where there is limited viability for a commercial business

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81 Ontario Northland, “Annual Report 2021-2022.” 2022. [https://www.ontarionorthland.ca/sites/default/files/corporate-document-files/Annual\\_Report21-22EN.pdf](https://www.ontarionorthland.ca/sites/default/files/corporate-document-files/Annual_Report21-22EN.pdf)

case, but there is a compelling social need.”<sup>82</sup>

Ontario Northland serves over 150 communities, including providing connections from Northern Ontario down to Toronto and Ottawa in the south, and to Winnipeg in the west. In the 2021-2022 fiscal year, it provided 167,676 passenger trips. These ridership numbers still reflect the impact of COVID 19—in 2018-19, trips were at 311,080. The bus company provides jobs for 746 people.<sup>83</sup>

ONTC’s mandate letter also includes accounting for the safety of Indigenous women, girls and 2SLGBTQQIA people, and the needs of all marginalized groups, including women, 2SLGBTQQIA people, racialized people, Indigenous communities and people with disabilities. The mandate letter instructs ONTC to engage with those groups to ensure their needs are being met.<sup>84</sup> Ontario Northland recently created an Accessibility Advisory Committee composed of passengers “with a range of abilities and experiences” to inform the company’s approach to improving accessibility.<sup>85</sup>

In 2022, Ontario Northland generated \$71,673,000 in revenue from rail freight, passenger rail, bus services, and remanufacturing and repair services. It received \$103 million in funding from the Ontario and Canadian governments.

Ontario Northland is an example of how provincially owned and operated bus services

82 Ontario Northland, “Annual Report 2021-2022.” 2022. [https://www.ontarionorthland.ca/sites/default/files/corporate-document-files/Annual\\_Report21-22EN.pdf](https://www.ontarionorthland.ca/sites/default/files/corporate-document-files/Annual_Report21-22EN.pdf)

83 Ontario Northland, “Annual Report 2021-2022.” 2022. [https://www.ontarionorthland.ca/sites/default/files/corporate-document-files/Annual\\_Report21-22EN.pdf](https://www.ontarionorthland.ca/sites/default/files/corporate-document-files/Annual_Report21-22EN.pdf)

84 Mulroney, Caroline. “Mandate Letter.” November 3, 2022. [https://www.ontarionorthland.ca/sites/default/files/2023-08/Letter-from-MTO\\_2023-24-Mandate-Letter\\_2022-11-03.pdf](https://www.ontarionorthland.ca/sites/default/files/2023-08/Letter-from-MTO_2023-24-Mandate-Letter_2022-11-03.pdf)

85 Ontario Northland, “Annual Report 2021-2022.” 2022. [https://www.ontarionorthland.ca/sites/default/files/corporate-document-files/Annual\\_Report21-22EN.pdf](https://www.ontarionorthland.ca/sites/default/files/corporate-document-files/Annual_Report21-22EN.pdf)

## Inter-community transit models



### Fixed-Route

The vehicle, usually a bus, follows a set route and schedule, picking up and delivering passengers at predetermined stops on a route.



### On-Demand or Demand-Responsive

A service that responds to pre-booked ride requests, usually with a small bus or van. On-demand service is usually door-to-door.



### Door-to-Door

A service that picks up passengers directly from their place of origin, and drops them off at their destinations, usually with a small bus or van. Usually aimed at low-mobility, door-to-door services are usually demand-responsive.



### Flex-Route

A cross between a fixed-route and on-demand model, a flex-route service follows a set route but may deviate by request to nearby pick-up or drop-off points.



### Car Share

A car share offers a fleet of vehicles, which are available for on-demand or pre-booked use within a certain region. Vehicles typically must be picked up and dropped off at specific sites, but may also be free-floating within the region.

Source: [https://communitytransitns.ca/wp-content/uploads/2022/10/DD-22-037-RTA-Managers-Toolkit\\_w\\_links.pdf](https://communitytransitns.ca/wp-content/uploads/2022/10/DD-22-037-RTA-Managers-Toolkit_w_links.pdf)

can play an important role in a rural and remote context. In the last five years, as some companies (Greyhound and Caribou Coach) have pulled out of the region, Ontario Northland has expanded its network. Though private companies and some municipalities and non-profits also provide bus services in the region, Ontario Northland plays an important role by providing a backbone to the inter-community network.

### **The Community Transportation Grant Program**

In 2017, the Ontario Ministry of Transportation organized a series of public consultations requesting feedback and suggestions on a proposal to remove regulatory mechanisms for entry into the motorcoach industry. Participants largely argued against removing regulatory mechanisms, saying it would likely result in lower levels of service for rural communities. Instead, participants pointed to increased provincial support as the solution, on both a community and regional level. In response, the Department issued two decisions: (1) to increase ONTC service; and (2) to establish a new Community Transportation Grant program, funded through the provincial gas tax, for municipalities to run their own small-scale inter-community bus services.

The Community Transportation (CT) Grant Program was launched in 2018, with the purpose of supporting both local and inter-community transit services in underserved communities. It followed a successful two-year pilot that ran from 2014 to 2016, which had found the model was effective for enabling municipalities to provide “customized transportation service” that met their needs.<sup>86</sup>

Under the CT program, 38 municipalities (9 in northern Ontario) are receiving a total of \$44 million over seven years for 43 transportation projects, which include fixed-route bus service, on-demand shared rides, and door-to-door transportation services.<sup>87</sup> The program will not fund services that duplicate Ontario Northland or other carriers’ routes. Many of the services are targeted towards specific groups including seniors and people with mobility challenges. Originally launched as a five-year program, the program has been extended until 2025.

The CT program provided a maximum grant of \$1.5 million for “long-distance scheduled inter-community bus service” for the initial five-year period. While only municipalities were eligible to apply for the funding, they were encouraged to partner with community organizations. Municipalities could operate the transportation service themselves or contract with a private company.

The township of Terrace Bay in northern Ontario is one community that has been funded by the CT program. In partnership with the Superior Seniors Club, it provides an on-demand door-to-door transportation service connecting several neighbouring communities in the region to the

86 Ontario Ministry of Transportation. “Community Transportation Pilot Grant Program: Survey and Final Reporting Evaluation.” 2018. [https://www.ruralontarioinstitute.ca/uploads/userfiles/files/CT%20Pilot%20Grant%20Program%20Evaluation%20Results%20MTO%20March%202018\(1\).pdf](https://www.ruralontarioinstitute.ca/uploads/userfiles/files/CT%20Pilot%20Grant%20Program%20Evaluation%20Results%20MTO%20March%202018(1).pdf)

87 “Backgrounder: Community Transportation Grant Program Recipients and Services.” Government of Ontario. June 28, 2021. <https://news.ontario.ca/en/backgrounder/1000417/community-transit-grant-program-recipients-and-services>

centres of Thunder Bay and Marathon for medical trips.<sup>88</sup> Services are open to anyone, but are not wheelchair equipped. Services must be booked in advance, with costs ranging from \$40 to Marathon or \$85 to Thunder Bay. These costs can also be reimbursed under Ontario's Northern Health Travel Grant. Terrace Bay received \$345,043 in funding from the CT program.<sup>89</sup>

## Nova Scotia

### Key Metrics

- Population: 969,383 (2021)
- Total area: 52,824 km<sup>2</sup>
- Population density: 18.4 / km<sup>2</sup>

### Key provincial programs and initiatives:

- Community Transportation Assistance Program
- Accessible Transportation Assistance Program
- Fare Assistance Program
- Nova Scotia Transit Research Incentive Program
- Nova Scotia Community Transportation Network
- Provincial dispatch platform (forthcoming)

While the province of Nova Scotia is much smaller geographically compared to Manitoba, it is similar in being home to a relatively large rural population. The provincial government takes a comprehensive approach to supporting locally-led community transportation solutions through close partnerships between towns and rural municipalities, and other local service providers. It provides extensive planning, funding (including operating, capital, and fare assistance), and coordination support. The province has an Active Transit and Community Transportation division, housed within the Department of Transportation and Active Transit. Community Transportation receives a \$7 million budget, spread across different programs explored below.<sup>90</sup> Community Transportation is included among the action items in the province's climate plan, as well as its 2013 Sustainable Transportation Strategy.

Nova Scotia is served by 19 community transportation providers, which provide door to door service. There are also another five fixed route services that serve rural communities. Together,

88 Community Health Travel Program, Terrace Bay. <http://www.terracebay.ca/residents/resident-information/transit/>

89 "Backgrounder: Community Transportation Grant Program Recipients and Services." 2021. <https://news.ontario.ca/en/backgrounder/1000417/community-transportation-grant-program-recipients-and-services>

90 Hansard, "Supporting Community Transportation." May 4, 2021. Nova Scotia House of Assembly, Standing Committee on Community Services. <https://nslegislature.ca/legislative-business/committees/standing/community-services/archive/community-services/cs2021may04>



combined these services 89.4% of the population outside of Nova Scotia's main population centres (the Halifax Regional Municipality and the Cape Breton Regional Municipality).<sup>91</sup>

The province has supported Community Transit since 2001 with the Community Transportation Assistance Program. The program provides operational funding to municipalities and non-profits for pre-booked, door-to-door transportation services in "areas of low population density." Services must be "inclusive," open to "any person in need of service including persons with disabilities, seniors, youth, students, persons with low income and the public." The program provides a baseline grant topped up according to population and the density of the road network within the service area.<sup>92</sup> The province also provides the Accessible Transportation Assistance Program which funds accessible vehicle purchases (75% of funding up to a maximum of \$75,000),<sup>93</sup> and the Fare Assistance program which helps to subsidize fares for low-income riders.<sup>94</sup>

On the planning side, the province offers the Nova Scotia Transit Research Incentive Program, which provides funding for feasibility studies, business plans, pre-pilot implementation, and pilot projects in rural areas.

The province has also enabled communication and coordination through the Nova Scotia Community Transportation Network (NSCTN) since 2000.<sup>95</sup> NSCTN receives a \$50,000 annual operating grant from the Community Transit budget.<sup>96</sup> NSCTN provides resources and toolkits on community transportation and volunteer driver programs and manages the South Shore Transit Network Project which provides regional inter-community bus service in partnership with the company Maritime Bus. Municipalities or regions interested in establishing or expanding transit can approach NSCTN to explore their options.<sup>97</sup> The Network also works with providers in a Transportation Literacy Program, to encourage ridership and reduce stigma around riding the bus. There is also a network for providers, the Rural Transportation Association.

The province continues to develop new initiatives to support Community Transportation, including a new provincial dispatch platform which will provide a place for centralized coordination of Community Transportation services and enhance route optimization. It is also

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91 Greg Sewell, "Nova Scotia Community Transportation," Public and Community Transportation in New Brunswick Symposium. 2023. <https://www2.gnb.ca/content/dam/gnb/Departments/esic/pdf/symposium/4-greg-sewell-ns-community-transportation-e.pdf>

92 Community Transportation Assistance Program, 2023/24 Program Guidelines and Application. Department of Public Works. <https://beta.novascotia.ca/sites/default/files/documents/1-1412/community-transportation-assistance-program-ctap-guidelines-en.pdf>

93 Accessible Transportation Assistance Program, 2023-2024 Program Criteria. <https://beta.novascotia.ca/sites/default/files/documents/1-1423/accessible-transportation-assistance-program-atap-criteria-en.pdf>

94 Hansard, "Supporting Community Transportation." 2021. <https://nslegislature.ca/legislative-business/committees/standing/community-services/archive/community-services/cs2021may04>

95 Nova Scotia Community Transportation Network. "What is the Network?" <https://communitytransitns.ca/what-is-the-network/#who-we-are>

96 Hansard, "Supporting Community Transportation." 2021. <https://nslegislature.ca/legislative-business/committees/standing/community-services/archive/community-services/cs2021may04>

97 Hansard, "Supporting Community Transportation." 2021. <https://nslegislature.ca/legislative-business/committees/standing/community-services/archive/community-services/cs2021may04>

working to address affordability, by exploring a \$5 rate for in-county trips.

The Community Transportation division collects data measuring the impact of all 19 Community Transportation providers. In 2019-2020, Community Transportation provided 205,000 trips, with an average distance of 28 km, and an average fare of \$11 per trip. The average cost per trip for the service provider is \$25. Data shows that the top reasons for travel are: sheltered workshops (29%); medical appointments (19%); education (12%); reducing social isolation (11%); and work (10%). Collectively, it is estimated that Community Transportation providers employ about 140 people in rural Nova Scotia, and spend about \$1 million in the communities on fuel and vehicle maintenance.<sup>98</sup>

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98 Hansard, "Supporting Community Transportation." 2021. <https://nslegislature.ca/legislative-business/committees/standing/community-services/archive/community-services/cs2021may04>

## SECTION 4

# Rural Manitoba public consultation

For this study, stakeholders from across rural Manitoba were invited to participate in a public consultation to discuss rural transportation solutions. This consultation took the form of two online conversations in late November 2023, and an online survey which was open for twelve weeks from November 2023 to February 2024.

The two online conversations were aimed at practitioners and service providers, targeting representatives from organizations that work with populations who are likely to be in transportation need. Invites were sent to rural municipalities, tribal councils, health regions, Indigenous health organizations, community economic development organizations, and provincial and rural organizations serving seniors, youth, Indigenous peoples, newcomers, people living with disabilities. During the online conversations, participants were asked to describe the inter-community transit options available in their communities and whether they meet residents' transportation needs. They were then invited to share their ideas for supporting and improving inter-community transit, focusing especially on the role of the province. In total, 23 people participated in the online conversations.

The online survey was targeted more broadly, open to all rural Manitobans over 18. Service providers invited to the online conversations were invited to share it with their clients and networks. Survey questions were aimed at building a sense of the needs and gaps surrounding the rural transportation system in Manitoba, the impacts resulting from those gaps, and satisfaction with and preferences for different transportation options. The survey was hosted on the Climate Action Team (CAT) website, and print surveys were also available upon request. Regional Connections Immigrant Services also translated the surveys into Spanish, Arabic, Ukrainian, and Russian, and supported clients to complete it.

The South Central region was over-represented in survey responses, with slight under-representation from the Interlake and Parklands regions. Despite efforts to reach target groups that may be in transportation need, the Indigenous population is slightly under-represented, as well as the senior (65+) population. However, other target groups (women, low-income, and newcomers) are well-represented, as well as non-vehicle owners. 6% of respondents indicated

they live with a disability that prevents them from driving, which is lower than the total percentage of Manitobans living with a disability, although that total includes disabilities that do not necessarily prevent the person from driving.

## Opinions on transportation options in rural Manitoba: survey findings

328 survey responses were received in total.



### Satisfaction with medical travel

*Do you find current transportation options (vehicle, air, bus, or other) satisfactory for medical travel (ie allowing you to access health and medical care in other communities in a convenient, timely, and safe way)?*

YES - 35%

UNSURE - 21%

NO - 40%



### Attitude towards Electric Vehicles

*Do you plan to purchase an EV as your next vehicle?*

YES - 9%

I WOULD LIKE TO, BUT\* - 44.5%

NO - 36%

\*32% > I would like to but cannot due to cost.

\*12.5% > I would like to but cannot due to lack of charging infrastructure.



### Support for rural public transportation

*Do you think a public rural bus service (with affordable fares, convenient scheduling, and service to the cities/towns you most frequently visit) would generally improve your life?*

YES - 81%

NO - 19%

Answers were also analyzed by demographic: age, gender, income, disability status, newcomer status, size of home community, Indigenous community, and vehicle ownership. No matter the demographic, every group was more likely to answer yes than no to the last question, except those in the top two household income brackets. However, the proportion of positive answers increased steadily as income decreased. 100% of respondents living in an Indigenous community and the Northern region said yes, and almost all non car-owners or those living with a disability. Finally, a greater proportion of respondents living in the Winnipeg Metropolitan Region, a small city, or small town responded positively compared to those living on a farm or rural area—though even those in rural areas were more likely to indicate yes than no.

## Transportation needs and Impacts from gaps in service

The following are demographics identified as being particularly in need of public transportation.



### Seniors & adult children of seniors

- Some seniors may be able to drive themselves most of the time, but desire alternate, safer options when the weather is poor, or when they must go into Winnipeg
- Online options (e.g. medical appointments, social activities) are not accessible to seniors who are less internet-savvy
- Lack of transportation contributes to isolation and loneliness for seniors:  
*“Because I don’t own a car, at the moment there is no convenient way for me to visit my elderly mother who lives outside a rural community (i.e. on a farm). I’m her only immediate family, so this is not only inconvenient, it’s dangerous for her wellbeing.”*
- Adult children spoke about the burden involved in being responsible for driving their ageing parents, in terms of time, stress, and missed work:  
*“I think it would improve my life but also my parents - it would lessen the stress for me to be a care provider.”*



### Newcomers:

- Some newcomers come from large urban centres, where they never needed to own a vehicle or learn how to drive: *“It’s often an unhappy jolt, when [newcomers] arrive and discover that public transportation just isn’t really a thing, especially in rural Manitoba.”* - Local Immigration Partnership staff person
- Many newcomers may be unable to afford a vehicle
- Many newcomers face a period without a driver’s licence while they are in the process of acquiring their Canadian driver’s licence
- Newcomers are unfamiliar with Canadian driving rules and roads and some may feel nervous about driving:  
*“I have a terrible experience about traveling between communities in Manitoba, because I had to go to Winnipeg to attend the knowledge test for driving. As a newcomer it was difficult to get to Winnipeg by my own personal vehicle. We are not familiar [with] the road structure of Winnipeg. In that moment if there is any public transport it will be very much helpful for us.”*
- Without a car, newcomers face challenges accessing employment, education, groceries and other basic necessities, medical care, as well as forming social connections:  
*“I am a newcomer immigrant. I live in Morden, Manitoba. I think it is very important to have transportation facility to make life easy. Especially in winter....”*

*It is very tough to go anywhere without transportation to get basic things like groceries, medicine etc.”*



### Families

- Families struggle to juggle different family members’ simultaneous commitments (work, appointments, children’s activities, social events, etc.) with only one vehicle: *“It is really hard to move around, be flexible, and be productive if there’s only one car in the family. We cannot commit to different events, we cannot enrol kids to different activit[ies], the stress if there’s [an] emergency, all because there’s no other mode of transportation available and affordable.”*



### Low-income individuals

- Costs of both purchasing and operating a vehicle have risen.
- While many respondents also spoke about the “necessity” of owning a car in a rural area, one respondent pointed out that it can represent a significant financial burden as well, and that: *“No one should be forced to own...a car if they do not wish to.”*
- Even for low-income people who do own a car, a public transportation service could help them reduce driving costs: *“That service [inter-community public transportation] for sure will help with my economic situation at home. I will try to use my car just few times.”*
- Where transportation options exist, they are often very expensive, with a participant citing \$800 for a shuttle service round trip to Winnipeg from the Central (Interlake and Parkland)
- Many of the groups most in need of public transportation (those on a fixed income like a pension or disability benefit, newcomers, youth) are likely to be low-income
- Challenges can interact with each other: for example, a person may be off of work due to long-term illness, which impacts their ability to afford transportation to access treatment, especially if they must travel frequently



### Individuals living with a disability

- The blind population is both less likely to be able to drive, while also needing to travel for medical appointments more frequently:
- *“We know this poses an obstacle for our blind population who want to go about their lives doing the daily tasks that any other person would do.....we have heard from our participants, and our demographics, [that] this is a concern for them having safe and accessible transportation to get them from point A to point B”*  
-Canadian National Institute for the Blind staff person



### Socially-isolated

- If someone without a vehicle is also socially isolated, without family or friends in the area, they are much less likely to be able to get a ride to access transportation. This could include seniors, newcomers, those living with a disability, or other groups:  
*“Our local emergency room/hospital is a 10 minute drive away. I’m not understanding how those without a car or finances for a taxi can get there without local support of friends and family (some also don’t have friends or family in our area)”*



### Uncomfortable driving in the city

- Some respondents (some elderly but not all) are able to drive within their rural community but will get a ride when they have to go into Winnipeg because they feel nervous about driving in the city

The following are types of trips that are difficult, complex, or outright impossible to make without public transportation:



### Medical:

- Medical services have been centralized without adding transportation options:  
*“I work in health care, and this is the most difficult part for our clients to arrange if we need them to seek medical care and [they] cannot access [it] in our town.”*
- Many mentioned the challenges in accessing Boundary Trails Health Centre, which is located in between Morden and Winkler
- Long wait-times also generate additional transportation need:  
*“Winkler residents often need to travel to Morden to use their urgent care, and vice versa”*
- Ambulances are either not available in certain areas or have long wait-times



### Work:

- Employers often are located on the edge of a community or outside of communities, which creates transportation challenges:  
*"In our city, we've got industry and a lot of employers that are on the edges of the community, and some major ones, that will be drawing a lot of employment. And so there's a struggle to get those employees to their jobs, especially in the winter..."*  
*"Employers have indicated attracting and retaining employees in rural areas can be difficult, especially if the workplaces are agriculture-based and not within a community, but in a rural municipality."*
- Some practitioners have difficulty accessing clients:  
*"The lack of transportation resources severely limited my job options in the past few decades. I'm transitioning to remote work, but being able to see clients in person would still be enormously helpful."*



### Shopping

- Grocery shopping was frequently mentioned as a challenge for newcomers, including the need to travel to urban centres to find speciality ingredients
- Even within the boundaries of a municipality, commercial centres may be located far from residential areas
- People are limited in how many groceries they can buy at a time, either being forced to haul large amounts of groceries by foot or bike (especially challenging during winter), or pay for a taxi:  
*"I don't drive....so I have to walk... to the small store for me to do my groceries or I ride a taxi when I have a lot of things needed at home. Then I need to go to the nearest Superstore or Walmart which is a 10-15 min drive from my home and the taxi will cost me \$50-60 going to the store and back home."*



### Education

- Young people from rural communities are more likely to move into the city (Brandon, Winnipeg, Thompson, etc.) to attend university instead of staying at home and commuting; once they move, it can be challenging to be able to visit home without a car:  
*"When I was in University in Winnipeg, it was a time and money saver for my parents to only have to pick me up or drop me off a few miles from home to catch the Greyhound when I went back and forth from the city to visit on weekends... I wish this was still an option in our region"*



Negative impacts on individuals and communities resulting from the lack of adequate public transportation:



### People are forced to leave rural communities

- Some newcomers settled in rural Manitoba move to an urban centre as soon as they have the chance
- Seniors and others are forced to move into the city once they are no longer able to drive, leaving behind friends and community:
 

*“That’s the other thing that happens in our community is people will sell their homes and move into the city so that they can have better transportation options, which is kind of sad if you’ve lived in some place for a long time, and you have good neighbours, but if you don’t want to drive anymore, or you can’t drive anymore, what are your options? So, I mean, just in my little area here, three or five couples, or individuals have moved out in the last couple of years because of that.”*



### Health conditions and healthcare costs increase

- Lack of affordable or accessible transportation results in missed appointments, creating greater negative health impacts to the individual:
 

*“Medical transportation in Manitoba is high cost, limited, not accessible, not reliable and oftentimes older adults miss life changing/saving medical appointments due to these barriers.”*

Further economic impacts:

- Adult children must miss work to drive their elderly parents to medical appointments:
 

*“I travel frequently to my parents’ appointments which are not in my town. There are no affordable options to help them without me driving them which requires time off of work (loss of income) and pretty long time commitments overall.”*
- Families may have to choose between one family member missing a medical appointment or another missing work:
 

*“My family (3 adults living in the same household) shares one vehicle. This means that either medical appointments are delayed due to trying to figure out scheduling of the vehicle, or a family member may have to miss a day of work because someone else needs the vehicle to get to an appointment in Winnipeg.”*
- People either cannot access jobs or spend significant time and energy travelling to work, sometimes being forced to walk:
 

*“My children cannot afford to own a vehicle and still live with me. Because of the low wages in our area they are forced to walk to work when I cannot drive them. A transit system would make a huge difference in their lives.”*
- In the North, bus service is especially important for the economic movement of goods and people:

*“Bus service is also a way to transport goods between communities and we previously used this service as a cost effective way to get goods to rural and Northern communities. Flights to and from Northern Manitoba are becoming expensive and very infrequent. This is causing challenges for many organizations as the cost for employees to attend training, work and connect with individuals needing services in the North is getting higher.”*



### Psychological:

- Non car-owners often spoke about “independence” or “freedom” when describing the benefits of public transportation:

*“It would greatly improve my independence as a mother of 4. Something as simple as taking my kids to a movie would be something I could do. Could get to Walmart and shop on my own and not have to always rely on others and so much more.”*

*“Giving everyone the option to travel and have the dignity to go where they want or need without constantly having to find help would change things, not just for myself, but others who can’t have a vehicle for whatever reason. The freedom to make your own choices, even with a tight budget.”*

Online conversations participants were asked to identify the inter-community transportation services currently available to their community, and whether they saw these services meeting the needs that exist.

Existing rural transportation services mentioned by participants included: informal rides (organized via Facebook, for example), taxi-cabs, volunteer driver programs, handi-vans, the Brandon Air Shuttle, the Southeast Shuttle, “northern companies,” and Ontario Northland.



### Informal Rides

Participants mentioned seeing people in their community organizing rides informally through Facebook: “....people putting requests for rides, I see there’s a ton of that on our local community Facebook groups...” This includes requests for rides to a nearby town or to Winnipeg. The perception among participants was that while this informal system can meet some needs, ride requests often go unmet. They also pointed out that the amount of ride requests demonstrates that there are a significant number of people who do not necessarily have family or friends they can ask directly for rides, and there is a need for other options.



### Taxi-cabs

Taxi-cabs are available for inter-community travel between some communities including between Brandon and Winnipeg, and within the Pembina Valley region (Winkler, Morden, Altona). Participants from rural municipalities in the Southeast region said taxis are generally not available outside of Steinbach. The most significant drawback to taxicab service is the cost, with one participant estimating it costs “a minimum of \$200” for a one way trip from Morden to Winnipeg. Participants also mentioned challenges with accessibility and fears of safety and harassment in regards to taxi-cab travel.



### Volunteer drivers

Some communities have volunteer driver programs coordinated through Support Services to Seniors, where volunteers with a vehicle are matched with a senior needing a ride, and are compensated for their mileage by the passenger. These services are generally more affordable than a handi-van program (a return trip between Ste. Anne and Winnipeg is about \$50, according to one participant), particularly since passengers are not charged a standby fee as they are with handi-vans. However, there was also general agreement that finding enough volunteers from an already small rural population is getting more and more difficult, a challenge attributed to the pandemic as well as the ageing demographic of rural communities. One participant involved in coordinating a volunteer driver program estimated that about 25% of requests go unfulfilled.

Volunteers with the Seine River Services for Seniors program are trained using resources from the Transportation Options Network for Seniors (TONS), which were described as very useful. But participants remained doubtful whether all volunteers participating in a volunteer driving program have the necessary training to handle the responsibilities that come with driving a more vulnerable demographic like seniors. This includes driving safety, first aid training in case there is a medical emergency en route, and accessibility training if the senior requires assistance with boarding and disembarking.

Lack of training on the volunteers’ part may still create risks for the seniors using these services, as well as placing an outsized responsibility on the volunteers themselves. A Senior Resource Coordinator from another town said that many of her regular volunteers were “ready to throw in the towel” after the bus crash near Carberry in June that killed 17 seniors, as they reckoned with the responsibility they were taking on and what could go wrong. One participant said that the attitude with her town council is that there is no problem with people in small towns relying on friends and neighbours: “It’s like asking volunteers to run the city of Winnipeg transit. It’s pretty crazy to me, but it happens right? Because: ‘it’s in small town Manitoba. We make everything happen and they’re amazing at what they do. So we’ll just let them figure it out!’ ” It was generally agreed that volunteers cannot be the backbone of a sustainable inter-community transportation service.



## Handi-vans

Handi-vans were the most commonly mentioned inter-community service available in rural communities. Participants agreed that handi-vans play an important role, but the need is greater than what the service can meet. One coordinator noted that her town's two handivans "often get booked up. And so we can't provide everyone the service, it's just not possible." On the other hand, another participant noted that handi-vans can sit unused for long periods if the municipality cannot find the money to train and pay a driver; and that a lack of promotion and advertising means the not all residents know the service exists or who it is meant for.

Others said they believed even more people would use their community's handi-van if it was more affordable. A one-way trip between Steinbach and Winnipeg is \$70, according to one participant. This could put the service out of reach for much of its target demographic, who may be on a fixed pension or disability income, or have medical needs that require regular appointments (such as dialysis).

Some participants spoke about the logistical challenges of scheduling handi-van services, with clients often having to wait in town, as the handi-van combines multiple client trips. Combining multiple trips also increases the trip length, which adds other logistical challenges like providing food and bathroom breaks. On the other hand, if the handi-van has to wait for them, clients are charged a standby fee, adding to the already prohibitive cost. The lack of flexibility is also a barrier, as handi-vans must be booked twenty-four hours in advance. According to one handi-van client, "Sometimes if you could be pretty well independent, if the weather's not poor, but if you wake up and there's a snowstorm, and you have an appointment and you haven't booked the van, it puts you in a kind of a begging situation, or try to change the appointment."

The structure of the handi-van program being delivered by individual municipalities and community non-profits also creates issues of coordination and efficiency. Handi-vans from smaller municipalities might each be running trips back and forth into the same regional centre, when it might be more efficient to combine trips. Or, smaller municipalities might be excluded altogether. One participant described how the RM of Ste. Anne used to be served by the city of Steinbach's handi-van, but because Ste. Anne and the other surrounding RMs were not contributing financially, Steinbach decided to limit use to only its own residents several years ago.



## Brandon Air Shuttle

Participants living in Brandon and nearby described using the Brandon Air Shuttle, which offers multiple daily trips between Brandon and the Winnipeg airport on a fixed schedule. While the Shuttle makes stops at communities on the #1 Highway, participants pointed out that people living in communities off the #1 face additional time and costs to get to those stops in the first place, which can be discouraging. According to its website, a one-way trip from Brandon to Winnipeg

is \$61,<sup>99</sup> quite affordable compared to other services, though it is encouraged to book as far in advance as possible. According to its website, the Shuttle can accommodate passengers with mobility issues including wheelchairs and walkers. Participants pointed out that while passengers can be dropped off along Portage Avenue in Winnipeg, it can be challenging to get to another destination such as a hospital. One senior resource coordinator said, “Some of my seniors will hop on [the Brandon Air Shuttle]. And then they cab it from the airport, or health science centres, wherever they need to go. But that’s a big concern, because they’re either, you know, hopping on the bus system or getting a cab, and they’re not comfortable with doing that. So that’s kind of out of their comfort zone.” Needing to access additional transportation within the city also drives up costs.



### Southeast Shuttle

The Southeast Shuttle is a newer service launched in fall 2023, which fewer participants were familiar with though it was described positively by those that were. Based out of Steinbach, the Shuttle is a 10-person van that also serves La Broquerie, Lorette, Landmark, Niverville, and Winnipeg (including the Health Sciences Centre, Polo Park, and the airport). The Shuttle can be booked on-demand, with door-to-door service in Steinbach. At around \$42-48 per one-way adult fare,<sup>100</sup> it was described by participants as fairly affordable.



### Northern companies (Mahihkan Bus Lines, Maple Bus Lines, and NCN Thompson Bus Lines)

Northern Manitoba participants’ opinions on companies serving the northern region were largely negative, though companies were not named specifically nor were they discussed at length. Participants described incidents where busses had broken down on route. They also identified instances of racism related to inter-community bus travel, including one experience where passengers from Thompson were not allowed to enter a local restaurant after their bus had broken down; and another incident witnessed of a passenger who was experiencing a diabetic episode being kicked off a bus by a driver who accused them of being drunk.



### Ontario Northland

Finally, one participant briefly mentioned Ontario Northland, which runs into Manitoba from Ontario along the #1 through Prawda and Richer, and makes two stops in Winnipeg at Sherbooke Street and the Southdale Mall. According to Ontario Northland’s website, a

99 Brandon Air Shuttle, “Schedules & Fares,” Accessed April 1 2024. <https://brandonairshuttle.com/schedules-fares/>

100 Southeast Shuttle, Accessed April 1, 2024 <https://seshuttle.ca/>

one-way fare from Prawda to the Sherbrooke Street stop is \$36.33.<sup>101</sup> Ontario Northland was described as a good affordable option for those living in communities along the route, but challenging to use for appointments because it lacks same day return.

## How can rural public transportation services be improved?

In online discussions participants were also asked to identify solutions to the gaps and challenges they had identified. Some of the following service-level solutions were mentioned directly by participants while others are drawn from the discussion on the advantages and disadvantages of existing services. Many of the characteristics below are common challenges faced in the design of rural transportation systems.

### Affordable

Cost was one of the most frequently mentioned drawbacks for existing services. Services should be affordable to the groups identified as needing inter-community services the most, who tend to be lower-income. Ensuring services are affordable for those most likely to use them is important, otherwise a new service will not be able to build the ridership it needs to be sustainable.

Increasing the provincial subsidy for the MDTP, which could allow municipalities to decrease the portion funded through revenue, could help make handi-van services more affordable.

Subsidized passes were mentioned as one way to make a service affordable for specific groups. Most of the bus companies in Manitoba offer discounts for seniors and students. However, this does not include other low-income riders. Publicly-owned or subsidized services could offer a subsidized bus pass similar to Winnipeg Transit's WINNpass program, which offers a 50% discount off transit services for those on EIA, new permanent residents or refugees, or below a certain household income threshold.

Since door-to-door and accessible services are more expensive to run, ensuring a cheaper, fixed route option is also available may help meet the affordability needs of riders who may not have specific accessibility needs (although identifying central pick-up and drop-off locations for fixed route services may be challenging).

### Universal ridership

Related to the point above, participants largely agreed that while handi-van and volunteer driver programs are important, "the need is wider than what the current options are." In other words, there is a need for more services available to the general public, "for everyone and whoever needs it," as one participant put it.

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Ensuring services are affordable for those most likely to use them is important, otherwise a new service will not be able to build the ridership it needs to be sustainable.

101 Ontario Northland, Accessed April 1, 2024. <https://tickets.ontarionorthland.ca/>

A fixed-route service that is moderately accessible may meet the needs of a broader portion of the community (including able-bodied seniors, low-income individuals, youth, and newcomers, for example). Participants suggested that capturing a broader ridership could generate more revenue and increase the sustainability and affordability of the service as well. Of course, there are limits to how many needs can be combined, and services like handi-vans would still be required to serve those with higher accessibility needs.

### **Convenient return trips**

Many inter-community trips that participants identified are to complete relatively short errands (appointments or shopping, for example). For these types of trips, being able to access a return trip within a few hours is ideal. The lack of a convenient return trip was identified as a deterrent towards using both handi-van service as well as Ontario Northland. Of course, frequency of service must be balanced with the need to minimize running empty busses or vans.

A regional coordination structure and centralized booking system for on-demand services like the handi-van could enable greater efficiency and contribute to making some trips shorter.

### **Spontaneity in accessing service**

One of the drawbacks identified with the handi-van service was the requirement to book 24 hours in advance. Given that needs for travel may arise more spontaneously (for example, weather, non-emergency medical transportation), the ability to access a service at shorter notice is desirable. As with the point on return trips above, a centralized coordination structure might also enable trips to be booked more spontaneously. Having a fixed route option would also enable travellers to travel more spontaneously, depending on the frequency of service. Advertising travel schedules through multiple avenues (municipal website; social media; print materials including local newspaper and posters; etc.) would also be important.

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**Given that needs for travel may arise [more spontaneously], the ability to access a service at shorter notice is desirable.**

### **Professional drivers**

Participants identified several problems involved with relying on volunteer or untrained drivers. Volunteer drivers are taking on a significant degree of responsibility, particularly where passengers with mobility challenges may need extra assistance entering and exiting the vehicle, or where there may be the potential for a medical emergency en-route. Problems of racism by drivers serving Indigenous and northern communities were also identified. All of this underscores the importance of professionally-trained drivers, which may include training not just in driving safety but also first-aid, cultural sensitivity, and de-escalation.

## How can the provincial government provide support?

Other solutions offered by online conversation participants related to the system-level, focusing on the role of the province in supporting inter-community transportation.

### Collaboration and Coordination

Participants believed there is a need for greater coordination of services at the regional or provincial level, and this is a role appropriate for the province to take on. Coordination could include creating networks for communication and sharing information, assisting with the coordination of routes and scheduling, enabling partnerships for joint ownership of transportation assets, and general enhancing of collaboration. Greater coordination could result in more efficient services in terms of cost; number of vehicles purchased; kilometres travelled; and passenger numbers, as well as equity between communities.

Currently, there are few provincial structures in place to assist municipalities, non-profits, health providers, and other stakeholder organizations in these kinds of coordination activities. It is up to these entities to build partnerships from the ground up.

One first step towards greater coordination suggested by participants was for the province to host a rural transportation symposium. It was noted that many municipalities, non-profits, businesses, and community groups are interested in or are currently exploring rural transportation solutions but there is a lack of information about what is happening outside one's region. Bringing together rural municipal governments, economic development agencies, employers, seniors organizations, settlement organizations, inter-community transportation companies, and other key stakeholder groups would be a simple, cost-effective first step towards building a more coordinated rural transportation system.<sup>102</sup> As the rural transportation system grows, the province could also support coordination through a provincially funded entity like the Nova Scotia Community Transportation Network (see Nova Scotia Case Study).

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**One first step towards greater coordination suggested by participants was for the province to host a rural transportation symposium**

102 While New Brunswick and much of the Maritimes is much further along when it comes to building a robust rural transportation system, the Symposium on Public and Community Transportation, hosted by the NB Economic and Social Inclusion Corporation in spring 2023 provides an aspirational example of what such a summit could look like. The NB symposium provided an opportunity for the 200 participants to learn about the current context in New Brunswick, leading models in the Maritimes and Canada, regulations and policy considerations, and available funding. It also included guest presentations on rural transportation models, programs and policies in Prince Edward Island, Nova Scotia, Quebec, and Ontario. <https://www2.gnb.ca/content/dam/gnb/Departments/esic/pdf/symposium/final-report-symposium.pdf>



## **Planning**

Another area where it was suggested the province could support municipalities or regions is with planning. One participant who works for a rural municipality said that having some kind of toolkit with information on how to conduct a needs assessment and gather necessary data, evaluate different models, conduct a cost-benefit analysis and build a business plan, and access funding would greatly extend the capacity of rural planners. These toolkits could be complemented by in-person training sessions hosted in rural centres like Brandon, Winkler-Morden, and Thompson. Assisting municipalities with planning and creating business plans would also leverage their ability to access federal funding for transportation initiatives.

## **Funding**

Participants also agreed the province should increase funding opportunities for rural transportation initiatives. Participants did not state a strong opinion between supporting public versus private sector services, but agreed that in either case, public subsidies are appropriate and necessary for maintaining a decent, consistent level of service, and that having subsidies available for all kinds of entities—municipal, non-profit, and private companies—would help support the full range of inter-community transportation services that already exist. This could include funding for planning and design, as well as capital and, crucially, operating funding. It was emphasized that funding should be consistent rather than short-term.

To encourage coordination, funding programs could also be designed to encourage joint applications between rural municipalities and other regional partners. This could include re-designing the MDTP program to offer additional funding to applicants that apply as part of a regional partnership.

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**To encourage coordination, funding programs could also be designed to encourage joint applications between rural municipalities and other regional partners.**

## **Attitude and Education**

Finally, participants agreed that the province could also support in education, promotion, and awareness-raising around rural transportation initiatives. While local organizations and municipalities are undoubtedly best situated to reach rural residents, the province could support these educational and promotional activities as part of its role in coordination and funding as discussed above. It was mentioned that this might include support with educating people on the true costs associated with driving, which would be necessary to encourage mode-shift.

Findings from this public consultation shows that many rural Manitobans do face significant challenges being able to travel conveniently, affordably, and safely between communities without a car, and they desire additional options. While the need for inter-community transportation is especially strong among specific demographics (especially seniors, newcomers, and low-income individuals), impacts extend beyond these groups to include

the families, friends, service providers who must step in to help, and who also experience the community-wide economic and social impacts caused by lack of transportation options. A majority of Manitobans surveyed believe that an inter-community bus service would improve their lives.

There is a lack of options available for low-income individuals, including newcomers, since many services are limited to seniors or those with accessibility needs. It is also possible that more general services could help families limit themselves to only one vehicle, which could save people money and contribute to the reduction of greenhouse gas emissions. Therefore, the need for services that are both available to the broader public and affordable was a strong theme.

Participants expressed a strong desire for the province to provide greater support for locally-designed and implemented solutions, through coordination, information and data-sharing, support with planning, and funding. Participants described how this would alleviate the strain on municipalities and local providers, and help create more sustainable and efficient service.

## SECTION 5

# Conclusions

This project demonstrates there is a need for more inter-community transit services in Manitoba, especially services that are affordable and open to the public. The current lack of a strong inter-community transit system translates into negative impacts for specific demographics, including seniors and people with mobility challenges, but also low-income individuals and newcomers, as well as the families that must step in to help. These gaps translated into negative impacts on individual health, income and employment, social relationships and wellbeing, as well as more widely on rural communities and economies.

The project posed three questions about what inter-community transit solutions should look like.

### **Why is inter-community transit important?**

Rural transportation can deliver multiple positive outcomes, including supporting rural economies and communities, providing life-enhancing transportation options and improving transportation equity for rural people, and reducing greenhouse gas emissions. Two specific findings from consulting with rural Manitobans were that rural transit could possibly play a role in reducing car ownership among rural households; and that while it plays a crucial role in serving seniors and those with mobility challenges, other demographics like newcomers and low-income individuals are currently falling through the cracks. More services that are affordable and open to general public use could help address this.

### **What is the role of the public versus private sector in delivering inter-community transit?**

While the private sector currently plays an important role in providing services that are open to the general public, these are currently not always sustainable, affordable, or safe. Greater regulation on the part of the province would help ensure private companies are able to play a role in the inter-community transit system. Municipal and non-profit ownership and delivery of services, with funding and coordination support from the province, is also crucial.

### **What is the role of the province versus municipalities and local organizations in delivering inter-community transit?**

While municipalities and other local actors are leading the local delivery of solutions across the province, they are struggling to take on this responsibility with little support from the province. Greater provincial support, especially through coordination and funding, is critical, as well as supporting the establishment of regional partnerships.

There are many additional initiatives the province could take that would build on the initial recommendations here. This includes leading the development of regional transportation plans that are aligned with provincial strategies and targets; and creating a provincial staff position dedicated to inter-community transportation. This would create more centralized coordination within the provincial government itself for an area which touches on many different departmental responsibilities.

## SECTION 6

# Recommendations to the Province of Manitoba:

### A. Support inter-community transportation services

1. **Convene a rural transportation symposium for stakeholders** to discuss the current context of rural transportation in Manitoba, learn what is happening in other rural municipalities and regions, share best practices, and learn about provincial regulations, policies, and funding.
  - a. Invite all stakeholders with expertise or interest in rural inter-community transportation, including rural municipal governments, economic development agencies, employers, seniors organizations, settlement organizations, inter-community transportation companies, and other key stakeholder groups.
  - b. Consider holding the event in Brandon, Steinbach, or Thompson, with in-person and online attendance options to accommodate all stakeholders.
  - c. Consider inviting experts to share examples of transportation models, programs and policies that have worked in other provinces.
  - d. Use the symposium to gather additional concrete recommendations and feedback from stakeholders on the provincial role in inter-community transportation.
2. **Establish a provincial network for inter-community transportation stakeholders** to share information and build collaborative partnerships.
3. **Provide rural municipalities and other interested public sector organizations with training and resources** on planning and designing inter-community transportation initiatives.

4. **Create an Inter-community Transportation Program** delivered by Manitoba Infrastructure and Transportation.
  - a. Provide capital and operational funding to projects from different regions across Manitoba. To be eligible, projects should be designed to serve multiple towns, rural municipalities, and Indigenous communities within the region.
  - b. Require applicants to form regional joint partnerships to access funding, ideally including multiple towns or rural municipalities as well as local community-based non-profits.
  - c. Do not limit the program to initiatives that serve a particular demographic only, but allow applicants flexibility to propose initiatives that meet the priority needs in their region based on a needs assessment.
  - d. Require all funding recipients to collect and report ridership, scheduling, and revenue data.
  - e. Assess projects on criteria related to their distinct goals.
5. **Aid in the collection, aggregating, and sharing of data by requiring all inter-community transportation providers**, including handi-vans, companies, municipalities, employers, etc. across the province to share data on ridership, scheduling, revenue, etc.
6. **Re-examine the Mobility Disadvantaged Transportation Program**, particularly:
  - a. Increasing funding to ensure sustainability and increase affordability for passengers.
  - b. Encouraging regional coordination to increase efficiency and ensure smaller municipalities benefit from the service.
7. **Work with the federal government** to:
  - a. Ensure Manitoban communities can access and benefit from rural transit funding through the Canada Public Transit Fund starting in 2026, and advocate for additional federal funding for operations.
  - b. Play a larger role in the coordination and support of inter-provincial transit.

## **B. Include inter-community transportation in the provincial green transportation policy**

8. **Include vehicle reduction and mode-shift targets in provincial climate planning.**
  - a. Support policies and programs that aid in meeting those targets, including mechanisms such as the provincial gas tax that fairly account for the full costs of driving on government and wider society.
9. **Develop a green transportation strategy for Manitoba that includes inter-community transportation** as an equity-based sustainable transportation solution.

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