

Rural and Small Community Transit – The Missing Piece in Canada’s Transport Plans

The lack of a coherent focus on planning and investment in transportation services for rural and small communities is having a significant impact on their ability to grow, attract new workers, as well as on their ability to be proactive partners in reducing the Canada’s greenhouse gas emissions.

Strong rural and small communities are an essential part of a vibrant nation. Canada’s rural and small communities are characterized by several critical elements - committed people with a strong sense of community; creators of wealth; and guardians of our natural resources. In fact the economic success we enjoy as a country is a direct result of the strength and vitality of our rural and small communities.

Transportation, more specifically transit connection between communities and regions, has increasingly come to be recognized as a primary responsibility of government at all levels, given its role as an integral part of community stability, growth and economic prosperity. Added to this is the increased recognition that transit services and the choices these alternatives provide to individuals will play a critical role in Canada’s ability to achieve greenhouse gas reduction targets.

The challenge we collectively face is that rural and small town Canada is characterized by a combination of low population densities and large distances between towns as well as limited, or no, provision of public transport services.

Some services do not connect with the nearest local service centre, and what services there are generally are so infrequent, that they require an alternative form of transport for individuals, to meet all essential needs. A new model of public transport is needed to support rural populations, particularly as the proportion of elderly people in rural and some regional areas will continue to increase. Funded, flexible transportation needs to be provided around smaller regional communities which do not currently have any adequate public transport service.

The Chamber recognizes that transit services are divided between a number of bodies, and a variety of services. In terms of responsibility, provinces and territories, in conjunction with local bodies are the primary level of government that has responsibility for transit within their jurisdiction. Indeed, for this very reason the Canadian Chamber has focused its efforts on the challenge facing urban areas. The Chamber has recognition that the primary challenge facing our transportation infrastructure is the growing trend towards urbanization and the need to ensure the efficient movement of people and goods within Canada’s urban areas.

However, it must be noted that our urban areas are extremely well served by transportation, both in terms of infrastructure and transit services. Indeed, significant revenue streams have been made available through targeted programs, such as the Building Canada Infrastructure Fund, the Gas Tax Program, Public Transit Capital Trust Public Transit Agreements.

Despite what is an unprecedented level of investment by senior levels of government, Chamber members are concerned with the lack of two key elements in government programming; a lack of a coherent plan for communities of all sizes and a seeming inherent bias against providing transit service to rural and small communities

Throughout many rural communities, there are private companies that financially support and offer a transit option to the residents and tourists of the community. By way of private partnerships within the community, there are some transit options available; however, these options are often not adequate enough to address all the transit needs of the community due to the limited amount of funds private partners are able to contribute.

If perceptions are reality, the reality is that many people continue to disregard public transport as within their consideration of travel modes. Many people still view public transport as a provision for

disadvantaged people that is unreliable, unsafe, overcrowded and dirty; these views are mostly outdated and ill-informed.

Positive and constructive work could be done to change these perceptions, for the benefit of customers and the transport system. Culturally, we need to move to a European model of provision and regard for the role of public transport in our society.

This might not be the primary issue raised by transport planners and engineers, but the social relationship to transport is an essential key to building ongoing investment in public transport across the political cycle.

Recommendations

That the Federal Government works with the provinces and territories to:

1. Develop a fully costed rural transport plan and to look into the creation of partnerships with private companies/organizations that will financially contribute to the success of the plan.
2. Work with municipalities to develop an implementation model.