



P.O. Box 1749  
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**Item No. 15.2.1**  
**Halifax Regional Council**  
**June 10, 2025**

**TO:** Mayor Fillmore and Members of Halifax Regional Council

**FROM:** Councillor Sam Austin, Chair, Transportation Standing Committee

**DATE:** May 22, 2025

**SUBJECT:** Rural Transit Grant Program Review

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**ORIGIN**

May 22, 2025 meeting of Transportation Standing Committee, Item 13.1.1.

**RECOMMENDATION**

The Transportation Standing Committee recommends that Halifax Regional Council direct the CAO to:

1. Establish a Rural Transit Advisory Group to lead and foster strategic partnerships with key stakeholders to implement the initiatives recommended in the staff report dated January 22, 2025;
2. Prepare a staff report to amend Administrative Order 2014-012-ADM Respecting Grants for Rural Transit to establish a capital grants funding subcategory with defined funding criteria, priority outcomes, and evaluation measures for consideration and approval by the Grants Committee and Regional Council;
3. Establish a professional development and training support program for Rural Transit Funding Program partners that leverages existing municipal training programs;
4. Develop a fare integration strategy for Regional Council's consideration to facilitate transfers from rural transit services to the Halifax Transit network;
5. Support brand awareness of rural transit services through Halifax Transit's existing marketing and communications channels; and
6. Develop a Microtransit Service Plan for Regional Council's consideration that prioritizes addressing gaps in rural service.

## **BACKGROUND**

Transportation Standing Committee received a staff recommendation report dated January 22, 2025 to consider the Rural Transit Funding Program.

For further information refer to the attached staff report dated January 22, 2025.

## **DISCUSSION**

Transportation Standing Committee considered the staff report dated January 22, 2025 and approved the recommendation to Halifax Regional Council as outlined in this report.

## **FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS**

Financial implications are outlined in the attached staff report dated January 22, 2025.

## **RISK CONSIDERATION**

Risk consideration is outlined in the attached staff report dated xx.

## **COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT**

Meetings of the Transportation Standing Committee are open to public attendance and members of the public are invited to address the Standing Committee for up to five (5) minutes during the Public Participation portion of the meeting. Meetings are live webcast on Halifax.ca. The agenda, reports, video, and minutes of the Standing Committee are posted on Halifax.ca.

For further information on Community Engagement refer to the attached staff report dated January 22, 2025.

## **ENVIRONMENTAL IMPLICATIONS**

Environmental implications are outlined in the staff report dated January 22, 2025.

## **ALTERNATIVES**

Alternatives are outlined in the attached staff report dated January 22, 2025.

## **LEGISLATIVE AUTHORITY**

Legislative Authority is outlined in the attached staff report dated January 22, 2025.

Administrative Order One, Respecting the Procedures of the Council, Schedule 7 Transportation Standing Committee Terms of Reference, sections 4 and 6:

4. The Transportation Standing Committee shall oversee and review of the Municipality's Regional Transportation Plans and initiatives, as follows:
  - (a) overseeing HRM's Regional Transportation Objectives and Transportation outcome areas;

(b) overseeing and reviewing the Regional Transportation policies, bylaws and functional plans;

(c) providing input into the Municipality's transportation funding strategies such as infrastructure funding, Gateway initiatives and approaches to Capital Cost Contribution;

6. The Transportation Standing Committee shall:

(a) review and oversee policy direction and long term funding approach to promote and encourage Transit alternatives as outlined in the Regional Plan;

## **ATTACHMENTS**

Attachment 1 – Staff recommendation report dated January 22, 2025.

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Report Prepared by: Krista Vining, Team Lead, Legislative Assistants, Municipal Clerk's Office 902.223.1046

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**Item No. 13.1.1**  
**Transportation Standing Committee**  
**May 22, 2025**

**TO:** Chair and Members of Transportation Standing Committee

**FROM:** Brad Anguish, Commissioner of Operations

**DATE:** January 22, 2025

**SUBJECT:** Rural Transit Grant Program Review

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**ORIGIN**

April 24, 2023, Transportation Standing Committee motion (Item 12.3.1):

MOVED by Councillor Cuttell, seconded by Councillor Purdy

THAT the Transportation Standing Committee direct the Chief Administrative Officer (CAO) to provide a staff report to review HRM's Rural Transit Program to assess existing regional services, identifying gaps in regional service, conduct a rural/regional transit service need analysis.

MOTION PUT AND PASSED

**EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

The objective of this report is to present strategic recommendations to help shape the future of Halifax Regional Municipality's Rural Transit Funding Program.

Established by Regional Council in 2014, the Rural Transit Funding Program provides grants to non-profit rural transit service providers in Halifax to support transportation services in areas outside the Halifax Transit network. To date, the program has supported four non-profit service providers: BayRides, East Hants Community Rider, MusGo Rider Eastern Shore, and MusGo Rider Valley-Sheet Harbour.

Funding through the program is dispersed through annual lump sum payments and a per-kilometre rate, based on available budget. Additionally, funding is adjusted annually based on the five-year average for inflation. For the 2024/2025 fiscal year, up to \$500,000 was approved for disbursement based on projections provided from rural transit service providers.

The recommendations outlined in this report align with key municipal plans that guide transit service development, including the *Regional Municipal Planning Strategy* (the Regional Plan) and the *Integrated Mobility Plan*, which provide a strategic framework for the Rural Transit Funding Program's evolution.

An engagement program for the Rural Transit Funding Program was conducted from June to September 2024 to inform recommendations presented in this report. Engagement activities included workshops with rural transit service providers, interviews with rural district Councillors, a public survey, and community outreach events in rural areas across the municipality. Additionally, meetings were facilitated with the Joint Regional Transportation Agency (the JRTA) to ensure recommendations in this report are aligned



with research, key findings, and feedback resulting from extensive community engagement to inform the *Regional Transportation Plan* currently underway. A Gap and Needs Analysis was developed based on insights gained from the engagement program, which identified key gaps and areas for improvement to inform future rural transit planning and the continued success of the Rural Transit Funding Program.

Based on engagement and the Gap and Needs Analysis, it is recommended that a Rural Transit Advisory Group be created to oversee the development and implementation of new rural transit initiatives outlined in this report. These initiatives include: the introduction of a capital grants program; the establishment of a professional development and training support program; the development of a fare integration strategy; marketing and branding support through Halifax Transit's existing communications channels to build positive brand awareness; and the development of a Microtransit Service Plan. Planning for several of these initiatives could begin in the 2025/2026 fiscal year, with implementation timelines for proposed initiatives varying over the next several years.

The Rural Transit Funding Program has \$450,000 available in the approved 2025/2026 operating budget. No other immediate costs are anticipated at this time and details of any additional funds required will be presented in separate future reports.

### **RECOMMENDATION**

It is recommended that the Transportation Standing Committee recommend that Regional Council direct the CAO to:

1. Establish a Rural Transit Advisory Group to lead and foster strategic partnerships with key stakeholders to implement the initiatives recommended in this report;
2. Prepare a staff report to amend *Administrative Order 2014-012-ADM Respecting Grants for Rural Transit* to establish a capital grants funding subcategory with defined funding criteria, priority outcomes, and evaluation measures for consideration and approval by the Grants Committee and Regional Council;
3. Establish a professional development and training support program for Rural Transit Funding Program partners that leverages existing municipal training programs;
4. Develop a fare integration strategy for Regional Council's consideration to facilitate transfers from rural transit services to the Halifax Transit network;
5. Support brand awareness of rural transit services through Halifax Transit's existing marketing and communications channels; and
6. Develop a Microtransit Service Plan for Regional Council's consideration that prioritizes addressing gaps in rural service.

### **BACKGROUND**

The Rural Transit Funding Program, adopted by Regional Council on August 5, 2014, provides grants to non-profit rural transit service providers in Halifax to subsidize the cost of their services. The program aims to support transportation needs in areas outside the Halifax Transit service area, enhancing mobility for residents in rural communities.

To date, four rural transit service providers have received funding through the program, including BayRides, East Hants Community Rider, MusGo Rider Eastern Shore, and MusGo Rider Valley Sheet-Harbour.

Since its inception, the program has disbursed funding in two forms: an annual lump sum payment and a per-kilometre flat rate, based on available budget.

On June 4, 2024, Regional Council adopted amendments to *Administrative Order 2014-012-ADM, Respecting Grants for Rural Transit* to allow for a one-time increase in the 2024/2025 fiscal year to the

lump sum funding available to applicants from \$5,000 and \$10,000 to \$6,381 and \$12,763 respectively, and an increase to the per vehicle kilometre rate funding from 50 cents to 64 cents<sup>1</sup>.

Additionally, amendments were adopted to account for inflation by increasing funding annually based on the five-year average for inflation.

In line with this amendment, a maximum of \$500,000 was approved for grant disbursements for 2024/2025, based on the following projections provided by Rural Transit Funding Program service providers.

**Figure 1: Projected 2024/2025 Grant Disbursements**

| Service Providers                | Projected kms  | Annual Lump Sum Payment | Per km Flat Rate (at \$0.64 per km) | Total Projected Grant Disbursement |
|----------------------------------|----------------|-------------------------|-------------------------------------|------------------------------------|
| BayRides                         | 186,423        | \$12,763                | \$119,311                           | \$132,074                          |
| East Hants Community Rider       | 39,600         | \$12,763                | \$25,344                            | \$38,107.00                        |
| MusGo Rider Eastern Shore        | 300,000        | \$12,763                | \$192,000                           | \$204,763.00                       |
| MusGo Rider Valley-Sheet Harbour | 135,000        | \$12,763                | \$86,400                            | \$99,163.00                        |
| <b>TOTAL</b>                     | <b>661,023</b> | <b>\$51,052</b>         | <b>\$423,055</b>                    | <b>\$474,107</b>                   |

## **DISCUSSION**

Since the launch of the Rural Transit Funding Program over a decade ago, rural transit service providers have navigated an evolving landscape marked by shifting regional demographics, rising service demand, escalating operational and capital costs, staffing shortages, and increasing concerns about long-term financial and service sustainability. These changes have highlighted the need for a comprehensive program review and innovative solutions to address current and emerging needs.

This report provides a Gap and Needs Analysis that identifies key challenges and needs and proposes strategic recommendations to support the continued success of the Rural Transit Funding Program.

### **1. Alignment with Key Municipal Plans**

The recommendations outlined in this report are aligned with the following key municipal plans that guide the development of transit services, offering a strategic framework for the evolution of the Rural Transit Funding Program.

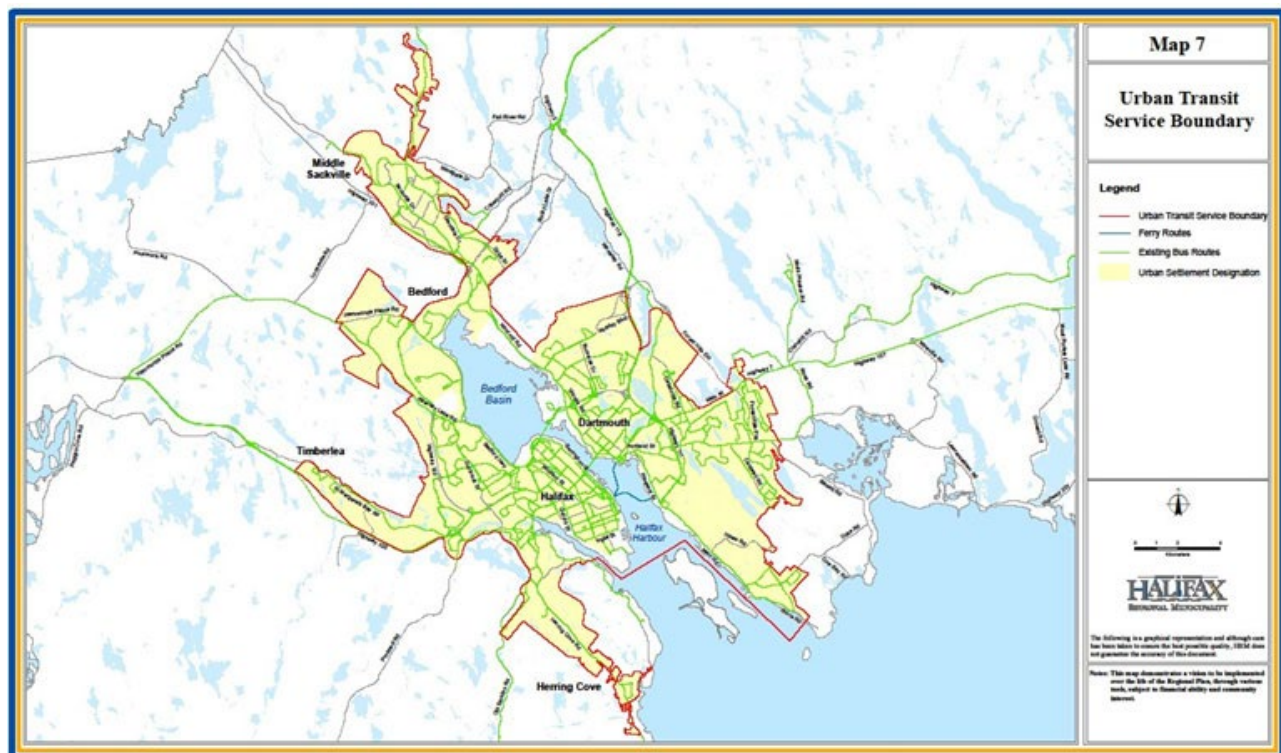
#### **1.1 Regional Municipal Planning Strategy**

Adopted in 2014, the *Regional Municipal Planning Strategy (the Regional Plan)* outlines a shared vision, guiding principles, and long-term planning policies that determine where, when, and how growth and development will occur across the region.

<sup>1</sup> See [Halifax Regional Council, June 4, 2024 – Item No. 15.1.5](#)

The Regional Plan plays a vital role in shaping both transit development and the direction of the Rural Transit Funding Program. It identifies the challenges of providing centralized transit services in low-density rural areas and underscores the need for enhanced rural mobility solutions. The plan also introduces updated land designations and growth centers that direct future transit investments, as well as the Urban Transit Service Boundary (UTSB), within which resources and improvements to conventional transit service will be focused (see Figure 2 below). As a result, no new or increased Halifax Transit services are currently contemplated outside of the UTSB, with the exception of Regional Express services (identified as rural commuter Express Service in the Regional Plan) to address commuter needs. These routes include 320 Airport-Fall River, 330 Tantallon-Sheldrake Lake, and 370 Porters Lake, with a potential future Route 310 Middle Sackville. Additionally, rural routes established prior to the implementation of the UTSB, including 401 Porters Lake, 415 Purcells Cove, (peak only), and 433 Tantallon (peak only), provide connections between rural communities and urban transit terminals. These routes have been grandfathered into the network but cannot be expanded.

**Figure 2: Urban Transit Service Boundary**  
**Regional Municipal Planning Strategy (the Regional Plan) 2014**



## 1.2 Integrated Mobility Plan

The *Integrated Mobility Plan*, adopted in 2017, guides investment in active transportation, transit, transportation demand management, goods movement, and the roadway network in Halifax.

Action 103 of the plan directs staff to identify areas where density or demand does not justify full transit services and to explore alternative service models to support specialized trips or enable service expansion.

As outlined in the plan, potential options include shared taxis in areas not served by Halifax Transit, subsidized taxi services such as "taxibus" programs, and various ride-sharing, ride-hailing, and car-sharing initiatives. Additionally, the plan considers subsidies for pilot or start-up routes and trips, as well as the expansion of the Rural Transit Funding Program.

## 2. Stakeholder Engagement

A comprehensive stakeholder engagement program was carried out from June to September 2024 to inform the recommendations in this report. Key findings from the engagement program can be found in *Attachment A: Rural Transit Funding Program Engagement Report*.

The engagement program included workshops with rural transit service providers, interviews with Councillors from rural districts, a public survey on rural transit, and community outreach events held in various rural areas across the municipality.

In addition, meetings were facilitated with the provincial Department of Public Works, and the Joint Regional Transportation Agency (JRTA) to ensure recommendations in this report align with provincial transportation planning. The JRTA, a provincial crown corporation established in 2021, is mandated with the development of a *Regional Transportation Plan* that will identify the long-term transportation needs of HRM and surrounding areas, generally encompassing a one-hour commuter shed.

## 3. Gap and Needs Analysis – Executive Summary

A Gap and Needs Analysis, based on key findings from the engagement program, was developed to identify critical gaps and areas for improvement to enhance rural transit service delivery and ensure the continued success of the Rural Transit Funding Program. Figure 3 below provides an Executive Summary of the Gaps and Needs Analysis. Detailed results of the engagement program, including the detailed Gap and Needs Analysis, can be found in *Attachment A: Rural Transit Funding Program Engagement Report*.

**Figure 3: Gap and Needs Analysis – Executive Summary**

### 1. COVERAGE & SERVICE DELIVERY

Some rural and suburban areas such as Sambro, Prospect, Lucasville, Pockwock Road, North Beaver Bank, Fall River, and Enfield, currently lack access to transportation options and are not serviced by either Halifax Transit or rural transit service providers (see *Attachment B: Current Transit Service Coverage*).

In some cases, provincial funding may not be available to current rural transit service providers due to population density thresholds surpassing the provincial Community Transportation Assistance Program (CTAP) funding allowances. In other cases, communities have been unable to attract potential service providers to service their areas.

Rural Transit Funding Program service providers are experiencing a growth in demand for service, resulting in increased service denials, especially for accessible transportation.

Rural Transit Funding Program service providers primarily tend to operate on weekdays only, making it difficult for rural residents to access transit during evenings or weekends; these limited service hours can restrict travel for rural residents, particularly those who rely on transit for work, social activities, or health care.

Residents report that for some, the lack of integration between rural transit services and the Halifax Transit network represents a financial challenge, making it more difficult for rural residents to travel efficiently and conveniently to and from urban areas.

There is a desire from residents and some Councillors for more Park & Ride facilities (and presumably with associated transit service increases in most cases) at the periphery of the transit service area, particularly to serve rural areas with limited transit options, to reduce reliance on personal vehicles.

Potential future solutions to consider include increasing service availability on weekends and evenings, improving fare integration with Halifax Transit, exploring new microtransit service

options, and considering the potential for fixed weekday commuter routes to urban transit terminals and Park & Rides.

## **2. INFRASTRUCTURE, SAFETY & ACCESSIBILITY**

Aside from feedback received regarding the Rural Transit Funding Program, Councillors and residents shared concerns regarding rural transit infrastructure within the Halifax Transit network, including inadequate shelters, lighting, and safe pedestrian access at transit stops, which negatively impacts public perception of safety and accessibility.

Resident and Councillor feedback highlights a desire for the construction of safe walking paths, better lighting, and the installation of more shelters at rural bus stops along rural routes grandfathered into the network prior to the establishment of the UTSB.

## **3. AFFORDABILITY**

The cost of rural transit services is cited as a barrier for many, including low-income individuals, seniors, students, and people with disabilities. The need to pay multiple fares when transferring between rural and urban transit systems further exacerbates affordability challenges. Current fare structures may not adequately address the needs of vulnerable populations, placing additional financial strain on both riders and rural transit service providers.

There are requests for additional fare subsidies or financial assistance programs to improve accessibility and reduce the burden on transit providers to subsidize fares for those in need. A review of current fare structures, including the potential introduction of sliding-scale fares or targeted subsidies for medical or social transportation, could make services more affordable for rural residents while reducing the reliance on rural transit service providers to subsidize trip costs.

## **4. FINANCIAL SUSTAINABILITY**

Rural transit service providers report significant financial challenges, largely due to their dependence on unpredictable funding sources and increasing operational demands. These financial constraints can hinder their ability to expand and maintain fleets, while escalating costs, such as rising insurance premiums, further strain already limited resources.

A more consistent and sustainable funding model could partially address these challenges. Dedicated capital funding may be an opportunity to facilitate fleet and facility expansion, enabling the integration of electric and accessible vehicles that can reduce long-term operational costs and improve service quality. In addition, exploring diversified revenue streams—such as partnerships with businesses and health care organizations—could provide a more stable financial foundation, ensuring long-term viability and sustainability.

## **5. WORKFORCE PLANNING**

Rural transit service providers face staffing challenges, including difficulties in recruiting and retaining qualified drivers, dispatchers, and volunteers, which can impact service reliability. Key contributing factors include low wages, competition from larger organizations, and an aging volunteer base. Additionally, with key managers nearing retirement, there is growing concern about the loss of valuable institutional knowledge, further complicating long-term service sustainability.

To address these challenges, support with HR strategies, including potential new professional development and training opportunities, could help with recruitment and retention efforts, and support long-term sustainability.

## 6. PUBLIC AWARENESS AND PERCEPTIONS

There appears to be a lack of public awareness regarding available rural transit services, with many community members unaware of the providers in their area or how to access services. This is compounded by inaccurate perceptions of the service provided by rural transit service providers, particularly among younger residents who view it as a service for seniors and individuals requiring accessible transportation.

Rural transit service providers report that many customers only become aware of these services during a family crisis or emergency, reinforcing the notion that rural transit is primarily for seniors or people with disabilities. This misunderstanding contributes to underutilization within certain demographics and could prevent rural transit from reaching its full potential in the future.

Enhanced marketing and outreach efforts with local organizations, health care providers, and businesses could improve public perception of rural transit services; however, it is crucial to consider the potential of increased demand that such initiatives may generate, which could further impact capacity challenges and service denials.

## 7. BUSINESS PLANNING

Rural transit service providers face the challenge of balancing immediate short-term priorities with the need for long-term planning. While short-term solutions are necessary to address urgent demands, they can sometimes overshadow the development of sustainable solutions for the future.

Establishing a Rural Transit Advisory Group and collaborating with service providers to co-develop a comprehensive long-term plan for rural transit could ensure that immediate needs are met while also providing a clear direction for future growth and sustainability.

## 4. Proposed Strategies

The formation of a Rural Transit Advisory Group is recommended to guide the development and implementation of strategies outlined in this report. The proposed advisory group would be led by Halifax Transit and would include internal and external stakeholders involved in delivering or developing rural transit services. In addition to steering the initiatives outlined in this plan, the group would offer long-term support to rural transit service providers by proactively working together to address challenges as they arise.

Based on input from stakeholder and public engagement and key insights outlined in the Gap and Needs Analysis, the following strategies are recommended:

- Amend *Administrative Order 2014-012-ADM Respecting Grants for Rural Transit* to establish a capital grants funding subcategory with defined funding criteria, priority outcomes, and evaluation measures for consideration and approval by the HRM Grants Committee and Regional Council;
- Establish a professional development and training support program for Rural Transit Funding Program partners that leverages existing municipal training programs;
- Develop a fare integration strategy for Regional Council's consideration to facilitate transfers from rural transit services to the Halifax Transit network;

- Support brand awareness of rural transit services through Halifax Transit's existing marketing and communications channels; and
- Develop a Microtransit Service Plan for Regional Council's consideration that prioritizes addressing gaps in rural service.

These strategies are detailed below.

#### **4.1 Capital Grants Program**

The need for additional capital funding for rural transit service providers has been highlighted in the Gap and Needs Analysis—particularly with respect to capital investments related to energy efficiency, accessibility, facility upgrades, and land acquisition for future expansion.

It is recommended that *Administrative Order 2014-012-ADM Respecting Grants for Rural Transit* be amended to add a new funding subcategory for capital grants, up to a maximum threshold of \$50,000 per year per applicant, with the intention of implementation within an 18-24 month period following Regional Council approval.

The Rural Transit Funding Program does not specify how grants are to be used (i.e. operating or capital); however, it appears that this funding is primarily used by recipients for operating costs. Over time, the Community Grants Program has received several applications from rural transit service providers for funding related to capital costs. While the Community Grants Program does not have a transit category, initial requests were related to accessibility, and some projects were approved within the Accessibility and Environment categories. Since then, the program has funded two grants over the period of 2019 to 2024; \$4,760 for a Facility Accessibility Study for MusGo Rider in 2019, and \$5,000 for a Marketing Plan for BayRides in 2021. Additional applications submitted for capital projects have been declined.

On December 2, 2024, the Grants Committee approved recommendations presented by Finance and Asset Management in a staff report outlining amendments to *Administrative Order 005-ADM Respecting the Community Grants Program*. One of the recommendations included consolidating community-based transit funding under the Rural Transit Funding Program. This recommendation was aimed at reducing duplication, eliminating inefficiencies for HRM and applicants, and streamlining the grant application process by providing a single point of entry for prospective applicants.

A Capital Grants Program for rural transit providers would not only establish an avenue to request funding for essential capital upgrades and repairs, but could allow applicants to better optimize funding opportunities from other programs and orders of government. Specifically, federal programs in recent years have provided a substantial portion of funding for rural transit projects but require cost sharing, which can be a barrier for rural service providers. A mechanism to provide a municipal contribution to these projects in the future may allow rural transit service providers to leverage additional funding.

Three grant categories that align with key municipal priorities are envisioned at this time, as follows.

#### **Greening Transit**

This capital grants category would align with the goals of HalifACT, Halifax's climate action plan, by supporting sustainable transportation solutions in rural communities. This category would provide capital grants to help rural transit service providers reduce their carbon footprint and improve energy efficiency.

Eligible projects could include projects such as: the purchase of zero emission or hybrid vehicles to replace or complement current fleets; the installation of charging or fueling infrastructure to support the transition to cleaner energy; and capital investments in upgrading facilities, incorporating energy-efficient features such as LED lighting, advanced heating/cooling systems, insulation, or solar power solutions aimed at reducing energy consumption and fostering sustainable practices.

### **Accessibility**

This capital grants category would focus on improving accessibility for rural transit customers, which was identified as a priority through stakeholder engagement.

Eligible projects could include: the purchase of accessible vehicles; capital costs to retrofit existing vans with modern accessibility features, ensuring older fleet vehicles meet current accessibility standards; and technology upgrades related to accessible transit.

By supporting these accessibility improvements, this funding category will help rural transit service providers address the growing demand for inclusive, accessible transportation.

### **Land Acquisition and New Construction**

This category would be designed to support rural transit service providers in expanding and enhancing their infrastructure to meet the evolving transportation needs of their communities. This funding stream could help providers acquire land and undertake new construction projects.

Eligible projects could include the acquisition of land, or the construction of new transit infrastructure such as garages, maintenance facilities, or parking and storage spaces for transit vehicles.

To implement this new capital funding stream, staff, in consultation with the proposed Rural Transit Advisory Group, Finance, and Legal Services would propose amendments to *Administrative Order 2014-012-ADM Respecting Grants for Rural Transit* to establish a capital grants funding subcategory with defined funding criteria, priority outcomes, and evaluation measures for consideration and approval by the Grants Committee and Regional Council.

### **4.2 Professional Development & Training Support Program**

During engagement with rural transit service providers, a need for enhanced professional development and training opportunities was highlighted. Challenges in recruiting and retaining qualified staff, particularly drivers and dispatchers, while also navigating the rising costs of training was noted.

To address this need, it is recommended that a professional development and training support program be considered for leaders and staff of Rural Transit Funding Program partners. The program would leverage HRM's existing knowledge of training opportunities in critical areas such as health and safety, crisis intervention, diversity and inclusion, mental health, and first aid, as well as professional development opportunities to support leaders in long-term planning and day to day business operations.

The Rural Transit Advisory Group will collaborate with Human Resources, the Halifax Transit Training team, and the Rural Transportation Association (RTA) to audit training gaps, create an inventory of current learning opportunities, and establish an ongoing list of training offerings. This work will help ensure coordinated efforts, avoid duplication of existing professional development programs, and support the development of a comprehensive and sustainable training framework.

### **4.3 Fare Integration Strategy**

Rural transit service providers each have their own fare schedules and payment methods, separate from Halifax Transit. Feedback from Councillors, residents, and service providers highlighted that managing multiple fare systems can be inconvenient for customers. A more integrated fare system allowing passengers to purchase all required fares through a single-point-of-entry would improve the user experience, making travel between rural areas and the urban center easier and more convenient.

In response to this feedback, it is recommended that the Rural Transit Advisory Group consider a fare integration strategy to explore ways to improve transfers between rural transit services and the Halifax Transit network. One potential solution could be the implementation of vendor portals on the HFXGO mobile fare payment app, which enables approved third-party vendors such as retail stores or partner transit agencies to sell and distribute electronic transit fares through a secure online interface. Vendors can issue digital or printed tickets, accept various payment methods, and provide real-time fare validation.



As part of the fare integration strategy, the Rural Transit Advisory Group would review the potential of fare discount options for transfers to Halifax Transit and prepare a report for Regional Council outlining financial impacts.

#### **4.4 Marketing and Communications Support**

As highlighted in the Gap and Needs Analysis, public awareness of rural transit services is limited, with many unaware of existing service providers operating in their area, or how to access them. The perception that rural transit is only for seniors or for people with disabilities may be hindering the services from reaching their full potential.

It is recommended that opportunities to support brand awareness of rural transit services through Halifax Transit's existing marketing and communications channels be considered. These opportunities could include: profiling service providers on the halifax.ca website; providing information about rural transit services in Halifax Transit Riders' Guides and Route Maps; developing engaging social media posts to bolster awareness; and featuring messaging on the municipality's digital screen network. This work would be led and managed by Halifax Transit's Programs & Engagement team in collaboration with Corporate Communications, and costs would be funded through Halifax Transit's annual operating budget.

#### **4.5 Microtransit Service Plan**

It is recommended that Halifax Transit develop a Microtransit Service Plan to address service gaps that currently exist within the municipality, with prioritization of rural areas.

Microtransit is a flexible, on-demand public transportation service that often uses smaller vehicles such as vans or minibuses to provide transportation in areas where traditional fixed-route transit isn't efficient or attractive for a variety of reasons. It typically relies on technology to communicate with passengers and transport them as the need arises. Microtransit can be an appropriate service model in areas that are rural, or otherwise have low population densities, because demand is typically unpredictable, and the built form (i.e., the physical characteristics and configuration of buildings and their relationship to streets and open spaces) discourages walking the distances that would be necessary for most people to reach conventional bus stops. These factors make microtransit an appealing option for transporting travellers between low density areas and conventional transit hubs.

Current Rural Transit Funding Program partners already provide flexible, door-to-door transportation options in many rural/low-density areas; however, gaps exist where these services don't operate or where demand exceeds availability. This is particularly true in several communities located just beyond the Halifax Transit service area, where it is a short distance to existing fixed-route transit. These areas would in some cases be ineligible for provincial rural transit funding.

In preparing the Microtransit Service Plan, research and engagement would need be undertaken to better understand travel patterns and community needs. Different microtransit models would be evaluated to determine those which would be most effective. The plan would also assess technology requirements, vehicle options, and sustainable funding models. All of this would be done in collaboration with current rural transit service providers and taken to the community for engagement and feedback. Further steps may include a pilot project launched in select rural communities to test service feasibility, with data collection and rider feedback informing adjustments before a final service plan is prepared and sent to Regional Council for review.

Due to the emergence of microtransit across the country as a viable transit service model, Halifax Transit intended to further explore the potential adoption in our region in the coming years. Where the introduction of microtransit has the highest potential to make significant improvements in the short term to mobility options in rural areas, it is recommended that this work be prioritized, and planning and engagement commence immediately. The intent would be to have a plan approved in 2025/26 to allow for inclusion of the implementation of a pilot program as part of the 2026/27 budget process.

## 5. Other Strategies Considered

Multiple suggestions brought forward through engagement were reviewed and considered in the preparation of this report, one of the more notable being the provision of a fare subsidy program.

Currently, rural transit service providers rely on a provincial grant program to support fare assistance; however, as more rural transit organizations access the fund, individual allocations have decreased.

While additional fare assistance has been requested, introducing a municipal subsidy could duplicate efforts already in place at the provincial level. In terms of scale, a starting point for a municipal fare subsidy program would be expected to be in the range of approximately \$60,000 annually. A more effective approach may be to formally request that the Province increase its existing contribution. This option could also be revisited in the future by the Rural Transit Advisory Group.

## 6. Implementation Timeline

Implementation of the initiatives outlined in this report can begin immediately. A Rural Transit Advisory Group could be struck relatively quickly (within 6-8 weeks).

It is anticipated that planning activities, including developing the framework for the capital grants funding program, drafting professional development and training support resources, preparing a fare integration strategy for Council's review, planning for marketing and communications support, and preparing a microtransit implementation plan (including engagement) could be completed within 12-18 months. Implementation of items with budget implications (specifically microtransit, capital grants, and potentially fare integration) would be subject to approval as part of a future budget year as they may carry significant ongoing costs.

## FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

The Rural Transit Funding Program has \$450,000 allocated in the approved 2025/26 operating budget. These funds are expected to be fully utilized by existing plans.

Further financial implications for the recommendations presented in this report are as follows:

1. Marketing and public engagement efforts are anticipated to cost \$30,000-\$40,000 but can be managed within the existing Halifax Transit R624 Operating Budget.
2. Funding requirements for the proposed Capital Grants Program, Fare Integration Strategy, and Microtransit Service Plan will be outlined in separate future reports and will be requested at that time. These costs could be relatively modest, or quite significant, with ongoing and increasing costs over time, depending on the scale of program, or implementation strategy imposed. There is \$200,000 available in Q421 for Musgo Rider that could potentially be used to fund a portion of one of these initiatives in the short term.

## RISK CONSIDERATION

The following provides an overview of risks and mitigation strategies to be considered to ensure successful implementation of recommendations outlined in this report.

### 1. Funding and Budget Availability

**Risk:** Potential shortfalls in funding for capital grants, fare integration strategy, and Microtransit Service Plan.

**Mitigation:** Funding will be dependent on available budget, similar to the current Rural Transit Funding Program model. Regional Council will approve scale and growth of any microtransit initiatives. Opportunities to offset costs will be explored.

### 2. Stakeholder Coordination

**Risk:** Effective collaboration is required among diverse stakeholders, which may present coordination challenges or delays.

**Mitigation:** Clear roles, timelines, and effective leadership will ensure alignment and accountability.

### 3. Operational and Technological Challenges

**Risk:** Integration of new transit models and payment systems could face operational hurdles and challenges.

**Mitigation:** Comprehensive planning, pilot testing phases, and ongoing engagement with service providers and technology partners will be implemented to manage risk.

### 4. Community Resistance

**Risk:** Resistance from rural communities to new transit models, such as microtransit.

**Mitigation:** Pilot programs, community engagement, and marketing will ensure potential new services meet local needs and encourage adoption.

## **COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT**

A comprehensive engagement plan was undertaken to inform this report, which included:

- Workshops with Rural Transit Funding Program service providers;
- In-person interviews with Councillors in Districts 1,2,11,13, and 14;
- Seven community outreach events in rural communities throughout the municipality;
- Talk Transit survey delivered in person and online;
- Meetings with JRTA and Public Works; and
- Interviews with rural transit service providers in other provinces to support a jurisdictional scan.

Residents and customers of rural transit service providers were encouraged to participate in the Rural Transit Funding Program survey and community outreach events, which were promoted through a comprehensive marketing and communications program that included social media advertising, the municipal digital screen network, and 16,000 direct mail postcards delivered to rural households. See *Appendix A: Rural Transit Funding Program Engagement Report*.

## **ENVIRONMENTAL IMPLICATIONS**

As reported in the Engagement Report, 83% of respondents primarily use personal vehicles for travel. Improving rural transit services could provide access to lower-emission alternatives and reduce reliance on personal vehicles, aligning with both the Integrated Mobility Plan and HalifACT, the municipality's climate action plan.

The Greening Transit subcategory recommended under the proposed capital grants program advances the goals outlined in these plans by supporting the decarbonization and electrification of transit vehicles and improving the efficiency and resiliency of rural transit infrastructure.

## **ALTERNATIVES**

The Transportation Standing Committee could:

1. Refuse to approve the recommendations outlined in this report.
2. Approve some but not all recommendations outlined in this report.

## **LEGISLATIVE AUTHORITY**

*Administrative Order 2014-012-ADM Respecting Grants for Rural Transit*

3. The purpose of this Administrative Order is to assist community organizations to operate community-based transit services in rural communities in the Municipality as an efficient, cost-effective form of public transportation outside of urbanized areas.

*HRM Grants Committee - Terms of Reference:*

The HRM Grants Committee shall review, evaluate and make recommendations to Regional Council regarding annual cash grants, rent subsidies, property tax exemptions, less than market value property sale and leases to registered non-profit organizations and charities managed by a duly appointed Grants Committee.

*Halifax Regional Municipality Charter, SNS 2008, c 39:*

- 7A** The purposes of the Municipality are to
- (a) provide good government;
  - (b) provide services, facilities, and other things that, in the opinion of the Council, are necessary or desirable for all or part of the Municipality; and
  - (c) develop and maintain safe and viable communities.
- 69** (1) The Municipality may provide a public transportation service by
- (a) the purchase of vehicles or vessels and operation of the service;
  - (b) providing financial assistance to a person who will undertake to provide the service; or
  - (c) a combination of these methods.
- 79A** (1) Subject to subsections (2) to (4), the Municipality may only spend money for municipal purposes if
- (a) the expenditure is included in the Municipality's operating budget or capital budget or is otherwise authorized by the Municipality;
  - (b) the expenditure is in respect of an emergency under the *Emergency Management Act*; or
  - (c) the expenditure is legally required to be paid.

**ATTACHMENTS**

Attachment A: Rural Transit Funding Program Engagement Report  
Attachment B: Current Transit Service Coverage

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Report Approved by: 

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# Rural Transit Funding Program

## Engagement Report

**Prepared by:**

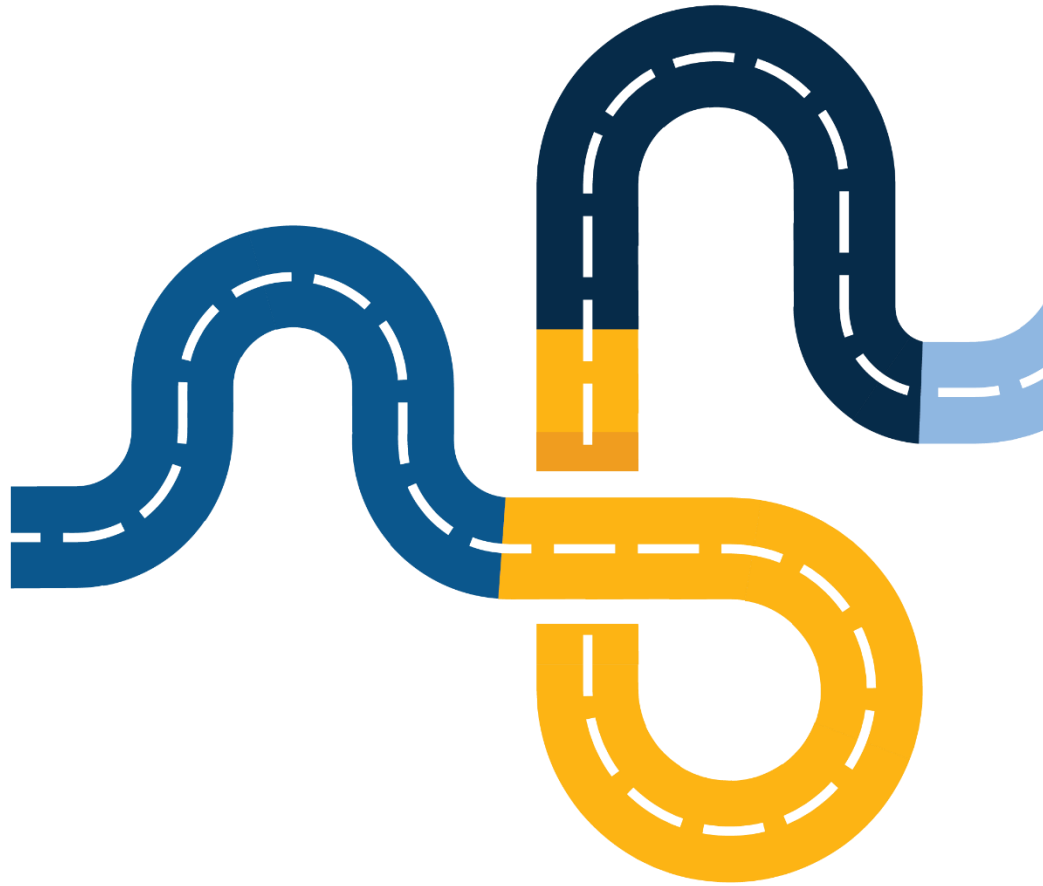
Halifax Transit  
Programs & Engagement

**HALIFAX**  
TRANSIT

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## **SECTION 1: Background**



# 1. Background

## 1.1 Project Background

At the August 24, 2023, Transportation Standing Committee meeting, the following motion was MOVED by Councillor Cuttell and seconded by Councillor Purdy:

*THAT the Transportation Standing Committee direct the Chief Administrative Officer (CAO) to provide a staff report to review HRM's Rural Transit Program to assess existing regional services, identifying gaps in regional service, conduct a rural/regional transit service need analysis.*

The development of a staff report is required which will include:

- A review of the current Rural Transit Funding Program;
- A jurisdictional scan that will explore other rural transit models across Canada;
- A Gap and Needs Analysis; and
- Recommendations to guide future iterations of the Rural Transit Funding Program.

To inform this report, a full-scale engagement and consultation program was implemented from June to September 2024 to gain feedback and insights to develop a Gap and Needs Analysis and provide recommendations for the future of the Rural Transit Funding Program.

The objective of this Engagement Report is to provide an overview of the engagement program that was implemented and key learnings.

## 1.2 About the Rural Transit Funding Program

On August 5, 2014, Regional Council voted to adopt the Rural Transit Funding Program, a grants program through which rural transit operators can apply for funding to subsidize the cost of operating their service in Halifax. Since that time, four rural transit service providers have received funding through the program to support the transportation needs of HRM residents outside Halifax Transit's service boundary.

### Eligibility Criteria

To be eligible for grants under the Rural Transit Funding Program, the transit service provided must meet the following criteria:

***It serves residents of the municipality:*** The organization must offer a public transit service within the municipality or is intended to serve the residents of the municipality.

***The service meets an unmet demand:*** The service must be in an area of the municipality not currently serviced by Halifax Transit or alternately, the service can be in an area which is serviced by Halifax Transit if it can be demonstrated that the rural transit service would complement existing Halifax Transit service and address an unmet need in the community.

***The service is available to the public:*** The organization offers a public transit service that is available to any member of the public and does not require a membership to access.

***The organization operating the service is a non-profit society or cooperative:*** The organization which operates the service must be a non-profit society incorporated under the Societies Act, R.S.N.S. 1989, c.435 and registered with the Nova Scotia Registry of Joint Stocks, or be a non-profit cooperative incorporated under the Co-operatives Associations Act, R.S.N.S., 1989, c. 98 and registered with the



Nova Scotia Registry of Joint Stocks. Registered Canadian Charitable Organizations (registered pursuant to the Income Tax Act) also qualify.

### Rural Transit Funding Program Service Providers

Currently, four rural transit service providers receive grants through the Rural Transit Funding Program:

- BayRides
- East Hants Community Rider
- MusGo Rider Valley Sheet Harbour
- MusGo Rider Eastern Shore

### Grant Disbursement Funding Formula

Since the inception of the program in 2014, grants through the Rural Transit Funding Program have been disbursed in two ways:

- An annual lump sum payment depending on the level of service provided; and
- A flat rate per kilometre travelled while providing transit service (subject to annual budget availability, as per *Administrative Order AO 2014-012-ADM*, section 14).

On February 6, 2024, Regional Council directed staff to amend the *Administrative Order 2014-012-ADM, Respecting Grants for Rural Transit*, to allow for a one-time increase in the 2024/25 fiscal year to the lump sum funding available to applicants from \$5,000 and \$10,000 to \$6,381 and \$12,763 respectively, and an increase to per vehicle kilometre rate funding from 50 cents to 64 cents. Additionally, staff were directed to amend *Administrative Order 2014-012-ADM* to account for inflation by increasing funding annually based on the five-year average for inflation.

Based on this amendment, up to \$500,000 was approved for grant disbursements for 2024/25, built on the following projections provided by Rural Transit Funding Program service providers.

### Projected 2024/25 Grant Disbursements

| Rural Transit Service Providers  | Projected kms  | Annual Lump Sum Payment | Per km Flat Rate (at \$0.64 per km) | Total Projected Grant Disbursement |
|----------------------------------|----------------|-------------------------|-------------------------------------|------------------------------------|
| Bay Rides                        | 186,423        | \$12,763                | \$119,311                           | \$132,074                          |
| East Hants Community Rider       | 39,600         | \$12,763                | \$25,344                            | \$38,107.00                        |
| MusGo Rider Eastern Shore        | 300,000        | \$12,763                | \$192,000                           | \$204,763.00                       |
| MusGo Rider Valley Sheet Harbour | 135,000        | \$12,763                | \$86,400                            | \$99,163.00                        |
| <b>TOTAL</b>                     | <b>661,023</b> | <b>\$51,052</b>         | <b>\$423,055</b>                    | <b>\$474,107</b>                   |

### 1.3 Alignment with Municipal Strategies

The Rural Transit Funding Program is aligned with key municipal strategies that guide transit development in HRM, including *The Regional Municipal Planning Strategy* (the Regional Plan), and the *Integrated Mobility Plan*.

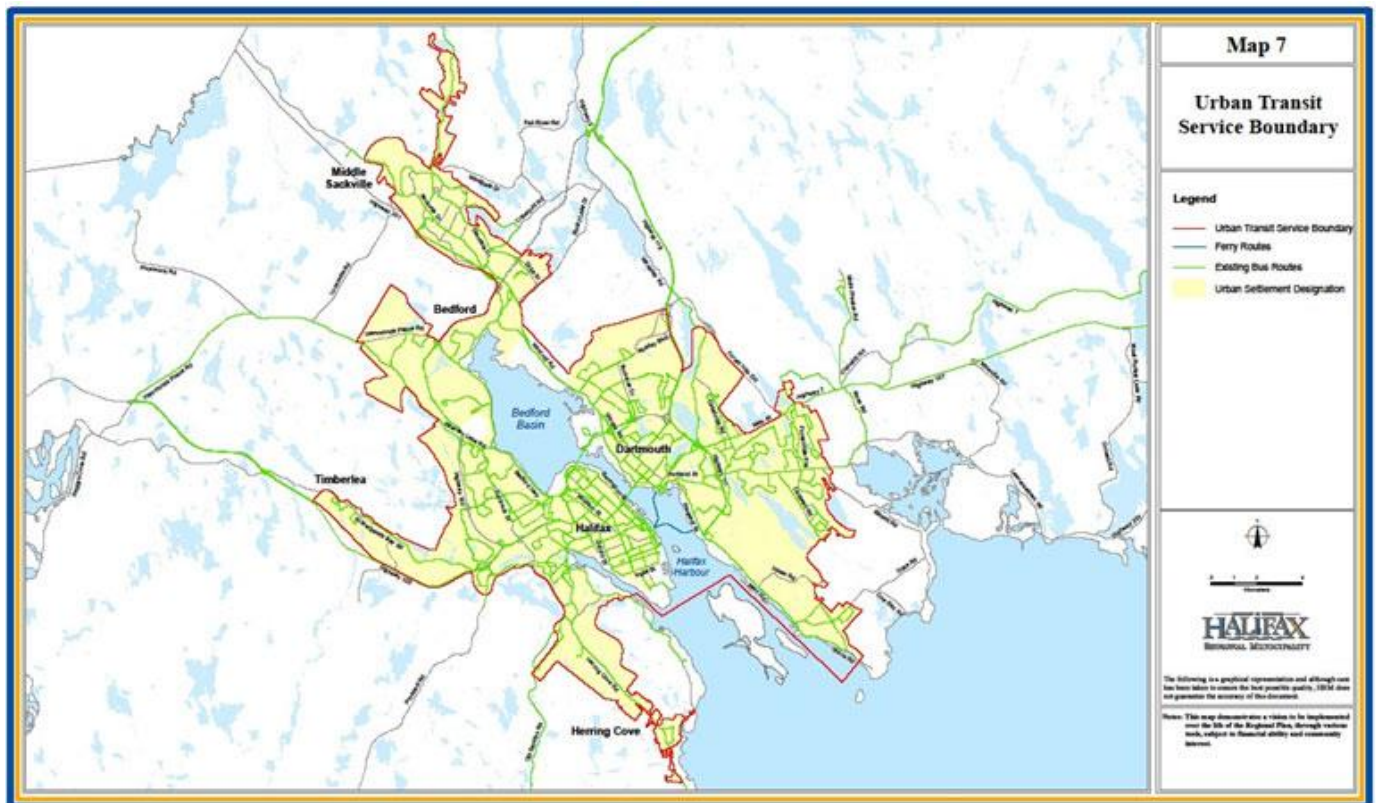
#### Regional Municipal Planning Strategy

The *Regional Municipal Planning Strategy* (the Regional Plan) outlines a shared vision, guiding principles, and long-term planning policies that determine where, when, and how growth and development will occur across the region.

The Regional Plan plays a vital role in shaping both transit development and the direction of the Rural Transit Funding Program. It identifies the challenges of providing centralized transit services in low-density rural areas and underscores the need for enhanced rural mobility solutions. The plan also introduces updated land designations and growth centers that direct future transit investments, as well as the Urban Transit Service Boundary (UTSB), which defines the Halifax Transit service area for new conventional bus and ferry service. (See figure 2 below).

Visit <https://www.halifax.ca/about-halifax/regional-community-planning/regional-plan> to learn more about the *Regional Plan*.

**Figure 2: Urban Transit Service Boundary**  
Regional Municipal Planning Strategy (the Regional Plan) 2014



## Integrated Mobility Plan

The *Integrated Mobility Plan*, adopted in 2017, guides investment in active transportation, transit, transportation demand management, goods movement, and the roadway network in Halifax.

Action 103 of the plan directs staff to identify areas where density or demand does not justify full transit services and to explore alternative service models to support specialized trips or enable service expansion.

As outlined in the plan, potential options include shared taxis in areas not served by Halifax Transit, subsidized taxi services such as "taxibus" programs, and various ride-sharing, ride-hailing, and car-sharing initiatives. Additionally, the plan considers subsidies for pilot or start-up routes and trips, as well as the expansion of the Rural Transit Funding Program.

Visit <https://www.halifax.ca/about-halifax/regional-community-planning/transportation-planning> to learn more.

## 1.4 Overview of Rural Transit Funding Program Service Providers

The following information, drawn from engagement workshops and materials shared by rural transit service providers, offers a high-level situational analysis of each rural transit service provider. The objective of this overview is to provide a general understanding of the service areas covered by rural transit service providers, fare structures, fleet information, and sources of funding.

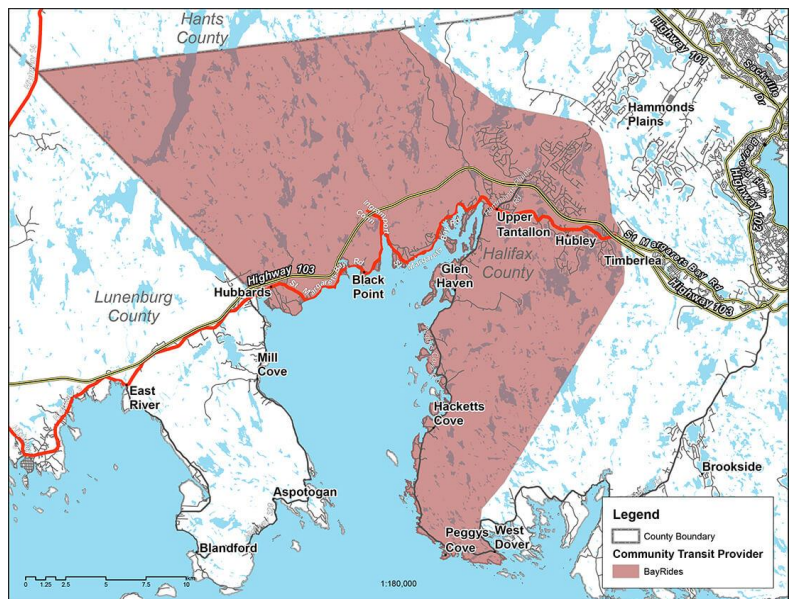
### BayRides

BayRides is a community-based, accessible transportation service offering door-to-door rides for residents of the St. Margaret's Bay area, including West Dover, Yankeetown Road, Sheldrake Lake, and the HRM County Line in Hubbards.

### Bookings

Bookings must be made 2 business days in advance for standard trips, with out-of-area trips requiring a week's notice.

### Fare Structure



| Distance  | Cost – One Way                       |
|---|--------------------------------------|
| up to 10 km   | \$7.00                               |
| 10.1 km – 20 km   | \$10.00                              |
| 20.1 km and above   | \$10.00 + \$0.80 per km over 20.1 km |
| Extra stops   | \$3.00                               |
| Extra passenger   | \$5.00                               |
| Out of service area trips but still within HRM (including shopping, specialist appointments, dialysis treatments, etc.) | \$10.00 + \$0.80 per km over 20.1 km |

## Fleet and Drivers

The BayRides fleet includes accessible vans and minivans, with a total capacity of up to 8 passengers. Drivers include a combination of staff and volunteers using their own vehicles.

## Funding and Support

BayRides is funded through various sources, including:

- The Province of Nova Scotia
- Halifax Regional Municipality through the Rural Transit Funding Program
- Donations

## Fare Subsidies

To ensure transportation remains accessible, BayRides offers fare subsidies for individuals in need, with funding support from a Fare Assistance Program funded by the Government of Nova Scotia, community partners and local organizations.

## East Hants Community Rider

East Hants Community Rider is a charitable transportation service managed by the East Hants Community Learning Association, a registered non-profit organization. The service provides safe, affordable, and accessible transportation to residents of East Hants and some rural communities within Halifax Regional Municipality. The Rural Transit Funding Program only pays for kilometres driven for passengers living within HRM.

## Bookings

Customers are asked to book 24 hours in advance, and service is provided on a first-come, first-served basis.





## Fare Structure

| Distance   | Cost – One Way  |
|--|-----------------|
| Minimum one-way trip (under 10 km):  | \$8.00          |
| Over 10 km   | \$0.80/km       |
| Flat rate for rides to or from Halifax Airport region to communities between Lantz and Fall River. | \$15.00         |
| Wait time \$20/hr wait time  | \$20.00/hour    |
| Group trips (more than 2 people with shared destination)   | \$50.00/vehicle |

## Fleet and Drivers

The service started in September 2015 with a single 8-passenger bus and has since expanded to include four additional vans. Volunteer drivers also contribute by using their own vehicles to assist in meeting demand.

## Funding and Support

The service is supported by a variety of funding sources, including:

- Community Transportation Network
- East Hants Districts Chamber of Commerce
- The Municipality of East Hants
- The Province of Nova Scotia
- Halifax Regional Municipality through the Rural Transit Funding Program

## Fare Subsidies

The service offers a Fare Assistance Program funded by the Province of Nova Scotia, reducing transportation costs for low-income individuals and families. The program supports single individuals with incomes under \$30,000/year, or couples/families making under \$55,000/year, subsidizing transportation for one day per week during regular hours (Monday to Friday, 6 a.m. to 6 p.m.) up to \$300 per month.

## MusGo Rider Cooperative Ltd.

MusGo Rider Cooperative Ltd. has been operating pre-booked door-to-door rural transit services since 2012. Their mission is to provide a safe, affordable and dependable transportation solution to improve the quality of life of residents, while contributing to a vision of a green community.

## Service Areas

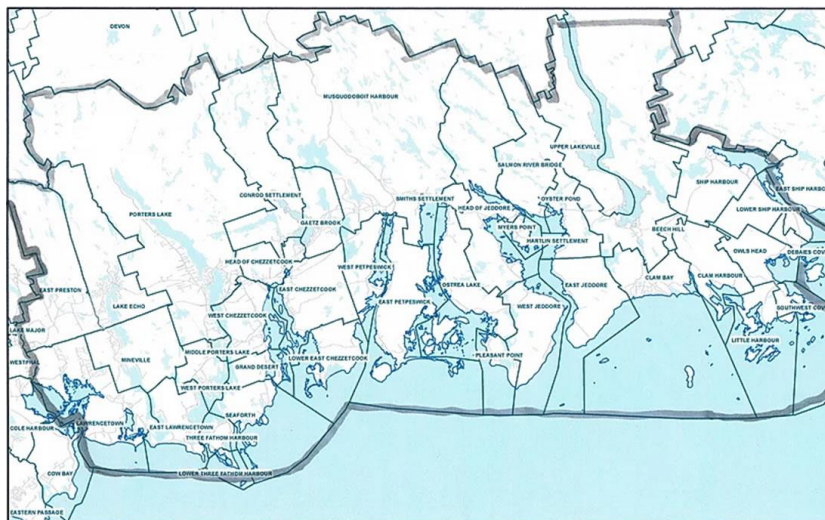
MusGo Rider services are divided into two distinct geographical areas: MusGo Rider Eastern Shore and MusGo Rider Valley-Sheet Harbour.

### MusGo Rider Eastern Shore

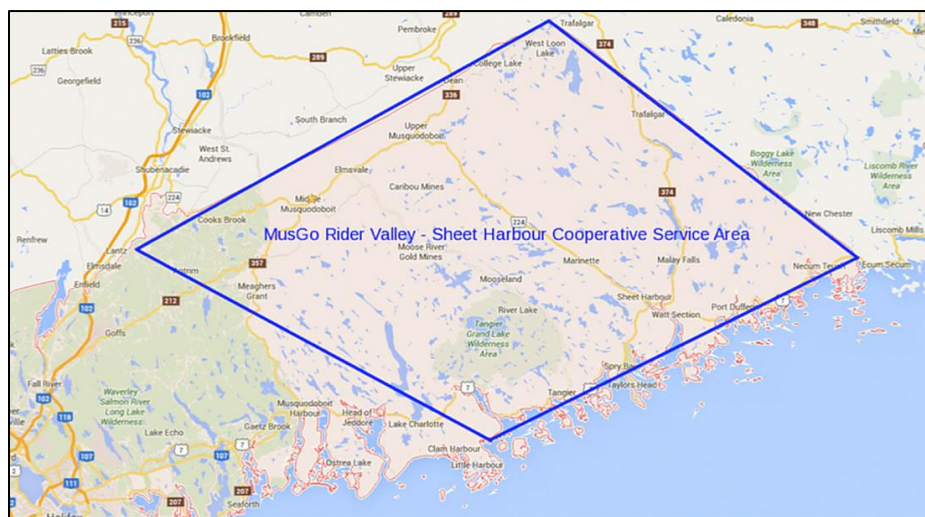
MusGo Rider Eastern Shore service travels as far east as DeBaies Cove and Ship Harbour, and west as far as Lawrencetown and East Preston.

### MusGo Rider Valley-Sheet Harbour

The MusGo Rider Valley Sheet Harbour service area extends from West Ship Harbour to Ecum Secum and the Musquodoboit Valley.



**MusGo Rider Eastern Shore**



**MusGo Rider Valley-Sheet Harbour**

## Bookings

Customers are asked to book 24 hours in advance.

## Fares

| Distance             | Cost – One Way          | Additional Passenger |
|----------------------|-------------------------|----------------------|
| Up to 15km           | \$7.00                  | \$5.00               |
| 16-25 km             | \$10.00                 | \$5.00               |
| 26-35 km             | \$15.00                 | \$10.00              |
| 36 – 45 km           | \$20.00                 | \$10.00              |
| Over 45 km           | \$.70/km                | -                    |
| Charter up to 200 km | \$250 for up to 4 hours | -                    |

These prices are within the catchment areas of the service. Airport transportation is \$1.05/km. A support person always travels free with the same pickup and drop off address.

### **Fleet and Drivers**

As of April 2025, MusGo Rider had 11 vehicles between the two services; four are wheelchair accessible, three are fully electric being charged by mainly solar, and three are hybrid. Drivers are paid staff.

### **Funding**

MusGo Rider has received funding from a variety of sources including:

- Donations
- Community Health Board
- Canadian Red Cross
- United Way
- Province of Nova Scotia
- The Government of Canada's Rural Transit Solutions Fund
- Joint Regional Transportation Agency (JRTA)
- Halifax Regional Municipality through the Rural Transit Funding Program

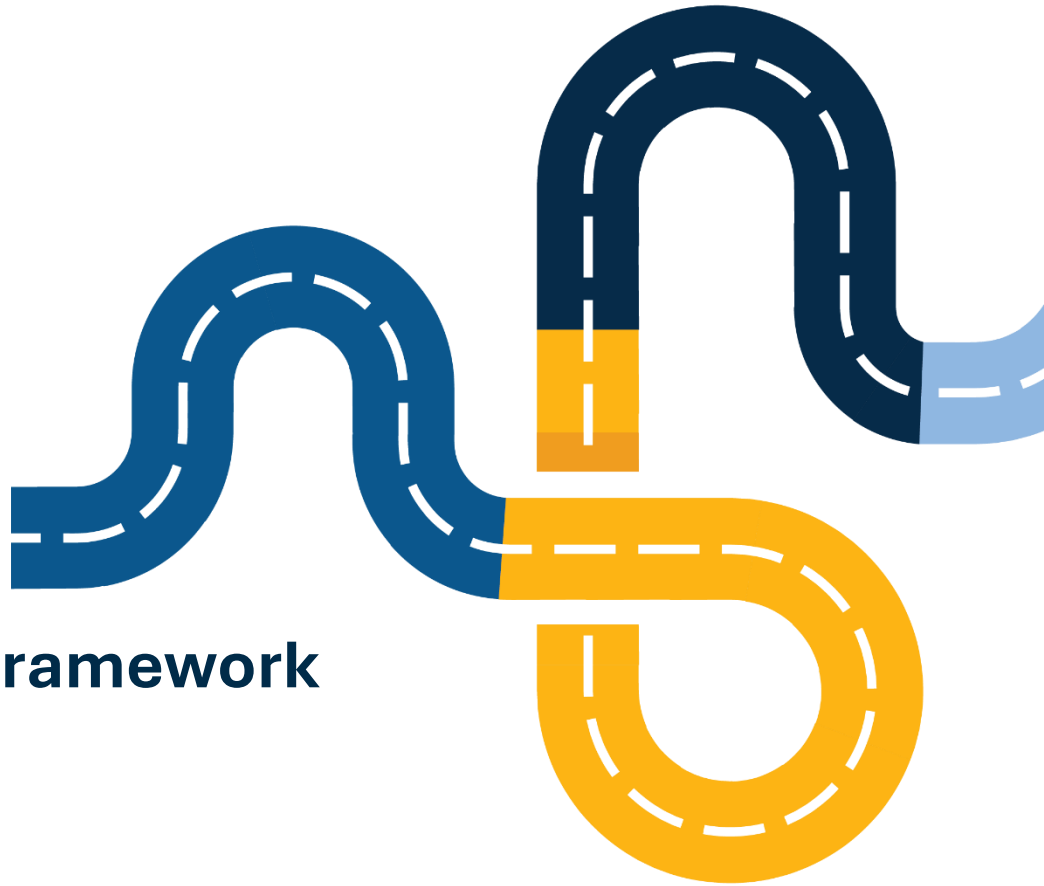
### **Fare Subsidies**

The service offers a Fare Assistance Program funded by the Government of Nova Scotia, reducing transportation costs for low-income individuals and families.

MusGo additionally partners with the Musquodoboit Harbour & District Lions Club and the Musquodoboit Valley Lions Club to offer free transportation to medical appointments and grocery stores for low-income families and individuals in their communities.

MusGo always delivers food bank orders free of charge

## **SECTION 2:** **Engagement Framework**





## 2. Engagement Framework

### 2.1 Engagement Scope

The scope of this engagement initiative was to gain insights to guide the following, as directed by Regional Council:

- Conduct a review of the Rural Transit Funding Program;
- Assess existing rural services;
- Identify gaps in rural service; and
- Conduct a rural transit service need analysis.

Engagement scope did not include:

- An assessment of current rural transit service providers' operational performance; and
- The addition of future Conventional bus service in rural communities beyond the Urban Transit Service Boundary (UTSB).

### 2.2 Engagement Objectives

The objectives of this Engagement Plan were to:

- Gain insights on challenges faced by rural transit service providers in delivering service, and the public in accessing rural transit options.
- Engage with key stakeholders and the public to develop a Gap and Needs Analysis.
- Generate recommendations to guide future iterations of the Rural Transit Funding Program.

### 2.3 Engagement Plan Overview

The Rural Transit Program engagement plan included the following engagement initiatives:

- Group and individual workshops with Rural Transit Funding Program service providers.
- In-person interviews with Councillors in rural districts.
- Seven pop-up events in rural communities.
- Talk Transit survey delivered in person and online.
- Information gathering on Provincial funding program.
- Interviews with rural transit service providers in other provinces to support a jurisdictional scan.

### 2.4 Public Engagement Communications Strategy

Residents and customers of rural transit service providers were encouraged to participate in the Rural Transit Funding Program survey and pop-up events, which were promoted through a comprehensive marketing and communications program that included:

- Social media posts and advertisements (Facebook, Twitter, Instagram).
- Shape Your City online engagement platform and Halifax.ca website.
- HRM Digital Screen Network.
- Direct Mail postcards targeted to more than 15,000 rural households in HRM.

## **SECTION 3:**

# **Rural Transit Service Providers Workshops**



### 3. Rural Transit Service Providers Workshops

#### 3.1 Rural Transit Service Providers Individual Workshops

##### Executive Summary

Three individual workshops were conducted with current service providers participating in the Rural Transit Funding Program. The objective of the workshops was to gain a deeper understanding of the individual service providers, and the unique and common challenges they face delivering rural transit services.

##### Key Themes and Insights

The following provides an Executive Summary of key themes arising from the workshops.

##### 1. Financial Sustainability and Funding Challenges

- BayRides, East Hants Community Rider, and MusGo Rider all report financial challenges, relying heavily on a mix of government funding, donations, and fundraising efforts. These sources can be unpredictable, placing long-term sustainability at risk.

##### 2. Service Demand and Capacity Limitations

- Increased demand for rural transit service providers has led to an increase in service denials.
- BayRides and MusGo Rider report challenges with denials related to medical or essential trips.
- East Hants has seen shifts in demographic needs, including an influx of younger professionals.

##### 3. Staffing and Human Resources

- All providers report challenges with staffing, particularly in recruiting and retaining qualified drivers and dispatchers.
- BayRides and East Hants report that they struggle to compete for skilled personnel against larger organizations.
- All providers encounter insurance barriers preventing them from hiring new drivers.
- Service providers report a shortage of staff for critical positions, such as dispatchers and Operations Managers, and a lack of succession planning, which they state makes the organizations vulnerable and at-risk during leadership transitions.

##### 4. Affordability and Accessibility

- Affordability is a concern for some customers, particularly for clients on fixed incomes, such as seniors and individuals with disabilities.
- Service providers express concern about balancing the need for affordable fares with the financial strain of maintaining operations, and there are calls for expanded fare assistance programs to support vulnerable riders.

## **5. Technological and Operational Challenges**

- Rural Transit service providers across the province are transitioning to a new Blaise software dispatch system, which is being led and managed by the Rural Transportation Association (RTA).
- This transition, while promising improvements in operational efficiency, is complicated by high upfront costs and system customization issues, and rural transit service providers are facing difficulties in implementing and adapting to new technology.
- The adoption of new technology has revealed operational challenges, including the need for better training, support, and IT infrastructure.

## **6. Service Coverage and Expansion**

- Rural transit service providers report that service expansion is hindered by operational and financial constraints.
- BayRides faces challenges with its service boundaries, which were established based on criteria that no longer reflect the growing and changing needs of the population.
- Similarly, East Hants struggles to cover its service area, particularly the further extents, and to offer weekend or evening services.
- MusGo proposed a fixed route 207 project to enhance connectivity with Halifax, though concerns about sustainability and funding for the long-term viability of such a route remain unresolved.

## **7. Community Partnerships**

- Community involvement and partnerships are viewed by rural transit service providers as key strategies for sustaining and growing rural transit services.
- MusGo Rider has built strong community relationships, partnering with local nonprofits and supporting social initiatives like food drives.
- These collaborations help position rural transit providers as integral parts of the local community, providing services beyond just transportation.

## 3.2 Rural Transit Service Providers Group Workshop

### Executive Summary

A well-attended half-day group workshop was conducted, bringing together leaders and employees from all rural transit service providers. The primary objective of the workshop was to foster collaboration in developing a comprehensive SWOT Analysis, identifying the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats facing rural transit service providers. This analysis aimed to inform a Gap and Needs Assessment for the Rural Transit Funding Program.

Below is the Executive Summary of the resulting SWOT Analysis.

### Strengths

- **Community Impact:** Rural transit service providers support community cohesion, healthcare, education, and local businesses.
- **Equitable Transportation:** Rural transit service providers work to provide equitable transportation services for seniors, youth, and social enterprises in rural communities.
- **Economic Support:** Rural transit service providers are vital for workforce mobility, connecting people to sectors like healthcare, retail, and agriculture.
- **Strong Partnerships:** Collaborations with local organizations enhance service delivery.
- **Resource Sharing:** The Rural Transportation Association (RTA) facilitates collaboration among providers, improving operations.
- **Diverse Funding:** Multiple funding sources, including government grants, donations, and fundraising, support financial resilience.

### Weaknesses

- **Funding Constraints:** Increasing demand and insufficient funding could lead to long-term sustainability challenges.
- **Service Boundaries:** Outdated boundaries limit service expansion in some areas.
- **Capacity Issues:** Service denials during peak times affect customer satisfaction and trust.
- **Affordability:** Rural transit fares, especially for medical and essential travel, are unaffordable for some vulnerable groups.
- **Public Awareness:** Lack of awareness and incorrect perceptions of rural transit service providers as transportation restricted to seniors and individuals requiring accessible transit could hinder growth, particularly among youth.

### Opportunities

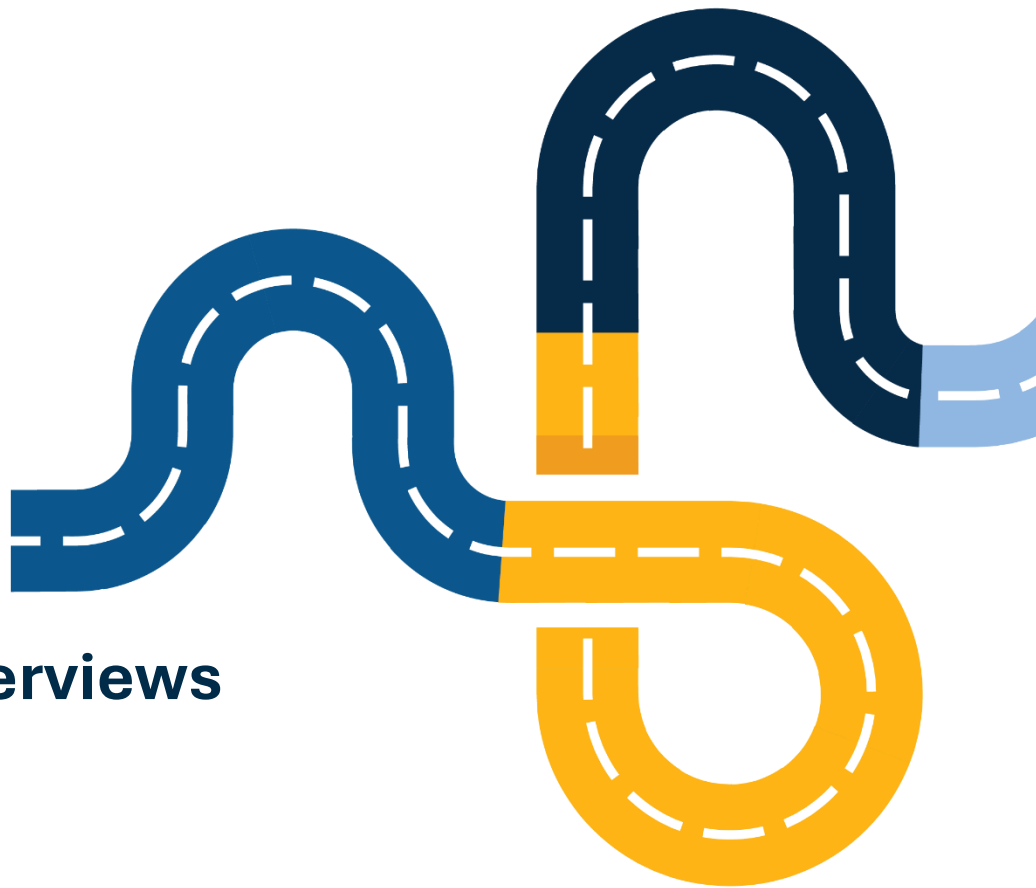
- **Increased Funding:** Additional funding would reduce financial strain and support long-term sustainability.
- **Integrated Systems:** Connecting rural transit to urban systems could improve accessibility and make travel to the urban core more convenient for rural residents.
- **New Partnerships:** Collaboration with businesses and healthcare providers could boost ridership.

- **Electric Vehicles:** Electric vehicles reduce costs and enhance sustainability.
- **Fare Subsidies:** Subsidies for youth and students could expand the user base.
- **Technological Advancement:** Technology like on-demand platforms would improve efficiency.
- **Capital Funding:** Investment in fleet expansion and maintenance is crucial.
- **Wage Support:** Subsidies and training programs would help recruit and retain staff.

## Threats

- **Funding and Sustainability:** Insufficient funding and rising demand threaten long-term viability.
- **Capacity Constraints:** Limited capacity, especially for accessible transportation, results in increased service denials.
- **Rising Costs:** Increased operational costs strain budgets.
- **Staffing Challenges:** Recruitment and retention of skilled workers is difficult due to low wages and competition.
- **Succession Planning:** Lack of succession planning for staff in leadership positions risks loss of institutional knowledge.
- **Insurance Concerns:** High insurance premiums limit volunteer recruitment and service expansion.
- **CTAP Business Plan Requirements:** Time-consuming and expensive business plans strain resources.

## **SECTION 4:** **Councillor Interviews**



## 4. Councillor Interviews

In-person interviews were facilitated with Councillors representing five rural communities in HRM.

The goal of these interviews was to gather insights and feedback on the views of Councillors regarding the current Rural Transit Funding Program, as well as potential improvements to inform the Gap and Needs Analysis. Additionally, these meetings provided valuable input on the most effective locations and strategies for public engagement efforts.

### Key Themes

The following provides an Executive Summary of key themes arising from Councillor interviews.

#### 1. Service Gaps and Accessibility

- Councillors report that some rural communities in HRM face transit challenges, including gaps in service coverage, particularly in underserved areas such as Sambro, Harrietsfield, Lucasville, and Fall River.
- The absence of conventional transit services or connections to urban transit systems leaves residents in some areas without reliable transportation options, especially for medical appointments, work, or social activities.

#### 2. Affordability and Financial Sustainability

- Councillors report that affordability is a concern for some rural transit customers, particularly for vulnerable populations such as seniors, people with disabilities, and low-income residents. High transit costs and inadequate funding strain both transit providers and riders.
- Councillors in all districts highlighted the high costs of rural transit services, with trips sometimes costing up to \$150.
- The reliance on community fundraising efforts requires significant staff time and makes transit sustainability a challenge.

#### 3. Volunteer and Staffing Challenges

- Many rural transit providers rely heavily on volunteer boards and management,
- All districts reported challenges in staffing and volunteer management for rural transit service providers.
- An aging volunteer and financial challenges are hindering the ability for rural transit service providers to meet the increasing demands for rural transit services.
- Staffing shortages, especially for critical positions like drivers and dispatchers, threaten the sustainability of rural transit services.
- All Councillors interviewed shared their belief that the burden of rural transit is being placed on communities with aging populations, a decline in traditional community support systems, and at times limited volunteer support.



#### **4. Integration with Conventional Transit**

- A consistent issue raised by Councillors across all districts is the lack of integration between rural and conventional transit systems. This disconnect results in inefficiencies for passengers, such as the need for multiple fare payments or limited transfer options, reducing convenience and affordability for rural residents.
- Lack of connections between rural transit services and Halifax Transit services forces riders to pay multiple fares and affects convenience of travel for passengers.
- Councillors advocated for more integrated transit models, including fixed routes and on-demand services or shuttles that could better serve rural communities while linking with urban systems.

#### **5. Infrastructure Needs**

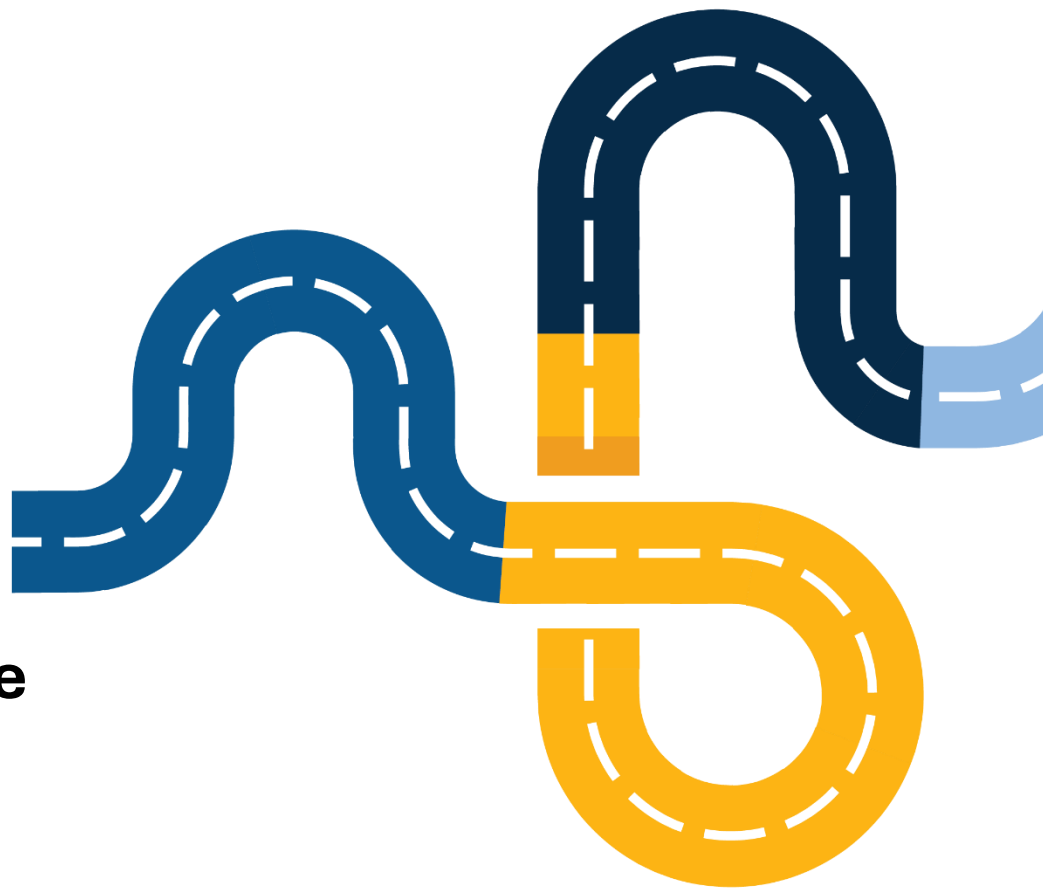
- Councillors stated that some rural districts lack adequate infrastructure, such as Park & Ride facilities, transit terminals, and accessible bus stops, to support growing demand.
- Councillors highlighted the need for better-designed infrastructure that is pedestrian-friendly and located within communities, rather than isolated at highway exits.

#### **6. Demand for Microtransit and On-Demand Services**

- Councillors communicated a desire for more flexible transit solutions that cater to the unique needs of their districts, including microtransit, on-demand services, and more customized solutions that could improve the efficiency and accessibility of rural transit systems.

## **SECTION 5:**

### **Provincial Role**



## 5. Provincial Role

Information was compiled regarding Provincial funding and key themes for rural transit service provision, through both documentation and discussions with program administrators.

The following provides key insights regarding ongoing provincial support for rural transit service funding.

### Community Transit Support

The province supports over 23 nonprofit community transit organizations with a total funding of more than \$7 million. The mandate of the department is to ensure that rural transit services are accessible in every community, operated for the community, by the community. This support ranges from assisting in feasibility studies to providing resources for the actual implementation of transit services. The department also connects these organizations with pre-approved consultants to help them develop business cases for sustainable transit operations.

### Affordability

The rising costs of operation are particularly burdensome in rural areas where many clients are low-income individuals. Longer distances increase operational costs, further complicating affordability for customers.

### Driver Recruitment and Retention

A major challenge for service providers throughout the Province is the recruitment and retention of drivers. The current wage rate of \$19 per hour is deemed too low for the nature of the work, making it difficult to attract younger workers.

### Business Sustainability and Long-Term Viability

Sustainability is a growing concern for these organizations. Many of them are facing challenges in maintaining operations as funding pressures and operational demands increase. By 2030, it is projected that many of these organizations may struggle to remain viable without significant changes.

The department is actively working on succession planning to ensure the continuity of these services, and tools like the Blaise dispatch system are being supported to improve efficiency and sustainability. Blaise offers a modular, user-friendly platform that helps with booking and scheduling, and provides better operational transparency, though internet connectivity issues in rural areas may limit its effectiveness.

### Accessibility Needs

The need for accessible transit services is growing, with 10-12% of all trips now requiring some form of accessibility support.

## Integration with Urban Transit Systems

There is a lack of integration between rural and urban transit systems, which limits the overall effectiveness and convenience of service for passengers. There is an opportunity to increase integration across systems to improve service continuity, offering more seamless travel for passengers across the region.

## Role of Community Transit in Future Models

Any future new service models or transit systems developed in rural areas over time still anticipate community transit playing a significant role in creating connected and integrated mobility options.

## Funding Programs for Community Transit

Various funding programs to support rural transit organizations exist, including the following:

### ***Rural Transit Solutions Fund Program***

The Federal RTSF program has been highly successful, with over \$30 million in funding provided, where 80% of the funds come from the federal government and 20% from the province. However, there are concerns that this program remains underutilized, particularly regarding vehicle replacements.

### ***Community Transit Assistance Program (CTAP)***

The Community Transit Assistance Program (CTAP) through the Nova Scotia Department of Public Works, with a budget of \$4 million, helps fund operational costs like driver wages and other necessary expenses for community transit organizations.

### ***Accessible Transportation Assistance Program (ATAP)***

The ATAP program, through the Nova Scotia Department of Public Works, provides capital funding for the purchase of vehicles, with 75% of the cost covered by the province and 25% by rural transit service providers.

### ***Nova Scotia Transit Research Incentive Program (NSTRI)***

The Nova Scotia Transit Research Incentive Program, through the Nova Scotia Department of Public Works, is a project-based funding program with up to \$450,000 available, requiring a comprehensive 5-year business model and feasibility plan.

### ***Sustainable Community Climate and Energy Program (SCCE)***

The Sustainable Community Climate and Energy Program aims to support the transition to hybrid and electric vehicles. However, there is a reluctance to adopt electric vehicles due to concerns over long travel distances and the lack of high-speed charging infrastructure in the province.

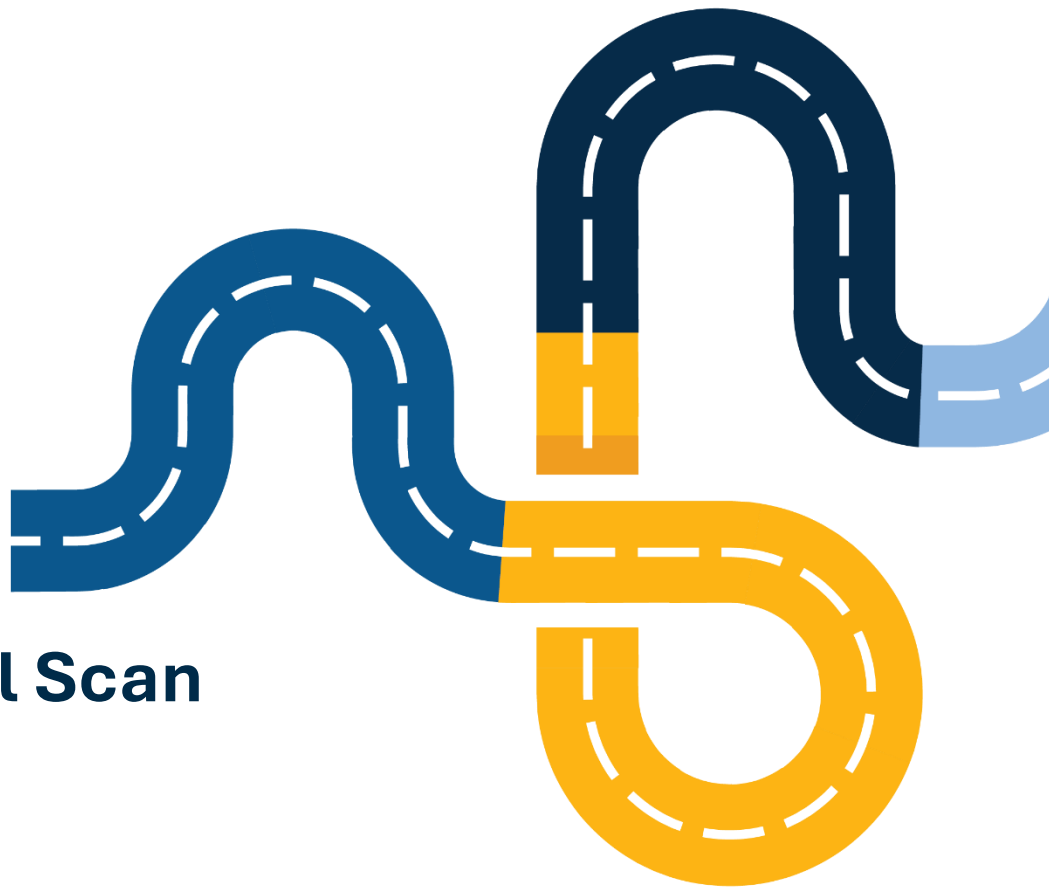
## Future Outlook and Long-Term Solutions

It was acknowledged that a more comprehensive and sustainable model for community transit would be beneficial. The province is working to maximize transit capacity and improve accessibility by investing in additional vehicles and shuttle services.

The landscape of rural community transit in the province is marked by several challenges, including affordability, driver shortages, and operational sustainability. However, the department's ongoing support, through funding programs and tools like Blaise, is aimed at enhancing both the efficiency and accessibility of services. Looking ahead, successful integration of community transit with regional systems, along with sustained investment and planning, will be critical for addressing the needs of rural communities and ensuring the long-term viability of these services.

## **SECTION 6:**

# **Jurisdictional Scan**



## 6. Jurisdictional Scan

A jurisdictional scan of community transit service providers in Canada was conducted by Dillon Consulting on the behalf of Halifax Transit, with the goal of gaining an understanding of the rural transit landscape in other provinces.

Based on discussions with Halifax Transit, seven peer agencies across various provinces in Canada were chosen for further review. The experiences of these agencies are intended to present an overview of a variety of different governance models (owned by municipal government or non-governmental organizations) service types (fixed-route or on-demand), and operational challenges.

The following provides key highlights from the jurisdictional scan.

### 6.1 Brant Transit

#### Brant County, Ontario

Brant Transit is a pre-booked, shared-ride, on-demand public transportation service that operates in the County of Brant and includes inter-municipal trips to and from the City of Brantford. The service provides door-to-door transportation to all residents, with a focus on accessibility for various types of passengers. In 2022, the service facilitated 1,998 trips.

The service has been running under its current model since 2019, and was recently transferred to a new service provider, Via Transportation, in 2024.

The service is available to all residents, with no specific eligibility criteria, and trip requests can be made via an online platform or customer service call center.

The program is funded through the County's budget, the Provincial Gas Tax subsidy, and fare collection. It is managed by Via Transportation, with one full-time staff member dedicated to its administration.

The fleet comprises three non-accessible SUVs and two accessible vans. The fare structure is flat rate, though there are no integrated fare systems with other services.

Public feedback on the service has been positive, with a high satisfaction rate of 4.8 out of 5, noting the quality of drivers, staff, and ride comfort. However, challenges remain, particularly the lack of specialized transit services for an aging population.

Looking ahead, Brant Transit plans to enter the RFP process for the 2025-2027 contract and is exploring options for fixed-route and specialized transit services to address increasing demand.

### 6.2 EasyRide

#### ONE CARE Home & Community Support Services Ontario

EasyRide is a community transit service operated by ONE CARE Home & Community Support Services. The service provides coordinated scheduling of door-to-door transportation delivered by Community Support Agencies across Huron and Perth counties. This service is provided to clients who are seniors, have physical or cognitive limitations, require specialized transit (example: wheelchair access), or do not have family or friends who are able to provide transportation. The service has been in operation for over 15 years, merging various county-operated services and fulfilling approximately 48,800 trips annually. Eligibility is based on case-by-case approval, typically requiring referrals from medical practitioners. Passengers request trips via phone.

ONE CARE manages the service with a dedicated team of 10 full-time staff, including a Director, Manager, Supervisor, and Schedulers. The service collaborates with four local partners, sharing capacity to meet demand.

Funding sources include Ontario Health Home and Community Care Support Services, Ontario Trillium Foundation, fares, and donations. The fare structure includes per-kilometer charges, wait time, and a base rate that aligns with local taxi rates.

The fleet consists of 15 accessible vehicles, including buses and vans, operated by paid drivers, with volunteers using their own vehicles. They currently have 20 full-time/part-time drivers and volunteers. Despite challenges such as volunteer recruitment and lack of centralized vehicle storage, the service is exploring improvements like centralized booking systems to optimize vehicle use and reduce overhead.

Looking forward, the service is working on a new fare model and addressing volunteer shortages, which have worsened post-COVID. There are no current plans for integrated fares, but the service continues to seek solutions to improve operational efficiency and capacity.

ONE CARE Home & Community Support Services, incorporated on January 1, 2011, is governed by a Board of Directors. These are dedicated community members from across the region who donate their time to ensure that their mission, vision and values are upheld.

## 6.3 Urban/Rural Rides

### New Brunswick

Urban/Rural Rides is a community transportation service operated by volunteer drivers who are dedicated to bridging transportation gaps in both urban and rural communities in New Brunswick. As a registered charity, their mission is to provide safe, affordable, and reliable transportation solutions to seniors and low-income families. Roundtrip transportation services are offered primarily for medical appointments and access to food banks.

Urban/Rural Rides is a pre-booked, on-demand service available in five Regional Service Commissions (RSCs) across New Brunswick: Southeast, Fredericton, Western Valley, Fundy, and Northwest. The service operates Monday to Friday, 8:30 am - 4:30 pm, with additional evening and weekend family support trips based on volunteer availability. The service primarily targets seniors, though low-income passengers also benefit from discounted fares. The service cannot accommodate all people with disabilities, as it uses non-accessible vehicles.

The service began in 2013 in Southeast New Brunswick and has expanded to other regions, providing a total of approximately 8,500 trips in 2023. Passengers request trips via phone. Urban Rural Rides manages the service with seven full-time staff members, and it partners with RSCs for funding.

Funding comes from government subsidies, donations, and fares, which are charged per kilometre. The fare structure is consistent across all RSCs, including for inter-regional trips.

The fleet consists of volunteer-owned and operated vehicles, which vary in size depending on volunteer availability.

Feedback on the service has been positive, with customers appreciating the connectivity and ability to travel across municipalities. However, the service faces challenges related to volunteer recruitment and managing passenger expectations, as some passengers expect a taxi-like experience.

Future plans include launching an online booking platform (Blaise), expanding the service to additional RSCs, and encouraging car users to shift to the service.



## 6.4 Ride Norfolk

### Norfolk County, Ontario

Norfolk County has been offering public transit services through a contracted provider, Ride Norfolk, since 2011.

The service was initially established in 2011 as a senior taxi token program and later shifted to a fixed-route model with funding from the Ontario Trillium Fund.

Initially, the service operated on a fixed-route model, providing scheduled transportation along specific routes. However, in July 2023, Ride Norfolk shifted away from the fixed-route approach and launched a one-year pilot program for an on-demand transit service, in collaboration with Blaise Transit. This new on-demand service allows for more flexible, responsive transportation options for riders.

Despite this shift, Ride Norfolk will continue to operate its fixed-route service with two daily routes, a model that will remain in place at least through 2025, ensuring ongoing transit options for the community.

Ride Norfolk's on-demand transit service is available Monday-Friday from 7:30 a.m. to 6:00 p.m. The on-demand service is a shared-ride service that lets riders request trips through a mobile app, website, or by phone by selecting a pickup point and destination. It is available from bus stop to bus stop on a first-come, first-serve basis.

The fixed-route service connects major communities in Norfolk County and Brantford, providing stop-to-stop transit along key corridors within the county.

Although the shift to on-demand has led to some loss of regular riders, expanding service coverage has attracted new passengers.

The service is open to all residents with no eligibility criteria, though it is primarily used by those near bus stops, as it does not provide door-to-door service.

In 2023, the service operated 16,752 trips, with expected ridership of over 20,000 in 2024.

Management and administration are handled by the contractor Voyago, with one full-time staff member overseeing operations. Service requests can be made through online platforms, phone, or the Blaise Transit App.

The service is funded through council funding, the Ontario Community Transportation Grant, and the Provincial Gas Tax, with fixed fares for in-town and out-of-town trips, as well as higher per-kilometre rates for Brantford trips.

The fleet consists of 10-seated cutaway buses, with two buses operating around Simcoe in the morning and expanding to three in the afternoon. The buses are accessible and can accommodate additional standees for in-town trips.

Feedback from the public has been generally positive, though some users find the app challenging and trip deviations to increase efficiency may discourage use due to longer travel times.

The service is exploring new funding opportunities, as the Community Transportation Grant funding is set to end next year, and as a result, they are considering changes to the service model based on funding constraints.

## 6.5 RIDE WELL

### County of Wellington, Ontario

RIDE WELL is an on-demand, publicly funded, rural transit pilot project, offering door-to-door transportation in Wellington County and Guelph. Ride Well is available to all residents and visitors of Wellington County. The Government of Ontario is currently funding this pilot project.

The service operates across Wellington County and includes inter-municipal trips to Guelph. In 2023, the service facilitated 8,861 rides. Accessible trips are provided through a contracted taxi service. The service operates through the RIDE WELL app, phone calls, and an online portal for booking trips.

The service was initiated to address both economic and social needs, supporting the local auto-supply industry, aiding low-income and senior residents, and promoting business development.

The program is managed by the County's Economic Development department with service provision contracted to RideCo.

The service has partnered with RideCo and Uber to fill gaps in service delivery and has discussed potential connections with neighboring transit services, including Guelph Transit and Owen Sound Transit, with plans for multimodal trip requests through the app.

Funding for the service comes from the Ontario Community Transportation Grant, Wellington County's budget, and passenger fares, which are charged on a per-kilometre basis with a minimum fare. Although taxi trips are subsidized for accessible transportation, no integrated fares currently exist with other service providers.

The fleet comprises four non-accessible sedans, with vehicles owned and operated by the drivers. The fleet size is variable depending on driver availability.

While the service is appreciated for its affordability, public feedback highlights challenges with service awareness, limited resources, and a broad service area that can result in unaccommodated trips. Limited service hours and demand for more urban connectivity have also been identified as areas for improvement.

In response to these challenges, the service is planning a performance and efficiency evaluation and will consider changes to the service model when the Ontario Community Transportation Grant expires. Potential improvements include establishing fixed routes, increasing service availability, and extending service hours to better meet demand.

## 6.6 Kelowna Division of BC Transit

### Kelowna, British Columbia

The rural transit service in the City of Kelowna and nearby communities operates a combination of fixed-route and off-peak door-to-door on-demand transportation. This service is open to all passengers, with no eligibility criteria, and is managed and administered by BC Transit. Passengers can book trips through a mobile app or customer service hotline, with the option of immediate rides based on availability, as no pre-booked trips are allowed.

The service is funded through a mix of provincial and municipal funding, along with passenger fares, and utilizes a fixed fare structure. The fleet consists of 72 accessible conventional buses and 10 accessible small community buses, based on 2022 data, ensuring that the service is accessible to all residents. This transit system provides flexible, efficient transportation, addressing the needs of Kelowna and its surrounding areas.

## 6.7 Niagara Region Transit (NRT)

### Niagara, Ontario

Niagara Transit's microtransit service is a flexible, on-demand transportation option that aims to provide more personalized and efficient transit solutions for the region. This service is designed to meet the needs of communities by offering door-to-door or stop-to-stop transportation, depending on the location. In areas like Fort Erie, passengers can request door-to-door service, while in St. Catharines, a stop-to-stop on-demand service is available. The microtransit service helps fill the transportation gaps that may exist in traditional fixed-route systems, especially in areas where demand is lower or more variable.

The service operates in coordination with specialized transit services, ensuring that all residents, including those with mobility challenges, have access to transportation. There are no eligibility criteria for using the service, so anyone in the service area can access it.

Passengers can book their trips through an online portal or by calling the service, with the option to book rides up to seven days in advance. The service operates with a dynamic booking window, which means that the rides are provided based on availability, offering flexibility to the users.

Niagara Transit's microtransit service is part of the region's broader transit solution, funded through a combination of provincial and municipal support, as well as passenger fares. The fleet includes both conventional and specialized accessible vehicles, ensuring that the service remains inclusive and can accommodate various mobility needs.

## 6.8 Summary of Operational Challenges and Opportunities

### Operational Challenges

Rural transit service providers reviewed shared key operational challenges in common with Halifax's rural transit service providers, including the following:

#### 1. High Operational Costs in Rural Areas

Rural transit service providers face challenges in delivering services due to the high operational costs associated with rural environments. These areas often have low population density, which increases the per capita cost of providing transit. This financial pressure requires agencies to carefully consider how best to balance service levels with available resources.

#### 2. Volunteer Recruitment Difficulties

Many rural transit agencies have traditionally relied on volunteers to help lower operational costs. However, post-COVID, recruiting and retaining volunteers has become a significant challenge. This issue has forced transit providers to explore alternative methods of service delivery, as volunteer support is no longer as readily available. The inability to rely on volunteers creates additional pressure to find the right balance between service provision and available resources.

#### 3. Uncertainty Due to Expiring Ontario Community Transportation Grant

Several rural transit organizations, such as Ride Norfolk and RIDE WELL, rely heavily on the Ontario Community Transportation Grant (OCTG) for funding. With the expiration of this grant in March 2025, there is uncertainty about how services will be sustained. The end of this funding may force organizations to either find new funding sources, collaborate with local municipalities, or increase

fares. Without guaranteed funding, there is a risk of service discontinuation or major restructuring, depending on the decisions made by local councils.

#### **4. Need for Service Model Adjustments**

In light of the potential funding challenges, many rural transit providers are considering changes to their service delivery models. For example, some are exploring the possibility of replacing on-demand services with fixed-route options in certain areas. This shift would improve operational efficiency by eliminating non-revenue-generating trips, such as deadhead miles, while still meeting the core transit needs of the community. However, such changes would require careful consideration of the community's service priorities, as it could impact service accessibility.

### **Opportunities for Service Improvement**

The following opportunities were identified by the organizations interviewed to improve service offerings and efficiencies.

#### **1. Expansion of Service Frequency and Operating Hours**

Rural transit providers face challenges in meeting the transportation needs of residents due to the large and sparsely populated service areas. Many rural agencies, such as Ride Norfolk and RIDE WELL, struggle with limited resources that are stretched across vast distances, leading to reduced trip availability. As a result, service is often confined to weekdays during typical business hours. This limited availability does not fully meet the needs of passengers, and there is a clear desire from both providers and users to expand service frequency and operating hours to enhance accessibility.

#### **2. Demand-Based Service Models**

Adapting the type of service to match ridership demand is critical for improving operational efficiency. For example, Ride Norfolk utilizes a fixed route between Simcoe and Brantford, where demand is high, while offering on-demand service in areas with lower ridership. This approach allows for more efficient use of resources by grouping various trips along major corridors rather than providing direct, costly trips. This demand-based model helps achieve higher cost-efficiency while still meeting the transportation needs of residents.

#### **3. Trip Grouping for Efficiency**

In rural areas, on-demand transit services often face challenges due to scattered demand and long deadhead times. Some agencies have implemented trip grouping strategies, where passengers are picked up along a shared route to maximize vehicle use. While this method helps reduce costs, there is a need to maintain a balance between trip efficiency and directness. Excessive detours or long wait times for passengers can lead to frustration, making it important to find an optimal balance that maintains service appeal.

#### **4. Enhancing Communications and Marketing**

A key challenge identified by several transit agencies is the lack of awareness among potential riders regarding on-demand transit services. For example, a recent survey conducted by RIDE WELL found that many Wellington County residents were unfamiliar with the service model, its availability, or how to use it. This gap in knowledge has led to hesitation among some passengers to use the service. A

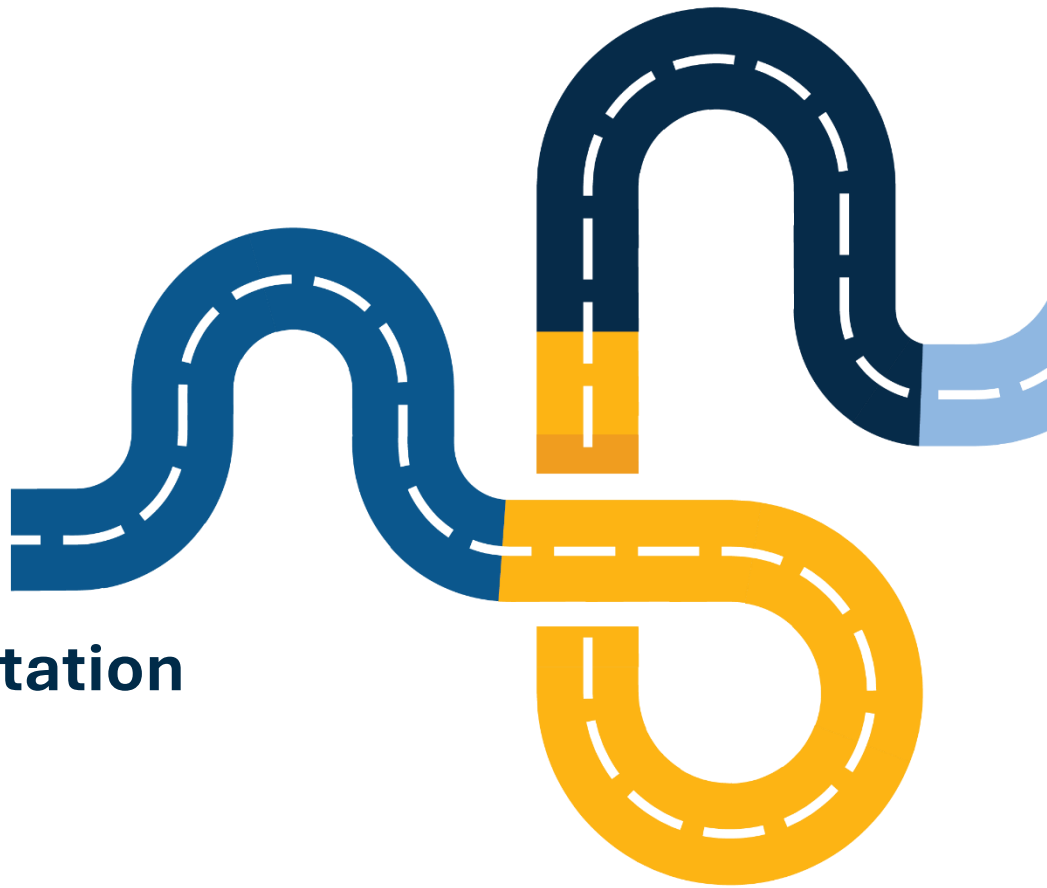
targeted marketing and education campaign could significantly improve awareness and utilization, addressing these concerns and encouraging more passengers to take advantage of the service.

## **5. Expanding Trip Booking Flexibility**

While many rural transit agencies offer mobile apps for booking trips, not all users are comfortable with this technology. It is essential for service providers to offer alternative methods for booking trips and disseminating ride information, such as phone call-ins or website portals. By ensuring that passengers who are not familiar with mobile apps still have access to the service, transit agencies can enhance inclusivity and meet the needs of a broader range of passengers.

## **SECTION 7:**

### **Public Consultation**



## 7. Public Consultation

### 7.1 Public Consultation Initiatives - Overview

Public consultation was conducted across rural areas of the municipality to gather residents' insights into local transportation needs, as well as their awareness and usage of services offered by rural transit providers funded through the Rural Transit Funding Program.

#### Community Pop-up Events

Residents in rural communities and customers of rural transit service providers were engaged through seven highly successful community pop-up events, outlined below.

| Rural Communities  | District and Councillor                     | Rural Transit Service Provider | Pop Up Location                           | Date                       |
|--|---|--------------------------------|---|----------------------------|
| St. Margarets Bay, Hubbards, Hubley, Tantallon   | <b>District 13</b><br>Pam Lovelace          | Bay Rides                      | Superstore Tantallon                      | Friday<br>July 19, 2024    |
|  |   |                                | Sobeys Tantallon                          |                            |
| Musquodoboit Harbour, Musquodoboit Valley, Sheet Harbour, Lawrencetown, Cow Bay, Mineville, Lake Echo, Porters Lake, North Preston, East Preston | <b>District 2</b><br>David Hendsbee         | MusGo Rider                    | Sobeys Jeddore                            | Thursday<br>July 25, 2024  |
| Fall River, Wellington, Oakfield, Enfield (major Waverley-Enfield 102 Corridor communities)  | <b>District 1</b><br>Cathy Deagle<br>Gammon | East Hants Community Rider     | Sobeys Fall River                         | Friday<br>July 26, 2024    |
| Musquodoboit Harbour, Musquodoboit Valley, Sheet Harbour, Lawrencetown, Cow Bay, Mineville, Lake Echo, Porters Lake, North Preston, East Preston | <b>District 2</b><br>David Hendsbee         | MusGo Rider                    | Superstore Porters Lake                   | Friday<br>August 2, 2024   |
| Terence Bay, Prospect, Peggys Cove, Hacketts Cove, Portuguese Cove, Sambro, Harrietsfield  | <b>District 11</b><br>Patty Cuttell         | N/A                            | Mishoo's Variety Store & Take out. Sambro | Saturday<br>August 3, 2024 |
| Musquodoboit Harbour, Musquodoboit Valley, Sheet Harbour, Lawrencetown, Cow Bay, Mineville, Lake Echo, Porters Lake, North Preston, East Preston | <b>District 2</b><br>David Hendsbee         | MusGo Rider                    | Foodland Sheet Harbor                     | Friday<br>August 16, 2024  |





## 7.2 Public Consultation Results - Executive Summary

The following provides an Executive Summary of results from the public Rural Transit Survey and community pop-up events.

### 1. Demographic Profile of Respondents

- **Geographic Distribution:** 93% of respondents reside in rural communities, with the majority living in areas serviced by at least one rural transit service provider (66%).
- **Age Distribution:** The largest group of respondents (51.3%) are aged 25-54, followed by seniors (65+), who represent 18.4% of the total.
- **Accessibility Needs:** Nearly 12.2% of respondents identified as having a disability or special needs, indicating a strong demand for accessible transit services.

### 2. Current Travel Patterns

- **Primary Modes of Transport:** A large proportion (83%) of respondents rely on personal vehicles for transportation. However, only 0.7% use rural transit services, pointing to a low utilization rate despite the availability of services in certain areas.
- **Barriers to Rural Transit Usage:** Despite the availability of transit services in some rural areas, the low usage rate suggests several barriers, including a lack of awareness, limited service offerings, and a preference for personal vehicles.

### 3. Awareness and Usage of Rural Transit Services

- **Awareness:** While 67% of respondents in areas with coverage are aware of at least one rural transit service provider, 44.2% of all respondents were unaware of available transit services.
- **Usage:** Despite awareness in covered areas, 89% of respondents have never used the services. This highlights a significant gap between awareness and actual usage, suggesting a prevalence of reliance on personal vehicles.

### 4. Interest in Access-A-Bus Service

- **Interest in Access-A-Bus:** A significant portion (71.7%) of respondents would not use an Access-A-Bus service, but 46.8% would be willing to accept tax increases to fund such a service, with senior respondents showing more interest in this service.

### 5. Specific Demographic Insights

#### Youth:

- **Travel Patterns:** 43.8% of youth travel in personal vehicles, but 25% use or have used public transit in the past. Only 2.1% use rural transit, indicating low engagement with these services.
- **Awareness & Usage:** Over 65% of youth respondents are unaware of rural transit options, and 93.8% have never used them. This highlights a need for better outreach and tailored services for this demographic.

### Seniors:

- **Travel Patterns:** Personal vehicles dominate travel choices for seniors (82.6%), with a significant reliance on family and friends (6.4%). Only 5.2% of seniors use public transit, and a very small percentage use rural transit services.
- **Awareness & Usage:** 37.2% of seniors are unaware of rural transit service providers, with 85.5% never having used these services.

## 6. Key Strengths of Rural Transit Services

- **Service Satisfaction:** When available, rural transit services are highly valued by vulnerable populations, particularly seniors, those with mobility issues, and individuals requiring medical transportation. High marks were given for reliability, door-to-door service, and subsidized fares.
- **Community Impact:** Rural transit plays a critical role in reducing isolation, enhancing independence, and enabling access to essential services like healthcare and shopping.
- **Environmental Benefits:** There is strong support for rural transit as a means of reducing traffic congestion and carbon emissions.

## 7. Key Gaps and Needs Identified by Participants

### Service Availability & Accessibility:

- **Underserved Areas:** Survey respondents reported that some rural areas such as Fall River, Sambro, Lucasville, and Enfield lack reliable transit options, with limited hours and infrequent schedules. There is a growing demand for fixed-route buses and expanded coverage, particularly to urban centers like Halifax.
- **Accessibility and Safety:** Safety concerns related to accessing transit stops (long walks on unsafe roads, lack of pedestrian infrastructure) were highlighted. Additionally, there is a desire for more Park & Ride facilities and safer waiting areas to encourage transit use.

### Affordability:

- **High Costs:** The cost of rural transit services, particularly for seniors and individuals with disabilities, was identified as a barrier. Subsidized fares and discounted passes are highly desired.

### Scheduling and Flexibility:

- **Service Hours:** Many respondents called for more frequent services, especially during evenings and weekends, to accommodate diverse schedules. Additionally, on-demand services and flexible routes were identified as effective solutions for rural areas with lower and less consistent demand.
- **Targeted Services:** Specific groups, including seniors, students, healthcare workers, and shift workers, reported a need for tailored services to ensure reliable access to medical appointments, educational institutions, and workplaces.

## 8. Public Suggestions for Improvements

- **Service Expansion:** Increased frequency of service, particularly during evenings and weekends, along with new routes connecting rural areas to urban centers, was a top request.

- **Innovative Solutions:** Respondents advocated for small-scale, flexible transit solutions like shuttles or on-demand services, which can better cater to rural communities with variable demand.
- **Equitable Taxation:** There is a desire for tax changes to fund improvements in service quality, with many expressing frustrations over the perceived inequities in service provision in growing rural communities that continue to pay taxes but lack adequate transit services.

## 9. Conclusion and Considerations

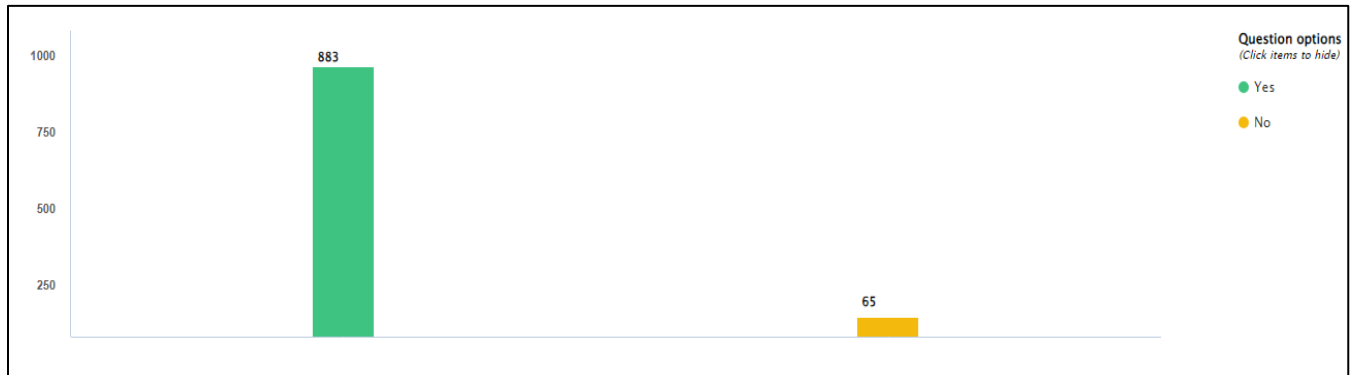
The survey results highlight a desire for improvements in rural transit services to address gaps in availability, accessibility, scheduling, and affordability. Key considerations include:

- Expanding service coverage to underserved rural areas, especially Fall River, Lucasville, Sambro, and Enfield, Cow Bay, and Lawrencetown.
- Introducing more frequent service, particularly on evenings and weekends, and exploring flexible service models like on-demand rides.
- Providing affordable, subsidized fares, especially for seniors, individuals with disabilities, and low-income residents.
- Improving pedestrian infrastructure and ensuring safe, accessible transit stops to increase the overall attractiveness and usage of rural transit services.

## 7.3 Full Public Survey Report

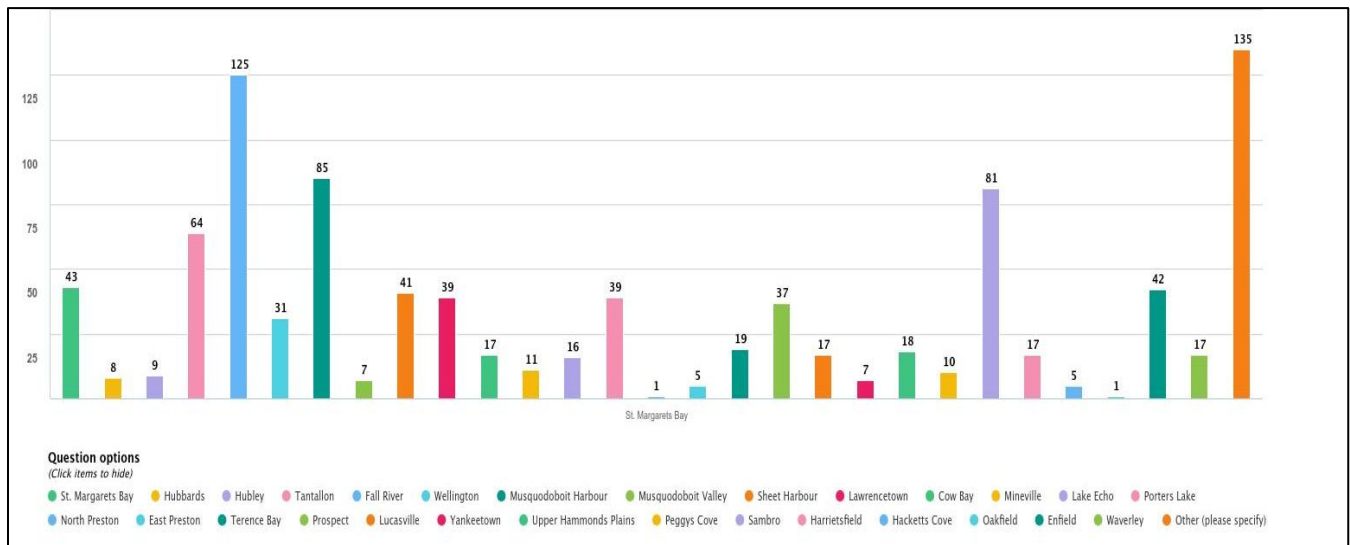
### Part A: Demographic Information of Respondents

#### 1. Do you live in a rural community?



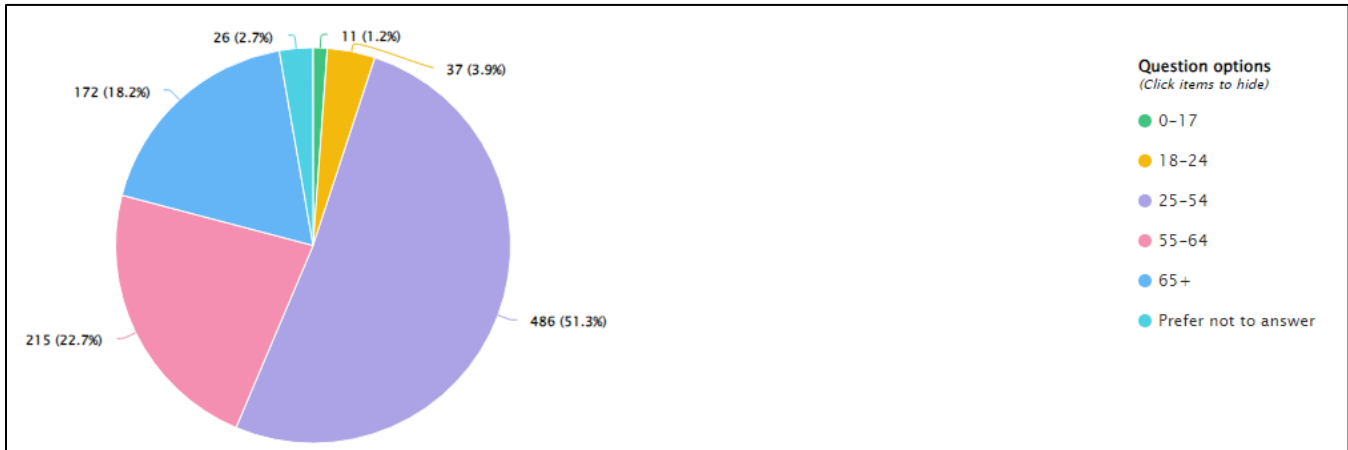
A substantial majority of respondents (93%) live in rural communities. Only 7% of respondents reside outside these rural areas, indicating that the survey accurately captured perspectives from predominantly rural populations.

#### 2. Which community is closest to where you live?



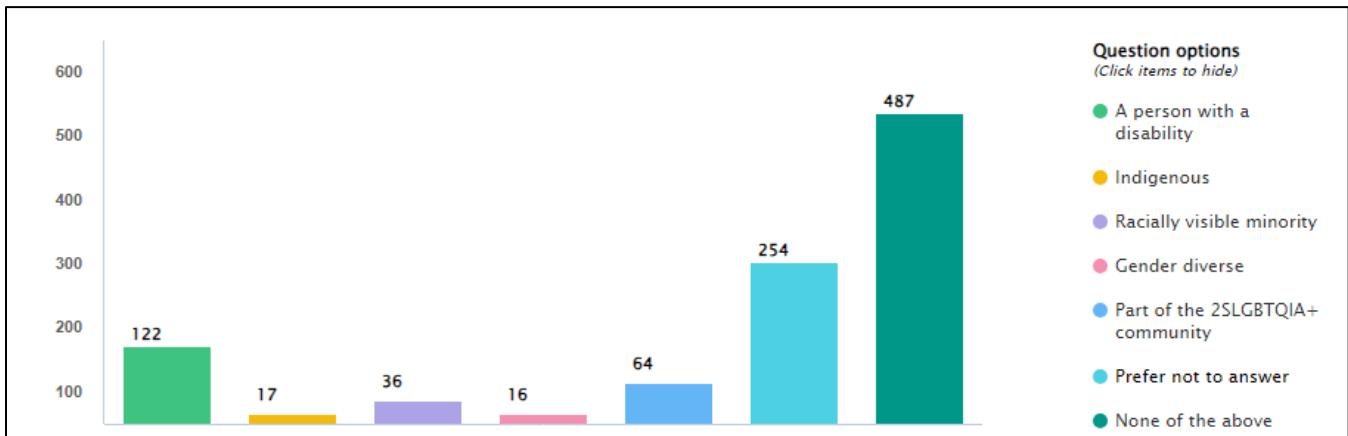
Fall River had the most responses (125), followed by Musquodoboit Harbour (85) and Sambro (81). Saint Margaret's Bay (43 responses) and Tantallon (64 responses) also contributed significantly. Smaller communities such as Prospect, Sheet Harbour, Porters Lake, and Enfield each had between 37 and 42 responses. The largest number of respondents in the "Others" category came from North Beaver Bank, which is outside the UTSB area. 66% of respondents live in areas served by at least one rural transit service provider.

### 3. Please specify your age.



The largest group of respondents is aged 25-54, making up 51.3% of the total, followed by those aged 55-64, who account for 22.7%. Seniors aged 65 and above represent 18.4% of respondents, while the under 24 age group makes up 5.2%. 2.7% of respondents chose not to disclose their age.

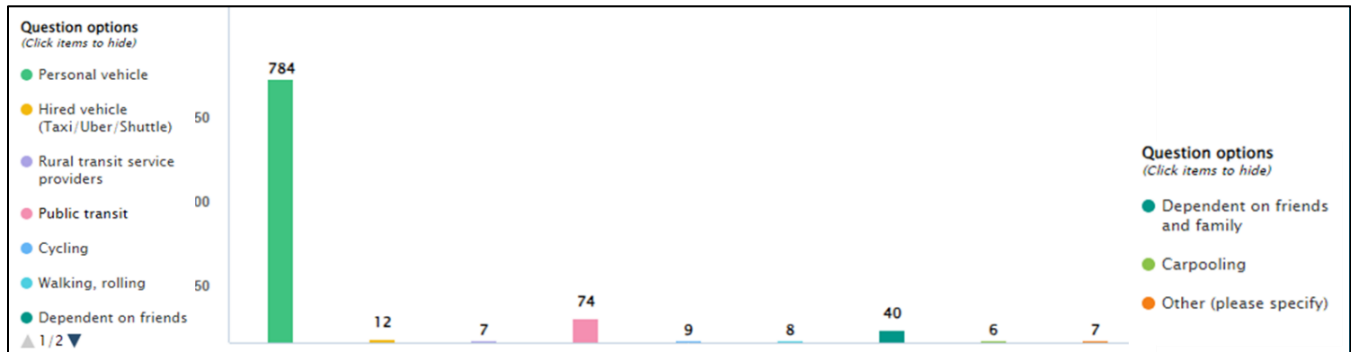
### 4. Do you identify as any of the following?



12.2% of respondents identified as having a disability or special needs, and 6.4% identified as part of the 2SLGBTQIA+ community. Additionally, 3.6% identified as racially visible minorities, 1.7% identified as Indigenous, and 1.6% identified as gender diverse. 25.5% of respondents chose not to disclose or answer.

## Part B: Current Travel Patterns

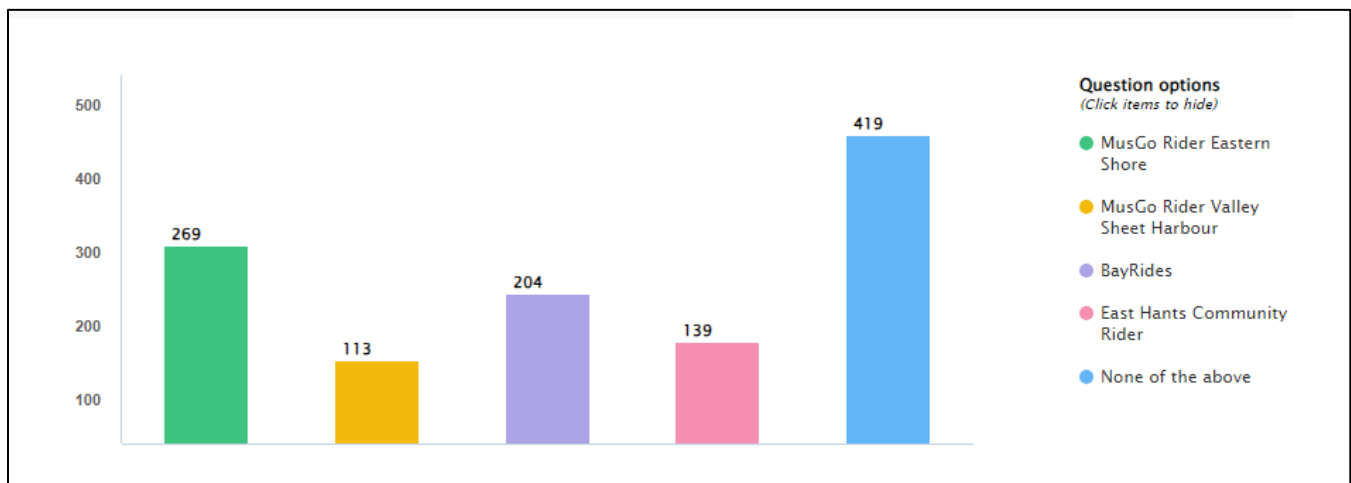
### 1. How do you typically travel?



83% of respondents primarily use personal vehicles for travel, while 7.8% rely on public transit. Only 0.7% use rural transit, which is even lower than the 1.3% who use hired vehicles like taxis or Uber. Cycling (1%), walking/rolling (0.8%), and carpooling (0.6%) make up a small portion of travel choices.

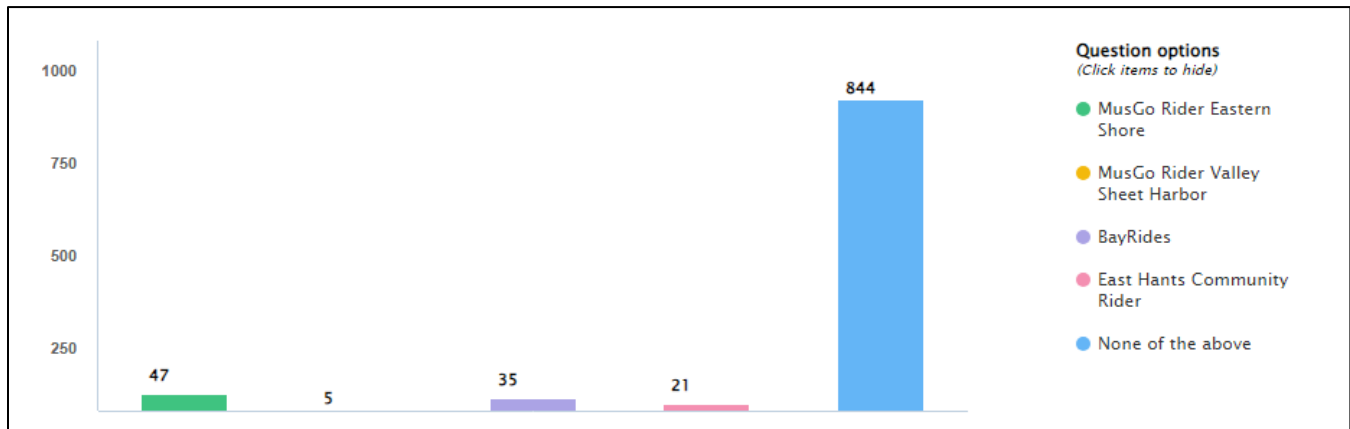
## Part C: Awareness & Usage of Rural Transit Service Providers

### 1. Are you aware of the following Rural Transit service providers? Select all that apply.



44.2% of respondents in rural areas are unaware of rural transit service providers. Excluding areas without coverage, such as Sambro and Lucasville, this drops to 33%. In regions with rural transit service providers, 67% of respondents are aware of at least one service, indicating strong awareness where services are available.

## 2. Have you ever used any of the following Rural transit services? Select all that apply.

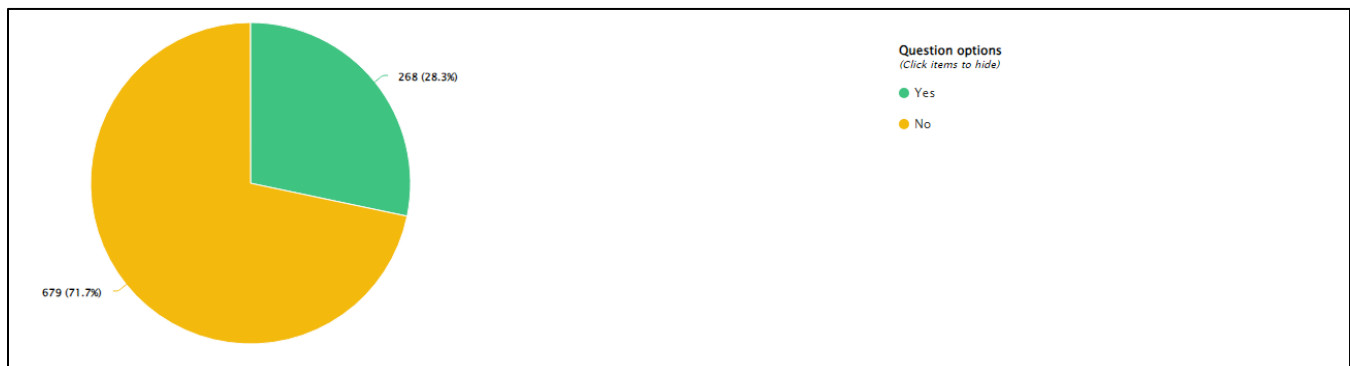


While awareness of rural transit service providers is relatively high among survey respondents in areas with service coverage (67%), approximately 89% have never used these services. Specific usage rates for different services are as follows: BayRides (3.7%), East Hants Community Rider (2.2%), MusGo Rider Eastern Shore (5%), and MusGo Rider Valley Sheet Harbour (0.5%).

## Part D: Access-A-Bus Service

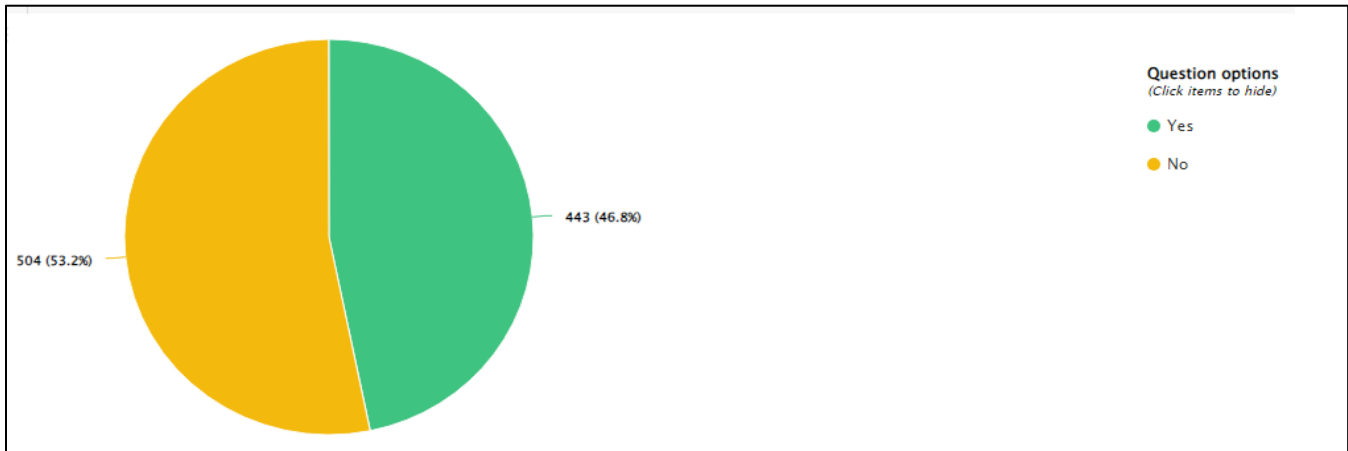
Please note, the following questions were included for completeness, as they were included in the survey to support a separate upcoming staff report.

### 1. Access-A-Bus is a shared-ride, door-to-door transit service for qualified persons unable to use the conventional transit system. Would this be a service you would access if it was available in your community.



71.7% of respondents would not use Access-A-Bus, even if available in their area. This indicates that a large number of respondents likely have access to other alternative modes of transportation or would not consider themselves eligible for Access-A-Bus service. Among seniors (65+), 56.4% would not use the service, while 43.6% expressed interest, in contrast to only 28% of the general population showing interest.

## 2. If Access-A-Bus was available in your community, would you be willing to see change reflected in the tax rate?



46.8% of all respondents would be willing to accept a change in their tax rate to fund the Access-A-Bus service in their communities. Among senior respondents (aged 65+), the willingness to adjust tax rates rises to 52.3%, indicating a higher level of support within this group.

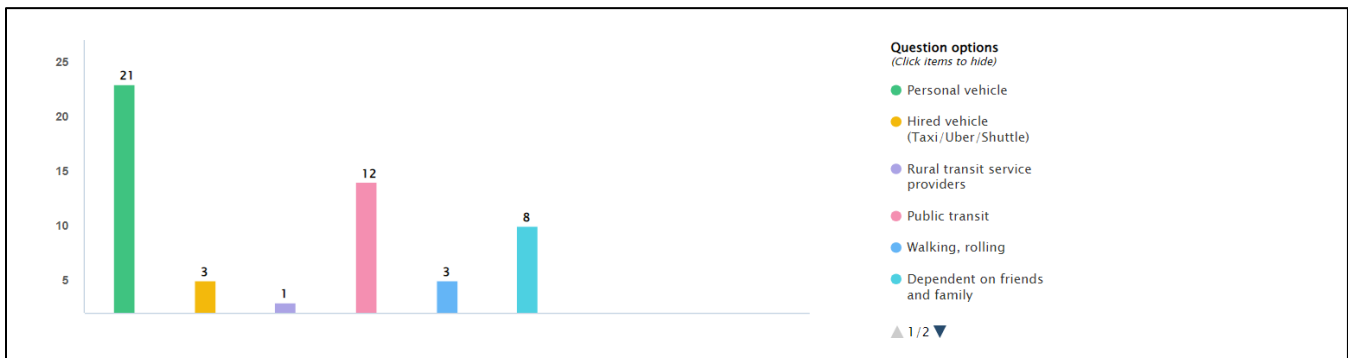
## Part E: Youth & Seniors Response

As part of the internal engagement process, youth and seniors were identified by rural transit service providers as important and particularly vulnerable populations with limited access to rural transportation. The following analysis provides segmented responses to gather further insights into these specific demographic groups.

### Section 1: Special Analysis of Youth Responses

A total sample size of 48 respondents from rural communities, covering the youth age brackets under 17 and 18-24 was collected in this survey. The following is a summary of the broad findings.

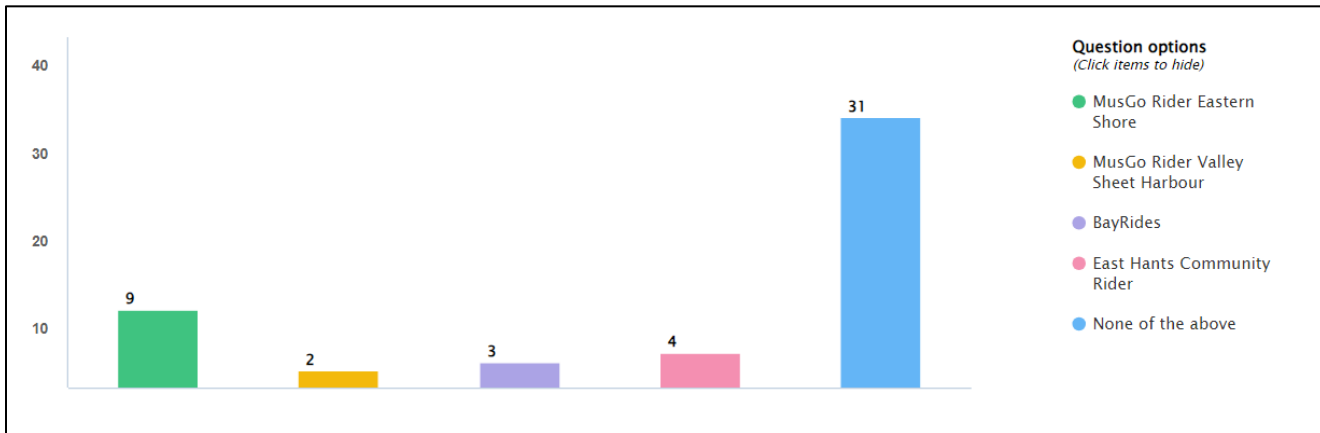
#### 1. How do you typically travel?





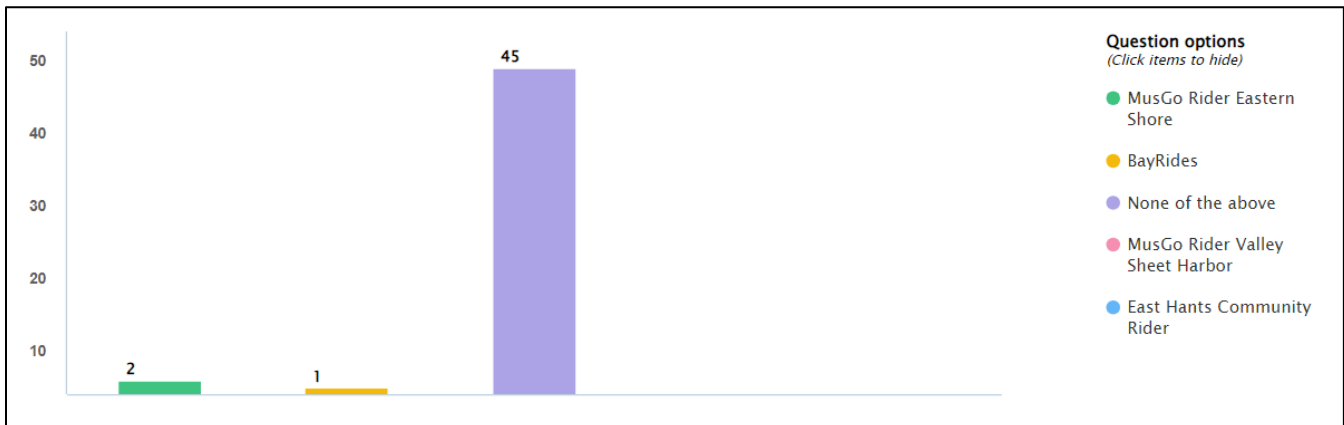
43.8% of youth report traveling primarily in their personal vehicles. 25% of youth in rural communities use or have used transit. Only 2.1% of youth listed the rural transit service providers as their primary transportation option.

**2. Are you aware of the following Rural Transit service providers? Select all that apply.**



Nearly 65% of youth respondents are unaware of the existence of rural transit service providers, highlighting a significant gap in engagement with this demographic.

**3. Have you ever used any of the following Rural Transit services? Select all that apply.**

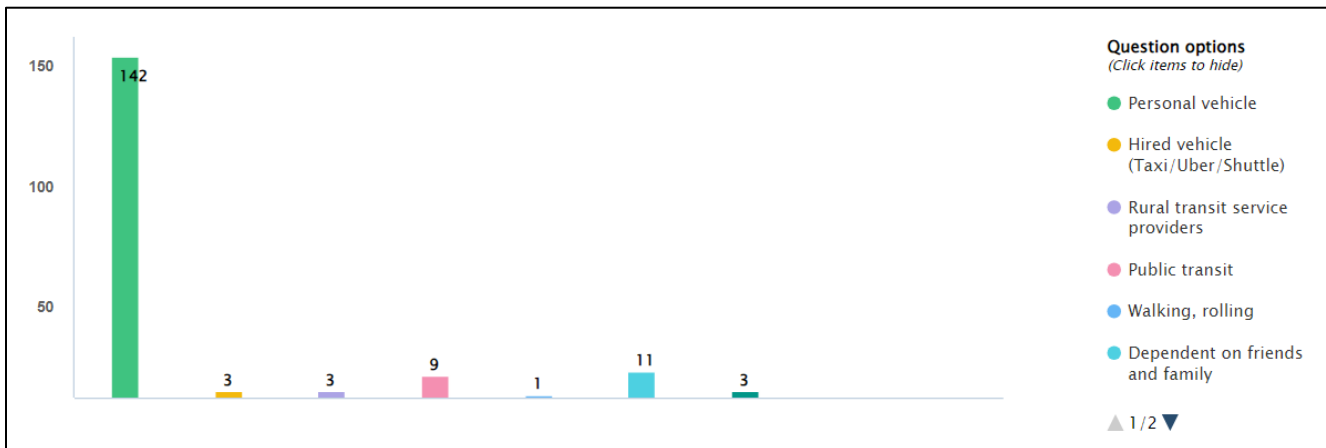


93.8% of respondents in the youth-based age groups have never used any of the rural transit service providers.

## Section 2: Special Analysis of Seniors' Responses

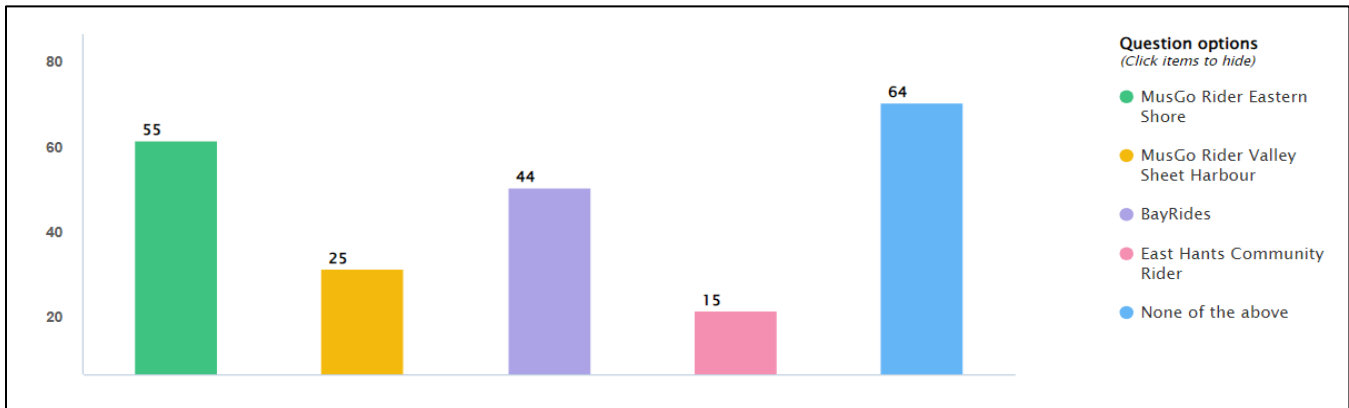
A notable sample size of 172 senior respondents (aged 65+) was collected, providing valuable insights into their transportation preferences and views on rural transit. Below is an analysis of their responses regarding modes of transportation and their perspectives on rural transit service providers.

### 1. Have you ever used any of the following Rural Transit services? Select all that apply.



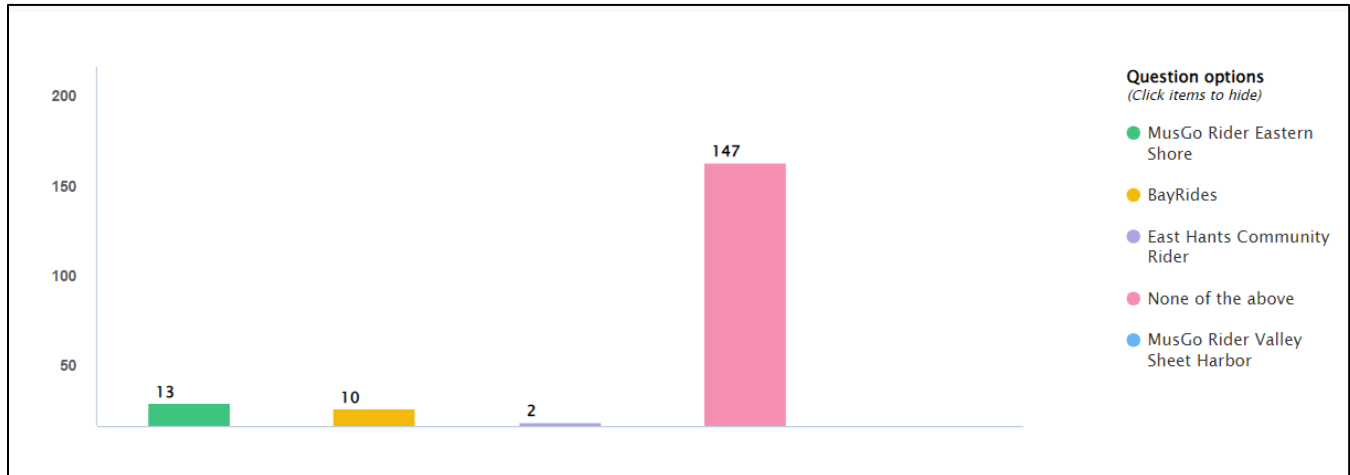
Personal vehicles remain the dominant mode of transportation for seniors, with 82.6% of respondents reporting it as their typical travel option. 6.4% of seniors rely on friends and family for transportation, while only 5.2% use public transit. Less than 2% of seniors identified rural transit service providers as their typical mode of transportation. Additionally, 34% of all respondents are located in areas where rural transit service providers are not available, which may impact the overall relevance of these services for seniors.

### 2. Are you aware of the following Rural Transit service providers? Select all that apply.



37.2% of seniors are unaware of any rural transit service providers. Among seniors living in areas where rural transit service providers are available, this percentage drops to 26.4%.

### 3. Have you ever used any of the following rural transit services? Select all that apply.



85.5% of seniors surveyed have never used any rural transit service providers. Among seniors residing in areas where these services are available, this figure drops to 78.2%, meaning 21.8% of seniors in covered areas have used these services at least once.

## Part F: Open Field Questions

The following open field questions were included in the Rural Transit Survey to gain insights into what residents feel is working well with respect to rural transit in their communities, areas for improvement, and general feedback:

- 1. What aspects of rural transit do you think are working well in your community?**
- 2. What do you think are the most important issues that should be considered to improve rural transit in HRM?**
- 3. Please share any additional feedback you have about rural transit in your community.**

The following provides a summary of key insights from these open field questions.

### Key Strengths

#### 1. Service Satisfaction and Effectiveness

Respondents report that rural transit is highly valued by seniors, individuals with mobility issues, and those needing medical transportation. The reliability, door-to-door services, and availability of subsidized fares are especially appreciated. Drivers are praised for their supportive, caring approach, particularly toward seniors and individuals with disabilities. Overall, service quality is considered high when available.

## **2. Community Impact**

Respondents shared that transit contributes significantly to reducing isolation, enabling seniors and low-income individuals, and those with disabilities and special needs to maintain independence and access essential services like health care and shopping.

## **3. Environmental Benefits**

Respondents recognize the environmental benefits of public transit, particularly its role in reducing traffic congestion and carbon emissions, and support expanding transit as part of sustainability goals.

## **4. Growing Demand**

As rural areas like East Hants, Fall River, and the Eastern Shore continue to grow, respondents report that there is an increasing need for reliable transportation within their communities and to the urban center.

## **Key Issues and Concerns**

### **1. Transit Availability and Service Gaps**

Rural areas such as Fall River, Sambro, Enfield, and Lucasville lack reliable transit options. Existing services are often inadequate due to limited hours, infrequent schedules, and long distances to transit stops. There is a desire for fixed-route buses and expanded coverage, especially in underserved areas.

### **2. Safety and Infrastructure Challenges**

Many respondents report challenges accessing transit stops, including long walks on unsafe roads without adequate lighting, and lack of pedestrian infrastructure. There is also a desire for more Park & Ride facilities, particularly in suburban areas. Safe waiting areas and improved infrastructure are desired to encourage greater use of rural transit services.

### **3. Affordability**

The high cost of existing rural transit services, particularly for seniors and individuals with disabilities, was noted as a barrier. There is a strong call for subsidized fares and discounted passes.

### **4. Flexibility**

Flexibility in scheduling for rural transit services is a key concern, with respondents requesting more frequent, on-demand services that accommodate last-minute trips and non-commute hours.

## **Suggestions for Improvement**

### **1. Service Expansion and Scheduling**

Increased service frequency, particularly on weekends and evenings, was a common request. Respondents also advocate for new routes connecting rural areas to urban hubs and key destinations like hospitals, universities, and shopping centers.

## **2. Innovative Solutions**

Small-scale and flexible transit options such as shuttle services, on-demand rides, and flexible routes are seen as effective solutions for rural communities with less consistent demand.

## **3. Targeted Services**

Special services tailored to seniors, students, healthcare workers, and shift workers were noted by respondents as a priority. These groups require reliable transportation to medical appointments, educational institutions, and work, particularly outside regular hours.

## **4. Equity and Taxation**

Many respondents expressed frustration with the perceived inequity in service provision, especially in growing rural communities that continue to pay taxes but lack adequate transit services. There is a willingness to support tax increases if they result in tangible improvements in service quality.

## **SECTION 8:**

# **Funding Sources & Challenges**



## 8. Funding Sources & Challenges

The following provides an overview of funding sources, based on engagement with rural transit service providers, as well as challenges and limitations experienced in managing and accessing funding.

### 1. Rural Transit Solutions Fund (RTSF)

The Federal RTSF program has been highly successful, with over \$30 million in funding provided, where 80% of the funds come from the federal government and 20% from the province. However, there are concerns that this program remains underutilized, particularly regarding vehicle replacements.

The Rural Transit Solutions Fund provides capital funding and support for studies, but not operational costs. However, accessing RTSF funding presents challenges, as the service must first pay expenses and submit for reimbursement, which can take up to 1.5 months. Additionally, RTSF retains 5% of funds until the completion of certain projects, like the construction of new garages. The reimbursement model can cause cash flow issues and delays in project execution.

### 2. Community Transit Assistance Program (CTAP)

The Community Transit Assistance Program (CTAP), with a budget of \$4 million, helps fund operational costs like driver wages and other necessary expenses for community transit organizations.

CTAP funding has remained static since 2017, leaving the rural transit service providers in a challenging financial position dealing with inflation and rising costs.

### 3. Accessible Transportation Assistance Program (ATAP)

The ATAP program provides capital funding for the purchase of vehicles, with 75% of the cost covered by the province and 25% by the rural transit service providers.

The ATAP is focused on funding for vehicles and related infrastructure, such as charging stations, rather than operational expenses. Rural transit service providers can apply for assistance through ATAP to support the acquisition of vehicles and necessary equipment to improve the service's accessibility. This funding helps address the growing demand for accessible transportation but does not address broader operational challenges.

### 4. Nova Scotia Transit Research Incentive Program (NSTRI)

The Nova Scotia Transit Research Incentive Program is a project-based funding program with up to \$450,000 available, requiring a comprehensive 5-year business model and feasibility plan, ensuring long-term sustainability.

### 5. Halifax Regional Municipality – Rural Transit Funding Program

HRM has increased its funding for rural transit service providers, but this increase is only intended to address inflation, rather than supporting growth or operational improvements. This funding boost does not fully meet the financial needs of the service, and additional sources of support will be necessary to ensure long-term sustainability.

## **6. Sustainable Communities Challenge Fund**

The Sustainable Communities Challenge Fund is a provincial grant program that some service providers have successfully applied for. This grant will support the construction of an energy-efficient garage and provide funding for six months of salary for key personnel overseeing the project. This funding is crucial for enhancing operational efficiency and sustainability by making the facility more energy-efficient, which aligns with the service's long-term goals.



## **SECTION 9:**

# **Gap & Needs Analysis**



## 9. Gap & Needs Analysis

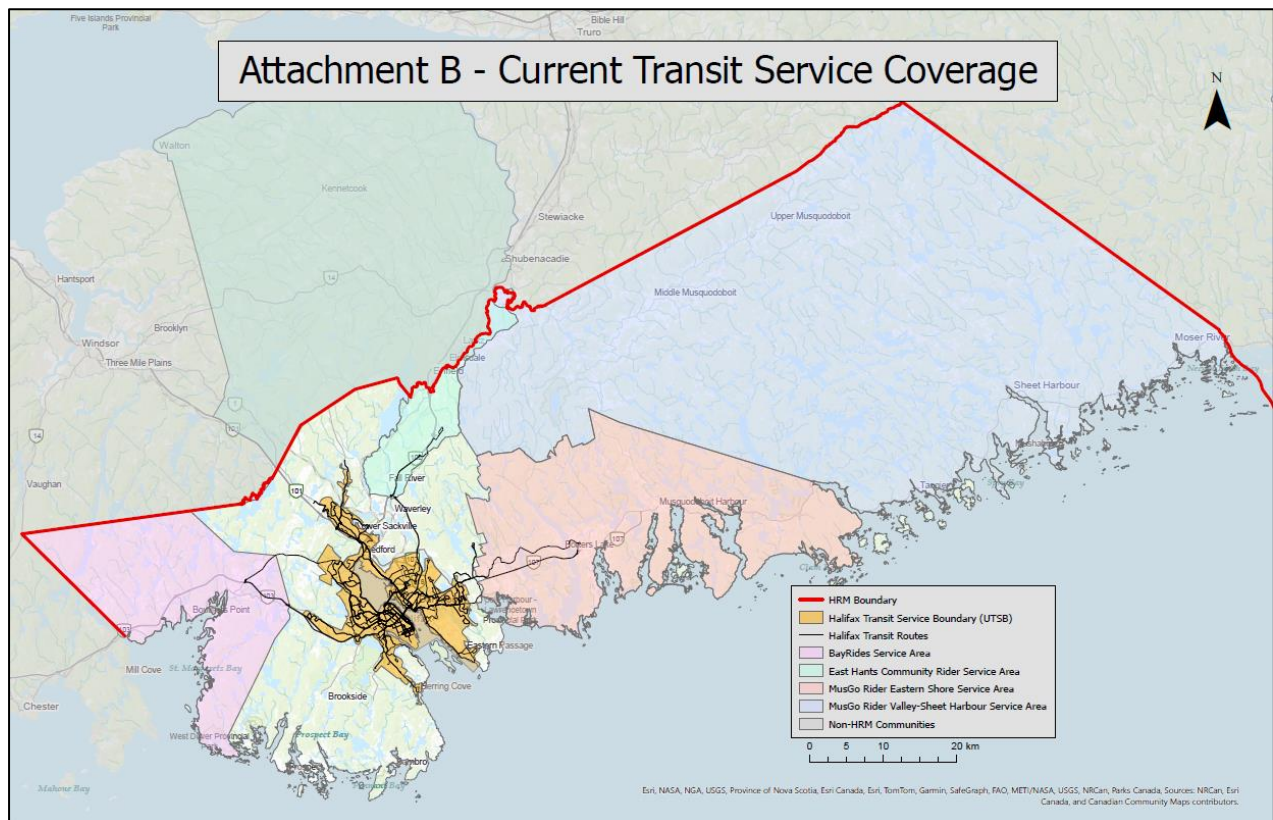
The following Gap and Needs Analysis, based on key findings from the engagement program, has been developed to identify critical gaps and areas for improvement to enhance rural transit service delivery and ensure the continued success of the Rural Transit Funding Program.

### 1. TRANSIT COVERAGE & SERVICE DELIVERY

#### Gaps Identified

##### Gaps in Transit Availability in Rural Areas:

- Some rural and suburban communities, including Sambro, Lucasville, Pockwock Road, Fall River, Enfield, and North Beaver Bank, lack public transit options.
- The following map shows the UTSB, and current transit service coverage for HRM including Halifax Transit routes and areas covered by the four Rural Transit Funding Program service providers.



For a larger version of this map, see Attachment B – Current Transit Service Coverage

**Service Boundaries and Coverage Gaps:**

- Current rural transit service boundaries established by the province based on historical population density are outdated, limiting expansion into these underserved regions, and the existing boundaries may no longer align with the needs of the population due to demographic shifts and urbanization.

**Service Hours and Frequency:**

- Current conventional transit routes servicing rural areas tend to operate only during weekdays, excluding evenings and weekends.
- There is a significant demand for more frequent service, especially during peak hours, weekends, and evenings.

**Service Integration with Halifax Transit:**

- There is a lack of connections between rural transit and Halifax Transit, making it difficult to connect rural communities to the larger urban centre.

**Increased Demand and Service Denials:**

- The demand for rural transit services is increasing, particularly among seniors, individuals with disabilities, and lower-income populations, resulting in service denials, especially for accessible transport.
- Services are unable to meet all demand, particularly during peak times or for specialized trips such as medical appointments, leading to missed opportunities and unmet community needs.
- This growing demand exceeds the available capacity, leading to concerns from rural transit service providers about customer experience and reputational damage.
- Limited capacity is also particularly problematic for accessible transport, leading to increased service denials and unmet needs for vulnerable populations.

**Needs Identified****Expanded Service Coverage:**

- Additional rural transit service in communities that lack service or are underserved outside the UTSB, is desired to connect rural communities to urban hubs, key destinations (medical facilities, universities, shopping centers), transit terminals, and Park & Rides.

**Review of Rural Transit Service Boundaries**

- There is a desire for a review of service boundaries to expand geographic coverage to meet the growing demands of rural communities.

**Increased Frequency and Flexibility:**

- More frequent services for both conventional transit and rural transit, particularly on weekends and evenings, could help to meet some of the growing demand, particularly for medical, employment, and social purposes.
- Flexible service options, including demand-responsive transit or expanded scheduling for areas with variable demand, are desired to enhance service delivery and avoid service denials.

**Better Integration with Urban Transit:**

- There is a desire for stronger connections between rural and urban transit systems, ensuring seamless and efficient travel from rural areas to major urban centers, such as Halifax.
- Initiatives such as fare integration between rural transit service providers and Halifax Transit could be explored to reduce costs for riders and improve the user experience.

**Targeted Services for Vulnerable Populations:**

- Tailored service for seniors, students, health care workers, and shift workers is sought, particularly to ensure these passengers can access medical appointments, educational institutions, and work, often outside of regular hours.

**New Transit Solutions:**

- There is a growing desire for the introduction of small-scale, flexible transit options such as shuttle services, on-demand rides, fixed rural routes, and flexible routes to cater to less consistent demand in rural communities.
- A shift toward smaller buses and on-demand transit models could better serve low-density areas and ensure that individuals with mobility challenges have access to transportation. Implementing a hub-and-spoke model with smaller vehicles could create a more flexible and community-focused system

## 2. INFRASTRUCTURE, SAFETY & ACCESSIBILITY

### Gaps Identified

**Infrastructure:**

- Lack of safe waiting areas, lighting, and shelters at rural bus stops are reported.
- There is a desire for more Park & Ride facilities to improve convenience and decrease the reliance on personal vehicles.

**Accessibility to Transit Stops:**

- Long distances to transit stops or Park & Rides combined with the absence of safe pedestrian infrastructure (sidewalks, lighting), are reported as factors that make access transit difficult in rural communities, especially for seniors and people with mobility issues.

**Needs Identified****Improved Safety and Accessibility:**

- Infrastructure improvements are desired at rural transit stops, including safe walking paths, better lighting, and shelters to create safer transit access for seniors and individuals with disabilities.

**3. AFFORDABILITY****Gaps Identified****Affordable, Equitable Access:**

- The high cost of rural transit services, especially for low-income individuals, seniors, students, and people with disabilities, is reported as a barrier to accessing essential services like health care, grocery shopping, and employment opportunities.
- Affordability issues are exacerbated by the need to pay multiple fares for connections between rural and urban services.

**Needs Identified****Increased Support for Fare Subsidies**

- There is a desire for more targeted fare subsidies or financial assistance programs to improve accessibility and make transit more equitable.
- A comprehensive review and adjustment of fare structures, including the introduction of sliding-scale fares or additional subsidy programs, could be considered to ensure all community members, particularly those with fixed incomes, can afford essential services.
- Expanding targeted subsidies for specific trip types (e.g., medical transport or social enterprise transport) could also enhance service access.

## 4. FINANCIAL SUSTAINABILITY

### Gaps Identified

#### Funding

- Rural transit service providers report that they are facing increasing challenges in balancing operating costs with long-term sustainability. Current funding models often fall short of covering essential expenses such as salaries, fleet maintenance, and rising insurance premiums. Without changes, some fear they may not be able to continue operations beyond 2030.

#### Fleet Expansion and Maintenance

- Rural transit service providers report that expansion efforts are hindered by funding limitations and challenges with vehicle maintenance, especially when it comes to integrating electric vehicles into their fleets.

#### Insurance and Liability Concerns:

- High insurance premiums due to the classification of rural transit as high-risk are reported as a challenge by service providers and contribute to increased operational costs.

### Needs Identified

#### Increased and Diversified Funding:

- Increased and diversified funding sources are required to reduce reliance on government grants and fundraising efforts and to support long-term financial stability.

#### Capital Funding for Vehicle Purchases:

- Rural transit service providers have expressed the need for additional capital funding for fleet expansion, maintenance, facility upgrades and technology, especially for electric and accessible vehicles.

#### Insurance Costs:

- There is a desire to advocate for changes in classification and insurance coverage to reduce high insurance premiums.

## 5. WORKFORCE PLANNING

### Gaps Identified

#### Staffing and Recruitment Challenges:

- Recruiting and retaining qualified staff, particularly drivers and dispatchers, is a challenge for rural transit service providers. Low wages, lack of benefits, and competition from larger urban transit systems challenge their ability to maintain a reliable workforce.
- A shortage of dispatchers and other essential operational staff is putting increased pressure on existing employees, leading to workload strain and disruptions in service delivery.
- All organizations are facing succession planning challenges, with the risk of losing institutional knowledge as managers approach retirement.

### Needs Identified

#### Workforce Development and Recruitment:

- Investing in professional development programs, including training in health and safety, crisis intervention, diversity and inclusion, and first aid, could reduce training costs and improve workforce retention.

#### Proactive Succession Planning

- Developing clear succession plans would ensure continuity in leadership and operations, mitigating the risk of losing institutional knowledge as key staff retire.

## 6. PUBLIC AWARENESS

### Gaps Identified

#### Public Awareness:

- There is insufficient public awareness of available rural transit services, with many community members unaware of routes, schedules, and how to access services.
- Incorrect perceptions of rural transit services, especially among younger populations who see it as a service for seniors or individuals with accessibility requirements, limit their broader appeal. Many community members are unaware of the services until faced with a family crisis or emergency.

## Needs Identified

### Public Awareness:

- Enhanced marketing and outreach efforts could help to raise awareness about available rural transit services.

### Increased Partnerships and Collaboration:

- Expanding partnerships with local organizations, health care providers, and businesses could open up new funding opportunities.

## 7. BUSINESS PLANNING

### Gaps Identified

#### Long-Term Planning

- Rural transit service providers report that they are so focused on the immediate needs of running day-to-day operations that they struggle to find time for long-term planning.

### Needs Identified

#### Strategic and Sustainable Planning

- An advisory group, comprised of transit and other municipal staff, and rural transit service providers, could be established to provide ongoing support to rural transit service providers for strategic planning.



# Attachment B - Current Transit Service Coverage

