

BRINGING OPPORTUNITY TO LIFE: ACCESSIBLE TRANSIT IN CANADA



Edmonton Transit System

For Canadians, access to opportunity is fundamental to our quality of life. Being able to get around is an essential part of finding a job, taking a course, seeing a doctor or meeting a friend. For that freedom of movement, millions of Canadians depend on public transit.

But for people who have disabilities or other mobility limitations, transit is not just another option. It means more than a minute saved here or a dollar there. Rather, it is an essential and irreplaceable key to health, advancement and happiness. Canadian transit systems are among the world's leaders when it comes to serving these customers, although progress has been challenging and expensive.

The stakes are very real. Accessible transit service enables many seniors and persons with disabilities to live full and independent lives, contributing to the economy and their communities while reducing public and private expenses. These broad benefits help justify the very real costs of providing accessible transit. Perhaps more importantly, they are helping to build new perceptions of the role and importance of individual age and ability in our communities.

To maximize the benefits of accessibility, Canadian transit systems are helping the greatest possible number of customers make use of conventional* transit services. They also offer parallel specialized† transit services for customers who are unable to use conventional transit. These complementary strategies support the principle of social integration, while also maximizing the return on transit investments.

The challenge

The importance of accessible transit services is clearly defined by the scope of their principal customer base—people who have (or may develop) restricted individual mobility.

As Canada's population has grown, so has the proportion of Canadians with disabilities. The result has been a dramatic 23% growth in the number of persons with disabilities between 2001 and 2006, an increase from 3.6 million or 12% of Canadians to 4.4 million or 14% of Canadians.^a In 2006, almost 3 million people—one in ten Canadians—had mobility limitations.

* Conventional transit includes regular scheduled bus, light rail, subway or commuter rail services.

† Specialized transit includes a range of services for passengers who meet specific disability criteria, including reservation-based, door-to-door or curb-to-curb services.

One factor behind the growth in disability is Canada's aging population. While many seniors live independent and highly mobile lives, their growing numbers and average age will inevitably lead to an increase in those who are frail or have a disability. Mobility issues will increasingly be a very real concern. The number of Canadian seniors (at least 65 years of age) increased by 11% between 2001 and 2006, rising from 3.9 million to 4.3 million.^b Seniors now make up one-seventh (14%) of Canada's population and are expected to make up almost 25% (representing 9.8 million seniors) by 2036.^c

Seniors are unevenly distributed across Canada, and transit systems face varying degrees of challenge in serving them. In 2005, the census metropolitan areas with the highest proportion of seniors (17%) were St. Catharines-Niagara and Victoria, while the lowest proportion (9%) was in Calgary. Several smaller communities have even higher levels, approaching 25% in Elliot Lake, ON and Penticton, BC.



Offering specialized transit services

Specialized transit provides essential service for those who are unable to use conventional transit. It typically involves wheelchair-accessible minibuses, vans or sedans, and requires customers to pre-book their trips. Some communities also offer more flexible and spontaneous travel by private taxi as part of a family of specialized services.

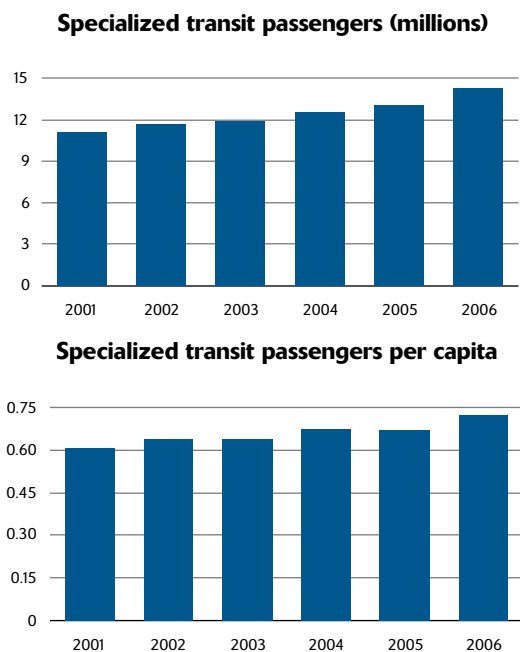
CUTA members include 65 transit systems that deliver specialized services to about 20 million people. As Figure 1 shows, those systems serve rapidly growing demands. Over five years from 2001 to 2006, the number of registrants rose 19% to 249,000 people, the total demand rose 28% to 14.2 million passengers, and the average usage rose 20% to 0.72 passengers per capita.

Along with an expanding customer base, one of the major challenges faced by specialized transit services is cost. Providing personalized service using smaller vehicles and variable schedules is increasingly expensive. The \$23.84 average cost of a trip in 2006 was 25% more than in 2001, having grown at more than double the rate of inflation.^d Because equity demands that specialized transit fares be similar to conventional transit fares, specialized services recover just 8% of their operating costs from fares on average, compared to 60% for conventional transit services.

Fiscal pressures are leading Canadian municipalities and transit systems to continually improve the efficiency of specialized services through measures such as:

- Automating reservation and dispatch services
- Modifying eligibility rules for specialized service as conventional service grows more accessible
- Modifying restrictions on the nature of trips and the maximum lead time for reservations
- Rationalizing operating contracts to achieve economies of scale
- Using more flexible and efficient vehicles, like taxis, to serve customers who do not need wheelchair lifts or driver assistance

Figure 1. Specialized transit statistics for Canada, 2001-2006



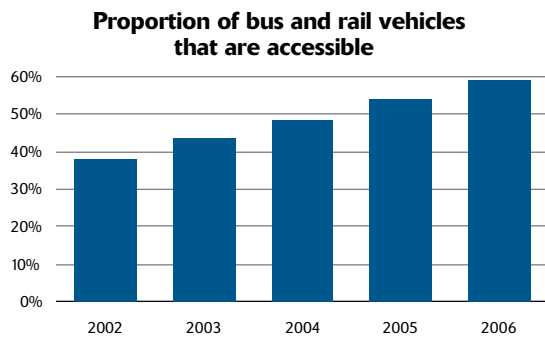
Dignitaries celebrate the acquisition of new lift-equipped buses by Kings Transit Authority in Nova Scotia

Making conventional transit services more accessible

Across Canada, transit systems are working hard to make conventional transit services more accessible to customers who would otherwise need specialized services. These efforts have social and economic benefits by promoting inclusion and reducing costs. Several strategies have worked particularly well:

- The development of community bus routes that link concentrations of seniors to shopping malls, medical centres and downtown cores, with smaller vehicles and flexible stop locations
- Low-floor buses with kneeling features and fold-out ramps to serve wheelchair and scooter users (see Figure 2)
- Buses and rail vehicles with on-board visual and audio announcements, priority seating areas and secure wheelchair areas
- Stops and stations with accessible travel paths, washrooms, accessible signage, wayfinding and fare vending machines
- Information and outreach, including special websites and travel training programs, to ensure that customers are aware of conventional transit services, understand how to use them, and are willing to do so

Figure 2. Transit vehicle accessibility, 2002-2006



A look ahead

Canada's transit industry is proud of its progress in improving the quality of life for Canadians with disabilities. Their travel options have improved greatly over the last two decades.

Transit systems cannot rest on their laurels, however, as demographics and economics challenge the feasibility of specialized services. How can they continue to provide necessary—but very expensive—services to a rapidly expanding population of Canadians with disabilities?

Part of the answer lies in strengthening the role of transit's partners. Transit suppliers will continue their commendable efforts in developing new technologies. Various levels of government will continue to provide infrastructure that makes operations more efficient. Local businesses will become more accessible and improve the choice of destinations for customers with limited mobility. Finally, agencies that serve and represent persons with disabilities—from hospitals to outreach organizations—will work to promote their clients' needs and help transit systems develop effective solutions.

Service de transport adapté de la Capitale — Quebec, QC

Enhancing service through technology

In response to dramatic growth in demand for specialized transit services—an increase from 1,500 to 2,500 daily trips over the last three years—the Service de transport adapté de la Capitale (STAC) has undertaken a major modernization program.

Notably, it has implemented an automated planning and dispatch system called ACCES to manage operations more effectively and efficiently. STAC's minibuses and accessible taxis feature a GPS-based fleet management system that enables real-time tracking of vehicle and passenger movements. The ACCES system also includes a mapping and payment management module that will make of the most of upcoming smart card implementation for fare payment.

Taxis (both regular and accessible) carry 85% of STAC trips, and local taxi companies are now adding GPS, onboard computers and electronic meters to their fleets. STAC will soon be hooked up to their dispatch systems, enabling all specialized transit trip requests to be routed automatically to the nearest vehicle—allowing maximum efficiency, precise trip costing, immediate billing and accurate service monitoring.

For more information visit www.staquebec.ca

OC Transpo — Ottawa, ON

Encouraging seniors to "Ride with us!"

In the summer of 2007, OC Transpo offered seniors free rides on conventional transit each Wednesday. The initiative responded to the reality that many seniors are first-time transit users, may be new to the region, and may face health and mobility challenges. Summer was an ideal time for the "Ride with us!" promotion because transit vehicles are less crowded then, and thus safer and less stressful for new users.

Community agencies helped promote the pilot project and expressed interest in supporting it through future incentives and special programming. Based on this response, and on evidence of the benefits to individual seniors who took advantage of the program, OC Transpo decided to extend the initiative.

Community partners play an important role in "Ride with us!" by providing a travel destination and offering incentives for their clients to take transit. OC Transpo works with agencies to review their programs and services, looking for ways to encourage seniors to take advantage of Ride Free Wednesdays.

OC Transpo is also set to work with selected agencies to offer travel training for seniors. This effort will be part of an innovative community-wide travel training program whereby qualified employees of partner organizations are taught travel training skills. In 2007 the program involved more than 1,100 trainers and trainees, with 44% of trainees successfully learning to take transit with comfort and security.

For more information visit www.octranspo.com



OC Transpo/City of Ottawa

Calgary Transit — Calgary, AB

Meeting the challenge of accessibility

Calgary Transit's Access Calgary division provides specialized transit services to area residents. Lift-equipped buses, accessible taxis, sedans and minivans provide door-to-door shared-ride service for people with disabilities who cannot make their trip using conventional transit. The fare is a regular adult transit ticket or a valid low-income monthly transit pass.

The demand for specialized transit in Calgary has grown dramatically. Access Calgary now has a base of more than 18,000 customers, and an operating budget of about \$27 million. Seniors represent a significant proportion of customers, and Calgary's aging population will undoubtedly lead to greater demand.

A recent customer satisfaction survey gives evidence of Access Calgary's success, with 97% of Handi-Bus and Shared Ride Taxi customers reporting favourable impressions.

For more information visit www.accesscalgary.ca



Calgary Transit

Focusing on customer needs

In recent years, Edmonton Transit's Disabled Adult Transit Service (DATS) has modernized and streamlined its operations. In 2002, a new application process and user eligibility criteria ensured that clients who need DATS have access to it, while encouraging them to use conventional transit services whenever possible. In 2005, DATS adopted a new service model to improve reliability and launched its fleet of 91 employee-operated lift vans while contracting with a private company to provide sedan and passenger van service.

In 2005, DATS installed mobile data terminals on its vehicles to improve communications. By verifying each vehicle's location and status, the terminals have reduced the reliance on radios while improving the accuracy of trip information. DATS also implemented a "call ahead" function—the operator simply pushes a button and an automated telephone call notifies the next customer that their ride will arrive shortly. Customers report that the service helps plan their ride, and DATS operators say it reduces waiting time as they pick up and drop off customers.

Edmonton Transit has also taken a leadership role through its Mobility Choices Travel Training program, teaching people with physical and cognitive disabilities how to use conventional transit with confidence and security. Individual and small group training sessions help users navigate the hectic transit environment by explaining how to obtain information, how to reach stops and stations, how to board vehicles and pay fares, how to identify destinations and landmarks, and what to do when new situations arise. Among other skills, trainees learn how to use special tools like Edmonton Transit's bus hailer kit (to show approaching buses what route the customer is waiting for), mobility card (to tell operators if the customer needs the bus to kneel or the ramp deployed) and communication cards (to discreetly make specific requests of an operator).



Edmonton Transit

For more information visit www.edmonton.ca/dats

Making transit more accessible to all

In the mid-1980s Metro Vancouver became the first region in Canada to adopt a policy of working towards full transit accessibility. Despite many successes since that time, some barriers still exist. Not all passenger facilities are fully accessible, some people with visual or cognitive impairments have difficulty using TransLink's website, and the HandyDART custom transit service struggles to keep up with demand.

In view of forecasts for a much greater number of seniors—notably in suburban areas—and rather than seek piecemeal solutions, TransLink launched a full accessibility review in 2005. The goal was an integrated spectrum of services to maximize individual options and help users overcome not only physical barriers but also cognitive, economic and linguistic ones. The resulting Access Transit Strategy focused on four areas:

- Creation of a new Access Transit Office to implement the strategy, administer HandyDART custom transit, provide a single point of contact for users, and work with a new Users' Advisory Committee
- Customer support improvements including a more accessible website, simplified and standardized signage, training and education for staff and customers, community outreach and a formal complaints process
- Better access to a range of transit services resulting from fleet and facility retrofits as well as new guidelines for vehicles, stops, stations, rail lines and terminals
- HandyDART improvements including a more responsive and flexible booking system, an expanded fleet, longer hours, a 30% increase in service between 2008 and 2010, and efforts with the provincial government to manage demand for medical and social service trips and increase capacity for other customers

By responding to the needs of those who face the greatest challenges, TransLink hopes to make transit more accessible to everyone.

For more information visit www.translink.bc.ca/Plans_Projects/Access_Transit



TransLink

References:

- Statistics Canada, *Participation and Activity Limitation Survey 2006: Tables*, 2007 (available at www.statcan.ca)
- Statistics Canada, national Census summary data (available at www.statcan.ca)
- Statistics Canada, *A Portrait of Seniors in Canada*, 2006 (available at www.statcan.ca)
- National specialized transit statistics are drawn from annual CUTA summaries of transit operating data, available at www.cutaactu.ca

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

