

Ride Norfolk

**ACCELERATING RURAL
TRANSPORTATION SOLUTIONS**



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A. Overview of Transportation Initiative

The Ride Norfolk bus service was established in 2011 to provide reliable, affordable and accessible transportation options to residents of Norfolk County. It is operated by the Community Services department of Norfolk County and overseen by the Ride Norfolk Transportation Committee (RNTC). A Public Transportation Coordinator is employed by the County to manage the service. One accessible bus provides public transportation within Norfolk County under a service contract with Donnelly Transit Inc. a company that provides transportation services within southern Ontario. The bus operates a fixed route service from 8:00 a.m. to 6:00 p.m., Monday to Friday. Each day of the week has a different route, with scheduled stops in a total of twelve different communities as well as several stops within the five larger towns. Fares cost \$2.00 for in-town rides and \$6.00 each way when travelling between towns.

B. Community Profile

Location

Located on the north shore of Lake Erie in the heart of southwestern Ontario, Norfolk County is adjacent to Elgin County, Oxford County, Brant County and Haldimand County. It is comprised of several small communities spread across approximately 1,623 square kilometres or 403,869 acres.¹

Demographics/Density

Norfolk County is a single-tier municipality with a population of 63,175, according to 2011 Census data.² A survey of 86 Ontario Municipalities conducted by BMA Management Consulting Inc. shows that Norfolk has a population density of 39 persons per square kilometer, compared to an average of 587 for the 86 participating municipalities, and an average of 551 for the southwest region.³

Political and Governance Structures

Norfolk was first created as a county in 1792. In 1800, Haldimand was formed from a portion of Norfolk. In 1974 the counties were reunited as the Regional Municipality of Haldimand, but were separated again in 2001.⁴

Economy

Norfolk County has a strong agricultural sector, due to a mild climate, lengthy growing season and some of the most fertile land in Ontario. It has long been the centre of the tobacco belt, but as tobacco consumption has declined substantially, many farmers are now growing lavender, ginseng, hazelnuts and wolfberries.⁵ Manufacturing and tourism are also important components of the county's economic base.

¹ Norfolk County Economic Development: www.norfolkbusiness.ca/invest-in-norfolk/location-demographics; accessed January 29, 2014.

² Norfolk Tourism: www.norfolktourism.ca; accessed January 29, 2014.

³ BMA Municipal Study 2012: [www.norfolkcounty.ca/download/government/BMA Municipal Study 2012.pdf](http://www.norfolkcounty.ca/download/government/BMA_Municipal_Study_2012.pdf); accessed February 3, 2014.

⁴ Norfolk County Council Strategic Plan, p.2: www.norfolkcounty.ca/download/government/countystratplan0910.pdf; accessed January 29, 2014.

⁵ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Norfolk_County,_Ontario; accessed February 3, 2014.

Major Travel Destinations

The county seat and largest community is Simcoe, with a population of 15,500. Simcoe is a main destination as more professional services, government offices and retail outlets are located there than any other community in the county. Port Dover, Delhi, Waterford, Port Rowan, Courtland and Langton are other larger communities in the county. Long Point, a 40-kilometre spit of land projecting into Lake Erie, is an important location for bird migration and was designated a World Biosphere Reserve by UNESCO in 1986. Long Point Provincial Park is located on the point.⁶ Norfolk County's most popular tourist attractions are the ports, towns and villages along Lake Erie, known as Ontario's South Coast. These towns include Port Dover, Turkey Point and Long Point. Fishing is another key attraction for tourists, as well as birding, hiking, camping and cycling.⁷

Local Transportation Context

Rural transportation issues within the Counties of Haldimand and Norfolk are long-standing. The lack of public transportation affects everyone, but it is a particular challenge to high-risk populations including the elderly, children, people with disabilities and low-income families. While there are some specialized transportation services provided by various community organizations, prior to the establishment of Ride Norfolk, there was no public transit system to connect people internally or to communities outside the counties.

There are particular challenges in developing a transportation service in Norfolk. Since the overall population density is very low, and the towns are spread out across the county at distances of 15 to 40 kilometres, it is quite costly to operate. The main towns in Norfolk County are configured in a hub-and-spoke formation, with transportation corridors that connect the smaller towns to Simcoe as the hub.

C. Background

Previous Public Transportation Initiatives⁸

Several attempts have been made in the past to implement some form of public transportation in Haldimand and Norfolk Counties.

In 1991, the study *Transportation Needs of the Elderly and People with Disabilities in Haldimand-Norfolk* was commissioned. Some of the key findings of this study include the following:

- Current transportation providers were community-based volunteer services, family, friends, neighbours and service providers.
- Among residents 55 years or older, 13% identified a need for additional transportation services and 6% of this population was critically disadvantaged, as they were without even an informal support network.
- Participation in social activities, health and medical services and out-of-region medical appointments were the main reasons for needing transportation.

As a result of this study, the Haldimand-Norfolk Transportation Task Force was established in 1994, and a consultant was hired to develop an implementation plan. Shortly thereafter, the Haldimand-Norfolk Community Senior Support Services Inc. began to operate a transportation system using a blend of volunteer drivers and paid drivers for its three accessible vans. Transportation services are continuing to be provided by Seniors Support Services so seniors can attend day programs, shop and attend medical appointments.

In 1997, the Community Transportation Action Program (CTAP), a provincial program, provided funding for communities to develop transportation resources and services across Ontario. The Haldimand-Norfolk CTAP

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Norfolk Tourism: www.norfolktourism.ca; accessed January 29, 2014.

⁸ Background information on transportation services in Norfolk County was compiled through an interview with Brad Smith, Transportation Coordinator, Ride Norfolk; and from *Spinning Your Wheels: Public Transportation Systems in Haldimand County and Norfolk County – Feasibility Study*, by ENTRA Consultants, August 2009.

Steering Committee was formed and hired a private carrier to operate a transportation service for which riders paid a fee. In February 1999, a review of the pilot service identified the following challenges:

- The rural nature of Haldimand & Norfolk with low population was not conducive to trip sharing.
- The high cost of single trips was prohibitive.
- Some agencies were able to provide transportation for their clients.
- There were restrictions to the shared use of some agency vehicles.
- Agencies could not subsidize private carriers when volunteer drivers were more cost-effective.
- The sustainability of the system would be dependent on fundraising.

When the provincial CTAP mandate and funding ended, the Steering Committee determined that a continuation of the project was not possible and disbanded.

Background of Current Initiative

The Haldimand & Norfolk Rural Transportation Initiative (H&N RTI) was formed in 2006, with representation from a broad cross-section of community organizations. Member organizations include the Best Start Network, Children's Aid Society of Haldimand & Norfolk, Work Force Planning Board of Grand Erie, Haldimand-Norfolk R.E.A.C.H., Haldimand & Norfolk Women's Services, Norfolk District Business Development Corporation, the Consolidated Municipal Service Manager for Haldimand & Norfolk Counties and the United Way of Haldimand and Norfolk.

The H&N RTI was very active over the next few years; they conducted research, held community consultations, surveyed community organizations and the general public, and conducted a peer review of models of rural transportation in comparative communities. Of 29 community organizations surveyed, 86% identified the need for transportation for their consumers, and 89% indicated that the lack of transportation is a barrier to accessing their service. Furthermore, 63% of the agencies were already providing or paying for transportation for their clients, and 100% of respondents indicated they

would or might support a consumer transportation system if one was created for Haldimand & Norfolk.

Following up on the recommendations from the 2006 survey, in 2008 a more detailed survey was distributed to 345 organizations in Haldimand and Norfolk, of which 142 completed the survey. The purpose of the survey was to compile a current transportation inventory for Haldimand and Norfolk and gather information to inform a transportation feasibility study. The H&N RTI, realizing that the success of a public transportation system would rely heavily on use by the general public, also surveyed the community at large. Ninety-two percent of respondents indicated that Haldimand and Norfolk Counties need a public transportation system, for the following purposes:

- Respondents in general would use public transportation for recreational and social activities (69%), followed by attending medical appointments (59%).
- Younger respondents are most likely to use it for recreational and social activities (81%), followed by employment needs (73%).
- Older respondents are most likely to use it for medical appointments (75%), followed by recreational and social activities (63%).
- Low-income respondents would use it for medical appointments (78%) and recreational and social activities (77%).

The H&N RTI secured funding from the Ontario Trillium Foundation to hire a transportation consultant to explore the feasibility of establishing a public transportation system in Haldimand and Norfolk Counties. The feasibility study provided a thorough examination of conditions and factors related to the development of a public transportation system in Haldimand and Norfolk counties, and made several recommendations regarding the type of service, routes, schedules and fares. The report from the feasibility study was presented to both councils. Haldimand County Council declined to participate in developing a public transportation program due primarily to funding concerns, but Norfolk County Council decided to proceed with the plan. At that point, the H&N RTI was disbanded and the Transportation Coordination Team

(TCT), later named the Ride Norfolk Transportation Committee (RNTC), was established. The feasibility study was updated in September 2010 to focus solely on Norfolk County.

The recommendation of the transportation consultant was to adopt a fixed route service with a paid driver. Consideration was given to expanding the volunteer driver program, but too many difficulties were encountered. For many of the participating organizations, providing financial support for a shared service would be outside their mandate; some were already pushing their mandate by sharing their vehicles, drivers and resources with each other. For some, there would have been significant implications or insurance and mileage costs. In contrast, by choosing a fixed route service and contracting with a transportation carrier for the bus and driver, the insurance coverage and liability becomes the responsibility of the carrier.

Ride Norfolk was launched in 2011 to provide reliable, affordable and accessible transportation options to residents of Norfolk County. It is operated by the Community Services department of Norfolk County. The Ride Norfolk Transportation Committee (RNTC) acts in an advisory role to both County Council and to the Public Transportation Coordinator. It is a volunteer committee of public sector organizations, many of whom are members of the H&N RTI. The mandate of the committee is twofold:

- i) To provide the overall guidance and direction in the development, implementation and operation of a fixed route and on demand public transit service in Norfolk County; and
- ii) to explore opportunities for future expansion into the outlying areas of Norfolk County and the development of interconnecting transit routes throughout the South Central Ontario Region (SCOR) and Haldimand County.

Initially, from 2011 to 2012, the Children's Aid Society was the lead agency for Ride Norfolk, holding the contract with Sharpe Bus Lines. In 2012, the operation was moved to the County so it could be eligible to receive gas tax funds.

The service is now provided by Donnelly Transit Inc., a company based in St. Thomas, which provide transportation throughout southern Ontario through a "family of companies." Ride Norfolk is listed on their website (www.coxtransportation.ca) as one of the services they provide.

Initial Funding Sources

The first Transportation Coordinator position was funded by the South Central Ontario Region, a group of five tobacco-producing municipalities that organized to help with the transition from tobacco production to other types of agriculture. They also received funding from the Rotary Club and United Way, which sponsored a week of free bus rides as a marketing promotion. They have considered raising funds by providing advertising space on the bus, but because they do not own the bus, they would need to work with the contractor to determine income splitting and acceptable advertising.

No capital investments were required, as the bus service is contracted out to a private carrier. The committee had considered buying a bus, but when owning was compared to leasing, it was found that the savings were negligible for a single bus.

Local Support for Transportation Initiative

Support for developing a local transportation initiative has been mixed. Since there is no history of public transit in the county, many residents are not familiar with transit services and do not have the same expectations as urban dwellers for an economical mode of transportation. Local service agency personnel have been champions of a universally available transportation program, and the current mayor has been very supportive. However, there are concerns about the use of public funds to provide the service, and some have the perception that the transportation service is diverting tax funds from other needed areas. It was noted during an interview with the Public Transportation Coordinator that the main source of funding for the program is the provincial gas tax fund, which is dedicated specifically to transit service improvement.

Legal and Liability Issues

The process of accessing the gas tax fund presented challenges. County Council was required to develop and pass a precisely worded bylaw to enter into an agreement with the province. While the provincial funds were helpful, the program favours more densely populated areas and more established programs. It is not designed for programs that involve long drives through sparsely populated areas.

Ride Norfolk conforms to the transportation segment of the Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act (AODA, 2005), and conformity to the Act is regularly scrutinized. The bus is accessible, and the necessary policies have been introduced. For example, the driver makes sure that a person using a walker stores it in a safe way while riding the bus.

D. Current Operations

Routes and Schedules

Ride Norfolk has stood by the original decision to provide a fixed route service, for which the hub-and-spoke configuration of the towns in Norfolk, connected by pre-existing transportation corridors, is particularly suited.

The routes have stayed constant since the start of the service, but some of the stops and the frequency of trips have been altered to align with service demand. The main change from the initial schedule is that, rather than travelling directly between communities, the bus now travels on a loop in each of the main towns before moving on to another town. There is an in-town loop offered in Simcoe seven times per day. There are five out-of-town routes with a different route being offered daily. Each of the urban centers receives service on one to two days per week. The routes and schedule may be viewed at www.ridenorfolk.ca.

Ridership

The decision to use a fixed route rather than an on-demand service was also based on a strong preference by community agencies for an inclusive service that would be used by the general public as well as individuals with disabilities. There is no application form or means test



required; anyone with two dollars can get on the bus. Community agencies supported this decision as it provides privacy, autonomy, independence and socialization for their clients.

Ridership on the bus averages between 25 and 30 on a typical day, with a range from 10 to 40. The bus is more popular in the summer than in the winter. The least number of riders for both 2012 and 2013 was counted in the month of January. Many of the riders are first-time riders; the service is still growing as more and more people learn about it. Some people use it to get to work on a regular basis; others use it for medical appointments, shopping, leisure activities and visiting friends and family. It is used mostly by people who do not own a car or do not drive. Many seniors use it, but other frequent rider groups include single mothers, students and persons with limited mobility. The bus is more popular in the summer than in the winter. The least number of riders for both 2012 and 2013 was counted in the month of January.

Operating Costs and Revenues

Bus fare for Ride Norfolk is \$2.00 for an in-town ride and \$6.00 when travelling between towns. This provides only a small portion of the funds required to operate the service. In its first year of operation, the cost to the municipality was \$334,941, but by 2013 it was reduced by 64% to \$95,000. This reduction was due to offsets from the provincial gas tax fund and a change in carriers that resulted in significant savings. In 2013, the offsets by the gas tax amounted to \$45,000, and ridership revenues accounted for \$18,000.

Challenges

The main challenge faced both during the development of the bus service and on an on-going basis is the economic

reality of providing an affordable public transportation service in a very low density area. There can be no expectation that the service will come close to self-sufficiency; it must be accepted as a vital public service that warrants public funding. This attitude, however, has not been adopted by all residents in the county. The service has been panned by residents who do not share the RNTC's priorities and have unrealistic expectations for ridership and cost recovery. It is inevitable that in operating a fixed route service there will sometimes be an empty bus on the road, whether on its way for maintenance, coming out of service or on a slow day. However, there are frequent comments made about an empty bus travelling around the county.

Impacts

Economic: Ride Norfolk has had a significant economic impact on county residents. The most obvious is the reduction of the cost of transportation for those that do not have access to a vehicle. A round trip cab ride from Port Rowan to Simcoe can cost \$180. The same trip made on the Ride Norfolk bus costs between \$10 and \$12. Social service agencies that pay for clients' transportation to medical appointments have reported considerable cost savings as a result of the bus. The bus has also contributed to increased employment as it enables workers to get to out-of-town jobs. Also, being able to shop at a grocery store rather than at a convenience store has increased both the economy and quality of many people's food purchases.

Social: The bus has also had a major impact on the social lives of riders. For many, riding the bus provides opportunities for social interaction. The bus routes take into account people's desire to go on social outings, with stops at the farmers' market, the swimming pool in Simcoe, Turkey Point Provincial Park in summer and the Port Dover beaches.

Mental Health: A representative of the Canadian Mental Health Association works with the RNTC, in acknowledgement of the important role public transportation plays in promoting mental health. The value of the increased self-esteem that is generated from being able to move around the community freely is considerable. Mental health staff have expressed to the

Public Transportation Coordinator that the bus is very important to their clients. It enables people to get to more activities and is non-stigmatizing.

Riders also have a strong sense of ownership of the bus, and a certain level of camaraderie has developed among riders. Another important function of the bus is that it serves the nursing home, which allows family members to visit the nursing home residents and enables residents who are able to ride the bus to go out more frequently.

Physical Health: The most obvious impact on health is in the increased ability of people without vehicles to attend medical appointments. For example, one of the nursing home residents needs to be in a wheeled bed for transportation, and he is able to use the Norfolk Ride bus.

Active Transportation: The bus contributes to active transportation in several ways. First, fixed stops require riders to walk to bus stops, increasing the level of activity over that of a door-to-door service. Ride Norfolk also specifically promotes the use of the bus to get to one of the many trails in the county. Second, all of the towns in Norfolk County are connected through trails created from abandoned railway tracks. Those who cannot walk the full distance can take the bus one way and walk back. Finally, it is possible to take a bicycle on the bus if the wheelchair space is not being used. The idea of mounting a bicycle rack on the bus was explored but was not pursued. It could not be the same type as for urban buses due to the distance of the trips and the condition of the roads; a stronger, more expensive type of rack would be required.

Community Support

While there has not been a formal evaluation of the bus service, daily statistics on ridership are tracked and a quarterly report containing ridership and revenue data is submitted to County Council. An attempt to undertake a qualitative evaluation would be hampered by the small sample size, which could skew the results significantly. Despite the lack of a formal evaluation process, Ride Norfolk collects a substantial amount of information about its service. The public is encouraged to provide feedback through the Ride Norfolk website, and a number of polls have been conducted. In addition, the driver has been with

the service since it started and is an invaluable source of information about the needs and interests of the riders. Changes have been made to the service as a result of the feedback from riders, including the aforementioned route changes. In three years of operation, there has been growth in ridership and revenue as the community continues to understand and embrace the service.

In the early days of the bus, it received criticism from some sectors. However, it seems that public opinion is beginning to change. As the costs continue to decrease and more people are using the service, more support is being generated. Now that the bus has been in operation for a few years, residents are seeing its value. However, some still see it as wasteful and unnecessary. Some have also complained that it is taking people out of town to shop in neighbouring towns, to the detriment of the town in which they live. In reality, however, the bus takes people both in and out of town.

F. Future Considerations

The Ride Norfolk Transportation Committee is continuing to work towards the goal for transportation services in Norfolk: “to implement an efficient system that can respond to the transportation needs of all citizens regardless of age, health, ability or socioeconomic status.”

As a result of community polls and other feedback received about transportation services in Norfolk County, it became apparent that the bus was not meeting the needs of all county residents. There are many people that cannot take a public bus and require a specialized, door-to-door, on-demand service. While some agencies provide transportation to their clients, many people were without assistance for their transportation needs.

Four agencies operating in Norfolk have their own vehicles to transport clients. Representatives of these agencies met in January 2014 to discuss the possibility of sharing resources. They realized that on some days two different agencies made the trip to the same area, carrying one passenger each, while, at the same time, the bus was travelling the same route and with no passengers.

They agreed to work together to develop a collaborative, integrated transportation service. The Public Transportation Coordination Office will act as a

dispatch centre to provide information about available transportation services and schedule on-demand services. Their software, which is designed specifically for transportation scheduling, will be used by all the participating agencies to schedule their vehicles. Everyone will be able to see the schedules so that they can coordinate their transportation services. The Public Transportation Coordinator will take calls from other county residents and schedule rides for them as vehicles and drivers are available. Riders will be charged \$0.45/km., which is more affordable than other options such as using a taxi or renting a car. For example, the trip from Port Rowan to Simcoe will cost \$15 instead of \$90, the current cost of cab fare for the same trip.

A three-year grant was received from the Ontario Trillium Foundation to purchase and provide training on the scheduling software as well as funds for marketing the program. Haldimand and Norfolk’s Women’s Services is the agency that is hosting the grant for integrated services. They have three years to create a sustainable service. Participating agencies may be asked to pay a membership fee, or Council may be asked to provide funding for the program if it can be shown that the service is being well-used. Council is supportive of this development as they have been hearing about this gap in service from their constituents.

There have been obstacles to the participation of some agencies in the integrated service. Each agency will have to sign a letter of memorandum to participate in the integrated transportation service. There have also been issues around insurance. For example, one agency was told by their insurance company that they would need to change their policy to cover the operation of public vehicles, which would have been very costly. Others faced restrictions regarding the borders within which they were able to travel, or on providing transportation to non-clients.

There do not appear to be any changes on the horizon at present that will affect Ride Norfolk. It is as stable as it likely ever will be. The budget is always a concern, but as long as there are no drastic changes to the county’s economy, it is likely that there will continue to be sufficient support for the bus to continue to operate.