

COLLTRANS

COLLINGWOOD-WASAGA BEACH AND COLLINGWOOD- BLUE MOUNTAINS TRANSIT LINKS

**ACCELERATING RURAL
TRANSPORTATION SOLUTIONS**



Information for this case study was provided by
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A. Overview of Transportation Initiative

The Collingwood-Wasaga Beach and Collingwood-Blue Mountains Transit Links programs are relatively new initiatives in the South Georgian Bay area. The Collingwood-Wasaga Beach Link was started in August 2011 as a pilot partnership between the municipalities of Collingwood and Wasaga Beach with support from the County of Simcoe.

Since then, it has become an integral component of the public transit systems for both communities operating seven-days-a-week.

The Collingwood-Blue Mountains Link was launched in November of 2013, also as a pilot service between the two municipalities. However, this pilot has been funded through a public private partnership among The Towns of Blue Mountains and Collingwood, as well as Blue Mountain Resorts Limited and the Blue Mountain Village Association.

Both Link programs have had higher than expected ridership figures, with transportation to and from school and work being the primary benefits for the Collingwood-Wasaga Beach route, while the Collingwood-Blue

Mountains service has been largely used for employees getting to work at the Resort and other businesses in the Village.

B. Context

Location

The three communities that are part of this initiative are Collingwood, The Blue Mountains and Wasaga Beach. Together with Clearview Township, they are often referred to regionally as South Georgian Bay.¹

The three communities are situated along the southern most part of Georgian Bay with the Town of Blue Mountains the furthest west, followed by Collingwood and then Wasaga Beach.

Demographics/Density

Collingwood (population 19,241)² is the business centre for the larger region. It is the largest of the four communities by population but the smallest by area.

The Blue Mountains (population 6,453)³ is actually part of Grey County (the other three communities are in Simcoe County). The community has two urban areas, Clarksburg

¹ South Georgian Bay Regional Economic Development Strategic Plan (June 2011)

² 2011 Census Profile for the Town of Collingwood <http://www12.statcan.gc.ca/census-recensement/2011/dp-pd/prof/details/page.cfm?Lang=E&Geo1=CSD&Code1=3543031&Geo2=CD&Code2=3543&Data=Count&SearchText=Collingwood&SearchType=Begins&SearchPR=35&B1=All&Custom=&TABID=1>

³ 2011 Census Profile for the Town of the Blue Mountains <http://www12.statcan.gc.ca/census-recensement/2011/dp-pd/prof/details/page.cfm?Lang=E&Geo1=CSD&Code1=3542045&Geo2=CD&Code2=3542&Data=Count&SearchText=The%20Blue%20Mountain&SearchType=Begins&SearchPR=01&B1=All&Custom=&TABID=1>

and Thornbury plus the Village at Blue Mountain Resort, which was developed as a mixed use (resort/retail/residential) development with fractional ownership properties.

The Town of Wasaga Beach (population 17,537)⁴ is the location of the “longest sandy largest freshwater beach in the world” and is the fastest growing community in the region.

The municipal boundaries of Collingwood and Wasaga Beach are very compact. Clearview and The Blue Mountains, on the other hand, have hundreds of square kilometres of agricultural land within their boundaries.

The region as a whole has experienced more than 10% growth over the last decade, prompted in part by the development of the Intrawest Blue Mountain Ski Resort and the rapid development of condos and new single family housing in Collingwood, The Blue Mountains and Wasaga Beach.

Wasaga Beach in particular has experienced very strong growth, expanding by 21% between 2001 and 2006. It accounted for more than half (53%) of all growth across the four municipalities. The population growth of the entire region at 10.1% exceeded the 6.1% provincial growth rate by a substantial margin.

Economy

The Town of Collingwood is the regional economic hub. According to the South Georgian Bay Regional Economic Development Strategic Plan, approximately 50% of the region’s retail and service sectors are in Collingwood. Additionally, the health, manufacturing, accommodation and food sectors are strong in Collingwood. Of the 20,000 jobs in the region, more than half (54.6%) are in Collingwood.

In the Town of The Blue Mountains, the economy is dominated by the Intrawest Blue Mountain Ski Resort,

which is the largest ski resort in the province. In 1999, Intrawest became a majority owner, taking over from the Weider family. Since then, the resort has undergone several major expansions.

The Town of Wasaga Beach is also dependent on tourism for its economy. With the longest fresh water beach in the world (at 14 kilometres), this natural tourism phenomenon is responsible for attracting hundreds of thousands of visitors each summer.

From an employment perspective, the region’s top six sectors are:

1. Retail (2,470 jobs)
2. Accommodation and food (2,610)
3. Manufacturing (2,190)
4. Health and social services (1,995)
5. Construction (1,115)
6. Agriculture (710)⁵

C. Background

Public transit in Collingwood and Wasaga Beach

The Collingwood Public Transit system, or Colltrans as it is commonly known, began in 1982, beginning with two routes. In 2007, with the aid of the Provincial and Federal Gas Tax monies, three new buses were purchased. The existing routes were also modified and a third route was added thereby increasing service levels. . The system operates seven days per week except on statutory holidays.

The fleet is comprised of three buses that are “fully accessible and can be used for wheelchairs, motorized scooters, pull behind shopping carts, as well as strollers. The buses are all equipped with a passenger side access ramp, which is available for use upon request as well as Q-STRAINT securement. All buses are outfitted

⁴ 2011 Census Profile for the Town of Wasaga Beach <http://www12.statcan.gc.ca/census-recensement/2011/dp-pd/prof/details/page.cfm?Lang=E&Geo1=CSD&Code1=3543064&Geo2=CD&Code2=3543&Data=Count&SearchText=Wasaga%20Beach&SearchType=Begins&SearchPR=35&B1=All&Custom=&TABID=1>

⁵ South Georgian Bay Regional Economic Development Strategic Plan (June 2011)

with bike racks as well which are available for use at no extra charge.”⁶

The Collingwood Public Transit system is also responsible for operating the Accessible Transit Service and the Collingwood Accessible Shuttle. The Town of Collingwood also provides operating funding and two Accessible Vehicles for The Red Cross Accessible Service that operates within Collingwood.

In 2008, Wasaga Beach introduced its public transit system, beginning with two routes. The municipality has since expanded the service to three routes.

Background of Current Initiative

According to Kristofer Wiszniak, Engineering Technician with the Town of Collingwood, talks began in 2009-10 among municipal politicians from the Towns of Blue Mountains, Collingwood, Wasaga Beach the County of Simcoe about the feasibility of creating a transit service that would link the three communities.⁷

At approximately the same time, researchers conducted a number of stakeholder consultations, including six sector-specific focus groups in the South Georgian Bay area. One of the key issues emerging from the focus groups was the lack of a coordinated regional transit service.⁸

Participants in the focus groups identified that a regional transportation system – in this case, a connection between Wasaga Beach and Collingwood – would help with the following:

- Attracting and supporting younger families who might otherwise not consider living in the area
- Providing transportation support for post-secondary programs

- Improving opportunities for young adults to work in other areas within the region, particularly The Blue Mountains
- Improving access to health care facilities, particularly those in Collingwood.⁹

The focus group participants also reported that improved regional cooperation was the key to building a successful regional transit system (among other priorities) and could build upon regional successes like sewage and water treatment; police servicing; the Georgian Trail; and the regional airport, to name a few.¹⁰

Initial Funding

In the summer of 2011, the Towns of Collingwood and Wasaga Beach were presented with an opportunity from the County of Simcoe: \$36,000 was to be made available in pilot seed funding for creating the first transit link between Collingwood and Wasaga Beach.

The funding was designed to accommodate a six-month pilot with the expectation that, if the ridership numbers warranted it, the transit link would continue to be supported by the two municipalities.

Initially, the municipalities rented a bus from the operator that won the bid for the pilot project – Sinton Transportation (the company also responsible for Collingwood’s other transportation services).

The Pilot Project – Collingwood-Wasaga Beach Transit Link

The pilot started on August 12, 2011, with one bus providing service in the morning between 6:00 and 9:30 am and in the afternoon between 3:00 and 7:00 pm, Monday through Saturday.

⁶ From the About Collingwood Public Transit webpage - <http://www.collingwood.ca/Colltrans>, accessed on May 7, 2014.

⁷ Telephone interview, May 8, 2014.

⁸ South Georgian Bay Regional Economic Development Strategic Plan (June 2011).

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid.



Once the pilot started, the project managers began surveying riders to gauge their needs and develop rider profiles. Several key trends emerged:

First, the biggest demand was from high school students commuting to school from Wasaga Beach to Collingwood.

The second greatest need was for people getting to and from work. The initial assumption was that there would be a greater flow of riders from Wasaga Beach to Collingwood for people going to work. However, they found that there was an almost equal flow from Collingwood to Wasaga Beach.

Third, many people began using the service to get to medical appointments in Collingwood, particularly younger mothers who did not have a vehicle, driver's license or family/friends who could drive them.

Initial Challenges

Kris reported the challenges there were when developing the service. First, riders almost immediately wanted an extended service and not just the 'broken' peak service that the pilot could accommodate.¹¹



Second, because of the need to cross two different municipal boundaries, the provincial Ministry of Transportation required a Public Vehicle License; however, because the company operating the bus, Sinton, already held such a license, there were no significant delays.

D. Current Operations – Collingwood to Wasaga Beach

Schedule and Fares

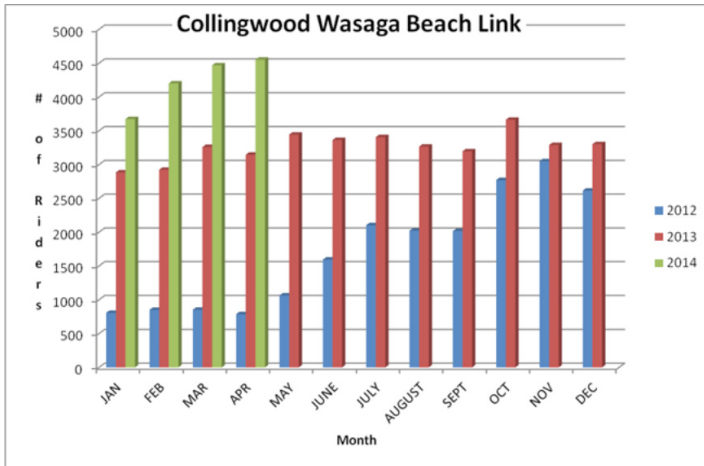
The Collingwood Wasaga Beach Link now runs as a continuous loop from Monday to Saturday between 6:00 am and 7:00 pm. The bus (there is only one bus) leaves/arrives Collingwood on the hour and arrives/leaves Wasaga Beach on the half hour.

A single fare is \$2.00 for all riders (regardless of age). Monthly passes are available for \$40.00. Recently, a "Universal Transit Pass" was created that, for \$120/month, allows unlimited access to the Link, Wasaga Beach Transit and Colltrans.

The service is coordinated out of the Collingwood office.

¹¹ Telephone interview, May 8, 2014.

Ridership



Partnership Structure

Currently, there is a partnership between the towns of Collingwood and Wasaga Beach. Through this partnership, a new bus was purchased to replace the one previously rented from Sinton Transportation. Sinton continues to operate the bus and was recently awarded the bid for a seven-year contract to run all of the Colltrans services.

Revenues

In addition to the individual and monthly fares, the program now benefits from the monthly passes purchased by Ontario Works (Simcoe County). This predictable and significant monthly purchase on the part of the County “offsets the operating costs immensely.”¹²

There are also Provincial Gas Tax dollars that help fund the Transit Link; however, because the majority (70%) of potential funding is population-based and therefore already captured through each municipality’s respective agreements with the Province, the remaining 30%, which is based on ridership numbers, is relatively low.

Collingwood to The Blue Mountains – Pilot Project

A report submitted to The Blue Mountains Council by The Blue Mountain Resorts Limited and Blue Mountain Village Association, states that a link between Collingwood and The Blue Mountains dates back to October of 2007. However, The Blue Mountains was not in a position to pursue the transit link initiative for several more years.¹³

As part of their report, the authors identified a number of potential benefits to the Town of The Blue Mountains, including:

- Support to regional economic development by: addressing the “biggest barrier to working at the Resort as well as the over 40 Blue Mountain Village employers”; assisting Resort employers; expanding regional commerce; connecting affordable housing with employment opportunities; and
- Support to sustainability by: ensuring provincial gas tax funding is received; providing a green transportation solution; providing expansion possibilities within the community.¹⁴

With the financial commitment of The Blue Mountain Resort and the Blue Mountain Village Association, combined with the support of a petition signed by 2000 residents, The Blue Mountains Council voted in favour of a pilot project to start in November of 2013 and conclude in May of 2014.¹⁵

Like the initial Collingwood to Wasaga Beach pilot, the Collingwood Blue Mountains service is broken up, with service in the morning between 7:00 and 10:00 am and in the afternoon between 3:00 and 7:00 pm, Monday to Sunday.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Part of a Staff Report to Committee of the Whole of The Town of Blue Mountains (DOR.14.06; February 3, 2014) by Shawn Everitt, Director of Community Services; accessed at http://www.thebluemountains.ca/public_docs/events/B.6.2%20DOR.14.06%20Update%20re%20Link%20to%20Collingwood%20Transit.pdf on May 24, 2014. The report is dated October 7, 2013.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ibid.

Unlike the initial funding for the Wasaga Beach to Collingwood service, which came from the County of Simcoe, \$40,000 in funding for the Collingwood to Blue Mountains pilot was provided by Intrawest Resort and the Blue Mountain Village Association through a public private partnership with the municipalities.

During the winter months, use of the service was encouraging. From November to February, inclusive, more than 7,000 riders took advantage of the service. As presented in the Staff Report to Collingwood Council on March 31, “ridership numbers are nearly triple what was projected by staff.” However, staff also caution, “although the numbers are much higher, the original budget was based upon a full year of service and factored in the lower ridership season.”¹⁶

The primary reason for its winter success was to transport employees to and from the Resort, which employed 1800 people in the winter, of which it is believed at least half had Collingwood addresses”.¹⁷ A survey of riders conducted in February determined that the majority of riders (58.2%) were from Collingwood, 29.7% from The Blue Mountains and 12% from Wasaga Beach. Additionally, one quarter (24.9%) of the riders said they were using the transit for work. Other reported reasons included a lack of vehicle (18.4%), recreation (11.0%) and shopping (10.8%).

The six-month pilot, which initially ended May 15, 2014, was extended to August. Organizers wanted to see if the ridership numbers from the winter continue throughout the summer months. If the service does appear to be viable, presentations will be made to both municipal councils to solicit support for ongoing funding.¹⁸

As of September 1, 2014, both Municipalities have agreed to extend the service to a permanent service for a five year term. With support from The Blue Mountain Resort and the Blue Mountain Village Association, the Collingwood Blue Mountains Link is expected to gain increased success for the upcoming winter months.

Additionally, officials from the Ministry of Transportation have estimated that the Collingwood Blue Mountains transit link could qualify for approximately \$55,000 in the Population category alone of the Provincial Gas Tax funding.¹⁹



Figure 1 Collingwood Mayor Sandra Cooper (left) and The Blue Mountains Mayor Ellen Anderson launching the Collingwood-Blue Mountains Link, November 19, 2013.

¹⁶ Town of Collingwood Staff Report (Report #PW2014-06, March 31, 2014); Submitted to Mayor and Council by Brian Macdonald; Subject: Collingwood Blue Mountain Transit Review; provided electronically by Kris Wiszniak, May 23, 2014.

¹⁷ Telephone interview with Kris Wiszniak, May 8, 2014.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Town of Collingwood Staff Report (Report #PW2014-06, March 31, 2014).