



INTER-COMMUNITY BUS SERVICE

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Southwestern Ontario was once served by a web of privately-operated bus routes that connected more than 100 large and small communities.

Today, this network has declined to one that largely provides low-cost, no-frills travel between main points along the Highway 401 corridor. Gone are the light-density feeder services that were cross-subsidized by the main routes and which often provided the only public transportation option for many smaller communities.

The reasons for the contraction of Southwestern Ontario's bus service are many. In the opinion of the industry itself, these include a lack of connections to the other modes, competition from publicly-funded carriers such as VIA Rail Canada and GO Transit, and a provincial regulatory system that prevents innovation and increases costs.

At its root, the bus industry's problem is the same one experienced by rail and transit operators: the car. Even though it is highly dependent on public

subsidies, car travel is still perceived by many as inexpensive, convenient and comfortable.

Another factor in the declining appeal of bus travel is the attractiveness of more spacious and comfortable passenger trains for intercity trips of more than 100 km.

However, the bus does have an important role to play in a regional public transportation system. It is well suited for inter-community and rural routes where rail service would exceed the requirements or there are no longer tracks on which to operate.

The usefulness of inter-community bus service as part of a multi-model system is demonstrated by several successful regional public transportation networks in the U.S. As feeders to the core intercity rail passenger services, these bus routes provide a rural version of the "first and last mile" service transit delivers in urban areas. They also provide stand-alone mobility for those who are not travelling onward by train and are only journeying between the communities the buses serve.



Photo courtesy of the Ontario Motor Coach Association

The U.S. inter-community bus services have resulted from partnerships between public agencies and private operators. Low-cost initiatives to launch new or sustain existing bus routes have included direct operating grants, guarantees against operating short falls, low-interest loans or grants for new buses and the provision of publicly-funded intermodal terminals, where passengers may connect with rail and transit services.

The opportunity to test such an approach in Southwestern Ontario may be at hand. The provincial government has said it will provide funding to assist local governments with pilot programs to improve rural and inter-community mobility. Test projects

have previously been launched in a handful of counties throughout the province.

If Southwestern Ontario's public transportation system is to be complete, inter-community bus service is a major – and currently deficient – piece of the puzzle.