

A COMMUNITY VISION FOR TRANSIT IN THE OKANAGAN

Report by the Okanagan
Transit Alliance



Acknowledgements

We extend our gratitude to the participants who shared their insights and experiences to help shape a community vision for better transit in the Okanagan.

Participants included:

- Accessibility Committee of the Okanagan
- Caroline Miller, Policy & Government Relations Advisor, Kelowna Chamber of Commerce
- Davis Kyle, Kelowna Area Cycling Coalition (KACC)
- Lori Goldman, First Things First Okanagan; Seniors for Climate South Okanagan; Council of Canadians South Okanagan Chapter
- Don Gayton, Penticton Community Member
- Gabby Urban, Communications & Strategic Project Coordinator, Okanagan College Students' Union (OCSU)
- Jamie Johnstone, Salvation Army
- Jacquie Bushell, Pandosy Neighbourhood Association
- Nathan Hind, Member at Large, Central Okanagan Parent Advisory Council
- Olivia Lai, Vice President External, UBC Students' Union Okanagan
- Paul Clark, Kelowna Neighbourhood Association
- Paula Quinn, Downtown Kelowna BIA
- Robyn Bunn, RAMA Okanagan
- Students' Union Okanagan of UBC

Methodology

This report is based on conversations with fourteen community members representing organizations across the Okanagan, working on areas including business development, tourism, education, poverty reduction, workers rights, accessibility, active transportation, climate change, and neighbourhood associations.

The Okanagan Transit Alliance hosted four one-hour long virtual focus groups. Participants were asked the following questions:

1. Tell us one way transit affects the people you serve.
2. What is working well and not working well with public transit in the Okanagan?
3. Thinking about the people you work with and serve, how would our communities be affected if transit was improved?
4. If you could make one change to transit in the Okanagan tomorrow, what would it be?

The results have been summarized into three report sections, followed by a conclusion.

A Community Vision for Better Transit in the Okanagan

What we asked: Thinking about the people you work with and serve, how would our communities be affected if transit was improved?

In the Okanagan of the future, public transit is the backbone of how people move, connect, and thrive. From Osoyoos to Salmon Arm, buses arrive frequently and reliably, creating a seamless connection between communities large and small. Students travel easily between classes; tourists and shoppers are able to explore the whole region and visit new areas without worrying about parking; seniors head out confidently to meet friends and attend doctors appointments; workers commute safely and affordably to jobs in every corner of the valley.

In this co-created vision for the future, buses are electric and quiet, moving smoothly along dedicated lanes that keep them on time even during busy hours. Bus stops are well lit, accessible, and close to where people live and work. Smaller shuttles serve neighbourhoods, connecting to central hubs where larger routes run. The website and app are intuitive and responsive, helping riders plan trips in seconds. Fare-free transit for those who need it most, including youth and seniors, has inspired new generations of riders and brought independence to those who need it most.

Participants were able to envision a future where better transit has done more than move people - it's strengthened the community. Fewer cars fill the roads, cleaner air fills the clear skies, and people meet each other in ways that once felt out of reach. In this Okanagan, taking the bus isn't a compromise; it's a choice everyone can be proud of.

What's Working (and What's Not)

What we asked: Tell us one way transit affects the people you serve.

What we asked: What is working well and not working well with public transit in the Okanagan?

Through these discussions across community organizations, student groups, businesses, and advocacy networks, participants shared a nuanced picture of public transit across the Okanagan. Their reflections highlight both an appreciation for what is working well, and frustration with the barriers that prevent people from using it more often. From accessibility and affordability to technology and safety, the following themes capture the lived realities of those who depend on transit every day, as well as those who want to see it become a more reliable, equitable, and sustainable choice for everyone in the valley.

Accessibility and Coverage

Transit coverage is strong in many areas, especially near schools and core routes. Riders appreciate features like bike racks and free fares for youth in Penticton. However, accessibility remains uneven. HandyDART's application process is difficult, stops are sometimes inaccessible, and first-and-last-mile connections can be too far - especially for people with mobility issues.

Frequency and Reliability

Participants shared that infrequent buses, limited hours, and unpredictable schedules are major challenges. Students and workers often miss transfers due to poor route coordination. Evening and weekend service is limited, and some routes stop running entirely after early evening. Riders want to see buses every 15 minutes or less on key corridors.

Affordability

Fares are seen as fair by some, but still a barrier for many, especially students and low-income residents. Several participants strongly support free transit for youth, seniors, and those with low incomes, viewing it as both a climate and equity solution.

Safety and Comfort

While most riders feel safe, perceptions of safety and comfort vary. Some are deterred by negative stereotypes or unreliable service. Lighting, stop design, and consistent driver training were identified as key areas to improve confidence and comfort across the system.

Technology and Information

The BC Transit website and app are a shared frustration. Riders want real-time information that works, easy trip planning, and reliable updates. As one participant noted, 'it should be as simple as standing at a stop and seeing when the next bus is coming.'

Regional Connectivity

Participants emphasized the need for better regional transit connecting Osoyoos, Penticton, Kelowna, Vernon, and Salmon Arm. Highway 97 offers a natural corridor, but current intercity routes are limited, infrequent, and slow. Intercity routes could unlock access to education, jobs, and services across the valley.

Community and Inclusion

Transit isn't just transportation - it's social infrastructure. Improved service would help seniors stay active, students reach school and work, and newcomers and migrant workers participate more fully in community life. Reliable transit means opportunity, inclusion, and connection.

Key Opportunities for a Better Transit Future

What we asked: If you could make one change to transit in the Okanagan tomorrow, what would it be?

The ideas shared through the focus group reveal a clear and united vision: Okanagan residents want a transit system that works for everyone. The participants represent and work with business owners, students, seniors, people with disabilities, workers, families, and visitors, and see opportunities for improving transit for all groups. Participants emphasized that better transit is not only about convenience, but also about affordability, equity, and environmental responsibility. The following four opportunities translate these community insights into tangible, policy-oriented actions that can strengthen ridership, reduce emissions, and create a more connected region. Each represents a meaningful step toward a transit system that reflects the Okanagan's values and future aspirations.

1. Fare-Free Transit for Youth and Seniors: Build ridership habits to encourage transit riders for life

Expanding fare-free transit for youth and seniors across the Okanagan would build lifelong habits around public transportation. It would provide an independent travel alternative for youth and seniors alike, who are amongst the most likely to [experience poverty in Canada](#). The cost for the school bus for one student is \$525 per year. Free transit could provide a cost-saving alternative to support families and seniors while also building new ridership habits for youth. [Penticton](#) currently has a fare-free program for youth under 25, with several other [examples across Canada](#).

2. Improve Usability of the Website and App: Low cost, big impact

Investing in a modern, accessible digital platform is one of the most cost-effective ways to increase ridership. A redesigned app should make it easy for riders to access real-time information, route planning, accessibility features, and multi-language support. Better digital tools build trust, reduce confusion, and improve the rider experience. [Mu Transit](#) has created a free, local-based third party platform to bring accessible digital information to Kelowna bus stops - a free solution which City Councils across the Okanagan could support and encourage.



3. Intercity Bus Routes Connecting Key Hubs: Building community, supporting tourism, and increasing access to work and school

Connecting the airport, post-secondary institutions, hospitals, and downtowns through frequent intercity routes would strengthen the region's economic and social fabric. Coordinating these routes through a unified regional planning framework could enable seamless travel for residents and visitors alike.

4. Increasing Service with a New Transit Yard: A key step towards the future

A new transit yard is essential for fleet expansion and increased frequency. This investment would enable earlier starts, later service, and improved coverage throughout the region. Locating the yard strategically will reduce deadhead travel time and operational costs, maximizing the efficiency of the system.



Conclusion

The conversations that informed this report make one thing clear: people in the Okanagan care deeply about building a transit system that keeps pace with the region's growth and reflects its community spirit. Transit is more than a way to get from one place to another. Public transit can be the foundation for inclusion, sustainability, and local prosperity. By investing in service expansion, accessibility, and affordability, the region can make transit a central part of daily life for more residents. With political will and continued collaboration across sectors, the Okanagan can move confidently toward a future where public transit connects people, strengthens communities, and drives the region forward together.