



**FINAL REPORT**  
**APTA Study Mission to Canada**  
**Developing a Pandemic-Resilient**  
**Transit Recovery Strategy**

**April 20-22, 2021**



*AMERICAN PUBLIC TRANSPORTATION ASSOCIATION*



## FINAL SUMMARY REPORT

Canada's transit agencies anticipate maintaining full service in their communities during the remainder of the pandemic and recovery. Throughout the pandemic, the Canadian Federal Government has reaffirmed its strong support for public transit through providing operating funding support and committing to investing in US \$11.7 Billion in transit capital projects across Canada over the next eight years.

How are agencies in Canada embracing innovation and developing best practices to recover from, adapt to and build resilience to pandemic-related trends in travel?

To answer this question, APTA organized a virtual study mission to Canada, in collaboration with the Canadian Urban Transit Association (CUTA) that examined the future of transit through the lens of recovery.

Over three days, participants visited with agencies across Canada, from Montreal, Toronto, Niagara and Belleville to Ottawa, Calgary, Winnipeg and Vancouver and held a special session with Transport for London in the UK.

Discussions focused on new revenue and financing opportunities, robust infrastructure investment plans, how agencies are preparing for a return of greater ridership, what alternative service delivery models are being piloted and how new technologies are being incorporated to create a mobility evolution.

Overall, study mission participants demonstrated that there is a tremendous drive within the industry to reinvent itself. Agencies across North America are thinking about how we can provide riders with an even better mobility experience as they return to, or continue to use, our service. The industry is preparing to do so not only from an enhanced customer experience perspective, but also with a view to increasing equity in our communities as well as environmental sustainability.

The following are general insights and examples of actions planned or taken by the participants across Canada as well as special guest, Transport for London.

## General Insights

- There is a recognition that many have created new travel habits, especially individual car use, and it will take increased efforts to attract them back to transit, including more on-demand choices. If transit is not easy to use and frequent, we may lose a whole generation of young riders.
  - Metrolinx, the Greater Toronto Metro Area Transit provider, remarked that there is a need to ensure its products and programs are as attractive as possible in new, fresh ways. This is bringing a greater focus on transit access and not only focusing on “first and last mile” but on “first and last feet and inches.”
  - Reviewing not only *what* an agency is good at and but what it *needs* to be good at is key from the perspective of the Toronto Transit Commission.
  
- Agencies are looking to diminish their reliance on the fare-box as a key funding source and diversify revenue sources with the adage: “access brings value.”
  - Translink views this as an opportunity to rethink their funding model and invest in community development, not just economic development, with a balanced focus on equity and climate resiliency. They are exploring how to capture additional value created by transportation infrastructure investments, such as increased property values, development potential, economic activity and productivity.
  
- Agencies are looking to new standards of service design and equity index scores beyond traditional metrics of service success.
  
- Agencies are digging deep into their data on travel patterns to closely watch how peaks are shifting and flattening and new destination patterns are taking hold. They are also aware they need to build service plans that can be quickly adapted to respond to ridership changes. There is a focus on analytical and fact-based implementation of service changes.
  
- The pandemic forced agencies to innovate, take risks and be creative to maintain a high standard of service. They plan to continue cultivating a culture of innovation.
  - Calgary Transit’s corporate goal is to “evolve our culture to be more future focused, tech savvy, and innovative” with a focus on technology integration, a more collaborative relationship with the customer and real-time data analytics and, in the long-term, implementing Mobility-as-a-Service (MaaS) as a way to respond to changing ridership patterns.

## **Service enhancements being implemented include:**

- New and revised routes with more frequency where needed the most for essential travel, especially for the most vulnerable communities, and the creation of “demand-responsive service plans” and more on-demand in low-density areas
  - The Toronto Transit Commission (TTC), is focusing on more off-peak and “out of downtown” services.
  - Montreal is adapting its financial plan to place a greater focus on enhancing local transit service rather than commuter service.
  - York Region, Ontario has seen a greater focus on local-to-local travel.
  - The Niagara Region is piloting on-demand service as a way to expand coverage and connectivity for customers.
  - At the start of the pandemic, Belleville Transit, determined that the best way to continue providing adequate service for essential trips and workers was to eliminate its fixed routes and create a full-day on-demand service. As riders returned, they were able to see where fixed routes made the most sense and eventually moved to reinstate fixed route service for daytimes and maintain on-demand evening service.
  - The City of Ottawa has invested in electric scooters, an autonomous vehicle pilot and paratransit online booking.
- Simplified route structures and better integration of regional and local service — making travel as simple and intuitive for riders as possible and ensuring they are not besieged with information overload — was a key theme. For riders to return and feel confident, agencies must eliminate the things that make transit complicated.
  - Transport for London is looking at providing better information on journey times and travel disruptions, a more targeted use of station staff.
- Simplified regional fare systems, more equitable fare structures, allowing for more payment options and more digital tools — making it as easy as possible to pay fares
  - Winnipeg Transit is focused on eliminating the barriers to using technology to pay for transit (e.g. smart phones, credit cards) as well as other systemic barriers to ensure the entire community can make use of the transit system.
  - OC Transpo is piloting a fare system with their new fare gates on the O-Train Light Rail System that accepts all forms of payment and technology with a “Smart Payment” option that enables customers to pay the way they prefer.
  - According to Transport for London, pricing will be more important than ever before for the customer.
- The introduction of new flexible work passes to reflect that many may not commute 5 days a week anymore

- Partnering with city/regional governments and local community stakeholders to accelerate bus priority lanes, the use of more flexible service models and to take a more holistic approach to the entire mobility eco-system including active modes such as walking and cycling.
  - The Niagara Region is collaborating with food banks, employment centers, long-term care facilities, community centers and high schools on its on-demand program and looking to local business partnerships and festival and event promotional opportunities.

**Other measures to welcome riders back include:**

- Phased implementation of “welcome back” campaigns, including slogans and theme songs starting with “where is my fare card” to an emphasis on the convenience and affordability of transit as well as a continued emphasis on enhanced ventilation, cleaning and disinfecting and moving to more of a celebratory tone
  - Transport for London is focusing on slogans such as “we are ready when you are” and “rediscover what you missed.”
- Partnerships with other local entities
  - TTC is working with the Toronto Region Board of Trade and local developers to get office workers back downtown and using transit.
- Real-time bus occupancy info/crowding heat maps
- A new need to authentically engage with the community to understand what they are looking for, not just extract information based on survey data and focus groups
  - TTC hired local youth leaders to talk to youth in underserved communities.
- With an anticipated diminished focus on commuter trips, looking at a greater focus on leisure and school trip purposes
  - Surveys in the Toronto Region show 45% have the intention of taking more discretionary trips. In that context, Metrolinx, the Greater Toronto Metro Area Transit provider, is looking to create “transit packages” around recreation destinations and events. They also see themselves as having an important role to play in “special events” travel and will be looking to partner with event organizers. They are also using behavioral science to normalize transit usage and make it a “social affair” with a view to the fact that post-pandemic people are excited to travel together again and that it means transit travel can become an experience in itself.

- Putting in place new travel rewards and incentives and other proactive initiatives and amenities that draw people to transit
  - TransLink in Vancouver is exploring putting in place a ridership loyalty program this Fall.

## **Conclusion**

In the longer-term, many transit agencies are seeing the recovery from the pandemic as an opportunity to rethink their role beyond traditional mobility service provision. Notably, agencies are trying to become a more active player in economic development and, beyond that, community development, land-use planning with affordable housing, climate resiliency and carbon emissions reductions.

Transit agencies recognize that they must be proactive in defining and executing their mission, in building up markets through partnerships and new programs, and in supporting and being a steward of their communities.

As agencies “build back better,” there is much to be hopeful for.