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Chair: Mr. Peter Schiefke



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Thursday, February 16, 2023

• (1110)

[*Translation*]

**The Chair (Mr. Peter Schiefke (Vaudreuil—Soulanges, Lib.)):** I call the meeting to order.

Welcome to meeting number 55 of the House of Commons Standing Committee on Transport, Infrastructure and Communities.

Pursuant to Standing Order 108(2) and the motion adopted by the committee on Thursday, February 3, 2022, the committee is resuming its study of intercity transport by bus in Canada.

Today's meeting is taking place in a hybrid format, pursuant to the House order of Thursday, June 23, 2022. Members are attending in person in the room and remotely using the Zoom application

[*English*]

Colleagues, I wish to inform you that all the witnesses have been tested for today's meeting and have passed the sound test with the exception, unfortunately, of Ms. Adele Perry. We're hoping to get that worked out before we turn it over to her for her opening remarks.

Appearing before us as an individual, we have Dr. Sarah-Patricia Breen, regional innovation chair in rural economic development, Selkirk College, by video conference. Welcome.

We have, as an individual, Ms. Adele Perry, distinguished professor of history and women's and gender studies, by video conference. Welcome to you as well.

We have, as an individual, Dr. Josipa Petronic, president and chief executive officer of the Canadian Urban Transit Research and Innovation Consortium, by video conference. Welcome to you as well.

We will begin today by turning to Dr. Breen for her opening remarks.

The floor is yours. You have five minutes.

**Dr. Sarah-Patricia Breen (Regional Innovation Chair, Rural Economic Development, Selkirk College, As an Individual):** Thank you and good morning.

I really appreciate the opportunity to speak today. I'm honoured to join you from the traditional territories of Sinixt, Syilx, Ktunaxa and Secwépemc peoples.

I'm hoping to summarize some of the key rural considerations for the committee.

When we talk about rural transit, we often focus on prominent examples like the loss of Greyhound Canada, but what's important to note is that this type of example isn't necessarily representative of the range of services that exist. Transportation between communities includes both long and short trips, those that are occasional and those that are regular. I want to pay particular attention to the need for intercommunity transit that serves these shorter regular trips.

As we know, it's a mistake to assume that people living in rural areas have access to personal vehicles. It's equally a mistake to assume that these regular shorter trips happen in the same community. It's much more common for people today to have the services they regularly use, their places of employment and their homes all in different communities. This highlights a need, particularly in those communities where there's a shortage of affordable housing and workforce shortages. The people needed to fill these workforce shortages end up living in outlying areas or neighbouring communities. The lack of intercommunity transit can really impact the ability of people to go to school, to see a doctor or to hold a job. This situation disproportionately impacts certain parts of our society, including youth, seniors, indigenous peoples and newcomers.

I want to offer a few highlights about what my research tells us about rural transit in Canada today.

We often treat rural as if it's a single homogenous group for which rural solutions or strategies are discussed very generally and do not recognize differences across different types of rural places. We found several barriers to sustainable rural transit between communities, and those included general challenges like the cost of operation, and very place-specific challenges like local travel patterns or economic structure. When we looked at related funding and support programs, we identified two substantial barriers: the lack of rural-specific funding and the lack of funding for operational costs.

It is important to note that the current state of knowledge around transit and rural places is very geographically uneven. What we know is dominated by the experiences of larger urban-adjacent communities, particularly those in southern Ontario, southern Quebec and British Columbia. Through our work, we identified over 100 examples of rural transit systems, most of which were actually intercommunity services. This highlights both a need and the growing number of available solutions, not just fixed-route bus systems but also more innovative approaches like on-demand services.

I want to spend my remaining time on three key considerations for the committee.

The first is that there is a need for us to address knowledge gaps, particularly when it comes to under-represented communities and regions. These knowledge gaps limit our ability to make evidence-based decisions. The federal government should continue to support efforts to address these gaps, not only through academic research but also through funding communities and regions to assess their needs and evaluate potential solutions. In the interim, we should be conscious of gaps and biases in the information we have.

The second consideration is that differences across places, particularly in rural, mean that there is no single solution. There is a key need to include rural considerations in the development of policy, programs and solutions so that we avoid unintentionally leaving out or otherwise negatively impacting rural places. The recent federal rural transit solutions fund is a great example of a rural-specific program.

Solutions for intercommunity transportation need to be flexible. While those solutions could look different across the country, there is a need for connection and collaboration between them. The federal government has an important role to play in ensuring continuity across Canada.

Last, I'll leave you with the fact that we really need to acknowledge and account for the differences between where the benefits of transit accrue versus where the costs are borne. We know that transit services have a range of social, environmental and economic benefits. A fundamental challenge is that where those challenges accrue is dispersed among individuals, businesses, communities and society, whereas the costs are all borne by the service provider. This situation is exacerbated in rural areas because of long distances and small populations.

• (1115)

The federal government has an important role to play in addressing this challenge not only by, say, publicly funding a transit system but also by deeming what is eligible for funding. The federal rural transit solutions fund I mentioned could be greatly improved if it allowed for operational funding.

I think I'm probably pushing five minutes, so I will leave it there. Thank you very much.

**The Chair:** Thank you very much, Dr. Breen.

Next we have Dr. Petronic.

The floor is yours. You have five minutes.

**Dr. Josipa Petronic (President and Chief Executive Officer, Canadian Urban Transit Research and Innovation Consortium):** Thank you very much to the committee. I appreciate the opportunity to be here.

To start with, I'd like to recognize the missing and murdered indigenous women that CUTRIC recognizes as part of its innovation strategy nationally. That is especially important here as we talk about access. I'm going to come back to that, as well as the Highway of Tears and the pilot experimentation occurring in British Columbia.

The general message and what I'm going to share here today is that public transit and inter-regional transit can't solve all problems, but they can solve a lot of them. They've been under-leveraged historically in Canada.

So far, in the context of today's discussion, the federal government has made great moves with the zero emission transit fund and the rural transit fund. These are great starts and critical, but it is the promise of permanent transit funding in the future that we're looking towards. Beyond that, however, to ensure those dollars are best spent and future-proofed, there are at least four areas we need to consider: pandemic recovery; recent safety issues and transit immobility; inter-regional coaching and bus connections with the rail network; and decarbonization of the entire system. I'm going to spend my next four minutes talking about those four points.

The first is pandemic recovery. Just to set the scene, I'm sure a lot of folks are wondering what the state of ridership is across the country. As we all know, during the pandemic ridership dropped off about 80%, 90% or 100% in some communities. It was catastrophic. The good news is that ridership is right back up; it's trending upwards. In some cities, such as Brampton, Charlottetown and Cornwall, there are prepandemic levels of ridership, which is both good and bad. The good is that ridership is coming back; the bad is there's crush capacity in those urban centres. That means the bus is passing you by because there's no room for you on the bus. That just points to the fact that transit was underfunded to start with across the country prior to the pandemic, and we're coming back to that scenario.

As for other locations, TransLink is back up to 80% in Vancouver, and Calgary Transit and a few others are still down around 60%, although this is in line with global experiences. We have cities like Vienna back at 100% and cities like Sydney at 60%, so the trend line is upward. That doesn't take away from the fact that nurses, teachers, public sector employees and especially frontline workers on minimum wage have no other option. It's their critical economic pipeline to get to their income-generating opportunity.

The first point to raise here is that, as part of pandemic recovery, ridership is coming back. It will go through the roof, especially as we start opening the doors, as we must, to hundreds of thousands of immigrants. They will need a means of getting around, but that system of getting around across our cities in Canada has historically been underfunded and insufficient. Now layer on top of that the fact that heading into the pandemic, almost no transit system in this country—urban, inter-regional or rural—was prepared to deal with the issues of viral load, ventilation or having materials on board that could reduce unsafe conditions.

The first recommendation we'd put forward to this committee is to consider the fact that transit needs to be a place of innovation. Although we have funding programs now for capital, there absolutely has to be a transit innovation supercluster-style strategic innovation fund focus. We have typically thought about transit immobility as the place that Infrastructure Canada and ministries of transportation have gone to when giving out capital, but in reality we need to really leverage the tools of ISED, the Ministry of Innovation, Science and Economic Development, for our postpandemic return to safe transit. Zoonotic illnesses are clearly here to stay. Whether there's a pandemic or an epidemic, transit cannot be brought back to a grinding halt. At CUTRIC we know there are potentially dozens of studies across the country that could help to make for safer systems, both at the station and on board the bus, in terms of preparedness for the future.

The second issue I'd like to raise has just come up and is top of mind for a lot of people. It's a recent safety issue beyond viral load and pandemic anxiety: the issue of physical safety of people on public transit. Whether, again, that's urban, inter-regional or rural, the spate of violence we've all heard about in the news does take over our thoughts about returning to transit and exacerbates the reluctance to return to riding public mobility systems.

We in the research world know very well that almost nothing in life is random, so although we want to say these are random attacks occurring, almost nothing in life is random. If you've done a course in statistics, you know that. In the words of the head of the TTC, Rick Leary, we really need better data analytics to start to identify why and where a lot of physical attacks are occurring.

It is true that transit alone cannot solve the social ills of society—housing is an issue and mental health is an issue—but it is also true that transit is a space where innovation can be implemented tomorrow to create greater levels of safety for Canadian riders in order to encourage people to return to transit in the way we need: in the interests of climate action and addressing congestion, and for all the reasons that public mobility helps people live a better life.

● (1120)

Some of those innovations already exist in our universities and pilots around the world, and we can start to implement them in Canada. They include everything from the basics, such as safety buttons, loud and piercing noise machines and signage around advertising for mental health supports throughout stations, to artificial intelligence, which is not that complicated. It can track in real time the geographic and demographic patterns of an unease attack or feelings of unease on the system. Big data analytics can demonstrate patterns in seemingly randomized attacks. There is CCTV,

musical interventions at stations, the classical musical effect to disperse crowding and of course on-track glass panelling for subways.

These are all things that exist in transit systems and mobility systems around the world. We have cities like Mexico City that are trying to figure out how to help women be safe because they know when they get on transit, there's a good chance of being raped. We are not operating on our own as Canadian mobility. It's not as though we're starting from scratch.

The second recommendation we'd make to this committee—which goes back to the first issue—is to invest in something like a supercluster or a strategic innovation fund stream focused on innovation in transit and mobility across Canada, both for postpandemic recovery and for safety innovation. Technological and social—

**The Chair:** Unfortunately, Dr. Petrunic, I have to ask you to wrap it up. Could you conclude in 15 seconds, please?

**Dr. Josipa Petrunic:** Absolutely.

Those are the first two recommendations. The third recommendation around inter-regional coaching and bus systems is to focus on investing in a national strategy that will ensure Via Rail coach systems, in provinces and public transit systems that back onto that skeleton, optimize and integrate with each other, which doesn't exist today for point-to-point mobility.

Those are the three recommendations we'd put forward to the committee to consider today.

**The Chair:** Thank you very much, Dr. Petrunic.

Next we have Ms. Perry.

Ms. Perry, the floor is yours. You have five minutes.

● (1125)

**Dr. Adele Perry (Distinguished Professor, History and Women's and Gender Studies, As an Individual):** Thank you for this opportunity to speak to you today. I have had some issues with being heard, but it sounds as though you can hear me.

I'm grateful to have this opportunity to speak to you from the traditional territories of the Anishinabe, the Ininew and the Métis people governed by the promises of Treaty 1.

It's fair to say that this territory, where I've lived as a settler for a little over two decades, is currently in a crisis of accessible, meaningful and appropriate long-distance or intercity public transit. In many respects, it has not always been this way. Manitoba did not develop the provincial system of bus transit that our provincial neighbours to the west did, but Manitoba did develop a network of overlapping bus and rail transportation that connected people to different communities and to leisure options. The shift toward auto-mobility that occurred throughout the continent made its mark here too, and many of the smaller bus lines and passenger train routes closed in the 1970s, 1980s and 1990s.

However, the near collapse of intercity bus transit that occurred in Manitoba in the 2010s is particular. Of course, Greyhound withdrew from its western Canadian routes in 2018. In the same year, though, Jefferson Lines cancelled its bus running between Winnipeg and North Dakota. A year later, the third company to try running a Winnipeg-Selkirk bus route ceased operation. Five years later, it is clear that the mixture of market subsidies and programs that are currently available is not sufficient to maintain reliable fixed-service bus routes within the province. There is a shifting patchwork of operators covering some routes at some times. Only two offer daily service: a van shuttle running between Brandon and Winnipeg's airport, and NCN Thompson Bus Lines, owned by Nisichawayasihk Cree Nation, covering the Winnipeg-Thompson route.

You can take Maple Bus Lines from Winnipeg to Thompson five days a week, Mahihkan from Winnipeg to Flin Flon five days a week and Ontario Northland eastward six days a week. There is only one bus currently travelling from Winnipeg to Regina, which leaves weekly at 11 p.m. on Saturdays. A few weeks ago, you could book a trip to Vancouver, though it would take three transfers, cost \$419 and take about 37 hours. When I checked last night, that route was no longer available.

The highly limited and confusing possibilities of intercity bus travel in Manitoba affect some communities and people more than others. As previous speakers here have said, we have too little data on who exactly depends on the bus in the age of automobility and air travel. We know that women have greater reliance on public transit in urban centres. The reduction in intercity transit options has particular implications for indigenous women and girls and two-spirit people, a point that was made very powerfully in the wake of Greyhound's shuttering. The Native Women's Association of Canada explained that it was "deeply concerned for the safety of Indigenous women, girls and gender-diverse people". Policy analyst Emily Riddle argued that indigenous women "deserve to travel our homelands free from violence, and while transportation is only a small component of the changes needed for that to happen, it is an important one."

"Reclaiming Power and Place: the Final Report of the National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls", which was completed in 2019, offered an important analysis of public intercity and urban transit, one that I think deserves more attention than it has received. Chapter 7 explains, "A lack of safe and affordable transportation can mean that people may be forced to rely on other methods, such as walking or hitchhiking, not only to escape dangerous situations but simply to travel for education or em-

ployment." In this way, "Inadequate infrastructure and transportation, or transportation that itself becomes a site for violence, punish Indigenous women trying to 'make a better life'".

Two of the calls for justice in the national inquiry's final report directly concern transportation. In particular, 4.8 says:

We call upon all governments to ensure that adequate plans and funding are put into place for safe and affordable transit and transportation services and infrastructure for Indigenous women, girls, and 2SLGBTQIA people living in remote or rural communities. Transportation should be sufficient and readily available to Indigenous communities, and in towns and cities located in all of the provinces and territories in Canada.

Effective transit policy of the kind that this committee is considering must consider at its core the needs and lived experiences of its users, who are not undifferentiated black boxes of human beings, but people whose lives are shaped by gender, by indigeneity, by race and by socio-economic class.

• (1130)

At a moment when Canada is again being forced to reckon with the ongoing crisis of missing and murdered indigenous women and girls and two-spirit plus people, I urge the committee to consider the impact that the real crisis in intercity bus transit in the prairie provinces—and more particularly Manitoba—may have played in this, and how better transit policy that puts its users at the centre might make meaningful change.

Thank you.

**The Chair:** Thank you very much, Professor Perry.

We have a situation, Professor Perry, where we unfortunately will not be able to hear your testimony today with regard to questions and answers. The sound quality is inadequate to ensure the safety of our interpreters.

If it's okay, Professor Perry, I'll ask members to submit questions to the clerk, which will be passed along to you by email. We would very much welcome your responses by email as well. We apologize for the inconvenience. We would have very much liked to hear from you today in answer to our questions.

That will leave Dr. Breen and Dr. Petrunic for testimony. We are hoping to get Mr. Joel McKay from the Northern Development Initiative Trust, who is trying to log on but is having difficulties. I guess it's going around.

We will begin the lines of questioning today with Mr. Muys.

Mr. Muys, the floor is yours. You have six minutes.

**Mr. Dan Muys (Flamborough—Glanbrook, CPC):** Thank you, Chair, and thank you to the witnesses, including Ms. Perry, who we won't have for the question period.

Thank you for your testimony at the outset, Ms. Perry.

The focus of this study is intercity buses, of course, and I'm thinking back to my university days, only a couple of years ago.

**Voices:** Oh, oh!

**Mr. Dan Muys:** A great bus line that I used operated from Hamilton to Kitchener-Waterloo. It followed Highway 8 along all the rural communities in my constituency, from Greensville to Peters Corners, where I usually caught it. If I missed that, I'd get it in Rockton or Sheffield. It went on into Cambridge, Kitchener and Waterloo, and it was very popular. It ran a few times a day because it was often full. It was profitable, and it connected all of those communities.

Dr. Breen, you talked about this in your testimony. Given your expertise, is it possible to quantify—even if it's a range—the number of these types of intercity routes that might exist in Canada?

**Dr. Sarah-Patricia Breen:** I'll try to answer that as best I can.

It's a hard thing to quantify because of what Professor Perry mentioned: There's a lot of instability in the existing transit systems, particularly those smaller ones. They pop up and they disappear, particularly in rural areas. They lack profitability, so we see the start-ups and the disappearances. As I mentioned, we looked for, found and mapped over 100 examples of rural transit systems, including intercommunity transit systems, and what we found shows there are really distinct patterns.

In southern Ontario, in your riding, we see a larger number of these systems, and that's in large part because of what I would call the urban-adjacent more commuter-type economy. Through the collaboration, if you will, of many communities, you get economies of scale that you might not have in other rural places, so we tend to see more longer-term successful systems.

In B.C., there's a large number of rural regional systems, owing in large part to B.C. Transit. We don't see that prominence in other parts of the country. In the Prairies, we largely see a vacuum. There isn't anything, in part because of the absence of the Saskatchewan Transportation Company, which was shuttered. Or we see clusters like those in the Atlantic provinces that are volunteer driven. They obviously took a huge hit during COVID, with volunteers fearing for their safety.

I apologize for not being able to provide a specific figure, but what I will say is that there's a large number of them. They ebb and flow, but the stability we see in southern Ontario and British Columbia is due to, one, population, and two, this stable B.C. Transit system that we have in British Columbia.

**Mr. Dan Muys:** Thank you. I appreciate that, because obviously this is a model we would want to replicate.

We heard in November from a privately operated Saskatchewan bus company that, similarly, was a success story, and we obviously want to encourage private operators that can offer this service. They were expanding throughout the province of Saskatchewan, but they talked about the myriad costs they had to deal with in terms of licensing, insurance, fuel and capital. Some of those things, of course, are provincial in nature.

Are there any federal barriers we can cut, whether it be red tape, regulation or taxes, that could help encourage the development of these sorts of bus lines?

● (1135)

**Dr. Sarah-Patricia Breen:** Yes, certainly. As I mentioned in my presentation, it was great to see the rural-specific federal funding that offers opportunities for rural transit systems. That's much appreciated. There's opportunity for improvement there, and one example of the potential red tape that can be taken away is with regard to the funding for operations.

I'm in the middle of penning an article called "Who's Driving this Bus?", because while we can get finances to purchase a bus or a van, there's no funding available to help with operators, the distances and the number of people for ridership. It makes it so that riders are paying so much that it becomes unusable or it's not financially viable, from a traditional perspective.

That's one piece, and then—

**Mr. Dan Muys:** If I could interrupt there for a second—sorry, I only have a couple of minutes left—I want to ask, on that point, about operational costs versus capital costs. My view is that there are successful models. Should this not be a user-pay system? Why should the federal government be responsible to help with operational costs?

In the time remaining—because in your testimony you talked about on-demand services—I'll ask how that would compare to on-demand services. I could take an Uber instead of a bus and obviously that's more pricey, so where's the sweet spot there?

**Dr. Sarah-Patricia Breen:** The sweet spot would be place-dependent. It's 100% dependent on the locale. In the examples that are successful, we see they cater very specifically to the local travel patterns and the regional travel patterns. There is no single answer to that.

In terms of the user-pay private model, the basic answer is that in rural places, the distances and dispersed population mean that a traditional return-on-investment model is very unlikely to be profitable. If they are profitable, they're going to be profitable because they are catering to people who can afford to pay, which completely excludes people who are low income or face disabilities or other barriers to access.

As I mentioned, there's a need to consider the very real benefits that those transit systems bring but that aren't easily calculated into return on investment.

**The Chair:** Thank you very much, Dr. Breen and Mr. Muys.

[*Translation*]

Go ahead, Mr. Iacono. You have six minutes.

**Mr. Angelo Iacono (Alfred-Pellan, Lib.):** Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you to the witnesses for being here.

My first questions are for Ms. Petronic and Ms. Breen.

Intercity bus transport has been in decline for years. How can we replace that means of transportation? What is the impact of that change?

[*English*]

**Dr. Sarah-Patricia Breen:** In terms of what could replace it, innovations that we're seeing in transit include the on-demand systems. That isn't like an Uber; it's more of a bus or a van system that people book in advance the night before. However, instead of operating like an expensive shuttle, it operates like a regular bus, so it's considerably cheaper.

We also see really innovative examples—some from Quebec—that include combinations of municipal fleets with local car shares. There are great examples of small communities in Quebec that have fleets of cars for the local municipality and that also use those as a line of revenue for the communities in offering them as car shares for individuals. We have regional car shares and ride-share operations popping up all over the place, so there's a really wide range of potential options that exist out there.

In terms of the implications, could I ask you to clarify for me what you mean by “implications”?

• (1140)

[*Translation*]

**Mr. Angelo Iacono:** I'm referring to the changes that go along that.

You talked about different types of transportation, and you explained well what the impacts were.

For example, do you know what the impacts would be for cities that have transport fleets?

[*English*]

**Dr. Sarah-Patricia Breen:** I see. I most often work in places where there are no existing transit systems, so there's no fallout, I would say, for an existing operator. That's not something I have a lot of experience with. The types of implications I see are mostly on the benefits side, with increased access for people, greenhouse gas reductions—it's a very positive news story—and increased access to services and education.

I can see where you're coming from in terms of potential implications for existing operators, but it's not something I run into very often in my line of work.

[*Translation*]

**Mr. Angelo Iacono:** Thank you, Ms. Breen.

Ms. Petronic, do you see the same trends in intercity bus transport in Canada as you do in the U.S.? Can you talk about that?

[*English*]

**Dr. Josipa Petronic:** Thank you very much for the question. I appreciate it.

Some of the trends we're seeing in the United States are starting to crop up in Canada.

For coaching systems, it is about identifying the fact that the middle class will happily take a coach bus if it is a luxury service and it serves their needs. Some luxury services—Red Arrow is a great example, between Calgary and Edmonton—are now expanding. It goes from having wider seats and cookies on board to Wi-Fi that functions. It's a moving office.

This is a niche area, but it has taken off in Europe. It started during the prepandemic period and became more popular in the United States. It targets the middle class person who can afford a bit more than a typical, old-style Greyhound ride, but who doesn't want to pay for a rail ride or flight. That is a trend.

The second trend we are seeing is on-demand shuttle service. This speaks to your previous question. Current public operators, whether it's B.C. Transit, St. Catharines Transit—now Niagara Region Transit—or Toronto Transit.... These existing public urban transit providers are also integrating on-demand shuttle services. There's absolutely no reason why, through provincial-federal alignment with municipalities, these services cannot extend beyond the jurisdiction where they typically operate. It is entirely reasonable that there could be a TTC-level or GTHA-level of on-demand shuttle service that is centrally controlled by public transit in the interest of transit. It's not a 40-foot or 60-foot bus. It's not a big coach. It's an on-demand shuttle.

Everywhere on-demand shuttles are deployed by centralized public transit, they reduce emissions, increase ridership, reduce ridership times and save operational dollars, including in Quebec, where Exo has one of the best operational pilots.

Those are two of the models. The first is the on-demand shuttle model. The solution is there. It would have to be centrally managed; otherwise it becomes a clustered, congested, inefficient, Uber-style system. It has to be centrally managed by the transit or public authority. The second is the luxury coach service.

If I may, I will add a third point to your previous question.



What are some of the possibilities for increasing inter-regional transit and rural mobility? An immediate one is leveraging Via Rail. We do not leverage Via Rail's data and clientele. Via will stop at a station, but there's no data going to the local, regional and rural transit providers saying when these customers are getting off. It's a simple data solution. This technology existed 20 years ago. Being able to leverage the existing clientele that already feeds into Via would support the growth of rural transit—including by private operators, as it should—into some of the communities that are poorly served today.

**The Chair:** Thank you very much, Dr. Petrunic.

[*Translation*]

We now go to Mr. Barsalou-Duval for six minutes.

**Mr. Xavier Barsalou-Duval (Pierre-Boucher—Les Patriotes—Verchères, BQ):** Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I want to begin by thanking the witnesses for agreeing to be here today. This is an interesting study. The issue is different from what the committee usually studies.

I'll start with a question for Ms. Perry.

Ms. Perry, I looked into your work a bit, and if I understand correctly, you study barriers, especially in connection with public transit.

• (1145)

**The Chair:** Excuse me, Mr. Barsalou-Duval, but Ms. Perry's audio quality isn't good enough for interpretation, so we can't ask her any more questions at this time. Instead, we will send her an email with all of the questions members wanted to ask her. She is still online, but we can't ask her any more questions, unfortunately.

Sorry, Mr. Barsalou-Duval. I thought you heard me say that earlier.

**Mr. Xavier Barsalou-Duval:** I missed that, but it's okay.

In that case, I'll ask Ms. Petrunic questions.

I really appreciated what you said about Via Rail. You were interrupted, but could you tell us more?

You were talking about the potential for the intercity bus transport sector to leverage Via Rail data to better serve people. Conversely, if Via Rail did a better job of coordinating arrivals and departures and sharing information with bus carriers, could it benefit from an increase in passengers?

[*English*]

**Dr. Josipa Petrunic:** That's 100% correct: This is a long-standing bane-of-my-existence issue.

We have a national rail provider, and we can debate until tomorrow, next year and the next century about whether or not it's properly subsidized. The reality is that it exists today, it moves people and it has a clientele, and that clientele can be leveraged both ways. This issue is not only for Via; it is also for Metrolinx and the GO regional network in the greater Toronto and Hamilton areas. It's increasingly an issue for anywhere regional rail is starting to deploy.

The issue is twofold. One, the clientele—the passengers on Via Rail or Metrolinx—get off at stations. Those stations are not served by Via or by Metrolinx per se. They are served by local transit agencies or, in the case of rural communities, sometimes private rural service providers or sometimes nobody and Uber.

The world would be flipped on its head to the benefit of Canadians with a simple data share of clientele arriving—when they arrive and where they need to get to—for local transit systems and rural providers. The reverse holds as well. Enabling those private and public providers to share their data backward to identify to the rail provider or, in the case of coach, if we take it even further, to the coach bus stations that do exist, with FlixBus and Red Arrow... When those people are arriving at their nearest local transit stop, they are necessary clientele who can be leveraged for the rail network or the coach network going in the other direction.

If I may give you one example, a long-standing issue has been across the Metrolinx line. It holds for Via as well. You will have a number of public transit agencies on the backbone of Metrolinx through the greater Toronto and Hamilton areas. What you have is a one-way flow of information, typically, from transit into Metrolinx. You don't have it the other way, so a lot of our members of the public transit agencies on that backbone don't have real-time data telling them when the train arrives and when their bus should be there.

It is very simple. It's an operational choice. There has been a lack of political will, shall I say, at the regional, provincial and federal levels to recognize that this is causing damage to the mobility of Canadians. It is a data solution, an operational integration solution, and what has hindered it, of course, is that for municipal transit it's municipal, for rural transit it's often the private provider and for rail it's regional or federal. All of these bodies are not talking together in a data-sharing arrangement for ridership optimization.

Your point is correct: There are clients going both ways, and we are not leveraging them properly.

[*Translation*]

**Mr. Xavier Barsalou-Duval:** I'm going to continue along the same lines.

The committee met with bus operators who said that they had already tried doing a better job of serving Via Rail stations and coordinating departures. They found it quite tough because of an apparent lack of reliability, for one, but there was also an infrastructure problem.

Do you think it would make a difference if money were put towards improving the infrastructure at Via Rail stations, precisely to accommodate other types of transportation and serve people better? Have you looked into that?

[English]

**Dr. Josipa Petronic:** Yes. There are two elements that can be acted on. One is long term, and that has to be a huge ideological choice by the government of the day. One is short term and can be implemented relatively quickly, with political will.

The long-term one, as we all know, reliably comes down to track ownership. The long-term one is building the track for passenger mobility and passenger rail and not being stuck behind CP and CN freight trains. That's killing our rail service. We all know that. That is a large Government of Canada and Canadian social discussion: Are we going to build that track for Canadians or not? That would increase reliability overnight, but it's a long-term investment.

The shorter-term investment is sharing data with providers. What the providers you heard from are lacking is not just knowledge of when the train will arrive, but knowledge of how late the train will be. There's the fixed schedule and then there's the real-time schedule. Simply put, that data sharing through applications and software would be able to inform the providers arriving to the stations for pickups so that those providers can inform their clientele. That is software innovation. That's technological innovation. That would require, very likely, a mandate to Via to share that data in real time.

Without proper track upgrade, we're not going to fully solve the reliability issue, but if reliability is informed and if clients are properly informed of delays, then the private and public transit agencies that feed into the backbone can properly inform their own clientele about when a train will come or not come and arrange their operations to fit. This is not an impossible problem to solve. Public transit deals with delays all the time. We know from research upon research that the more we inform passengers and clients, the less likely they are to get turned off by the system the next time. That solution can be enacted almost immediately, but it's a choice by government, through Via Rail, to mandate that interaction.

• (1150)

**The Chair:** Thank you very much, Dr. Petronic.

[Translation]

Thank you, Mr. Barsalou-Duval.

[English]

Next we have Mr. Bachrach.

Mr. Bachrach, the floor is yours. You have six minutes.

**Mr. Taylor Bachrach (Skeena—Bulkley Valley, NDP):** Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

Thank you to all three of our panellists. I'm really sorry that we can't hear from Ms. Perry, but hopefully we'll be able to receive a brief and some answers to our questions.

I'll start with Dr. Breen.

Your testimony was very interesting. You've written about this dynamic between smaller volunteer-run systems or non-profit sys-

tems and their innovation and flexibility, and the flip side of the coin, which is the stability and dependability of larger government-run systems. We're also talking about another dynamic, which is the difference between intercommunity transportation and intercity transit between larger centres across Canada. That is something Greyhound provided. You could book a ticket from Prince George, B.C., all the way to Toronto on a single carrier with an integrated system.

Do we need to think about these systems separately? Do we need to think about intercommunity needs differently from intercity needs? How does that play out in terms of the kinds of solutions we apply to those challenges?

**Dr. Sarah-Patricia Breen:** That's a really interesting question.

I would say, similarly to the previous speaker's responses to the last questions, that the data piece on sharing information between these systems is really important. As I said in my opening remarks, there isn't a single silver-bullet system. We could bring back Greyhound tomorrow and we'd still be having conversations about issues with transit. Similarly, Via Rail is fantastic, but it comes nowhere near the Kootenays where I live, so I kind of forget it exists.

It's about a combination of transit systems that are regional in nature and intercommunity, and then the long-haul systems. They're not two separate conversations; they're two parallel conversations. It's very important for them to talk to each other.

**Mr. Taylor Bachrach:** Picking up on that, the key challenge we face right now, and the reason the committee has come forward with this study, is that people's transportation needs are not being met all across Canada. I'm wondering if the main challenge is a lack of overall vision and direction nationally, and funding to go with that, or the challenge is that we have lots of solutions but they're fragmented. They're not talking to each other. We're not sharing data. We're not making them work together.

Is the challenge that we're just not funding enough in this bucket, or is the problem that the things that are already in the bucket don't work together?

**Dr. Sarah-Patricia Breen:** It would be very cheeky of me to say that it's both, but that is in fact the answer. We need an overarching vision and connection for this solution. The federal government is well poised to play that role and to provide some additional funding and connection there. However, that needs to go hand in hand with the fact that it can't be an overarching blanket solution where we're going to do this one thing and it's going to work in every place. That's been categorically proven to be untrue.

Again, it's a kind of push and pull of the need for a connection at the higher level and funding for those pieces, but acknowledging that the needs and on-the-ground solutions in different areas are going to look different. That gets into essentially overcoming jurisdictional hurdles. I get into a lot of conversations where I hear, "Oh, it would be great to do that, but that's so-and-so's jurisdiction." People don't care whose jurisdiction it is. They want us to work together so they can go to school and go visit their grandmothers and all of those things.

That would be my answer.

• (1155)

**Mr. Taylor Bachrach:** Jumping off on that answer, when you talk about the people we're trying to serve with these kinds of systems, what are the first principles when it comes to the needs of passengers accessing public transportation systems?

**Dr. Sarah-Patricia Breen:** I would say that safety is top of mind, and not just while they're waiting for and on said mode of transportation, but the first and last mile. If I have to walk to a bus station, is it lit? Are there sidewalks? These are things that in rural places are hardly ever given consideration. There's a lot of getting on and off on highways with very high speeds and those types of things.

That safety piece is huge. That turns a lot of people off of public transit. I can quite literally run to our neighbouring community faster than I can get there on a bus, and I would say it would actually be safer.

It's the safety piece, and second to that is understanding who the audience is. That piece differs according to community and region.

**Mr. Taylor Bachrach:** Both you and Ms. Perry have spoken about the impact that the lack of intercity bus service has on marginalized communities. Could you expand a bit on what those impacts are?

I'm also curious as to whether these communities were being adequately served when Greyhound was at its peak. When we had full Greyhound service across Canada, were the needs of those communities being adequately served? How do we learn from that?

**Dr. Sarah-Patricia Breen:** In the interest of full disclosure, I don't typically study longer-distance trips such as those with Greyhound, but from what I know, I don't think they were being served, not because they were inadequate for the long distances but because those shorter-term regular trips weren't being met.

We see that a lot, and a great example of the impact on local people has to do with medical services. For example, in the communities in my region, there is B.C. Transit. There are also specialized shuttles. They run intermittently, and if anyone has ever tried to get an appointment with a specialist, you know they don't make it on your schedule. It's "get here Tuesday", and it doesn't matter if the bus only runs every other Wednesday. So in terms of the impact on people who don't have access to a personal vehicle or who can't drive, those are the things we're talking about. It's an inability to access medical and specialist appointments or other types of services, and an inability to hold a job.

I work with a large number of international students who love—

**The Chair:** I'm sorry, Dr. Breen, but I have to cut you off there because we're over time.

**Mr. Taylor Bachrach:** Thank you so much, Dr. Breen.

**The Chair:** Thank you very much, Mr. Bachrach.

Mr. McKay is joining us online.

Thank you so much for figuring this out and being patient with our team until we had that done. I'm going to turn it over to our clerk really quickly to do a sound check for the benefit of our interpreters.

I'll turn it over to you, Madam Clerk.

**The Clerk of the Committee (Ms. Carine Grand-Jean):** Good morning, Mr. McKay.

**Mr. Joel McKay (Chief Executive Officer, Northern Development Initiative Trust):** Good morning. Can you hear me?

**The Clerk:** Yes. We will just check your microphone headset. Thank you for joining us.

Can you speak a bit about the committee?

**Mr. Joel McKay:** What do you want me to say? It's been an absolute disaster getting connected this morning, and far more difficult than it should be after three years of a pandemic. How does that work?

**The Clerk:** We still don't have the thumbs-up from interpretation. We will need a bit more talk just to make sure interpretation is hearing you.

• (1200)

**Mr. Joel McKay:** I'm not sure what more you want me to do. I gave you a diatribe. If the committee would like to hear what I really think about things, please continue asking questions, but I'd rather we focus our time on transportation than on your technology, which doesn't seem to work.

**The Clerk:** Thank you very much. We're just going to check right now.

Interpretation is telling me that we're going to try, so we might see how that goes.

Thank you very much for your attention, Mr. McKay.

**The Chair:** We'll continue with our lines of questioning, and we'll turn it over to Mr. Strahl for six minutes.

The floor is yours.

**Mr. Mark Strahl (Chilliwack—Hope, CPC):** Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

My question is for Dr. Breen.

We heard previous testimony from witnesses who indicated there was a need for the sharing of data between modes of transport but also between carriers. They suggested that this should be done through a non-profit clearing house type of entity. Have you done any work on that and do you have any comments? It is one of the recommendations that might come out of this report, and I'm just wondering if you have done any work there.

We talked about how if you were booking a holiday, you would use Expedia, Travelocity or something like that, but the fees there are much too high for many of these smaller companies. Have you done any work or do you have any thoughts on the need for a sort of government-supported clearing house for information sharing?

**Dr. Sarah-Patricia Breen:** One of the groupings of innovations we noticed when we were doing our work was about the importance of software for everything that previous speakers have mentioned, like tracking who is getting on, where they are getting off and those types of things.

I'm not a software expert, but from a technical perspective, setting up data sharing or linking data sharing between different systems is not technically challenging. It's not that there's a specific software. It is technically possible.

The challenge is in data-sharing agreements, particularly when it comes to for-profit companies not wanting to divulge things that they feel may interfere with their profits. It is really important for multimodal transit and to link all of those different systems that they talk to each other. It's not technically challenging; it is getting data-sharing agreements in place and making people play nice, for lack of a better way to say that.

**Mr. Mark Strahl:** As Mr. Bachrach said earlier, when you no longer have a single carrier that operates coast to coast, there might be a way to string together a few tickets to get from one destination to another. However, if there's no coordination and if someone doesn't have the technical expertise or the time or resources to develop that themselves, it seems like this would be a good intervention for an entity to take on if they were empowered to do so.

I heard a bit about operating funding versus capital funding. I think the challenge for government is that there is a certain amount of money available. Money is finite. In the last number of years, perhaps that belief has been suspended. I hear about the lack of resources for busing, but then I look at what is being done for Via Rail. We're talking about a multi-billion dollar expansion that's been referenced for dedicated high-frequency rail track. The subsidy for riders between Windsor and Quebec was \$80 per rider prior to the pandemic and \$180 during the pandemic. From Jasper to Prince Rupert, it was \$483 per passenger, and that was up to almost \$1,500 when ridership was down. Clearly the Government of Canada is willing to subsidize certain travellers on certain routes using certain modes.

How do you think the Government of Canada should prioritize that? It seems to me that if we're talking about safety, giving people a hand up and perhaps giving them a service they otherwise wouldn't have, subsidizing intercity busing or intercommunity busing might be fairer than subsidizing those who are at least middle-class people taking the train. I'd ask for your comments on that too.

We're talking about fairness. How is it fair that a rail passenger in a highly populated area from Windsor to Quebec City gets a huge subsidy while people often put in danger by travelling are getting nothing?

• (1205)

**Dr. Sarah-Patricia Breen:** I'll answer the best I can, and perhaps one of my colleagues can jump in, because I don't have a great deal of knowledge on the rail system.

In terms of cost, we did a project recently called "Building the Future" in Ontario and other provinces. A quote that stuck with me from one of the local government folks was that they would rather have no money predictably than the scattergun randomness that they're often left to deal with in response to random calls for funding. It becomes very difficult to work in a system of unpredictability.

There's a need for predictability and stability particularly around transit. This is one of the reasons we see the intercommunity regional transit in British Columbia being more successful. It is because of the provincial entity B.C. Transit, which works with local governments and creates local, regional systems.

Is it perfect? No. Does it handle those long-distance things or cross-province things? Absolutely not. However, it does provide operational funding and predictability and stability for those communities.

**Mr. Mark Strahl:** How much time do I have, Mr. Chair?

**The Chair:** You have about 30 seconds, Mr. Strahl.

**Mr. Mark Strahl:** I will ask Dr. Breen about the Highway 16 B.C. Transit improvement, and whether that's an example of how... Obviously, it was born out of tragedy. They worked with communities, community groups, etc. Perhaps give us a brief comment on the work that's been done there and whether that's a model other communities can follow.

**Dr. Sarah-Patricia Breen:** While I know of the pilot and how it was structured, I'm afraid that I haven't seen any information on its impact. I don't know whether others have. I would be interested to know the answer. I won't pretend I know it.

**The Chair:** Thank you very much, Mr. Strahl and Dr. Breen.

We're going to turn it over to Mr. Badawey.

Mr. Badawey, the floor is yours. You have five minutes.

**Mr. Vance Badawey (Niagara Centre, Lib.):** Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I'm going to concentrate my questions on Ms. Petronic.

I like the road—no pun intended—that Mr. Barsalou-Duval and, to some extent, Mr. Bachrach were travelling down.

I'll preface my comments by saying this. It's 2023. To some extent, our entire transportation system can be looked at as being somewhat archaic. I have to say this to members of the committee: This is not unlike what this committee is studying with respect to the integration of moving trade within our binational and international supply chains. We've been talking about integrating the distribution and logistics of trade; now we're talking about integrating the distribution and logistics of people.

I'll say this to the witnesses. It's not what we say or ask that makes it onto the record. It's your answer or testimony that's put onto the record. Therefore, it's very important to get what you're saying onto the record and have the minister respond to that very testimony.

Ms. Petronic, we know the "what" in terms of the needs. It's just a matter of getting to the "how". I have two questions, and then I'm going to let you have the floor for the rest of my time.

Do you think a multimodal people-mover study would be more appropriate for this committee to pursue versus simply a bus study?

As to my second question, which is in line with that, what about data, the digital side, central booking and sustainable, leveraged funding to offset capital? This in turn offsets operational...on the need to finance any capital debt. I want to throw that on the floor.

Ms. Petronic, the floor is yours to answer that.

• (1210)

**Dr. Josipa Petronic:** Thank you very much, Chair. I appreciate the dual questions of the member.

I'll answer the first one: Is a multimodal study more appropriate than a bus study? Yes, absolutely. The reason is that this study has to merge with a strategy, and the strategy has to be very clear on the questions previously asked: Who do we want to move, how many Canadians do we want to move, where do we want to move them, at what cost and how fast?

That's it. We have to answer those questions, and we won't be able to answer them and say we want to move all Canadians everywhere all the time at any cost. The answer has to be that we want to move some Canadians from some places at some times, at a certain cost and at a certain speed, because there are finite resources out there.

Layering on top of that, obviously, are the issues that have been raised by my colleagues of who the most vulnerable are and who the most in need are. They should drive the answers to those questions, but those questions have to be answered. If we leave it ambiguous and omnibus, we will continue to have a 19th century transportation system heading into the 22nd century.

That's the first answer: It should be multimodal. The assumption underlying this is that both public and private providers have a role to play there, because there is money to be made on all sides of that equation with the clientele we have. The clientele we have is 36 million or 37 million Canadians, at last head count, plus a few hundred thousand immigrants every year.

That's our clientele, and it's structured in about five large cities in this country, with a smattering of smaller rural communities that are

not connected today. That's the marketplace we're dealing with, so we need those answers. Who do we want to move? How many Canadians? Where and at what cost, and how fast between those marketplaces? These are the logistics of passengers and clientele movement issues. It is no different from the freight matter that you referred to. It is about moving people in the limited capacity of the system that we have today and incrementally growing it.

Therefore, I would say, as a second component to the first question about a multimodal study, that it is insufficient for the multimodal study to be a national strategy only. It does have to be a CUSMA study, for the same reason that when we talk about electrification and the use of hydrogen, it's not enough for CP and CN to find some hydrogen on either side of the country. They need a North American solution. Moving Canadians east to west and north to south does include integrating Canadians with the hubs in Seattle and New York and across the North American barrier, so this study has to have some integration capacity, at least in the big centres of Vancouver and Toronto.

That's the answer to the first question. Within that, of course, are the private providers of not only coaching and shuttle services but also the on-demand services.

The answer to the second question on the data is twofold.

Number one, identify the clientele. As a case study, it was only a couple of years ago that Via Rail started identifying your profile. Air Canada has known all about you for years. Aeroplan has known all about you. Air Miles knows all about you. Via only just started to know about you.

Anybody who has run a business knows that you need to know your customers. We don't know anything about our customers, and that's not just Via. Public transit collects almost no data about its customers and clientele. How do we treat customers, therefore? Like a kick in the pants, because they're not treated as customers; they're treated as obligatory servants of a welfare system. That is no good and cannot proceed forward.

The first issue of data is to identify the clientele so that we know what the clientele wants. Where are they going? Who are they? What are their demographics? What is their profile from an income perspective? That data can be incorporated into this study, because data can be collected at every point of contact: the app that I download, the ticket I buy, the ride I take. I can consent to handing over my data in exchange for a better service. That has to happen across those multi-modes.

The second side of it is very business oriented. Whether it's publicly subsidized or not, those data allow for performance measures. They allow us to identify how many people are moving, how far, how fast and at what cost, and whether the service we are subsidizing is performing at the measures we expect it to perform at.

**The Chair:** Thank you very much, Dr. Petronic. We very much appreciate your responses.

Thank you very much, Mr. Badawey.

**Mr. Vance Badawey:** Thank you, Doctor. That was wonderful.

[*Translation*]

**The Chair:** Mr. Barsalou-Duval, you have two and a half minutes. Go ahead.

**Mr. Xavier Barsalou-Duval:** Thank you, Mr. Chair.

This is for Ms. Petrunic as well. She's quite popular today.

This is something we haven't talked about yet, but I wish it had come up, even though everything else we've discussed has been especially interesting. I'm referring to the electrification of bus transportation. I know it's something you've researched. I'd like to hear your views, because it's an area I haven't been able to get much information on during our study.

Given today's technology, what's the range an electric bus could feasibly have?

In the middle term, what can we expect to see in the market?

• (1215)

[*English*]

**Dr. Josipa Petrunic:** There's the Ph.D. answer, which we don't have time for, and then there's the Coles Notes answer. The Coles Notes answer is that the range depends on the size of battery and the platform. However, in typical form, if you have a regular city bus that's 40 feet—that's your normal city bus—and you have about a 400-kilowatt-hour battery pack, you can get more or you can get less. Generally in the spring and summer, in good weather conditions, you're going to get about 300 kilometres out of that thing—250 to 300 kilometres out of a 400-kilowatt-hour battery pack. In the winter, it's going to be under 200, so your range is cut in half.

Put that battery pack on a coach bus and it's even less. You have to take a lot of space for luggage on a coach bus, and the dynamics of a coach bus are that you can't put all of the battery at the top because it will tip over.

Unfortunately, it's not the same amount of range, and that is why the solution for electrified coaching and electrified transit necessarily has to include high-power charging systems at locations on the route, in the middle of the city or, if you're Metrolinx, at GO stations. This is going to require regional integration and planning across municipalities, regions and provinces. That's what's coming up.

[*Translation*]

**Mr. Xavier Barsalou-Duval:** If I understand correctly, it's reasonable to think that an electric bus could cover a distance of 150 to 200 kilometres between two stops, say. The bus could even stop there and resume service a little later, considering that the charging technology is increasingly efficient, if I'm not mistaken.

Can you talk about the charging element? It's something that's quite promising.

[*English*]

**Dr. Josipa Petrunic:** The first component is correct. It is possible to increase the range of the electrified system overall, whether it's buses or coaches—or rail, for that matter—by adding more

charging capacity, so you're pulling in to a stop, topping up and then continuing along your route.

To the second part of your question, it's not so much about chargers becoming more efficient. These are really high-power charging systems, at 450 kilowatts or 600 kilowatts. They pump out a lot of electrons at a very high power level. They're pretty efficient. The problem is the absorption on the bus. It's the powertrain, the battery and the software being able to absorb the power at that level. If you're basically blasting the powertrain with a ton of energy, you're going to blow the battery; you're going to degrade it.

The issue so far has been the absorption rate, and that slows it right down. We can put high-power chargers everywhere.

**The Chair:** Thank you once again, Dr. Petrunic. I know you could go on, and we actually very much enjoy hearing you speak.

I know Mr. Bachrach is going to have questions for Mr. McKay. Before I turn it over to Mr. Bachrach, I'd like to give Mr. McKay an opportunity to provide opening remarks or an opening presentation for five minutes.

Mr. McKay, it's totally up to you—no pressure. I know we're kind of putting you on the spot here, but if you're willing to do it, we'd very much like to hear it.

**Mr. Joel McKay:** Yes, absolutely. Thank you for that.

Can you hear me okay?

**The Chair:** I'm looking around the room, and I think we should be good.

**Mr. Joel McKay:** Good morning, everybody.

I'm sorry for my tardiness. I informed the staff ahead of time that I had drop-off duty for my daughters this morning. That's why I was delayed.

My name is Joel McKay. I'm the chief executive officer of the Northern Development Initiative Trust. We're a regional economic development organization that serves northern British Columbia, an area about the size of France, to give you a sense of our magnitude. We have about half a billion dollars in assets.

A year and a half ago, we took on responsibility, in partnership with the Ministry of Transportation and Infrastructure here in British Columbia and with B.C. Transit, for B.C. Bus North and intercity transportation for the area of British Columbia that is described as northern B.C., which is the Fraser Canyon and north to the Yukon border. In that time, with \$7.5 million, which is not much money, we have been able to create an integrated transportation network that includes 18 intercity transportation services, both long haul and intercity short haul—so distances of between 100 kilometres and 200 kilometres—serving both indigenous and non-indigenous communities. We have been able to add routes throughout that entire service area, reduce costs and keep the fare cost in line with inflation.

This year we are launching a new project, which will be a first in Canada, called the connected network. The connected network is a project that will create for the first time a technology that allows the traveller to transfer among all of these services using their mobile device or a phone-in service without any issue.

Right now in northern British Columbia and, frankly, anywhere in Canada, you have to act as your own travel agent. That is difficult when there are a number of different transportation services that are run by different non-profits or for-profits. We see this as a key barrier. We have adopted a technology that has already been deployed in western Europe in a far more complex transportation environment than the one in Canada, and we are going to pilot it and integrate these services here beginning this summer.

In short, our focus—and the reason we're involved in this—is that we see ground transportation as critical to serving the economy in northern British Columbia, which is our mandate. We take a community economic development approach to that. In 18 months, we have been able to significantly expand ground transportation services in northern B.C., integrate them, add new routes and actually reduce costs, and we will very shortly be launching a new technology.

I hope that provides an overview of what our involvement is here.

• (1220)

**The Chair:** Thank you very much, Mr. McKay.

I have requests from some members that you pass that information along to us if you could. It would be great to have that on hand.

Mr. Bachrach, I will turn it over to you for your line of questioning. You have two and a half minutes.

**Mr. Taylor Bachrach:** Thank you so much, Mr. Chair.

Thank you, Mr. McKay. I really wanted the committee to hear your testimony, especially because I think northern British Columbia is unique in all of Canada in terms of the evolution of intercommunity transportation. I really appreciate the role the trust has played and you as CEO have played in trying to integrate what has become a bit of a patchwork of services that have evolved over time. Obviously this goes back well over a decade, and a lot of it was driven by the concerns about the tragic history of our highway through the region.

You spoke a bit about where we're at now with 18 different services, many of them publicly funded, the need for integration and the role of technology in that. You also mentioned the \$7.5 million you have been provided to achieve this monumental task.

Perhaps you could speak broadly about federal leadership. If the federal government was serious about public ground transportation and wanted to play a substantive role in enhancing the work you're doing, what would that role look like? How could the federal government play a meaningful role in ensuring that northern British Columbia residents had access to affordable, safe and convenient bus transportation?

**Mr. Joel McKay:** Thanks for the question.

From my perspective as somebody who's spent a career in rural development and, previous to that, in the media, it would be nice if the federal government got serious about rural development, full stop. We have not had leadership on that file for half a century, whether it's economic development, transportation, trade or defence. That's the first thing.

The second thing is this: Where I see a federal role is in the inter-provincial piece. Jurisdictionally, transportation is, in my view, primarily the responsibility of the provincial governments. That's where the leadership should be coming from. However, the federal government can lead by helping to incentivize the provinces and territories to work together in order to have an integrated system that will travel across provinces.

From a British Columbia perspective, we're already doing this in northern B.C. Our intent is that, within two to three years, what we've built will expand across the entire province. However, our influence and ability end at our borders. It would be really nice to have that integrated with other provinces and, as one of the earlier speakers said, integrated with the U.S. system as well. That's critically important for the movement of people in North America.

That is where federal leadership should come in. It does take leadership. It takes direction, but I don't think it takes a ton of money. You can do these things very effectively by building on solutions that are already operating in jurisdictions throughout Canada, linking them together and enforcing collaboration in the way we've been able to achieve in northern B.C.

**Mr. Taylor Bachrach:** Thank you very much, Mr. McKay.

I will pick up on the leadership question and the need for inter-provincial coordination.

We've had the minister at committee, and we've asked him those questions. He feels very strongly that this lies within the provinces' wheelhouse. However, I imagine you talk to passengers in northern B.C. who need to get to Calgary, Winnipeg or Toronto.

Do we need to see more from the federal government when it comes to pushing those solutions forward, even in the context of provinces that aren't prioritizing this as highly as they should?

• (1225)

**Mr. Joel McKay:** Yes, absolutely. From a jurisdictional perspective, every province is going to tell you that it's not going to work beyond its borders. It can't with its tax dollars. That is where the federal government needs to come in and provide some direct leadership if not an incentive, or both, to make sure that the network is integrated.

I would add that in our service area, we have a gap right now: Services go up to Fort Nelson, but we don't have service that extends from Fort Nelson to Watson Lake or up further in the Yukon. The federal government assumes a different level of responsibility for the territorial governments, so when it comes to northern Canada, it should have more of a leadership role than it would with the provinces. That's critically important for getting people around the Yukon, Nunavut or the Northwest Territories and integrating with their provincial counterparts.

**Mr. Taylor Bachrach:** Thank you, Mr. McKay.

My last question is about the multimodal aspect.

We've heard from Dr. Petrunic and others about a vision of integrating rail and bus transportation. You and I both live in northern B.C. We know how challenging it is to use passenger rail for anything other than tourism purposes.

Is integrating passenger rail within the scope of the technology you're trying to implement? Is the potential for multimodal integration in northern B.C. a reality at this point given the inherent challenges Via Rail faces?

**Mr. Joel McKay:** It is. We expect that most multimodal integration through the connected network will be live within 12 to 24 months. We're going to start with the 18 transportation services we already have. We're going to expand those to Northern Health Connections—our provincial northern bus ground service—add in Via Rail and B.C. Ferries, and then look to integrate ride-sharing and taxis as well.

The technology exists. It's well established and it's been operating in Europe. Again, in the Canadian context, our transportation environment is far less complex in a sense given how many transportation services are operating in a concentrated area. Our complexity is distance, climate—those types of things. Then, of course, there's the business case around it.

Yes, I absolutely think that is achievable from a technology perspective. The problem with passenger rail is that right now in northern British Columbia, the primary focus for rail is on freight movement. That's great for the economy, but it creates delays—as you know and as I have experienced—in northern B.C. if you are a rail passenger.

Under the existing structure, I do not see a future where rail transportation in western Canada is an affordable and reliable solution for the average citizen with the average household income. It's too expensive and takes too long. The infrastructure is not there.

**The Chair:** Thank you, Mr. McKay.

**Mr. Taylor Bachrach:** Thank you very much.

**The Chair:** Thank you, Mr. Bachrach.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Barsalou-Duval, did you have a question for me?

**Mr. Xavier Barsalou-Duval:** I'm just trying to understand something, Mr. Chair. Today, we had witnesses who couldn't participate properly, whom we couldn't ask questions, so I want to know whether the connection tests were done ahead of time for those witnesses and whether the results were adequate for interpretation.

**The Chair:** Yes, except for Ms. Perry.

For Mr. McKay, unfortunately he couldn't be online for the pre-meeting sound check, so the test was done off-line. When Mr. McKay was finally able to join the meeting, I asked the clerk to do the sound check.

Unfortunately, all kinds of things aren't working in the room today. I heard the clerk say that this room was known for having

sound issues. That's why we are going to try to avoid using it from now on.

That was a good question, Mr. Barsalou-Duval.

[*English*]

Ms. Perry, we very much wanted to hear you speak and provide your testimony. I spoke to the clerk, and we have one more meeting scheduled for this study. We already have four witnesses lined up for that, but we always have room for six in a two-hour meeting. We'd very much like to invite you back if you are willing to join us once again and give us two hours of your time, which is very valuable. We will be sending out an invitation to you to join us for that meeting.

I'm going to turn it over to Mr. Lewis, if it's okay, to have the final line of questioning before I thank our witnesses for their time today.

• (1230)

**Mr. Chris Lewis (Essex, CPC):** Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

Thanks to all the witnesses, of course, for your testimony.

There are a couple of things, Dr. Breen, you mentioned that really caught my attention. You talked about the urban-adjacent aspect. Can you tell me the difference between urban-adjacent and what I'm thinking about now, which is rural-adjacent?

To set that question up, and in fairness to you, my riding of Essex is next to Windsor, which is obviously next to the busiest international bridge in North America. A lot of my riding is incredibly rural. We have about five municipalities with around 25,000 folks in each of them, and there's only one bus, to the best of my understanding, in the Leamington-Kingsville area that goes up to the city.

Can you explain the difference between urban-adjacent and rural-adjacent? After that, I'm going to jump into the cross-border side of things.

**Dr. Sarah-Patricia Breen:** Yes, certainly. It's a fuzzy definition, as many things out of academia are. An urban-adjacent community would be a rural location from which you would be able to commute to work every day. For example, my brother lives in an urban-adjacent rural community and commutes to Mississauga every day. That's possible for him. I live in the middle of nowhere. It's not possible for me.

In terms of distance, that would typically be anywhere up to 100 or more kilometres. Obviously, with that being fuzzy, we know there are areas in southern Ontario that aren't strictly urban-adjacent even though their proximity might indicate otherwise. It's a combination of distance from urban and the travel patterns of the people who live there.

**Mr. Chris Lewis:** Thank you, Dr. Breen. It is a bit fuzzy, but I appreciate the answer for sure.



As I mentioned, it's a very unique riding. I can literally go from rural to urban to large city to what I would like to jump into now: the challenges of the cross-border aspect, so not only intercity but also intercountry and intercity. There are a lot folks who commute from Windsor over to Detroit and vice versa using our bus lines. Can you expand a bit on what would make life simpler for these folks with regard to how our countries work together? I'm not talking about just NEXUS or passports. I'm trying to look at it on a larger scale with regard to the bus lines. Is there something specific we should be looking at and working on?

**Dr. Sarah-Patricia Breen:** I'll defer the opportunity to answer to one of my colleagues. I focus strictly on rural Canada. I don't do the cross-border side, so I don't think I'm the best person to answer.

**Mr. Chris Lewis:** Thank you.

Dr. Petronic, would you be able to answer that question?

**Dr. Josipa Petronic:** Yes. Thank you. It's an excellent question.

Windsor is really at the nexus and the forefront of what international public mobility and public transit should look like. There's a great case study with Transit Windsor. If you get on the Transit Windsor bus, you can hop over the border in a matter of minutes. They have such a good system set up with Detroit on the other side for public transit. Clearly, there were municipal and federal dialogues that allowed for that. It's clean. It's safe. It's efficient. If I got on the previous Greyhound bus, as I used to, to get into Detroit for auto conferences, I'd get stuck for five hours at the border. There was not the same kind of interconnectivity. It was the same border and nearly the same crossing point—they were effectively a few metres apart—but one bus would get stuck for hours and the other had an integrated service.

It is very clear in Canada that the place to start building best practices is the Transit Windsor pattern of behaviour. It is extremely

efficient. I've not seen anywhere else in Canada where mobility across the border is that cheap, that fast and that seamless for anybody on a bus. That's a case study to build from.

As I said, it did take federal intervention to make that happen and it went well beyond the capacity and jurisdiction of the city and the province to enable it.

**Mr. Chris Lewis:** Thank you very much. I appreciate that. I'll make sure that I pass that message on to the mayor of Windsor as well. Kudos to him and his council, and all levels of government.

I know what you're talking about with regard to that bus. Once a year, I get to go over and watch my beloved Detroit Lions play, and I usually take the bus. I always go over with a big smile, but I don't usually have a big smile when I come back.

I appreciate you answering those questions.

Thanks, Chair.

**The Chair:** Thank you very much, Mr. Lewis. I still respect you even though you're a Lions fan. Go Packers.

I want to conclude by sincerely thanking all of our witnesses for joining us today, and by apologizing for some of the technical issues we've had, specifically to Mr. McKay and Ms. Perry. We look forward to having you back, Ms. Perry. We'll send that invitation out shortly.

With that, I will suspend the meeting for five minutes as we move in camera.

Thank you, everyone.

*[Proceedings continue in camera]*

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