Response to the Ministry of Transportation on *Towards a Northern Ontario Multimodal Transportation Strategy* – Discussion Paper

December 2016
ABOUT THE ONTARIO FEDERATION OF INDIGENOUS FRIENDSHIP CENTRES

For over four decades, Friendship Centres in Ontario have been gathering places for Indigenous people who live in urban areas, community-driven, and focused on the well-being of anyone who walks through their doors. When there were very few other options in cities and towns, Friendship Centres provided a safe space for Indigenous culture to be shared and to thrive, for community members to be connected to supports and opportunities, and for Indigenous people to assume leadership roles and build meaningful careers.

Today Friendship Centres are dynamic community hubs. They are idea incubators for young Indigenous people attaining their education and employment goals, they are sites of cultural resurgence for Indigenous families who want to raise their children to be proud of who they are, and they are safe havens for Indigenous community members requiring supports. Our vision is to amplify this work.

The Ontario Federation of Indigenous Friendship Centres (OFIFC) is a provincial Indigenous organisation representing the collective interests of 28 member Friendship Centres located in towns and cities throughout Ontario. The vision of the Indigenous Friendship Centre Movement is to improve the quality of life for Indigenous people living in an urban environment by supporting self-determined activities which encourage equal access to, and participation in, Canadian society and which respects Indigenous cultural distinctiveness. The OFIFC administers a number of wholistic, culture-based programs and initiatives which are delivered by local Friendship Centres in areas such as justice, children and youth, health, family support, long term care, healing and wellness, education, and employment and training with direct cultural supports. Friendship Centres respond to the needs of tens of thousands of community members requiring culture-based services every day.

The Friendship Centres represent the most significant off-reserve Indigenous service infrastructure in Ontario and are dedicated to achieving greater participation of all urban Indigenous peoples in all facets of society, inclusive of First Nation, Métis, Inuit and all other people who identify as Indigenous to Turtle Island.
RESPONSE TO **TOWARDS A NORTHERN ONTARIO MULTIMODAL TRANSPORTATION STRATEGY**

Over the past months, the OFIFC and Friendship Centres have provided high quality, detailed input into the development of the Ministry of Transportation’s (MTO) *Northern Ontario Multimodal Transportation Strategy* (NOMTS), with the goal of participating in the improvement of Northern Ontario’s transportation systems at the local and broader policy levels. Transportation is a central issue for urban Indigenous communities, which often face a range of barriers in accessing critical social, health, and education services, and participating in the economy. The identification of new or improved transportation policies, programs and partnerships, as well as recommended infrastructure projects to enhance Northern Ontario mobility and support the *Growth Plan for Northern Ontario*’s objectives must meaningfully respond to the needs of communities across Northern Ontario, including urban Indigenous communities.

The OFIFC’s response to *Towards a Northern Ontario Multimodal Transportation Strategy* (the “Discussion Paper”), outlines the priorities of Friendship Centre communities vis-à-vis the emerging NOMTS, as well as recommendations as to how NOMTS can better respond to the transportation needs of urban Indigenous communities in Northern Ontario.

**Vision and Objectives**

Building a transportation system in Northern Ontario that is responsive to economic, social and environmental needs and change will require NOMTS to recognise and respond to the priorities of communities across Northern Ontario, including urban Indigenous communities. Being transformative in supporting new economic activity, healthy communities, and a cleaner environmental, will inherently require transformative design, planning and implementation – being open to innovative ideas as well as addressing the priorities of a wider range of communities.

As such, NOMTS must find ways to facilitate real change in the design, planning, and delivery of transportation services in order to markedly improve access to transportation by better linking communities to social services, health services, education and training, and employment opportunities. NOMTS must lay the foundation for increased public and community transportation investment within and between northern communities by initiating investment in this area and planning for strategic funding on an ongoing basis. NOMTS should implement long-term investment in the development and enhancement of local transportation systems through funding for Friendship Centres and other local partners to provide affordable, local and regional transportation services that are sorely needed. Opportunities to build upon, and incorporate innovative transportation solutions developed at a local and regional level that improve access of multi-barriered community members must be leveraged.

The planning objectives listed in the draft *Discussion Paper* must be expanded to provide a clear description of their scope and intent. There should be clear explanations
as to how the planning objectives will guide the development, implementation, and evaluation of NOMTS.

In particular, the objective “Identifying and Integrating New Infrastructure to Support Economic Development” is not adequately addressed in the Discussion Paper to reflect its importance for Northern Ontario. Economic development is more than industry and tourism – yet these are the sole focus of economic development in the Strategy. NOMTS should explore a wider range of ways in which improvements in transportation infrastructure can support local and regional economic growth and development.

**Supporting Northerners in Daily Living**

Overall, the OFIFC is encouraged by the much improved description of local transportation challenges facing communities and urban Indigenous priorities in Northern Ontario. The Ministry’s recently released *Intercommunity Passenger Transport Draft Technical Backgrounder* highlights the need for improved intercommunity transportation and the fact that a significant amount of intercommunity transportation in the North is around accessing services – particularly health care, education, and training. It provides further evidence and support for the role of community organisations in providing local transportation, and the need to provide resources to these organisations.

There is a need for regular, reliable, affordable, safer intercommunity transportation in Northern Ontario. As noted in the *Draft Technical Backgrounder*, residents in communities along the provincial highway network have a need to travel to urban centres for a range of crucial services, yet transportation options are often extremely limited, impeding access for community members. In Red Lake, for example, there is no bus system. As such, community members are often required to take taxis to get around, which can cost hundreds of dollars in some cases. These realities highlight the significant disparities in access to transportation in Northern Ontario, which has direct implications for the overall well-being of individuals and families.

The *Draft Technical Backgrounder* also sheds light on the recent bus and rail service changes and discontinuances that have taken place in Northern Ontario, which have further limited inter- and intracommunity bus services. As highlighted in the Backgrounder, private-sector bus companies have found it challenging to turn a profit in Northern Ontario. This may be due to a range of factors, including the possibility that the current intercommunity bus service delivery model is resulting in depressed ridership, which in turn leads to subsequent service cuts, and further deteriorates into a downward spiral of diminishing passenger ridership. Continued service reductions and discontinuances compound the range of transportation challenges facing urban Indigenous communities in northern Ontario. When services are suspended or cut, people in communities are challenged to find alternative transportation options, which do not exist in many northern communities.

This is a crucial area of need that the NOMTS’ strategic options must respond to. As recognised in the *Draft Technical Backgrounder*, “A revised framework for a network of intercommunity passenger transportation services in the north is needed to make intercommunity rail and bus travel more coordinated and to provide more viable
In developing this revised framework, the OFIFC supports the overarching planning principles presented in the Discussion Paper relating to intercommunity transportation, including:

- Ensuring a basic level of service connectivity between regional hubs/centres along major provincial highways and effective service between regional centres;
- Improving the coordination of travel schedules between modes and providers to optimise connections;
- Providing safe shelters/waiting areas at all major pick-up points with basic services and connections; and,
- Enhancing information about available intercommunity transportation services.

In many urban Indigenous communities, Friendship Centres provide community-based transportation services and supports on a needs-basis through the use of small vehicles in areas where ridership demands exist, but are too low to fill a full-sized bus. Given that Friendship Centres, as providers of wholistic, culturally-appropriate services, are trusted community hubs, they are well-placed to continue to provide these transportation services. However, non-profit community organisations such as Friendship Centres must be supported by the provincial government through infrastructure and financial resources in order to provide transportation services, in addition to delivering their mandated services and programming. It is unrealistic to expect community organisations to assist in meeting growing local transportation needs in Northern Ontario without enhanced support and funding. Friendship Centres operate with budgets that are already stretched thin, forcing staff to increasingly respond to a wider range and higher volume of client needs. The reality that Friendship Centres are often required to provide transportation services to clients means that resources are taken away from overall program efficacy and efficiency.

In regards to the MTO’s Community Transportation Pilot Grant Program, it will be important to involve urban Indigenous communities, and Friendship Centres specifically, in evaluating and enhancing the program to be more inclusive, more responsive to community needs, and to provide more sustainable options for local and intercommunity transportations. Taking a more inclusive, responsive, and sustainable approach to encouraging local transportation partnerships will result in outcomes that are more meaningful and beneficial for community members. As highlighted in the NOMTS Discussion Paper, non-profit organisations are required to partner with municipalities in order to be involved in the Community Transportation Pilot Grant Program – this is problematic in cases where organisations such as Friendship Centres do not have existing relationships with municipalities and where program timelines do not allow enough time to engage in relationship-building or enough time to demonstrate meaningful results. In addition, some municipalities do not engage adequately with urban Indigenous organisations, which further strains the relationship-building process that is key to making partnerships work.

Supporting Industry

In order to maximise its impact, NOMTS should expand its focus to include supporting economic activity across communities and sectors in Northern Ontario. NOMTS should seek to explore the range of ways in which transportation systems contribute to developing and sustaining healthy economies. Currently, the Discussion Paper focuses its planned support for industry on the Ring of Fire, which is one of a range of economic activities that would benefit from improvements in Northern Ontario’s transportation systems. Chapter 4 of the Discussion Paper on Supporting Industry should also address the ways in which transportation can support local economic activity, not just large industries or resource development. While the movement of goods is a major part of Ontario’s economy, the movement of people and improving accessibility within and between communities also has important implications for economic growth in Northern Ontario.

Transportation is a key component of infrastructure that facilitates access to and connections between local, regional, and broader economies. Transportation connects investors and businesses with consumer markets and supports the development of local labour markets. Strong transportation systems are a critical component to supporting the growth of local and regional human capital, particularly for multi-barrièred individuals in Friendship Centre communities who may seek to enhance their participation in the economy through participation in education and training programming. Transportation systems that support individuals’ access to education and training, as well as critical services such as health care, child care, housing and food, play a major role in local and regional economic growth. Strong transportation systems also attract new businesses, entrepreneurs and tourism initiatives that support the development, growth, and diversification of economies.

As social infrastructure, transportation systems are crucial in supporting economic growth within Friendship Centre communities. Activities around social enterprise, sustainable community development, and community economic development that urban Indigenous communities engage in at the local level benefit substantially from well-functioning, inclusive, sustainable transportation systems that provide the often overlooked connections that facilitate economic activity.

As such, a re-naming and adaptation of Chapter 4 to “Supporting Industry, Tourism, and Economic Growth,” would more accurately reflect the range of ways in which NOMTS can support industry and economic growth potential in Northern Ontario.

Emerging Strategic Directions and Linkages to the Growth Plan for Northern Ontario

Looking back to the provincial government’s Growth Plan for Northern Ontario, NOMTS’ strategic directions and eventual options must respond to the reality that people, communities, infrastructure, and the environment are intricately connected and work together to create economic growth and well-being. Transportation systems have a central role to play in connecting Northern Ontario and creating sustainable, inclusive, diversified economic growth.
In refining options for the strategic direction around “Supporting Northerners in Daily Living,” NOMTS should seek ways to partner with community organisations, such as Friendship Centres, in improving local transportation services. This may include a range of actions, including the following:

- Supporting Friendship Centre programming through providing infrastructure and resources for activities around client transportation;
- Working with Friendship Centres to enhance the safety of local and intercommunity bus transportation, such as locating bus stops at or near Friendship Centre locations;
- Creating mechanisms for community members to provide input regarding the effectiveness of Strategy actions and implementations, as well as changing community needs and priorities;
- Facilitating information exchange between communities, industry and government.

Additionally, NOMTS must address how transportation systems in Northern Ontario will be better coordinated and managed in order to improve the client experience. As it stands, not only is there a lack of service, but existing services are poorly linked, scheduled, and located, which further diminishes the effectiveness of service delivery.

The emerging strategic direction of “Supporting Industry and Tourism” must be refined to reflect the guiding principles of the *Growth Plan*, which prioritise economic growth and development for a range of sectors. As discussed above, creating a highly productive region with a diverse economy will require NOMTS to play a supporting role in economic activity outside of tourism, the Ring of Fire, or other resource extraction projects. Northern Ontario is a diverse region with a range of sectors that would benefit from improvements in Northern Ontario’s transportation systems.

For urban Indigenous people and Friendship Centre communities in Ontario, transportation systems must work to support the development of healthy populations. Communities are the economic and service hubs of the North, and are critical gateways between the North and other economic regions. As NOMTS seeks to support industry as one of its strategic directions, it is helpful to remember the *Growth Plan’s* call for focus on a number of sectors including education, health, energy, information and communications technology, arts, culture and creative industries, and community infrastructure – all building blocks for economic growth. These sectors, among others, would all benefit from improvements to transportation systems in Northern Ontario. NOMTS’ strategic directions must respond to the social and economic realities and opportunities described above in order to play a meaningful role in unlocking the potential in Northern Ontario communities, including urban Indigenous communities.
RECOMMENDATIONS

The OFIFC recommends that the MTO, through NOMTS:

- Respond to the transportation service reductions and discontinuances highlighted in the *Passenger Transport Draft Technical Backgrounder* by restoring and enhancing service levels within and between communities;

- Expand the scope of the strategic direction of “Supporting Industry and Tourism” to “Supporting Industry, Tourism, and Economic Growth” to more accurately reflect the potential for NOMTS to be a driver of economic growth;

- Improve the coordination of transportation systems in northern Ontario in order to improve services to clients, including urban Indigenous community members;

- Involve Friendship Centres communities in evaluating and enhancing the Community Transportation Pilot Grant Program to be more inclusive, more responsive to community needs, and to provide more sustainable options for local and intercommunity transportation; and,

- Work with the OFIFC and Friendship Centres to develop strategic options for NOMTS that recognise and leverage the role that Friendship Centres play in providing local transportation services.

CONCLUSION

Urban Indigenous communities are uniquely positioned to benefit from improvements to transportation systems in Northern Ontario and are vital to the North’s future success, as highlighted by the *Growth Plan*. The urban Indigenous population is the youngest and fastest growing population in Ontario, growing at nearly double the rate of the non-Indigenous population, 1.8 percent compared to 1.0 percent.² Further, urban Indigenous youth under the age of 24 represent 48 percent of the Ontario urban Indigenous population.³

Improved access to adequate transportation will aid in connecting the young and growing urban Indigenous population to critical services and employment opportunities, supporting local economies while increasing economic agency among urban Indigenous people and their communities in Ontario.

In the spirit of reconciliation, NOMTS must continue to work with urban Indigenous communities to improve vital transportation services within and between communities.

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Friendship Centres have urged the MTO to consider ways to leverage transportation systems to support communities, promote economic growth, and support a cleaner environment. After sharing high-quality input on NOMTS through a number of engagement activities with the MTO, Friendship Centre communities now look to the Province of Ontario to take actions that respond to their concerns by improving Northern Ontario’s transportation systems in the pursuit of improving outcomes for urban Indigenous peoples.