



OFIFC

Ontario Federation of
Indigenous Friendship Centres

Submission on the Ministry of Transportation's
Draft Northern Ontario Multimodal Transportation
Strategy

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About the Ontario Federation of Indigenous Friendship Centres

Founded in 1971, the Ontario Federation of Indigenous Friendship Centres (OFIFC) works to support, advocate for, and build the capacity of member Friendship Centres across Ontario.

Emerging from a nation-wide, grass-roots movement dating back to the 1950's, Friendship Centres are community hubs where Indigenous people living in towns, cities, and urban centres can access culturally-based and culturally-appropriate programs and services every day. Today, Friendship Centres are dynamic hubs of economic and social convergence that create space for Indigenous communities to thrive. Friendship Centres 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.

In Ontario more than 84 per cent of Indigenous people live in urban communities. The OFIFC is the largest urban Indigenous service network in the province supporting this vibrant, diverse, and quickly-growing population through programs and initiatives that span justice, health, family support, long-term care, healing and wellness, employment and training, education, research, and more.

Friendship Centres receive their mandate from their communities, and they are inclusive of all Indigenous people – First Nation, Status/Non-Status, Métis, Inuit, and those who self-identify as Indigenous.

Learn more about the work the OFIFC does to support Friendship Centres at www.ofifc.org.

Introduction

Over the past years, Friendship Centres have been increasingly vocal about a central issue in Northern communities that affect their ability to serve urban Indigenous community members – access to affordable, adequate transportation.

The Ministry of Transportation's (MTO) Northern Ontario Multimodal Transportation Strategy (NOMTS) presents a crucial opportunity to address the transportation needs of Indigenous communities in cities and towns across Northern Ontario.

As a deliverable of the 2011 *Growth Plan for Northern Ontario*, NOMTS has a unique role to play in supporting community economic development and improving the quality of life for community members. Through NOMTS, the provincial government can create a clearer path towards the achievement of greater economic security, social inclusion, and meaningful reconciliation.

This paper responds to the MTO's draft NOMTS, which aims to ensure that Northern Ontario's transportation system is responsive to economic, social and environmental needs and change, and is transformative in supporting new economic activity, healthy communities and a cleaner environment.¹ NOMTS' goals include:

- **Goal 1: Connected and Prosperous** - Increase and modernize transportation options to support everyday living and economic activity in northern Ontario.
- **Goal 2: Safe and Reliable** - Enhance traveller safety and system reliability and minimize travel delays and complications.
- **Goal 3: Address Remote and Far North Challenges** - Work with remote and Far North communities to address unique transportation needs with more reliable connections between communities and to the all-season ground transportation network.
- **Goal 4: Integrated and Innovative** - Anticipate and respond to economic, technological, environmental and social change to link people, resources and businesses.
- **Goal 5: Healthy and Sustainable** - Create a cleaner and more sustainable transportation system in northern Ontario by reducing GHG and other environmental and human health impacts.

As NOMTS is finalised, we turn our attention to laying the groundwork for actions that can be taken to support the transportation needs of urban Indigenous communities in Northern Ontario, while suggesting ways to improve the policy framework on which NOMTS' implementation will be built.

¹ Ministry of Transportation, *Draft 2041 Northern Ontario Multimodal Transportation Strategy* (Toronto, ON: Ministry of Transportation, 2017).

Friendship Centres: Understanding the Context

Public policy that affects Friendship Centre communities, such as NOMTS, must consider the historical, social, and economic context in which urban Indigenous communities are situated.

The Friendship Centre movement has grown significantly since the late 1950s when Indigenous community centres were established in Kenora, Thunder Bay, and Toronto, propelled by the growing Indigenous population and the migration of Indigenous peoples to cities and towns across Ontario. In pursuit of culture, opportunity, and improved well-being, Indigenous people continue to migrate to urban and rural centres. Yet, many urban Indigenous communities still face unacceptable service gaps across areas such as transportation, health, education, child care, and housing, and face daunting barriers that get in the way of achieving a quality of life that residents of Ontario should expect.

The legacy of colonialism continues to threaten the well-being of urban Indigenous communities. While the impact of residential schools, and Sixties Scoop, and other failed historical government policy continues to reverberate through our communities, modern-day government policy still carries colonial concepts and ways of interacting with community that continue to create negative outcomes for urban Indigenous communities. As Premier Kathleen Wynne discusses in *Journey Together: Ontario's Commitment to Reconciliation with Indigenous Peoples*, Canadian policies based on racism and deceit have been disempowering and devastating for Indigenous communities.

This context shapes the need for all people in Ontario to take meaningful steps toward reconciliation. Reconciliation looks like building partnerships based on mutual respect and shared benefits – we need to continue to build momentum around this work through initiatives designed to bring meaningful change to the lives of Indigenous people and communities. As NOMTS is finalised, it is imperative that reconciliation through respectful relationship-building with urban Indigenous communities remains a driving principle.

A Note on Terminology

While many members of Friendship Centre communities have close ties to, or may have migrated from First Nation reserves, people in urban Indigenous communities have unique needs and priorities as a result of living in towns, cities, or other urban areas in Ontario. Recognition of the similarities (including shared historical and social context) and differences between urban Indigenous communities and on-reserve First Nation communities is important. The appropriate use of terminology – not using First Nation as a catch-all term for all Indigenous communities in northern Ontario, is an important step towards reconciliation that should remain a central tenet in the way MTO interacts with Friendship Centre communities.

Our Position and Priorities for NOMTS

Improving Local and Intercommunity Transportation: What We've Heard from Friendship Centres

Friendship Centres have participated in several engagement initiatives to provide advice and share their lived experiences with transportation issues in local communities. At a recent engagement session in August 2017, Friendship Centres provided input on ways to enhance the impact of NOMTS for urban Indigenous communities, along with stories of experiences serving community members and efforts to address acute transportation needs around accessing services.

Friendship Centres raised the following issues as priorities, among others:

- **Building Local Capacity:** There is a lack of support and resources for community-based transportation needs
- **Services for People with Disabilities:** Volunteers at Friendship Centres are using their personal time to assist community members with disabilities to get to appointments and other important places to be, due to insufficient transportation accessibility services for people with disabilities
- **Equity and Access:** There should be equitable access to transportation regardless of geographic location and economic circumstances
- **Road/Highway Infrastructure:** The lack of roads in some areas lead to dangerous situations, sometimes including terrifying encounters with wildlife – with no assistance available to call on
- **Local Partnership Development:** Lack of support for the development of transportation partnerships, including a need for long-term funding once a pilot project has ended
- **Public Transportation:** The complete absence of any public transportation, including in the town of Red Lake
- **Weather-Related Evacuations:** Inadequate transportation infrastructure (and planning) to support weather-related evacuations, such as those experienced in Kashechewan

These issues draw attention to areas of focus that must be clearly addressed through NOMTS, particularly as implementation or action plans are developed.

The issues outlined above, amongst others raised by Friendship Centres, are even more concerning given the trend in the passenger transportation sector of major cutbacks across the country. As CBC News has reported, rural transportation is increasingly threatened by service cuts by Greyhound in northwestern Ontario, suggesting that it is time to carefully review and address “gaping holes” in Canada’s

transit system.² Indigenous communities, women, seniors, and young people are especially vulnerable in the face of diminishing transportation options,³ which are crucial links that connect people to key programs and services.

The intercommunity bus system must be improved to provide more adequate, affordable passenger bus transportation options to Indigenous people in cities and towns. As a matter of safety, access to key services, and economic development, intercommunity bus modernisation must be a central component of NOMTS.

NOMTS *Direction 2.5*, which aims to increase the safety for people accessing intercommunity bus services in northern Ontario through provision of amenities that better meet user needs, is particularly important given the high incidence of violence against Indigenous women and girls.⁴ Reports of hitchhiking due to a lack of reliable, affordable transportation in many urban Indigenous communities are especially disturbing. Community members have also shared concerns about bus stops located in isolated areas, along with a lack of amenities and staff in and around bus shelters, which increases the level of threat perceived and experienced by Indigenous women and girls. NOMTS must prioritise the safety of vulnerable communities, recognising barriers to safe travel and respond to this need through concrete action.

Building Local Partnerships to Improve Access to Passenger Transportation

NOMTS *Goal 1: Connected and Prosperous*, which aims to “increase and modernise transportation options to support everyday living and economic activity in Northern Ontario,”⁵ is a particularly important priority for urban Indigenous communities. From the perspective of urban Indigenous communities, this goal is a crucial aspect of achieving the 2041 vision set out in NOMTS. Communities in Northern Ontario continually express concerns about the lack of local transportation options, which have been voiced repeatedly by Friendship Centres throughout the NOMTS engagement process. The OFIFC strongly encourages the MTO to partner with urban Indigenous organisations and support other local partnerships to implement NOMTS *Goal 1: Connected and Prosperous*.

As stated in NOMTS, it is local community organisations, health and social service agencies that provide transportation services for their clients to specific destinations, using their own vehicles or private operators such as taxi services.”⁶ This highlights two realities in Northern Ontario – that there is a serious lack of local transportation

² Yvette Brend, “Goodbye Greyhound? The thread stitching together Canada's North wears thin,” *CBC News*, (September 1, 2017), Retrieved from <http://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/british-columbia/greyhound-bus-canada-transit-northern-routes-health-bc-1.4270314>

³ Ibid.

⁴ Native Women’s Association of Canada, *What Their Stories Tell Us: Research findings from the Sisters In Spirit initiative* (Ottawa, ON: Native Women’s Association of Canada, 2010), 7.

⁵ Ministry of Transportation, *Draft 2041 Northern Ontario Multimodal Transportation Strategy* (Toronto, ON: Ministry of Transportation, 2017).

⁶ Ibid, 19

services, and that many Friendship Centres actively work to address the transportation gap through limited community-van based services.

Friendship Centres' supportive transportation services reduce barriers to services, promote access to culture, and facilitate economic activity as well as access to employment in urban Indigenous communities. These services are especially meaningful for low-income people who face poverty, those with young families, elderly community members, youth, and people with disabilities. The impact of expanded supportive transportation programming in urban Indigenous communities can have a range of positive effects locally, including multiplier effects that can improve economic inclusion and enhance economic development opportunities.

While some Friendship Centres are able to provide some limited supplemental transportation services for community members in need, staff often are not able to meet the level of demand. Further, many staff are required to use their personal resources to fund these services. We have also heard a growing number of anecdotal stories of individual volunteers who donate their time and resources to meet the local demand for community transportation, which is often necessary to aid the most vulnerable community members who face mobility barriers.

Some of the transportation service provided by Friendship Centres is resourced through the Life-long Care Program, which is delivered in 41 communities in Ontario and was able to serve 935 community members seeking local transportation services during the 2016/2017 fiscal year. However, the capacity of this program to provide transportation services is often exceeded by the third quarter of the fiscal year, based on internal program reporting. This increases the burden on Friendship Centre staff to try to fill local transportation gaps, and further limits access to services for community members.

This highlights the role of Friendship Centres in delivering supportive transportation services as well as the consistent demand for local transportation that exceeds their capacity to address local needs. With increased, sustainable support from the provincial government, the Friendship Centres' approach to addressing transportation needs through integrated programming is a model that can be expanded across Friendship Centre communities in Northern Ontario.

The role of Friendship Centres as providers of local community transportation should be leveraged and expanded as a key action of NOMTS, towards fulfilling NOMTS *Direction 1.2* to "Connect and improve community transportation services and make them available to more people."⁷ Further, the expansion of the Community Transportation Pilot Grant Program is another key NOMTS action that should be made more accessible for community organisations such as Friendship Centres in order to enhance its impact.

⁷ Ibid, 19

The Role of Transportation in Local Economies

Local transportation has a major role to play in creating community economic development opportunities. Through NOMTS, the MTO has a unique opportunity to invest directly into communities to address local transportation, one of the most significant gaps in Northern infrastructure. NOMTS *Direction 1.9*, which aims to increase and enhance economic opportunities for Indigenous peoples in government-related transportation projects, is a key priority for urban Indigenous communities.

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.

Urban Indigenous communities experience lower levels of postsecondary education completion and higher levels of unemployment, particularly Indigenous youth. In 2016, the unemployment rate of Indigenous youth (aged 15-24) in Ontario was 19.4 percent compared to 13.9 percent for the non-Indigenous youth population.⁸ For Indigenous adults (aged 25 years and older) in Ontario, the unemployment rate was 7.5 percent compared to 5.2 percent for their non-Indigenous counterparts in 2016.⁹ Further, Statistics Canada has found that when asked about barriers to employment, 39% of Indigenous respondents cited a lack of transportation as a major reason for not finding work.¹⁰ Transportation facilitates access to key services tied to overall wellbeing, such as healthcare, affordable housing, child care, education and training, and cultural programs. With improved community transportation, urban Indigenous community members will have improved access to pre-employment services, creating a clearer path to economic security and social inclusion.

While NOMTS speaks to the need to support economic activity in northern Ontario,¹¹ the MTO should develop specific actions to boost linkages between people, community agencies, education, and employers. NOMTS *Direction 1.9* on increasing and enhancing economic opportunities for Indigenous people, in the spirit of reconciliation, must entail a partnership approach with community urban Indigenous organisations, such as Friendship Centres, in developing culturally- and locally-driven solutions for gaps in transportation services. With a focus on developing the local labour force, social enterprise, and access to employers, NOMTS has an important opportunity to support

⁸ Statistics Canada. *Table 282-0226 - Labour force survey estimates (LFS), by Aboriginal group, sex and age group, Canada, selected provinces and regions, annual (persons unless otherwise noted)*, CANSIM (database)

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Statistics Canada, *The Education and Employment Experiences of First Nations People Living Off-Reserve, Inuit, and Métis: Selected findings from the 2012 Aboriginal Peoples Survey* (Ottawa, ON, Minister of Industry, 2013).

¹¹ Ministry of Transportation, *Draft 2041 Northern Ontario Multimodal Transportation Strategy* (Toronto, ON: Ministry of Transportation, 2017), 4

greater economic participation and meaningful community economic development in Friendship Centre communities.

As Aboriginal Skills and Employment Training Strategy (ASETS) agreement holders and deliverers of employment and training programming through Apatisiwin, Friendship Centres have frontline and programmatic experience in connecting job-seekers to training and employment opportunities. Yet, like most other Friendship Centre programs, clients repeatedly cite lack of access to transportation as one of the leading reasons for not being able to find a job or staying employed.

We are aware of similar conversations about the importance of promoting economic development in northern Ontario. The federal government has recently found that “economic growth in Northern Ontario is slow relative to the rest of Ontario and Canada as a whole,” and that there is a continued need for programs that support community-specific approaches to strengthen and diversify the region’s economy.¹² There is also a clear need to drive the transition to a knowledge economy, and the recognition that northern Ontario’s population and geographic characteristics create challenges for economic growth and program delivery.¹³ Transportation, both local and intercommunity, provides crucial links that fuel local economies and creates opportunities for a greater diversity of community members to participate economically.

At the community level, economic development looks like improved local transportation that increases access to key programs and services for Indigenous people. Not all economic development is large-scale in nature – investments into community organisations is an often overlooked and underestimated policy tool that can ultimately have significant impact and economic multiplier effects in a community, particularly for community members that have historically been marginalised yet continue to face poverty and multiple barriers to economic participation. Using a community economic development approach that emphasises the importance of community voice in meeting local social and economic needs is the type of inclusive approach to policymaking that NOMTS should adopt as a concrete step towards reconciliation with Indigenous communities.

Cultural and Ecological Intersections with Transportation

In the context of urban Indigenous communities, community economic development allows for people to pursue economic growth in locally- and culturally-driven ways. Principles of sustainability and respect for the environment are central to conceptions of well-being for many urban Indigenous communities. Cultural and ecological considerations around transportation impact urban Indigenous communities in different ways, highlighting the need for NOMTS to recognise the connections between reconciliation, sustainability, and the cultural needs of Friendship Centre communities.

¹² Innovation, Science and Economic Development Canada, *Northern Ontario Development Program: Final Evaluation Report* (Ottawa, ON: Innovation, Science and Economic Development Canada, 2016).

¹³ Ibid.

Lack of access to transportation services ultimately results in social exclusion, which can have detrimental effects for low-income community members, people with mental health issues or disabilities, those experiencing violence, youth, and seniors. This can compound barriers to accessing culture-based services, which are key to the well-being of urban Indigenous people.

Friendship Centres' priorities for transportation services include the use of sustainable vehicles that use renewable materials, in recognition of the connections between land, culture, and environment. At a recent engagement session, Friendship Centres voiced their concerns with modern society's short-sighted and oftentimes irresponsible treatment of the environment, while reminding the group of our collective responsibility to ensure that environmentally sustainable approaches are used, where possible, throughout the implementation of NOMTS.

NOMTS *Direction 5.1's* focus on reducing GHG emissions from car and truck transportation in northern Ontario, while decreasing reliance on non-renewable fuels and shifting to the use of electricity and lower-carbon fuels is an encouraging step forward. Community organisations such as Friendship Centres should be better-supported to participate in policy initiatives to improve environmental well-being.

The government's new Electric School Bus Pilot Program is a positive and practical step forward in reducing reliance on fossil-fuel powered vehicles. Initiatives such as these should be expanded to more communities in order to reduce GHG and other environmental and human health impacts, which aligns with NOMTS *Goal 5: Healthy and Sustainable*.

Utilising sustainable approaches to build up community transportation infrastructure and improving access to culturally-based local services is a key part of supporting the leadership of urban Indigenous communities and our self-determined ways of being.

Measuring Progress

To understand its impact on urban Indigenous communities, NOMTS must be accompanied by an outcomes measurement strategy that is developed in collaboration with the OFIFC and Friendship Centres. The OFIFC calls for the MTO to take a collaborative, partnership-based approach to the development of key performance indicators and outcomes specific to urban Indigenous communities in northern Ontario.

Urban Indigenous communities are key knowledge-holders regarding local and regional transportation issues, and have important lived experience that would enable a clearer picture of how the government can drive the improvement of northern Ontario's transportation system. Friendship Centres are well-positioned to support the MTO's effort to evaluate progress towards the proposed outcomes of the NOMTS. Working in collaboration with urban Indigenous communities to design the measurement of NOMTS is an important relationship-building exercise towards reconciliation that can enable more effective implementation of the forthcoming NOMTS Action Plan.

Recommendations

It is recommended that the MTO, through NOMTS and the forthcoming Action Plan:

1. Recognises and carefully considers the implications of the historical, social, and economic context in which urban Indigenous communities are situated as the NOMTS is finalised and plans for implementation are developed.
2. Recognises the role of Friendship Centres as providers of local community transportation by leveraging and expanding supportive transportation programming as a key action of NOMTS, towards fulfilling *Direction 1.2* to “Connect and improve community transportation services and make them available to more people.”¹⁴
3. Recognises that *Direction 1.9* on increasing and enhancing economic opportunities for Indigenous people, in the spirit of reconciliation, must entail a partnership-based approach with community urban Indigenous organisations, such as Friendship Centres, in developing culturally- and locally-driven solutions for gaps in transportation services.
4. Leverages NOMTS to support the development of northern Ontario’s local labour force and increased access to employers to support greater economic participation and meaningful community economic development in Friendship Centre communities.
5. Expands support and resources for local and intercommunity transportation services for people with disabilities.
6. Expands and improves transportation infrastructure in rural communities where roads and highways are not available or accessible.
7. Aligns the MTO’s Intercommunity Bus Modernisation Initiative with the NOMTS Action Plan to provide more adequate, safe, affordable passenger bus transportation options to Indigenous people in cities and towns.
8. Expands and improves access to the Community Transportation Pilot Grant Program for community organisations such as Friendship Centres in order to enhance its impact.
9. Expands and develops additional programming similar to the Electric School Bus Pilot Program in more communities in order to reduce greenhouse gas emissions and other environmental and human health impacts.

¹⁴ Ministry of Transportation, *Draft 2041 Northern Ontario Multimodal Transportation Strategy* (Toronto, ON: Ministry of Transportation, 2017), 19

10. Provides adequate support for weather-related evacuations through improved transportation infrastructure.