

2024 Age-Friendly Transit Consultation: Summary Report

Project Overview and Objectives

Funded by BC Healthy Communities' Age-Friendly Program, this project aimed to review a transit service on Gabriola Island and how it caters to the needs of the aging population. The Gabriola Community Bus Foundation (GCBF) sought to gather insights on the transportation habits, challenges, and desires of island residents, with a focus on the 44% of the population over the age of 65. The key objective was to engage the senior population in a meaningful consultation process to create a transit system that meets their specific needs, while aligning with sound operating practices. The data collected will inform GCBF's decision-making as it seeks to build a responsive, community-driven transit service.

Community Engagement: Methods and Scope

From May to September 2024, the project team undertook an extensive community engagement process using a combination of focus group meetings, public market booths, online surveys, and individual meetings. Engagement efforts included:

- Focus groups with GERTIE drivers, senior organizations, and community groups.
- Hosting information booths at Saturday and Sunday markets to gather anecdotal feedback and raise awareness.
- Online surveys targeting both riders and non-riders of GERTIE, with follow-up surveys to delve deeper into key issues.
- Direct consultations with non-profit organizations, local businesses, and community leaders.

Key events included attending senior group meetings like Palette People, Gabriola Quilters, and People for a Healthy Community (PHC) Seniors Luncheons, as well as engaging with organizations such as the Gabriola Recreation Society, The Hope Centre and the Gabriola Lands and Trails Trust.

What We Heard: Key Insights and Themes

1. Rider Experience and Perception

- **Diverse Rider Groups:** GERTIE serves various groups, including school students, seniors, commuters, tourists, and reverse commuters (workers traveling from Nanaimo).
- **Complaints:** Users cited confusion with the schedule, discomfort at the village bus stop due to social behavior, and concerns about the cleanliness and reliability of the buses. A recurring issue was the lack of flexibility in the schedule, which led to long waits between trips.
- **Community Building:** Despite challenges, GERTIE fosters a sense of community. Drivers know many riders by name, passengers socialize, and the bus serves as a critical resource for some residents.

2. Seniors' Transportation Barriers

- **Limited Freedom:** A primary barrier for seniors was the lack of flexibility in GERTIE's schedule, forcing them to plan entire days around bus availability.
- **Accessibility Concerns:** Many seniors noted that bus stops were too far from their homes, particularly in areas like Spring Beach and Whalebone. For those people within walking distance of the routes, people with mobility aids (e.g., walkers) expressed concerns arose over whether drivers could provide sufficient assistance.
- **Preference for Other Modes:** Some seniors expressed a preference for alternatives like e-bikes or using personal vehicles due to perceived limitations of GERTIE and a sense of personal freedom.

- **Desire for Event-Related Service:** There was significant interest in having transit services tied to local events, with shorter, more convenient trip durations.

3. Suggestions for Improvement

- **Bus Schedule and Routes:** Requests included simplifying the printed bus schedule, creating more frequent trips (e.g., hourly service), and developing dedicated routes for seniors, such as grocery runs and event-based services.
- **Promotional Ideas:** Suggestions included advertising GERTIE in Nanaimo, partnering with tourism boards, offering special charters for community events on Gabriola, and more advertising in general.
- **Community Involvement:** Several ideas focused on increasing community participation in the service, including Bus Buddy volunteers to help seniors navigate the system, and local fundraising campaigns.

4. Non-Profit and Business Consultation

- **Non-Profit Partnerships:** Conversations with organizations such as People for a Healthy Community (PHC) identified gaps in transportation services, particularly for seniors, and particularly for those with mobility limitations. Opportunities emerged to consider integrating GERTIE into local Non-Profit funding proposals for programs and activities.
- **Business Support:** Through the Gabriola Chamber of Commerce, discussions with local businesses explored the potential for sponsorship opportunities, including the creation of bus shelters. Several businesses expressed interest in formalizing partnerships with GERTIE to support local transit needs.

Lessons Learned

1. **Increased Awareness:** The consultation process revealed that many residents were unaware of GERTIE's services, particularly the wave/flag-down policy and the seasonal route changes. However, the community's appreciation for GERTIE became clear during the consultation, showing strong support for the service despite the barriers identified.

2. **Value of Community Engagement:** Collaborating with local community organizers allowed GERTIE to more easily engage age-friendly populations. By integrating consultation about transit services into existing social programs, the project gained richer insights into the community's needs.

3. **Bus Drivers as Key Stakeholders:** The drivers' feedback illuminated unique ideas for enhancing service, such as Bus Buddy volunteers and more localized routes. Their close relationships with riders revealed GERTIE's role in fostering social connections on the island, making it more than just a transit service.

4. **Ongoing Communication and Technology Needs:** The project highlighted the importance of clear, ongoing communication with the community, particularly in providing more accessible information about schedules and services. There was also interest in exploring technology solutions, such as real-time GPS tracking for buses and app-based ride requests.

Next Steps and Opportunities

With consideration of restricted budgets and few volunteers, GCBF Board is cautious about over promising GERTIE services to the community. However, these findings have influenced future planning to achieve a more robust service.

Moving forward, GERTIE plans to solicit more volunteers and funding to update its rider guide and continue refining its services based on the feedback gathered. Efforts will be made to improve communication with the community, expand partnerships with local non-profits and businesses, and explore technology grants to enhance service delivery. Additionally, the organization will consider launching fundraising initiatives to support further improvements.

This consultation has underscored the vital role GERTIE plays in connecting the community, and the organization is committed to evolving in response to the island's needs.