



Rural municipalities must have the trust of their residents and elected officials to sustain their transit services, making it important to demonstrate accountability through transparency. *Photo courtesy of the Municipality of North Grenville*

Foundation for sustainable rural transit

Lessons in good governance from North Grenville

by **Hillary Geneau and Mary King**

When a rural Ontario municipality of 18,000 people decided to launch public transit across 352 square kilometres in a community where there are no private taxi or ride share options, leaders knew transparency was essential to building trust and confidence in the service. Two years later, the Municipality of North Grenville's NGtransit has completed more than 25,000 rides, earned a national transportation achievement award, and become a model for rural communities across Canada.

With significant funding from the provincial gas tax, the municipality launched NGtransit in January 2024 to provide a service, available seven days a week, to residents of all ages and abilities. Riders book the service one of three ways: phone, online, or through the Blaise app. The cost of the service is \$5 per ride for adults and \$3 for youth (ages 12-19), with youth aged 11 and under riding for free.

NGtransit addresses a need that stretches beyond the municipality's borders.

According to the Affordability Action Council, less than two per cent of rural commuters in Canada use public transit to get to work and more than four million Canadians (approximately 10 per cent of the population) live in low-density areas with limited transportation options beyond personal vehicles.

Building a Foundation of Trust

NGtransit exemplifies how meaningful data and transparency are as integral to



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With significant funding from the provincial gas tax, North Grenville launched NGtransit to provide a service, available seven days a week, to residents of all ages and abilities. *Photo courtesy of the Municipality of North Grenville*

sustainable rural transit as buses, routes, and riders.

At a basic level, residents must see how their tax dollars are being used and trust that their council is making sound decisions. This is particularly important since rural transit economics can be challenging. NGtransit's fare recovery is only nine per cent, with a cost per ride of approximately \$45. Without context and data, these numbers invite criticism. But with transparency, they help to tell a story about serving residents who need transit most.

From the outset, the North Grenville council prioritized public accountability, and the transit program used two performance dashboards: a public-facing monthly dashboard showing performance metrics and an internal council dashboard with detailed operational

data. The public dashboard gets hundreds of visits per month, while the transit program page is the most-visited page on the municipal website.

The NGtransit public dashboard measures performance across six categories, with each telling a part of the story:

- **Trips** – Tracks trip status, rejection rates, average daily ridership, boardings per hour, and urban versus rural to monitor demand distribution across a large geographic area.
- **Financials** – Shows cost effectiveness and fare recovery rates with full transparency about the investment required.
- **Behaviour** – Details how people use the service, including booking methods, passenger types, payment methods, heat maps displaying geographic demand patterns, average

booking lead time, busiest days of the week, and whether riders request arrival or departure time.

- **Performance** – Reports on-time performance within the 15-minute pickup window, average passengers per vehicle, unique and new rider counts, and trip frequency by rider.
- **User experience** – Displays the average passenger rating (consistently holding at 4.7 out of 5).
- **System updates** – Communicates major changes, funding announcements, service expansions, and plans.

The dashboard has proven invaluable for responding to council inquiries. When the deputy mayor asked whether the program had defined goals or targets for assessing metrics, the internal dashboard provided specific thresholds:

- the expected rejection rate based on demand
- boardings per hour that would trigger service changes
- financial comparisons to similar systems

When council members asked whether data could be separated for a new commuter route, the dashboard allowed for a new section that tracks commuter service separately and gives the requested cost-per-ride visibility. This data-driven approach has been essential as the service evolves to meet community needs.

North Grenville's Transit Evolution

The decision to pursue on-demand service rather than fixed routes was data-informed from the start. Council required a commitment that the program serve all 18,000 residents, not just the 33 per cent in the urban core.

Starting in January 2024, the on-demand service used real-time ride optimization technology and mostly small, accessible vehicles that do not require a commercial driver's license. The Promaster, V10, and G5 vans operate seven days a week with full wheelchair accessibility.

The service has evolved through feedback, including extending hours until 10 p.m. Monday through Saturday, based on demand data. Boarding times were adjusted to accommodate mobility needs following rider feedback, and ticket bundles were introduced to improve affordability, with 10 rides costing \$45 for adults versus \$5 per single fare.

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Free fare partnerships were established with Ontario Works, and the program is shifting toward integration with the Ontario Disability Support Program.

In September 2025, NGtransit expanded to a commuter service, connecting to Ottawa's Light Rail Transit system at Limebank Station. The service now operates with two vehicles and a backup, has completed more than 25,000 rides, and received national recognition for innovation in rural transit with the Transportation Association of Canada's Small Municipalities Achievement Award.

"Before NGtransit, the only option I had to get to work in Kemptville from Ottawa was a ride from a co-worker," said Blessing Umoh, a NGtransit rider. "They have great customer service and experienced and friendly drivers. The service is also consistent and very reasonably priced."

Eight Strategies from North Grenville's Experience

Two years of operations have generated lessons during each stage of the process to help other municipalities improve their approach to transit.

1. Secure top-tier support from the start

Support from elected officials ripples out to both staff and residents.

In North Grenville, transit is one of only two service areas required by council to provide monthly updates. This is a sign of importance that helped to sustain momentum through challenges.

2. Transit planning is not a one-and-done

A commitment to iterative improvement ensures progress and impact.

The service transitions from monthly council reporting to quarterly as year-over-year data accumulates. The dashboard also evolves, shifting to year-over-year comparisons rather than month-to-month displays.

3. Right-size your solution to your reality

Geographic area matters enormously. With 352 square kilometers to serve, fixed routes would have left most North Grenville residents unserved.

The system considers fixed routes only when specific areas reach approximately

four boardings per hour. Dashboard heat maps and trip distribution data show when that threshold is reached.

4. A successful transit service requires an internal champion

Without a dedicated staff champion, a new transit service is likely to stagnate. This may require reorganizing roles or adding transit to an existing portfolio.

The champion maintains the data, communicates with council members and the public, and drives continuous improvement.

5. Put people and processes in place before purchasing software

Technology is crucial, but implementing software without the right organizational structure will stall progress.

Determine who will manage data, how decisions get made, and what reporting cadence makes sense – then select tools that support those processes.

6. Communicate frequently about the service

The internal champion needs ongoing communication channels with council, staff, and the public.

This is not one-time education but a sustained effort to help people understand how on-demand service works differently from fixed routes.

7. Use a public dashboard as accountability to multiple stakeholders

North Grenville's public dashboard serves residents but proves equally valuable for provincial funding applications.

Ontario's gas tax allocations are formula-based on population, ridership, and municipal contribution. NGtransit's transparent data helped secure \$719,000 in 2025 from the Ontario Transit Investment Fund for the commuter service expansion.

Provincial staff requested dashboard access because their traditional data collection methods did not fully capture how on-demand rural transit operates.

8. Public visibility of progress creates community advocates

When critics on social media question costs, satisfied riders increasingly share their experiences unprompted.

The data gives them confidence to speak up. Council members can reference the

dashboard rather than getting into arguments, and gradually the narrative shifts from “too expensive” to “essential service.”

Trust Through Transparency

North Grenville’s transit program demonstrates that rural transit is essential infrastructure. Consider that one-in-five Canadians live in rural communities that represent 30 per cent of Canada’s gross domestic product. The federal government announced in 2024 a \$30 billion Canada Public Transit Fund over 10 years, while Ontario’s Rural Transit Solutions Fund provided \$3.7 million to 17 recipients in December 2025.

There are other signs of growing interest in rural transit. At least a dozen communities have examined the municipality’s transit program, and the public

dashboard has become a benchmarking tool for other municipalities. And in March 2025, the Ontario Transit Expo featured its first-ever panel exclusively focused on small rural systems.

Rural municipalities must have the trust of their residents and elected officials to sustain their transit services, making it important to demonstrate accountability through transparency. Data-driven decision making, supported by accessible public dashboards, is one of the most effective ways to show – rather than tell – communities how transit investments are working.

The cost per ride will always seem high compared to urban systems, and the fare recovery will always be lower. But, when residents can see who benefits, how service improves over time, and what

the actual investment is after provincial subsidies, the conversation changes from “Can we afford this?” to “How can we expand this?”

For North Grenville, transparency is not merely good governance, it is the foundation for making rural transit sustainable, turning abstract concerns about costs into concrete evidence of community impact.



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