



Modernizing Transit in the RDCK: A New Framework for the Future

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Public transit in the Regional District of Central Kootenay (RDCK) is entering a new era, with a newly adopted framework aimed at making services more transparent, equitable, and responsive to community needs.

For many years, transit funding across the region was based on a patchwork of historic funding formulas and legacy agreements, with no clear or consistent framework for sharing costs or measuring benefits. This made service changes – such as adding new routes – difficult to discuss, often leading to uncertainty around cost, fairness, and priorities.

Recognizing these challenges, the RDCK Board took steps in 2023 to modernize rural transit governance. The West Transit Services Committee (WTSC) was established, bringing together impacted elected officials from Castlegar, Kaslo, Nelson, New Denver, Salmo, Silvertown, Slocan, Nakusp, and Electoral Areas A, D, E, F, G, H, I, J, and K to guide the work.

From the outset, the committee agreed that meaningful change required returning to first principles.

Building a Shared Understanding

The RDCK undertook a comprehensive review of the transit system. Through in-depth interviews with elected officials, RDCK staff, transit partners, plus extensive follow up discussions with the WTSC, the focus shifted away from maintaining historic funding formulas towards a values-based approach to funding. This work led to a clear conclusion: public transit in the RDCK is fundamentally a social service. While environmental and economic benefits remain important, the primary purpose of transit is to connect residents—especially those unable to drive—to healthcare, education, employment, and community life.

This was translated into a set of guiding principles:

- Transit connects people to essential services and community life,
- Services must be reliable and frequent enough to be usable,
- Success should be measured both quantitatively (ridership) and qualitatively (community outcomes),
- Funding must be transparent, equitable, and clearly understood,
- Those who benefit should contribute, while ensuring access for those who need it most.

These principles became the foundation for both governance and funding decisions.

Designing a New Funding Framework

Transit funding is a shared responsibility between the Province of British Columbia and the Local Governments participating in public transit services. Through BC Transit the Provincial Government funds approximately half of all transit services in the Regional District with the other half being funded by local government. While the funding framework for the Provincial Government is enshrined in the Transit Act, the Regional District has the discretion, under the Local Government Act, to develop its own approach to sharing local government transit costs.

In 2025, this principles-based approach was used to develop a new cost-sharing model for rural transit services. Bringing together 17 jurisdictions with varying service levels and needs was a significant challenge, but the process remained grounded in clarity, transparency, and equity.

The committee established clear objectives for the new model:

- Simplify and clearly document funding methods,
- Strengthen the connection between service levels and costs,
- Make cost allocation understandable to both decision-makers and the public,
- Use multiple factors to reflect the diverse benefits of transit.

A key outcome of this work was the recognition that the RDCK transit system is not one uniform service, but a network of distinct service types.

A Three-Part Service Model

The WTSC identified three main types of transit services:

- **Regional Connector:** The #99 Kootenay Connector forms the backbone of the system.
- **Conventional Services:** Routes like the #20 Slocan and #10 North Shore run frequently on fixed schedules.
- **Paratransit Services:** These serve rural and remote areas, offering limited but essential access to larger centers.

Because each service operates differently, their costs are shared in different ways.

- **Regional Connector costs** are split based on population, since it benefits both rural and urban users. This share is adjusted based on how much access each community has to the service. For example, someone in Area D/Kaslo can access about 15% of trips, while someone in Nelson can access all of them.
- **Conventional Service costs** are based on ridership. Since these routes run frequently and serve many passengers, costs are distributed according to how much each area uses them.
- **Paratransit Service costs** are shared equally among participating communities. For example, the City of Nelson pays for all HandyDART services within its boundaries.

The resulting apportionment combines each jurisdiction's share across all three service types, giving elected officials a clear picture of what their residents fund via taxation.

From Complexity to Clarity

This funding model is based on a simple principle: you get what you pay for, and if you want more service, you contribute more. Costs reflect actual use and access, ensuring that communities see value in what they fund.

At the same time, the framework allows for existing transit hours to be reallocated where they can have the greatest impact, improving service without necessarily increasing overall costs.

By aligning funding with usage and priorities, the model supports more efficient use of resources and better decision-making, helping staff deliver services that match community needs.

Adoption and Looking Forward

In March 2026, the RDCK Board formally adopted the updated transit service bylaws, making the new cost apportionment model the official framework for rural transit services. Implementation work is now underway, with future service discussions guided by this modernized approach.

The work has also attracted attention from BC Transit and other local governments as a model for transparent, values-based transit governance. Tom Dool, who manages public transit in the RDCK, was recognized by BC Transit as a Transit SuperStar for his leadership in delivering services across a large and complex region.

Most importantly, this work demonstrates how regional collaboration can succeed. Despite differing priorities and service levels, communities across the RDCK were able to come together around a shared understanding of transit's role.

With this foundation in place, the RDCK is well positioned to move forward—enhancing service, adapting to changing needs, and ensuring residents remain connected to essential services and opportunities.

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