



transportation

Bathurst city bus service viable

City of Bathurst, New Brunswick

Green Municipal Fund Case Study



The Bathurst transit team and one of its buses (Photo: City of Bathurst).

Urban Transit Test Project (GMEF 7026)

Date project completed: April 2006

Total project value: \$404,500

GMF grant: \$179,500

- Local demand and climate change commitments prompt pilot bus service
- Three buses run for almost 10 months
- Popular system projected to cut 168 tonnes of emissions annually
- Project stalls over lack of funding

OVERVIEW The City of Bathurst explored public transit options in response to local demand and to help meet its commitment under the Partners for Climate Protection (PCP) program, a partnership between the Federation of Canadian Municipalities and ICLEI — Local Governments for Sustainability. The system was projected to cut 168 tonnes of greenhouse gas emissions annually. The project showed that it is feasible for the city to implement a small transit service, consisting of two main routes and three buses. The project was undertaken on the understanding that the system would not require municipal funding. But it was put on hold after the study showed it was unable to cover its operating costs.

PROJECT TEAM

City of Bathurst

Bathurst Sustainable Development

CONTEXT Bathurst, with a population of about 13,000 on the northeast coast of New Brunswick, committed to reducing greenhouse gas emissions as a member of the Partners for Climate Protection program. Setting up a transit service was seen as a way to cut emissions. It was also seen as a way to serve people who do not have cars. The ability of middle- and low-wage earners to afford a car has eroded in recent years and soaring fuel prices are increasing the cost. There are also many citizens, particularly the elderly, who have challenges that prevent them from being able to drive. Transit was seen as a way to help both groups. In addition, Bathurst's population has been declining for the last 10 years. Maintaining and growing the population will take innovative ideas and competitive basic services such as public transit.

APPROACH Before launching the project, the city commissioned Bathurst Sustainable Development, a non-profit community group, to conduct a feasibility study to set certain guidelines, including average fares, a service level covering 80 per cent of the city and an



A GMF Case Study



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understanding that the system would not receive city funding.

Three 1999 semi-refurbished, 42-seat buses were leased from Dupont Industries, which provided maintenance, driver and staff training, and technical assistance. Two buses were designated for regular service. The third was kept in reserve for peak periods and to act as a replacement during breakdowns. The first month of service, June 2006, was free for riders. The service was expected to run for 10 months.

Three system options were considered. Option one, which lasted from July to September, was a mix of hourly and 30-minute service operating from 7 a.m. to 7 p.m. on weekdays. This was seen as the most viable option in terms of costs and benefits. Option two began in September with 30-minute service all day on weekdays and hourly Saturday service. Option three, slated to begin in mid-March, would have consisted of one bus on hourly service. This option was not explored because of a funding shortfall.

RESULTS The system served 3,000 riders per month at its peak, enough to make the system viable according to data from the Canadian Urban Transit Association. However, the city would need extra funding to help cover its operating costs.

The project showed public transit could decrease greenhouse gas emissions and improve air quality. It demonstrated a demand for affordable transit. It was also seen as an economic development tool that could potentially encourage employers to invest in the region and keep people from moving to larger centres with more accessible services. Some city stores noticed a drop in customers after the bus service was stopped.

Riders were stable and firm supporters of the service, and the atmosphere on the buses was described as a “community in motion.” Many riders expressed their sense of freedom at finally having transportation that they could afford. However, some community members were against the project. They said buses were too expensive to run and were too big for the streets.

NEXT STEPS Bathurst Sustainable Development is continuing to work with city council to see if they can lobby the provincial and federal governments to change the gas tax rules to allow some of the funds to be used for operating expenses. If funding is secured, a weekday service with a 30- to 60-minute schedule will be implemented. The team also recommends that system management be delegated to a municipal commission.

LESSONS LEARNED “It’s important to have people with experience running a public transit system. It was a big learning curve for us,” said André Doucet, the city manager. “You also need to have all your funding lined up. It’s not realistic to expect a small system to pay for itself in the first few years.”

While Bathurst was able to lease buses, Doucet cautions that this is a tough proposition for pilot projects. “Rarely do transit bus companies lease buses for just a one-year period. Most bus companies either want you to purchase the buses or finance the purchase through the municipality over a five- to 10-year period.”

Critics of the project said smaller buses would have been less disruptive for traffic. But Doucet pointed out that as ridership grows, more of the smaller buses would be needed. This would inflate operating costs, since they would need double the fuel, double the insurance, double the wages and double the maintenance costs.

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ADDITIONAL RESOURCES To read the full report or to learn about other GMF-funded initiatives, please visit the GMF website at www.fcm.ca/gmf or contact us at 613-907-6208 or at gmf@fcm.ca.

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Federation of Canadian Municipalities

About the Green Municipal Fund

The Government of Canada endowed the Federation of Canadian Municipalities (FCM) with \$550 million to establish the Green Municipal Fund™ (GMF). The Fund provides low-interest loans and grants, builds capacity, and shares knowledge to support municipal governments and their partners in developing communities that are more environmentally, socially and economically sustainable.

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