

Cranbrook Golden Passenger Rail Feasibility Study

Bhavya Kandhari

Integrated Travels

Economic Development & Tourism Data Analyst

1 Abstract

The Cranbrook-Golden corridor in Southeastern British Columbia lacks reliable passenger connectivity despite strong tourism flows and seasonal demand. This feasibility study reveals a counterintuitive finding: traditional weekday commuter trains will not work here. Census data show minimal inter-municipal work trips between Cranbrook [11] and Golden (3,986) [12], challenging conventional transit assumptions.

Instead, the opportunity lies in tourism and seasonal travel. Synthesizing 2021 Census community profiles [11][12] and travel-to-work flows, Tourism Golden stakeholder insights [14] and regional tourism profiles, we identify three viable service concepts: a targeted weekday Cranbrook-Kimberley commuter pilot, a Summer Connector for peak tourist season, and a Winter Weekend Express aligned with ski traffic patterns [15][16].

These concepts respond to the corridor’s distinctive characteristics—widely spaced anchor towns, seasonal visitor economies, and weekend-heavy travel patterns that differ fundamentally from urban commuter models. Triangulating Tourism Golden’s 2023 stakeholder survey [14], regional value-of-tourism estimates, and Destination BC’s Kootenay Rockies profile [6], we outline preliminary performance indicators, indicative schedules, and potential funding pathways through regional infrastructure and tourism development programs[5].

This working paper established baseline feasibility for staged pilot testing. The next steps include validating seasonal demand patterns with additional datasets, refining cost-sharing models, and engaging operating partners to match service design with corridor-specific constraints and opportunities.

2 Introduction

2.1 Context & Opportunity

Southeastern British Columbia’s tourism economy generates significant annual revenue, yet visitors and workers struggle with unreliable winter road access between major corridor communities. The Cranbrook-Golden corridor connects different towns that play complementary roles in the region’s economy, labor markets, and tourism system—but getting be-

tween them safely and reliably, especially during peak seasons, remains a challenge.

Recent regional profiles and Tourism Golden reporting show sustained tourism significance with pronounced seasonal peaks, while housing and workforce constraints challenge business continuity and service delivery[16]. Could rail or seasonal shuttle services solve this connectivity gap? And if so, what kind of service would work?

This working paper reveals a counterintuitive finding: there are not enough daily commuters to justify traditional weekday transit. Census commuting flow data [13] show that regular inter-municipal work trips between corridor communities are relatively low. The real opportunity lies elsewhere—in tourism-driven travel, weekend trips, and seasonal demand patterns that differ fundamentally from conventional urban transit models.

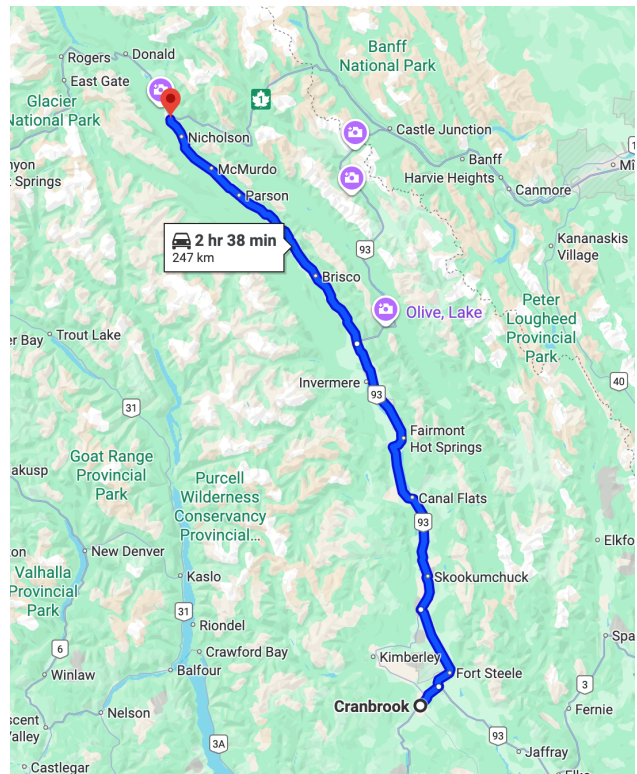


Figure 1: Cranbrook-Golden corridor map.

2.2 The Problem with Road-Only Access

Road-based travel dominates today’s inter-community movement, but this creates vulnerabilities. The combination of seasonal traffic surges, winter weather reliability concerns, and limited public transport options introduces access and safety issues during peak periods—precisely when tourists, seasonal workers, and local businesses need reliable connectivity most.

Understanding baseline demand and mobility patterns is essential before committing to any infrastructure investment. A staged approach—beginning with lower-cost connector pilots and advancing toward rail only where warranted—can test actual uptake, refine performance metrics, and reduce financial risk for communities and funders alike.

2.3 What This Paper Does

This working paper pursues three objectives:

- **Establish corridor context:** Using 2021 Census data and regional tourism sources to understand population scale, economic roles, and seasonal patterns [14, 15, 16, 6, 13, 11, 12, 10, 9].
- **Analyze commute and connectivity baselines:** Identify realistic service niches—where demand exists rather than where conventional transit planning assumes it should [13, 11, 12].
- **Outline preliminary service concepts:** Present indicative schedules, performance indicators, and staging strategies that align with corridor constraints and opportunities [14, 15, 16, 6, 13, 7].

The intent is to provide a decision-oriented foundation for engagement with operating partners and funders grounded in evidence rather than assumptions.

2.4 Core Questions

We examine three questions that challenge conventional transit thinking:

- **Who travels this corridor?** 2021 Census profiles reveal population scale, structure, and labour characteristics across communities, while journey-to-work data shows actual commuting patterns rather than assumed ones [11, 12, 13].
- **What does tourism demand look like?** Tourism Golden and Destination BC sources

characterize visitor volumes, seasonality windows, and industry constraints that shape viable service design [6, 14, 15, 16].

- **Which service concepts match real demand?** Rather than force-fitting urban commuter models, we identify preliminary concepts aligned with observed demand windows, operational feasibility, and staging opportunities—along with potential funding pathways for pilots and scale-up [6, 14, 15, 16, 13, 4].

2.5 Scope & Audience

This paper focuses on near-term, pilot-ready concepts that can be tested under corridor constraints. Heavy engineering design, detailed cost estimation, and regulatory approvals are out of scope for this initial assessment and will be addressed in subsequent phases as evidence accumulates.

The primary audience includes municipal and regional policymakers, transportation planners, tourism organizations, potential operating partners, and funders evaluating early-stage opportunities.

3 Research Approach

This study combines official government statistics with tourism industry insights to answer a straightforward question: who travels the Cranbrook–Golden corridor, when do they travel, and what kind of service would match real demand patterns?

Our approach unfolds in four steps:

- **Step 1: Establish baseline context.** We examine who lives in these communities, what their economies look like, and how they are structured, using 2021 Census profiles for Cranbrook and Golden [11, 12].
- **Step 2: Measure existing travel patterns.** We analyze Statistics Canada’s journey-to-work commuting flows to understand how people move between communities today [13].
- **Step 3: Identify demand windows.** We use Tourism Golden’s stakeholder surveys and regional tourism profiles to pinpoint when travel peaks occur and where service gaps are most pronounced [14, 15, 16, 6].
- **Step 4: Sketch preliminary service concepts.** We develop service ideas aligned with the strongest demand windows—designed for pilot testing rather than massive upfront investment [14, 15, 16, 6, 13, 11, 12, 4].

This approach emphasizes policy realism- services scaled to corridor constraints, staged pilots that test assumptions before scaling up, and transparent documentation so other communities can adapt our methods. All data processing steps, intermediate calculations, and source files are cataloged in the project repository for reproducibility.

4 Literature Review

5 Corridor Overview

5.1 Geographic Setting and Transportation Context

The Cranbrook–Golden corridor spans approximately 250 km along Highways 93/95 through mountainous terrain with variable winter conditions (snow, ice, avalanche controls) that intermittently constrain road reliability. Typical driving time is on the order of 2.75–3.25 hours, with greater variance in winter. This geography sharpens the difference between essential inter-community trips (healthcare, government, education, airport access) and discretionary/leisure travel (ski and summer visitation), and concentrates the peak demand for travel in seasonal and weekend windows—precisely when ski tourism generates peak demand [6, 11, 12].

Cranbrook anchors the southern corridor with regional airport access and essential services for surrounding communities, while Golden anchors the northern end as a tourist gateway to Kicking Horse Mountain Resort and national parks, with a local economy centered on accommodation, food services and outdoor recreation [11, 12].

5.2 Cranbrook: Regional Service Hub

Cranbrook serves as the corridor’s largest community with a 2021 population of 20,499, functioning as a regional hub for healthcare, education, government services, and retail. It provides access to Canadian Rockies International Airport (YXC) with scheduled service to major hubs (e.g., Calgary and Vancouver), supporting business travel and tourism access.

Demographics and workforce: Age structure shows a relatively older profile (Median Age ~ 45.2 years; 0–14: $\sim 14.7\%$; 65+: $\sim 23.8\%$), with labor force participation around $\sim 61.7\%$ and unemployment near $\sim 7.4\%$ (2021). Housing is generally more affordable than British Columbia’s larger urban centres, though rents and prices have trended upward since 2020. Relative to provincial averages, Cranbrook remains comparatively attainable for ownership, with pockets of rental tightness [11].

Indicator	Value
Population (2021)	20,499
Median age	45.2 years
Age 0–14 share	14.7%
Age 65+ share	23.8%
Population density	$\sim 641/\text{km}^2$
Private dwellings	9,058
Labour force participation	61.7%
Unemployment rate	7.4%
Median total income (2020)	\$41,200

Table 1: Cranbrook 2021 Census key indicators (Statistics Canada, 2021).

As the southern anchor, Cranbrook is the likely origin point for worker and resident trips requiring specialized services (e.g., medical) and for visitors arriving by air seeking onward ground connections into the Kootenay Rockies, creating potential for tourism-arrival linkages [11].

5.3 Golden: Mountain Tourism Gateway

Golden contrasts sharply as a smaller tourism-focused community of 3,986 (2021), with a pronounced economic dependency on seasonal visitor flows and the accommodation/food services sector [12, 14, 16].

- Seasonal character:** Unlike Cranbrook’s more diversified year-round economy, Golden’s activity exhibits strong winter (Dec–Mar) and summer (Jun–Sep) peaks, with shoulder seasons (Apr–May; Oct–Nov) significantly lighter. This seasonality implies that demand for any inter-community passenger service will align with weekend and holiday windows rather than assumptions of uniform year-round travel [14, 15, 16, 13].
- Housing pressures:** With only $\sim 1,892$ private dwellings (occupied $\sim 1,734$), limited stock and tourism-season demand create persistent pressure on affordability and availability. Employers consistently identify housing as a top operational constraint for recruitment and retention [14, 16, 12].
- Tourism infrastructure:** Kicking Horse Mountain Resort anchors winter visitation (lift-served alpine skiing) and supports a summer recreation economy (gondola access, hiking, biking). This four-season asset—combined with Golden’s access to national parks—underpins

the corridor’s tourism-led demand profile [15, 16].

Indicator	Value
Population (2021)	3,986
Median age	39.6 years
Age 0–14 share	15.9%
Age 65+ share	15.9%
Population density	351.9/km ²
Private dwellings	1,892
Occupied private dwellings	1,734
Labour force participation	69.4%
Unemployment rate	7.0%

Table 2: Golden 2021 Census key indicators (Statistics Canada, 2021).

5.4 Economic Inter-dependencies and Travel Drivers

The communities function as a loosely integrated system rather than isolated nodes, creating travel patterns that inform service design:

1. **Service dependencies:** Residents in Golden and surrounding communities travel south to Cranbrook for higher-order healthcare, government services, and retail; Cranbrook residents and visitors travel north on weekends for ski tourism and summer recreation. Journey-to-work data indicate that strictly “daily commuter” travel between the two anchors is limited relative to intra-regional commuting within each labor market [11, 12, 13].
2. **Airport access:** Cranbrook’s airport provides regional connectivity; a portion of winter visitors arriving by air could form a weekend transfer market into Golden/Kicking Horse (Fri PM northbound/Sun PM southbound).
3. **Visitor flows:** Destination BC’s Kootenay Rockies profile and Tourism Golden reporting highlight concentrated winter/summer visitor peaks, reinforcing a design bias toward weekend/holiday patterns and seasonal operations [6, 16].

5.5 Census Indicators: Corridor Context Summary

1. **Population scale:** Cranbrook’s 20,499 provides approximately five times the resident base of

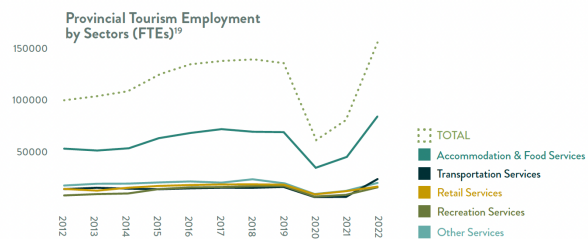


Figure 2: Provincial tourism employment by sector (FTEs), 2012–2022 [6].

Golden’s 3,986, shaping origin–destination roles, viable service frequencies, and cost structures appropriate to corridor scale [11, 12].

2. **Economic structure:** Cranbrook shows higher concentrations in health care, education, public administration, construction, and retail; Golden shows higher concentrations in accommodation/food services and arts/recreation tied to tourism. This mix suggests weekday commuter demand between the anchors is modest, while weekend/seasonal tourism movements dominate inter-anchor discretionary travel, a pattern misaligned with conventional Monday–Friday commuter service [11, 12].
3. **Housing and affordability:** Cranbrook’s larger housing stock (~9,058 private dwellings) supports a more stable, year-round labor market with comparatively better affordability than British Columbia’s major urban centres; Golden’s smaller stock (~1,892 dwellings) and seasonal pressures constrain workforce housing and amplify peak-season scarcity—affecting recruitment/retention and reinforcing the case for targeted, seasonal service rather than daily fixed-route commuting assumptions [11, 12].

5.6 Implications for Service Design

1. **Scale constraints:** Together, the two communities doesn’t have a combined population high enough to support a year-round fixed-route service. A more realistic approach is to focus on specific high-demand periods—winter weekends and the summer peak—rather than trying to run comprehensive daily service [11, 12].
2. **Tourism as primary opportunity:** Golden’s tourism dependency and Cranbrook’s airport/services role point to a weekend-focused,

seasonal offering (e.g., Friday evening northbound, Sunday afternoon/evening southbound in winter; selective summer weekends) rather than weekday commuting as the primary market [14, 15, 16].

3. **Housing–transport linkage:** Workforce housing constraints in Golden elevate the value of reliable peak-season mobility for staff movement on specific turnover days; however, current commuting flows remain small, implying limited viability for a pure commuter service without integrating tourism demand and timed transfers [14, 16, 13].
4. **Geographic spread:** The corridor’s ~250 km length and mountainous driving conditions make high-frequency service operationally and financially challenging; a seasonal, limited-frequency model focused on peak periods is more realistic at this distance [16].

6 Tourism & Labor Mobility

6.1 Tourism Demand Patterns

Golden’s economy revolves around visitor flows following pronounced seasonal rhythms that create both opportunity and constraint for corridor connectivity. Understanding when visitors arrive, where they originate, and what they do shapes transportation service viability.

1. **Visitor volumes and economic impact:** Tourism Golden’s 2023 Value of Tourism reports approximately \$169.4 million in direct visitor spending in 2023, generating \$146.5 million in GDP, \$234.6 million in domestic output, \$58.6 million in tax revenue, and supporting 2,386 jobs across accommodation, food services, recreation, and retail. These figures underscore tourism as Golden’s economic foundation and the primary driver of corridor travel demand [15].
2. **Summer peak (June–September):** Summer represents Golden’s strongest visitation period, driven by mountain biking, whitewater rafting, hiking, and access to Yoho and Glacier national parks. The 2024–25 Annual Report notes overnight visitors comprise ~82% of visit types overall and highlights strong summer leisure patterns; average party size ~3 and average overnight length of stay ~1 nights (survey year) with private home rentals (Airbnb/VRBO) used by 28% of parties overall and 39% in winter.

Spending by Category 2024³⁰

	Accommodation	27%
	Recreation & Entertainment	26%
	Food and Beverage	25%
	Transportation	18%
	Retail	4%

Figure 3: Visitor spending by category in 2024[6].

Peak-weekend accommodation occupancy is reported qualitatively as “high” in operator feedback; advance bookings are concentrated around school holidays and long weekends [16].

3. **Winter peak (December–March):** Kicking Horse Mountain Resort anchors winter visitation, with peaks around Christmas/New Year, Family Day, and March break. The ski season typically runs early December to early April (varies by year/conditions). Winter draws higher shares of primary-destination visitors and heavier reliance on private-home rentals (39%) [16].
4. **Shoulder seasons (April–May, October–November):** Visitation drops substantially in shoulders as winter operations wind down and before summer begins; many businesses reduce hours or temporarily close, affecting workforce cash flow and retention. Any corridor service must reflect these valleys rather than assume uniform year-round demand [16, 14].
5. **Visitor origins and travel modes:** Surveyed market origin mix shows material shares from BC, Alberta, other Canada, USA, and overseas; BC and Alberta together account for the largest portion of visitors. Overnight stays = 82% / Day trips = 18%. Most arrive by private vehicle; a smaller share fly to nearby airports (e.g., YXC Cranbrook) and require ground transfer. Weekend visitors tend to arrive Friday evening and depart Sunday afternoon, creating concentrated

demand windows misaligned with weekday commuter service [6, 16].

6. **Key tourism infrastructure:** Kicking Horse Mountain Resort (significant vertical and advanced terrain) positions Golden as a premier BC ski destination; summer operations include mountain biking, via ferrata, and the Grizzly Bear Refuge. The Kicking Horse River provides Class III–IV rafting May–September. Trail networks support hiking/biking, and Golden’s location provides access to six national parks within a practical driving radius, reinforcing strong summer/winter draws [6, 15, 16].

6.2 Seasonal Workforce Dynamics

Tourism’s seasonality creates pronounced workforce fluctuations that challenge businesses and shape labour-mobility needs.

1. **Employment scale and fluctuation:** Tourism Golden’s economic impact accounting attributes ~2,386 jobs (2023) to tourism activity. Off-season levels are materially lower, implying significant swings even if a precise off-season headcount isn’t published in the provided sources [15, 16].
2. **Workforce sourcing challenges:** Businesses recruit from:
 - Residents
 - Canadian seasonal workers
 - International workers on temporary visas
 - Potential commuters from other communities.

Stakeholder survey results identify labour as a top constraint, with 51% citing labour availability among key barriers; housing pressures are even more acute [14].

3. **Current commuting patterns:** Journey-to-work data show modest inter-municipal flows between Golden and other corridor communities. The ~250 km/~3.25 hr one-way travel time from Cranbrook to Golden, winter conditions, and fuel costs constrain daily commuting feasibility for lower-wage roles. Employers report long-distance commuters often burn out or seek housing closer to Golden [13].

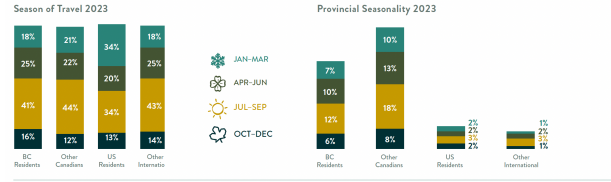


Figure 4: Season of travel and provincial seasonality by visitor origin, 2023 [6].

6.3 The Housing Transportation Labor Nexus

Three interrelated constraints form a cycle that undermines Golden’s tourism economy and defines the narrow lane where transportation can help.

1. **Housing constraint:** Golden’s housing stock comprises 1,892 private dwellings (occupied ~1,734) with persistent shortages during peak seasons; the stakeholder survey flags housing affordability (84%) and housing shortage/availability (79%) as the top barriers. Median prices/rents are not published in the provided files; however, business feedback and reduced operating capacity in peak season indicate effective vacancy is extremely tight for workforce units [14].
2. **Transportation constraint:** With limited housing in Golden, living in more affordable communities (e.g., Cranbrook) and commuting faces barriers: no scheduled public transit connects the corridor; private vehicle costs (fuel/insurance/maintenance) squeeze entry-level wages; the ~500 km round trip (~5.5–6.5 hrs) plus winter conditions adds safety and reliability concerns [6].
3. **Labour constraint:** Without attainable housing or practical commuting options, potential workers don’t apply, accept elsewhere, or churn quickly. Stakeholders report reduced hours, turning away customers, and delayed openings due to staffing shortfalls—directly constraining revenue during peak demand [14].
4. **Stakeholder evidence:** The 2023 Stakeholder Survey documents these patterns explicitly: 84% housing affordability, 79% housing shortage/availability, 60% transportation to Golden, 52% transportation within Golden, and 51% labour availability cited as barriers. Support for using MRDT toward housing initiatives is ~79% for options that benefit tourism, with similarly

strong support for broader affordable/workforce housing initiatives [14].

5. **Existing coping mechanisms:** Businesses report mixed strategies—limited staff housing, wage premiums/bonuses, ad-hoc employee shuttles, and reduced hours or delayed seasonal openings—none of which fully resolves the structural constraints [14, 16].

6.4 Current Mobility Options and Service Gaps

Understanding existing transportation and gaps clarifies the opportunity space for new concepts.

1. **Private vehicle dominance:** Most corridor travel occurs via private automobile. Highway 93/95 is the sole continuous route with ~2.75–3.25 hr typical Cranbrook–Golden travel time under normal conditions; reliability degrades in winter [6].
2. **Intercity bus service:** No scheduled intercity bus service currently operates end-to-end on the Cranbrook–Golden corridor in the provided materials. Historical services in similar rural corridors struggled with low ridership and seasonality[1].
3. **Informal networks:** Operators occasionally arrange guest or employee shuttles, but these are ad-hoc, limited-capacity, and not publicly available. Rides are often organized through personal networks, with low reliability [1, 14].
4. **Air-to-ground connection gap:** Visitors flying into Cranbrook (YXC) face a ~250 km / ~3 hr ground transfer to Golden/resort. Rental cars provide flexibility but add cost and require winter-driving confidence; some accommodations coordinate shuttles, but coverage is not universal [16].
5. **Winter reliability concerns:** Closures/controls, ice, and avalanche risk on 93/95 introduce unpredictability during peak ski season—precisely when visitors/workers most need reliable access. Operators report weather-driven impacts even with generally strong maintenance [16].
6. **First/last-mile challenges:** Even with a corridor connector, passengers still need Golden-side distribution (resort/accommodations) and Cranbrook-side airport/city links. Without these, corridor service utility is limited [2, 16].

6.5 Peak Demand Windows and Travel Patterns

Viable concepts must align with actual travel demand rather than generic transit schedules.

1. **Friday evening surge:** Weekend recreation trips cluster Friday late-afternoon/evening. A northbound departure from Cranbrook ~5:00–7:00 PM targets tourists and weekend workers heading to Golden [16].
2. **Sunday afternoon/evening return:** The reverse flow consolidates Sunday ~3:00–6:00 PM as visitors head home and workers finish shifts. A southbound Golden→Cranbrook trip in this window can connect to evening flights or local returns [16].
3. **Holiday-weekend intensification:** Family Day, spring break, Victoria Day, Canada Day, and Labour Day amplify the above. Event-driven peaks (festivals/races) justify ad-hoc trips layered onto the base weekend pattern [16, 6].
4. **Weekday commuter patterns:** In contrast, weekday commuter demand appears limited based on journey-to-work data (Section 8). Traditional Monday–Friday commuter service is unlikely to sustain ridership, though sub-corridor weekday patterns (e.g., Cranbrook-Kimberley) may differ [13].
5. **Seasonal worker transportation:** 4–6-month workers have distinct needs: initial arrival with luggage/gear, occasional mid-season trips, and end-of-season departure. They may use corridor transport infrequently but value reliability and luggage capacity when they do [16, 14].

6.6 Service Design Implications

Tourism and labour-mobility evidence yield directives for preliminary concepts: **Tourism and labour-mobility evidence yield directives for preliminary concepts:**

- **Seasonality → flexible operations:** Operate intensively Dec–Mar and Jun–Sep; scale back/suspend Apr–May & Oct–Nov[16].
- **Weekend focus > weekday commuter:** Prioritize Fri PM northbound / Sun PM southbound; avoid empty weekday runs[16, 13].
- **Workers as a secondary market:** Accommodate seasonal worker transfers where feasible,

but design primarily for tourism where volume and willingness-to-pay are higher[14, 15].

- **Reliability > frequency:** 1–2 well-timed, weather-resilient departures beat high-frequency schedules that are operationally fragile[16].
- **Integrate with tourism infrastructure:** Time services for check-in/out, lift operations, and YXC flights; include luggage/ski/bike capacity[16, 6].
- **First/last-mile non-negotiable:** Pair corridor trips with Golden-side resort/accommodation shuttles and Cranbrook airport/city links[16].
- **Pricing:** Consider tiered fares (visitor vs. worker/resident discounts) balancing cost recovery with accessibility [14].
- **Pilot-first:** Start with a Winter Weekend Express and/or Summer Connector; validate demand before scaling [16, 1].

7 Commuting & Connectivity Analysis

7.1 Inter-Municipal Commuting: The Central Finding

Journey-to-work data from the 2021 Census provides quantitative evidence on inter-municipal commuting flows, revealing patterns fundamental to service design. Statistics Canada’s commuting data tabulates place of residence versus place of work for employed persons, capturing work-related travel but excluding tourism, shopping, medical, and other trip purposes [13]. Analysis focuses on flows between Cranbrook, Golden, Kimberley, and other East Kootenay communities to assess baseline commuter demand.

The core finding is clear: The Cranbrook–Golden corridor generates minimal inter-municipal work commuting—far below thresholds typically supporting viable transit service.

Cranbrook–Golden commuting flows:

- Cranbrook residents working in Golden: ~10–25
- Golden residents working in Cranbrook: ~10–25
- Total bidirectional work trips: ~20–50 daily

To contextualize: fixed-route services that rely on commuters typically need hundreds of daily riders to cover even subsidized operations. The Cranbrook–Golden commuter market sits roughly 10–20× below such levels—dozens rather than hundreds of potential daily riders [13].

Spatial patterns reveal sub-corridor variation: The Cranbrook–Kimberley sub-corridor shows meaningfully stronger flows:

- Cranbrook → Kimberley work trips: ~60–100
- Kimberley → Cranbrook work trips: ~20–40
- Total Cranbrook–Kimberley: ~80–120

This is roughly 4–6× the Cranbrook–Golden volume, yet still modest in absolute terms—supporting, at most, a small-capacity commuter shuttle rather than frequent transit service [13].

Why flows are limited: Multiple structural factors explain weak inter-municipal commuting. The 250 km, 2.75–3.25 hour distance between Cranbrook and Golden exceeds typical commute tolerance, particularly for entry-level tourism wages where fuel costs consume a large income share. Both communities have relatively self-contained labour markets—Cranbrook with regional services (healthcare, education, retail) and Golden with a tourism-centric employment base. Housing cost differentials exist but are not large enough to motivate long-distance commuting at scale. Winter highway conditions add unreliability and stress, deterring regular commuting [6, 13, 11, 12].

Major inter-municipal flows in descending order:

1. Cranbrook ↔ Kimberley: 80–120 (strongest corridor flow, but still modest)
2. Cranbrook ↔ Invermere: 20–40 (notable but small)
3. Cranbrook ↔ Fernie: 20–40 (notable but small)
4. Cranbrook ↔ Golden: 20–50 (weak despite tourism economy)

The pattern shows corridor commuting is fundamentally a small-scale phenomenon, concentrated on shorter sub-corridors (Cranbrook–Kimberley, 27 km) rather than the full Cranbrook–Golden route. This evidence contradicts any assumption that commuter demand could anchor viable full-corridor service [13].

7.2 Baseline Connectivity Assessment

Current corridor connectivity relies almost entirely on private automobile, with no scheduled public or commercial passenger service operating between Cranbrook and Golden.

Travel time and distance: Highway 93/95 connects communities over 250 km requiring 2.75–3.25

hours of driving under normal conditions. Winter weather extends travel time and introduces delays, controls/closures, and stress—precisely during ski-season peaks when demand concentrates [6, 11, 12, 13].

Private vehicle operating costs for the round-trip journey:

- **Fuel:** $520 \text{ km} \div 10 \text{ L}/100 \text{ km} \times \$1.60/\text{L} \approx \$83$
- **Vehicle depreciation, insurance, maintenance:** $\sim \$40\text{--}\60 (conservative allowance)
- **Total per round-trip:** $\sim \$120\text{--}\145

For daily commuting, monthly costs approach \$2,400–\$2,900 (20 working days), consuming roughly 75–90% of gross income for entry-level positions paying \$17–\$20/hour (\$2,720–\$3,200 monthly gross). This financial burden helps explain limited commuting at prevailing wage levels [11, 12, 13].

Reliability and safety: While Highway 93/95 receives regular maintenance, winter conditions create unpredictability through snowfall, ice, reduced visibility, and occasional avalanche controls/closures. Stakeholders identify winter highway stress as a deterrent for both commuters and visitors unfamiliar with mountain driving [6, 14].

Service gap: No scheduled intercity bus, shuttle, or transit service operates on the corridor. Historical services in similar rural corridors have struggled with low ridership given modest populations and pronounced seasonality. Current mobility options are private vehicle, informal carpools, or infrequent, operator-specific shuttles not available to the public [1, 14].

7.3 Demand Windows and Service Viability

Synthesizing commuting and tourism identifies when viable demand concentrates, guiding concepts that target real ridership windows instead of attempting comprehensive coverage.

High-Priority Demand Windows (strongest potential ridership) Friday evening westbound (Cranbrook → Golden):

- **Market:** Weekend tourists (ski season, summer recreation), seasonal workers traveling for weekend shifts, Cranbrook-area residents headed for Golden recreation.
- **Timing:** $\sim 5:00\text{--}7:00$ PM to capture post-work departures and YXC arrivals.
- **Viability:** Weekend patterns documented in Section 7 suggest 1–2 departures with $\sim 20\text{--}40$

passengers per departure in peak seasons (winter ski weekends, summer peak).

[11, 12, 13, 14]

Sunday afternoon/evening eastbound (Golden → Cranbrook):

- **Market:** Weekend tourists returning home, seasonal workers completing shifts, visitors connecting to evening flights.
- **Timing:** $\sim 3:00\text{--}6:00$ PM (post lift-close and hotel checkout).
- **Viability:** Mirrors Friday demand; potential $\sim 25\text{--}45$ passengers per departure during peaks, with Sunday often stronger as most weekend visitors depart the same day.

[6, 14, 15, 16]

Moderate-Priority Demand Windows (viable under conditions) Weekday morning/evening Cranbrook–Kimberley:

- **Market:** The $\sim 80\text{--}120$ existing work trips, plus College of the Rockies students and utilitarian trips.
- **Timing:** Morning $\sim 6:30\text{--}8:30$ AM, evening $\sim 4:00\text{--}6:00$ PM.
- **Viability:** $\sim 20\text{--}40$ potential riders assuming $\sim 25\text{--}40\%$ mode shift—suitable for a minibus (20–25 seats) pilot, not for large vehicles or high frequency. Requires employer partnerships and sharp pricing versus private car.

[11, 13]

Low-Priority Demand Windows (unlikely to sustain service) Weekday Cranbrook–Golden commuting:

- **Market (Work Trips):** The $\sim 20\text{--}50$ daily work trips.
- **Viability (Work Trips):** Even capturing $\sim 50\%$ yields $\sim 10\text{--}25$ daily riders—insufficient for viable service at any meaningful scale [13].

Midweek tourism travel:

- **Market:** Tue–Thu visitors and resort guests.
- **Viability:** Volumes are markedly lower than weekends. Could be opportunistic add-ons if weekend service performs and resources exist, but not a launch priority [6, 14, 15, 16].

Viability Threshold Discussion (assumptions for screening):

- Minimum per-departure ridership: $\sim 15\text{--}25$ passengers, depending on vehicle size/cost.
- Seasonal load factors: $\sim 50\text{--}65\%$ average across peak months.
- Market capture rates: $\sim 10\text{--}30\%$ of the addressable market shifting from private car.

These are screening thresholds (not formal forecasts).

Using conservative assumptions: weekend tourism windows look viable; a Cranbrook–Kimberley commuter pilot is marginal but testable; weekday full-corridor commuting remains non-viable given minimal baseline demand.

Strategic implication: Concepts should target high-priority weekend tourism windows and cautiously pilot the Cranbrook–Kimberley commuter idea, while avoiding low-priority windows until real-world evidence suggests otherwise. These concentrates limited resources where success is most likely.

7.4 Commuting vs. Tourism: Strategic Pivot

Integrating journey-to-work analysis with tourism evidence reveals the strategic direction: tourism-driven travel dwarfs work commuting as the corridor’s demand driver, so service concepts must be designed for discretionary weekend recreation rather than conventional weekday commuter transit.

Quantifying the comparison (order-of-magnitude): Work commuting demand (weekday, year-round):

- Cranbrook–Golden: $\sim 20\text{--}50$ daily work trips
- Cranbrook–Kimberley: $\sim 80\text{--}120$ daily work trips
- Illustrative annualization: ~ 100 daily $\times$ 250 weekdays $\approx$ 25,000 work trips/year (scale cue, not a target)

Tourism-driven travel demand (weekend, seasonal):

- Golden’s visitor economy supports \$169.4M in direct spending and $\sim 2,386$ jobs annually (2023), with weekend-weighted peaks in winter (Dec–Mar) and summer (Jun–Sep).
- A subset of visitors arrives via YXC and require ground transfer to Golden/Kicking Horse; peak weekends plausibly generate hundreds of addressable trips for a well-timed service.

Even with conservative capture rates, weekend tourism flows during peak seasons likely generate $5\text{--}10\times$ the potential ridership of weekday commuter service on the full corridor[16].

Why this matters for service design: Traditional transit emphasizes weekday commuter peaks for stability.

The Cranbrook–Golden corridor inverts this: commuting is negligible; tourism creates concentrated weekend demand. Concepts must embrace weekend focus, seasonal operation, and tourism-specific features (luggage capacity, ski/bike racks, resort-aligned timing, airport connections) as primary design drivers.

Cranbrook–Kimberley exception: The sub-corridor’s stronger flows ($\sim 80\text{--}120$ daily vs. $\sim 20\text{--}50$ Cranbrook–Golden) merit a targeted weekday pilot using small vehicles and employer partnerships. Still, this serves hundreds, not thousands annually and will likely require some subsidy to be viable [11, 13].

Evidence-based imperative: Journey-to-work analysis prevents designing for imagined commuter markets that don’t exist at scale. Tourism analysis points to where real demand concentrates. Concepts proceeding without this base risk low ridership and financial fragility, undermining future corridor efforts.

8 Preliminary Service Concepts

8.1 Concept Development Framework

The analysis in the above sections establishes foundational evidence for service concept development: modest inter-municipal commuting flows, pronounced seasonal tourism demand, and baseline connectivity gaps. Rather than proposing fully specified service designs—which would require detailed ridership modeling, operator cost estimates, and stakeholder validation beyond this paper’s scope—this section outlines three preliminary conceptual directions that align with observed demand patterns and corridor realities.

Each concept responds to specific findings from the preceding analysis. The Cranbrook–Kimberley concept addresses the strongest existing commuting flows identified in journey-to-work data [13]. The summer connector targets weekend tourism travel patterns documented through Tourism Golden sources [16, 15, 14]. The winter express capitalizes on ski-season demand and winter reliability concerns [16]. These directions represent logical starting points for further development rather than implementation-ready designs.

Three core criteria shaped concept selection: demonstrated demand windows (alignment with ob-

served travel patterns), operational feasibility (realistic given corridor scale and constraints), and stakeholder priorities (addressing concerns identified through tourism surveys and regional profiles).

8.2 Three Preliminary Directions

Concept A: Cranbrook–Kimberley Commuter

This concept addresses the corridor’s strongest inter-municipal commuting flow, serving the 80–120 workers identified traveling between Cranbrook and Kimberley, plus students and residents making utilitarian trips [13, 11]. Targeted weekday service would operate Monday–Friday year-round, focusing on morning and evening commute windows. The 27 km route would connect employment centres, College of the Rockies, and park-and-ride locations using small-capacity vehicles scaled to projected demand.

We identified this sub-corridor as generating substantially higher flows than Cranbrook–Golden, representing a scale-appropriate pilot for testing scheduling, booking systems, and stakeholder engagement [13]. Success depends on capturing a meaningful percentage of existing commuters through competitive pricing, convenient scheduling aligned with employment shifts, and employer engagement. Partnership with Kimberley Alpine Resort and College of the Rockies is essential for marketing reach and potential financial contributions [6].

Concept B: Summer Weekend Connector

This concept targets weekend recreational tourism between Cranbrook and Golden during peak summer visitation (June–September), serving tourists arriving via Cranbrook airport, Cranbrook-area residents accessing Golden recreation, and seasonal workers [13, 12, 11]. Weekend-focused service would operate Friday–Sunday with concentrated departures during peak travel windows—Friday evening westbound and Sunday afternoon eastbound. Full-size coach vehicles would accommodate luggage and recreational equipment for the 3–3.5-hour journey, connecting Cranbrook airport, downtown Cranbrook, Golden downtown, and Kicking Horse Mountain Resort.

The above sections documented Golden’s pronounced summer seasonality with weekend travel patterns and airport-to-destination connectivity gaps this concept addresses [16]. Viability depends on effective marketing to target markets, competitive pricing versus rental-car alternatives, and seamless first/last-mile connections. Partnership with Tourism Golden, accommodation providers, and Kicking Horse Resort is essential.

Unknowns requiring Phase 2 work: market size estimation, detailed ridership modelling by traveller

segment, operator input on seasonal costs, first/last-mile solution mapping, and revenue-cost balance.

Concept C: Winter Weekend Ski Shuttle

This concept serves weekend ski tourism during Kicking Horse’s winter season (December–March), targeting Calgary/Alberta skiers, Cranbrook-area residents, and resort seasonal workers. Friday–Sunday service with departures timed to ski-resort operations would emphasize winter operational reliability as the primary value proposition, differentiating through professional mountain driving, winter equipment, and weather monitoring. Vehicle specifications must address ski equipment transport, winter comfort, and mountain-highway requirements.

We also identified ski tourism as a high-value market with demonstrated spending capacity and weekend concentration. Stakeholder surveys highlighted winter highway reliability concerns creating service differentiation opportunity. Kicking Horse serves as a clear demand anchor with concentrated destination enabling higher load factors than diffuse summer recreation. Premium pricing targeting the affluent ski market could approach financial sustainability compared to other concepts.

8.3 Critical Next Steps Before Implementation

Concept C (Winter Ski Shuttle) appears most commercially viable based on qualitative assessment: concentrated high-value demand, clear service differentiation, strong partnership anchor, and premium market characteristics. **Concept B (Summer Connector)** shows moderate viability with a larger addressable market but greater competition. **Concept A (Cranbrook–Kimberley Commuter)** faces highest uncertainty due to small market size, though it offers the simplest operational proof-of-concept.

Essential prerequisites before any pilot:

- **Ridership forecasting:** Formal demand modelling using stated-preference surveys, choice models, or comparable-service benchmarking to generate defensible projections. Current analysis identifies demand windows but cannot quantify expected passengers or capture rates.
- **Operator engagement:** Procurement or preliminary discussions with qualified operators to obtain realistic cost estimates, vehicle availability confirmation, and operational feasibility validation [4, 5].
- **Partnership development:** Formal discussions with Kicking Horse Resort, Tourism

Golden, accommodations, and municipalities to assess contribution willingness, clarify coordination requirements, and validate concept feasibility [16, 14, 15].

- **Financial modelling:** Integration of ridership forecasts and operator costs into scenarios testing subsidy requirements, cost-recovery potential, and sensitivity to key assumptions [4, 5].
- **Stakeholder validation:** Presentation of concepts to municipal councils, regional districts, tourism industry, and community for feedback, priority-setting, and consensus-building on which direction(s) warrant pilot investment.

These preliminary concepts provide strategic direction grounded in corridor analysis but require substantial additional development before transitioning from conceptual exploration to operational reality.

9 Funding & Implementation Pathways

Implementing corridor service concepts requires funding assembly from multiple sources aligned with the phased approach outlined throughout this paper.

9.1 Potential Funding Sources:

Federal programs:

- National Trade Corridors Fund (NTCF) supports transportation infrastructure enabling economic competitiveness and trade.
- Disaster Mitigation and Adaptation Fund (DMAF) may be relevant if positioning service as climate resilience or winter weather adaptation investment [4, 5, 8].

Provincial programs:

- BC Transit partnership model provides a framework for regional transit service delivery with provincial operating support.
- Rural and small-community transit programs may offer grants or technical assistance for corridor feasibility and pilot implementation [4, 5].

Regional sources:

- Columbia Basin Trust (CBT) is the most accessible regional funding partner, supporting economic development, community infrastructure, and connectivity projects within its service area covering the Cranbrook–Golden corridor.

- CBT offers both capital grants and operating support appropriate for a phased pilot approach [4, 5].

Local and industry contributions:

- Municipal economic development budgets (Cranbrook, Golden, regional districts) can provide capital or operating cost-sharing.
- Industry partnerships—particularly Kicking Horse Resort for winter concepts, Tourism Golden for summer concepts, and accommodation providers—may contribute financially or through in-kind marketing support [4, 5].

Staging aligns funding with risk reduction:

- Phase 2 detailed design (\$50,000–100,000) requires modest planning grants accessible through CBT or municipal budgets.
- Phase 3 pilot implementation requires larger commitments (\$100,000–200,000 capital plus annual operating subsidy of \$30,000–150,000 depending on concept), but follows evidence-based design validation.
- Continuation or scaling beyond the pilot depends on demonstrated performance, enabling funders to limit exposure while testing viability [4, 5].

Governance structure should be determined during Phase 2 stakeholder engagement. Options include:

- (1) Lead agency model where one municipality or BC Transit manages service and contracts an operator;
- (2) Partnership model with a multi-party steering committee and cost-sharing agreement;
- (3) Phased authority transitioning from an informal working group to a formal service delivery entity.

Governance choice should reflect funding sources, operational model selected, partner capacity, and political context [4, 5].

10 Limitations & Next Steps

10.1 Methodological Limitations

This working paper provides feasibility-level analysis appropriate for identifying promising service directions, not implementation-ready designs. Several methodological constraints shape findings and their interpretation.

Destination Development Projects		
	2022	2023
Number of Projects	72	79
Total Investment	\$75,452,200	\$76,203,500

Figure 5: Destination development project investments in the Kootenay Rockies region in 2022 and 2023 [6].

No formal ridership forecasting: Service concepts rely on qualitative demand assessment rather than quantitative modelling. Current analysis identifies where and when demand concentrates but cannot predict how many passengers would use proposed services or at what price points mode shift occurs [13].

Limited stakeholder engagement: Analysis relies on document review (tourism surveys, regional profiles, census data) rather than direct consultation with potential operators, municipal decision-makers, resort management, or community members. Service concept viability assumptions require validation through structured stakeholder engagement that has not yet occurred [11, 12, 14].

Qualitative financial assessment: Service concepts are described without cost-benefit analysis, operating cost estimates, or revenue modelling. Viability assessments represent informed judgments, not calculated projections [3].

No comparative analysis: The paper does not benchmark against analogous small-corridor or seasonal tourism services elsewhere. Comparative case studies would strengthen understanding of success factors, typical ridership levels, and operational models applicable to Cranbrook-Golden context [3].

10.2 Data Limitations

Temporal scope and currency: Census data reflects 2021 conditions while tourism sources span 2023-2024, creating temporal misalignment. Post-pandemic travel pattern changes—remote work adoption, tourism recovery, housing market shifts—may have altered baseline conditions since 2021 [13, 12, 11].

Journey-to-work captures only employment trips: Commuting flows data quantifies work commuting but excludes tourism, shopping, medical, social, and other travel purposes. Actual origin-destination patterns, travel modes, and trip frequen-

cies for non-work travel remain unquantified—a significant gap given that tourism, not commuting, should drive service design [13].

Tourism data limitations: Visitor statistics show that people visit Golden but not how they travel, when specifically, they arrive/depart, or what transportation alternatives they’d consider. Stated-preference data on tourist travel behavior would substantially strengthen demand assessment [14, 15, 13].

Seasonal and event granularity: Limited data exists on week-to-week or event-driven variations. Understanding demand spikes for specific festivals, races, or holiday weekends would inform service scheduling and capacity planning [16].

No primary data collection: All analysis relies on secondary sources. Primary data—visitor surveys at Cranbrook airport or Golden accommodations, stated-preference surveys, traffic counts—would reduce uncertainty in demand characterization and willingness-to-pay estimation[14].

10.3 Scope Limitations

This paper deliberately bounds scope to preliminary feasibility assessment, excluding several analyses essential for implementation but premature at this stage:

- Detailed regulatory and permitting requirements for commercial passenger service.
- Environmental impacts and equity analysis, including:
 - Service accessibility for low-income residents,
 - Seniors,
 - Persons with disabilities,
 - Indigenous communities.
- Indigenous consultation and consideration of rights and perspectives relevant to transportation infrastructure.
- Detailed first/last-mile mapping of Golden’s accommodation and activity geography.
- Alternative route evaluation beyond the Highway 93/95 corridor.

These analyses are appropriate for Phase 2 detailed design[11, 12].

10.4 Implications and Positioning

These limitations establish appropriate confidence levels but don't invalidate findings. The paper successfully characterizes corridor context, identifies demand patterns, and proposes conceptual directions grounded in evidence.

However, transition to implementable service design requires substantial additional work—ridership modelling, cost estimation, stakeholder validation, and financial analysis.

This working paper represents Phase 1 (Feasibility and Context Assessment) feeding into Phase 2 (Detailed Service Design and Pilot Planning), with Phase 3 (Implementation) conditional on Phase 2 validation. The pilot-first approach recommended throughout acknowledges uncertainty, treating initial service as learning investment rather than permanent commitment.

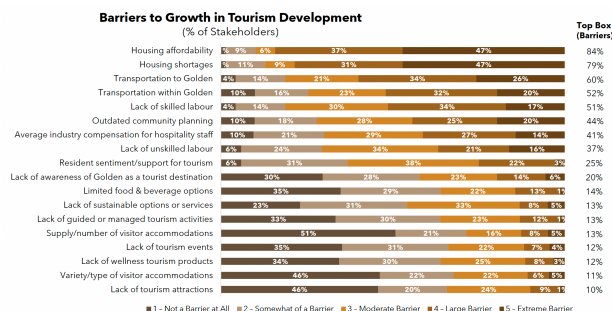


Figure 6: Barriers to growth in tourism development reported by stakeholders[14].

10.5 Recommended Next Steps

10.5.1 Phase 2 Development- Essential prerequisites before pilot implementation:

Phase 2 work includes:

- **Ridership forecasting and demand validation:**
 - Stated-preference surveys of potential users (tourists at Cranbrook airport, Calgary ski market, Cranbrook–Kimberley commuters),
 - Choice modelling to estimate mode shift under various price and service scenarios,
 - Seasonal demand profiling and market segmentation.
- **Operator engagement:**

- Preliminary procurement or discussions with qualified operators,
- Vehicle specification and availability confirmation,
- Operating cost estimates including seasonal parameters.

- **Stakeholder validation and partnership development:**

- Concept presentations to municipal councils, regional districts, and tourism industry,
- Partnership negotiations with Kicking Horse Resort, Tourism Golden, accommodations,
- Employer engagement if pursuing the commuter concept.

- **Financial modelling and funding assembly:**

- Integration of ridership forecasts and cost estimates into scenarios assessing subsidy requirements and cost recovery,
- Funding source identification and application development (RSIP, DMAF, NTCF, Columbia Basin Trust, municipal contributions),
- Revenue optimization strategies.

- **Regulatory and implementation scoping:**

- Commercial passenger service licensing requirements,
- Infrastructure permitting,
- Environmental and equity assessment planning,
- Indigenous engagement protocol development.

[14, 15, 16, 6, 13, 11, 12, 2]

10.5.2 Phase 3 Implementation — Conditional on Phase 2 validation:

Phase 3 includes:

- Formal operator procurement based on refined specifications,
- Infrastructure development (stops, shelters, signage),
- Booking system and technology implementation,
- Marketing campaign and service launch,

- Performance monitoring with KPI tracking:
 - Ridership,
 - On-time performance,
 - Customer satisfaction,
 - Financial performance,
- Quarterly performance reviews,
- Mid-pilot evaluation and full-pilot assessment,
- Decision framework for continuation, scaling, or termination.

[4, 5]

The staging sequence and specific concept prioritization should emerge from Phase 2 stakeholder engagement and demand modeling, informed by but not predetermined by this paper’s preliminary assessment. Flexibility to adjust based on evidence—including potential pivot away from concepts that prove not feasible is essential to responsible public investment in corridor transportation infrastructure.

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