



PASSENGER RAILWAY FOR INDIGENOUS RURAL COMMUNITIES IN ALBERTA

Connecting Communities

ABSTRACT

a passenger rail system will facilitate the creation of urban Indigenous healing and employment hubs, providing centralized locations for youth programs, mentorship opportunities, and entrepreneurship initiatives (NIEDB, 2019)

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In the rural landscapes of Alberta, Indigenous communities face various challenges, including limited access to healthcare, employment opportunities, and educational resources due to geographic isolation and inadequate infrastructure. However, there is potential for improvement, particularly through the implementation of a regional passenger rail system. This infrastructure project could address many of these challenges by improving healthcare accessibility, stimulating economic development, supporting Indigenous youth, promoting cultural tourism, and enhancing overall safety. By connecting remote communities to essential services, the passenger rail system offers a practical solution to longstanding issues and represents a significant opportunity for advancement and prosperity in Indigenous communities across Alberta.

Access to healthcare in Indigenous rural communities in Alberta faces significant challenges due to various systemic factors. Historically, healthcare restructuring in the province has centralized services in larger urban centres, leaving rural communities with limited access to essential healthcare facilities and resources (Brassolotto et al., 2019). This centralization has resulted in the closure of rural care homes, cuts to care services, and a reliance on informal family, community, and volunteer services to fill the resulting gaps (Brassolotto et al., 2020). However, the ability of communities to provide such informal care depends on their resources, leading to disparities in healthcare access between communities (Brassolotto et al., 2020).

Rural areas, particularly Indigenous communities, face specific healthcare challenges:

- A lack of transportation options,
- Difficulties in accessing long-term care (LTC) homes, and,
- recruitment and retention issues for healthcare professionals (Brassolotto et al., 2020).
- These challenges contribute to a rural deficit discourse, framing rural health service users as disadvantaged compared to their urban counterparts (Brassolotto et al., 2019). In this context, the lack of adequate transportation infrastructure exacerbates the healthcare access issue.

Transportation is a crucial determinant of a resident's health by providing affordable access to healthcare, social services, and other social determinants of health, especially for vulnerable populations like Indigenous communities (Alhassan et al., 2023). However, rural Canada has experienced a decline in transportation options, particularly due to austerity policies, leading to increased rural-urban health inequities (Alhassan et al., 2023). This decline in transportation options

not only limits access to healthcare but reduces social participation and autonomy, particularly for individuals with disabilities (Alhassan et al., 2023).

To address these challenges, implementing a passenger rail system in Alberta could significantly improve healthcare access in Indigenous rural communities. A reliable and accessible public transportation system will provide essential connections to healthcare services and other social determinants of health, mitigating the effects of rural isolation and centralization of healthcare services (Alhassan et al., 2023). An integrated interprovincial public transportation system, as suggested by Alhassan et al. (2023), will ensure seamless access to healthcare across provincial borders, benefiting Indigenous communities with limited local healthcare resources. In light of recent closures of transportation services like the Greyhound bus company, such initiatives are crucial for promoting public health and reducing the vulnerability of marginalized populations, including Indigenous communities, in accessing essential healthcare services (Alhassan et al., 2023).

An interview conducted for this research with Alexander Littlechild, Economic Development Officer of Ermineskin Cree, sheds light on the specific limitations faced by Indigenous communities in accessing healthcare services. Littlechild highlights the existence of Maskwacis medical transportation, which provides essential transportation for elders to access scheduled appointments with licensed healthcare professionals, including specialist appointments in Edmonton (A. Littlechild, personal communication, April 6, 2024).

However, this transportation system has its limitations, particularly concerning access to services outside of those provided directly by Maskwacis Health Services (A. Littlechild, personal communication, April 6, 2024). For instance, Maskwacis medical transportation does not extend to private clinics, such as those offering physiotherapy services.

Consequently, community members needing such services must rely on insurance payouts and pay out-of-pocket for transportation to these appointments (A. Littlechild, personal communication, April 6, 2024). This limitation exacerbates the financial burden on individuals seeking healthcare beyond the scope of Maskwacis Health Services and underscores the need for more comprehensive transportation solutions to address the diverse healthcare needs of Indigenous communities (A. Littlechild, personal communication, April 6, 2024).

Integrating this perspective into the discussion emphasizes the multifaceted nature of the healthcare access issue in Indigenous rural communities in Alberta (A. Littlechild, personal communication, April 6, 2024). While existing transportation services cater to specific needs, gaps remain in coverage for services outside of the formal healthcare system (A. Littlechild, personal communication, April 6, 2024). Therefore, alongside broader systemic changes, initiatives like a passenger rail system could provide a more inclusive and accessible means of transportation, addressing not only the geographical challenges and the specific needs of Indigenous communities for comprehensive healthcare access.

A second interview was conducted for this research with Paul Johnson, Economic Development Officer of Samson Cree, who discussed the lack of proper access to healthcare and he highlighted the pressing need for senior care within Indigenous communities, alongside the scarcity of healthcare workers to meet these needs (P. Johnson, personal communication, April 4, 2024). Johnson's observations highlight the critical gap in healthcare services tailored to the aging population, exacerbating the challenges faced by Indigenous elders in accessing essential medical care (P. Johnson, personal communication, April 4, 2024).

Johnson identifies the daunting nature of travel for elderly community members, particularly when neighbouring communities lack adequate public transportation options (P. Johnson, personal communication, April 4, 2024). This lack of accessible transportation compounds the already existing barriers to healthcare access, forcing elders to navigate cumbersome journeys to access necessary medical services outside their immediate vicinity (P. Johnson, personal communication, April 4, 2024).

These insights from Johnson further illuminate the complex dynamics surrounding healthcare access in Indigenous rural communities in Alberta (P. Johnson, personal communication, April 4, 2024). The shortage of healthcare workers and the absence of adequate public transportation options create formidable challenges for Indigenous elders seeking essential medical care (P. Johnson, personal communication, April 4, 2024). Integrating these perspectives underscores the urgent need for comprehensive solutions, such as improved transportation infrastructure and increased support for senior care services, to address the unique healthcare needs of Indigenous communities effectively (P. Johnson, personal communication, April 4, 2024).

The issue of underemployment and unemployment in Indigenous rural communities in Alberta is multifaceted and deeply entrenched, stemming from a combination of geographic isolation, limited access to education and training, and regulatory barriers to business growth (NCCAH, 2019). These communities often face significant challenges in accessing employment opportunities due to their remote location and lack of infrastructure, including public transit and higher educational institutions (NCCAH, 2019). Government regulations, such as those within the Indian Act, further hinder on-reserve business growth by restricting the use of assets as collateral for loans, thereby impeding entrepreneurship and self-employment opportunities (NCCAH, 2019).

In light of these challenges, the implementation of a passenger rail system in corridors like the Calgary-Edmonton corridor holds promise for addressing the employment needs of Indigenous rural communities (Wyman, 2018). The Calgary-Edmonton corridor, with its substantial population density and recent economic growth, presents an opportune environment for the development of high-speed rail services (Wyman, 2018). Such infrastructure projects not only improve connectivity between major urban centres, the projects stimulated regional economic development and job creation (Lingaitis & Sinkevičius, 2014).

By enhancing mobility and facilitating the movement of individuals between market centres and production locations, a fast and effective passenger rail connection can contribute to raising the quality of life and attracting businesses offering high-paying service and scientific jobs, as desired by Alberta's economic diversification efforts (Wyman, 2018). Furthermore, The National Indigenous Economic Development Board (NIEBD) attests that a robust passenger rail system can help bridge the infrastructure gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous communities, addressing disparities in connectivity and economic development (NIEBD, 2019).

The availability of reliable transportation options is crucial for Indigenous communities' social and economic development, enabling access to education, training, and employment opportunities (NIEBD, 2019). With Indigenous communities often located in rural and remote areas with limited access to public transit and employment centres, the introduction of a passenger rail system could significantly alleviate transportation barriers and stimulate local economies by facilitating the movement of labour and attracting investment (NIEBD, 2019) By promoting regional economic growth and specialization, a well-established passenger rail infrastructure will create employment opportunities, not only in construction and maintenance services, but in associated industries and services (Lingaitis & Sinkevičius, 2014).

This aligns with the goals of Indigenous economic development, which relies on sound governance, transparent financial management, and access to revenue-generating opportunities (NIEDB, 2019). Initiatives aimed at enhancing Indigenous community connectivity and funding mutually beneficial projects, as advocated by the NIEDB, can further leverage the potential of passenger rail systems to drive economic empowerment and reduce unemployment rates among Indigenous populations (NIEDB, 2019). Therefore, the implementation of a passenger rail system in corridors like the Calgary-Edmonton corridor presents a promising opportunity to address the persistent challenges of underemployment and unemployment in Indigenous rural communities in Alberta.

By improving connectivity, stimulating economic development, and creating employment opportunities, such infrastructure projects can contribute to building more resilient and sustainable economies while fostering social inclusion and equity. Alexander Littlechild emphasized the critical role of transportation in Indigenous rural communities like Ermineskin Cree. Littlechild highlighted the absence of public transportation in the community, noting that while there are cars, trucks, and school buses, there is a lack of accessible public transit.

Alexander underscored the impact of this absence on employment opportunities and access to essential services, particularly in light of the discontinuation of services like Greyhound in Alberta, which previously provided transportation options (A. Littlechild, personal communication, April 6, 2024). Littlechild emphasized that transportation gaps exacerbate the already higher-than-average unemployment rates in First Nation communities across Canada, reflecting the broader issue of employment disparities in rural areas.

Littlechild recognized past initiatives aimed at addressing transportation challenges in the community, citing a previous employment opportunity at a meat processing workplace in Red Deer (A. Littlechild, personal communication, April 6, 2024). While transportation was provided for employees, it was funded for specific projects or employment opportunities rather than as a permanent solution (A. Littlechild, personal communication, April 6, 2024).

Littlechild highlighted the challenges of sustaining transportation initiatives without continuous employment opportunities to support the costs, illustrating the need for a more permanent transportation solution (A. Littlechild, personal communication, April 6, 2024). This interview underscores the urgency of addressing transportation barriers in Indigenous rural communities like Ermineskin Cree and the potential of initiatives like passenger rail systems to provide reliable access to employment, services, and economic opportunities. By addressing transportation gaps and

fostering regional connectivity, such infrastructure projects can contribute to reducing unemployment rates, stimulating economic development, and improving the overall quality of life for Indigenous communities in Alberta.

Paul Johnson provided further perspective on the transportation challenges facing Indigenous communities in Alberta. Johnson highlighted the absence of public transportation in his community, emphasizing that most residents resort to paying for taxis or hitchhiking to neighbouring towns due to the lack of affordable options (P. Johnson, personal communication, April 4, 2024). He expressed the belief that a passenger rail system would significantly benefit First Nation communities, providing a reliable and affordable means of travel to the employment centres of Red Deer, Edmonton, and Calgary (P. Johnson, personal communication, April 4, 2024).

Johnson stressed the importance of accessible public transit for low-income individuals, many of whom cannot afford vehicles. He noted that a public transit option through passenger rail that is reasonably priced is possible and will be beneficial for residents who currently face financial constraints in accessing transportation services (P. Johnson, personal communication, April 4, 2024). Johnson highlighted the economic implications of transportation barriers, noting that First Nation community residents face higher prices of products compared to neighbouring cities. To save money, residents are forced to seek goods elsewhere, contributing to economic disparities (P. Johnson, personal communication, April 4, 2024). Johnson outlined the potential societal benefits of a passenger rail system, such as enabling residents to purchase more affordable homes while still being able to commute to work in other cities via train, effectively "bringing the job closer to home" (P. Johnson, personal communication, April 4, 2024). This underscores the transformative impact that improved transportation infrastructure can have on Indigenous communities in terms of economic opportunities and by enhancing overall quality of life and access to essential services.

The issue of lack of access to education and limited educational opportunities for youth in Indigenous rural communities in Alberta exacerbates existing employment challenges. Educational attainment is closely linked to employment rates, with individuals with lower levels of education experiencing lower rates of employment (OECD, 2018). Despite improvements in high school graduation rates, Indigenous youth still face barriers to accessing post-secondary education, with less than 50% of Indigenous students living on a reserve obtain a high school degree (NIEDB, 2019). There has been little improvement in the college/trade attainment levels of Indigenous youth, widening the gap in educational attainment between Indigenous and non-Indigenous populations

(NIEDB, 2019). Investing in Indigenous education and training is crucial to closing these educational gaps and improving employment outcomes for Indigenous youth. Strategies such as expanding access to early childhood development programs, increasing access to post-secondary educational opportunities, and enhancing skills development initiatives are essential in preparing Indigenous youth for the workforce (NCCAH, 2019).

These educational initiatives require adequate infrastructure and support systems to be effective. This is where a passenger rail system can play a crucial role. By connecting Indigenous communities to larger urban centres and educational institutions, a rail system will enhance access to educational opportunities for Indigenous youth. Students would be able to commute to schools, colleges, and universities more easily, overcoming the geographical barriers that currently limit their educational prospects.

Initiatives such as the federal government's Aboriginal Skills and Employment Strategy, which funds Indigenous organizations involved in developing and delivering training programs, require support through improved transportation infrastructure (NCCAH, 2019). Thus, a passenger rail system will facilitate the creation of urban Indigenous healing and employment hubs, providing centralized locations for youth programs, mentorship opportunities, and entrepreneurship initiatives (NIEDB, 2019). By promoting Indigenous entrepreneurship and providing support for youth start-ups, a rail system could empower Indigenous youth to pursue alternative career paths and contribute to economic development in their communities.

Investments in educational infrastructure, such as the First Nations Post-Secondary Partnerships Program, will be complemented by improved transportation access, ensuring that Indigenous students have the support they need to succeed academically (NIEDB, 2019). Therefore, addressing the lack of access to education and limited educational opportunities for youth in Indigenous rural communities requires a comprehensive approach that includes both educational and infrastructural interventions. A passenger rail system will improve access to educational institutions while creating employment opportunities and support Indigenous entrepreneurship, ultimately contributing to the economic empowerment and well-being of Indigenous youth in Alberta.

In rural communities across Alberta, the issue of road conditions and safety due to weather conditions presents significant challenges that hinder mobility, access to essential services, and economic opportunities. In the winter, harsh weather conditions, such as heavy snowfall and ice, often make roads hazardous and unreliable for travel. These conditions pose a safety risk to visitors,

residents and commuters. This has led to increased frequency of accidents and fatalities on rural highways (Barua et al., 2010).

Intersections on rural highways are particularly hazardous, with high speeds and inadequate design contributing to a higher risk of severe crashes (Barua et al., 2010). Moreover, the inefficiency of driving in rural communities exacerbates the challenges associated with road conditions. Limited access to public transportation options leaves residents reliant on personal vehicles for travel, despite the risks and challenges posed by poor road conditions. The lack of reliable and efficient transportation infrastructure contributes to isolation and limited access to essential services such as healthcare, education, and employment opportunities. This perpetuates socio-economic disparities and impedes community development efforts in rural areas. In addressing these challenges, the implementation of a passenger rail system emerges as a viable solution that offers numerous benefits for Indigenous communities.

Passenger rail services provide a reliable and safe alternative mode of transportation, particularly in regions where road conditions are unpredictable. Unlike road transport, rail services are less susceptible to weather-related disruptions, offering greater predictability and reliability in travel time (Ivaldi & Seabright, 2003). Littlechild highlighted the challenges of winter and spring transit on gravel roads in Indigenous rural communities. He emphasized that these seasons pose significant difficulties due to the impact of large vehicles on road conditions, particularly when carrying overweight loads (A. Littlechild, personal communication, April 6, 2024). He pointed out that heavy vehicles worsen road conditions, leading to increased wear and tear to vehicles, as well as safety hazards for commuters (A. Littlechild, personal communication, April 6, 2024).

Littlechild stressed the need for the availability of transportation options to alleviate the burden on heavily travelled routes, especially during adverse weather conditions. He emphasized that the diversified transportation infrastructure will lessen the impact of vehicles on the community's road system. This will improve the road conditions, reduce emissions associated with heavy vehicle traffic, and may lower the road maintenance budget (A. Littlechild, personal communication, April 6, 2024).

Littlechild's insight underscores the importance of investing in alternative transportation solutions, such as passenger rail and bus services, to address the challenges faced by Indigenous communities in Alberta. Littlechild's perspective reinforces the urgency of implementing sustainable transportation solutions that prioritize safety, reliability, and environmental stewardship (A.

Littlechild, personal communication, April 6, 2024). By heeding the advice of community leaders including Littlechild and by investing in passenger rail infrastructure, Indigenous communities will overcome the challenges posed by road conditions and improve the overall well-being of residents while reducing their carbon footprint.

Paul Johnson emphasized the dire conditions of roads during the winter months (P. Johnson, personal communication, April 4, 2024). Johnson highlighted the challenges faced by residents when navigating treacherous roadways, describing them as "atrocious" (P. Johnson, personal communication, April 4, 2024). He underscored the importance of implementing alternative transportation options, such as passenger rail or busing, to ensure the safety and well-being of community members during inclement weather (P. Johnson, personal communication, April 4, 2024).

Johnson emphasized that a passenger rail system will offer a much-needed sense of safety and security for residents, particularly during harsh winter conditions when road travel becomes hazardous (P. Johnson, personal communication, April 4, 2024). By offering a reliable and efficient mode of transportation, rail services will alleviate the risks associated with navigating icy and snow-covered roads, thereby enhancing the overall mobility and accessibility of Indigenous rural communities in Alberta (P. Johnson, personal communication, April 4, 2024). Transportation is a significant contributor to greenhouse gas emissions in Alberta. By offering an alternative to driving in hazardous road conditions, a passenger rail system aligns with sustainability goals by reducing greenhouse gas emissions associated with personal vehicle travel.

The Government of Alberta recognizes the need to invest in alternative transportation solutions to mitigate environmental impact (Kaddoura et al., 2020). By shifting towards rail transport, Indigenous communities will reduce the carbon footprint while improving mobility and accessibility within and between cities. Addressing the challenges of road conditions and safety in Indigenous rural communities requires a comprehensive approach that includes investment in alternative transportation solutions like passenger rail. By prioritizing railway infrastructure and expanding rail services, Indigenous communities can improve safety, reliability, and efficiency in transportation while reducing environmental impact.

A passenger rail system may significantly boost tourism in Indigenous rural communities in Alberta, thereby stimulating economic development and fostering cultural exchange. Alexander Littlechild emphasizes that the affordability and benefits of such a rail system are crucial factors for its success

in remote communities. He highlighted the importance of active advertisement for events and tourist destinations, including radio promotions for cultural celebrations like Powwows and the showcasing of Indigenous tourism projects such as outdoor living experiences in Teepees (A. Littlechild, personal communication, April 6, 2024).

Effective promotion of these cultural attractions will lead to traditional economic development opportunities within Indigenous communities. Increased traffic facilitated by the rail system may attract renowned franchise restaurants thereby creating additional economic prospects for First Nations (A. Littlechild, personal communication, April 6, 2024).

Littlechild identifies the potential for foreign tourism, noting that the tourists who visit popular destinations like Jasper or Banff may seek opportunities to explore other regions of the province (A. Littlechild, personal communication, April 6, 2024). With a passenger rail system in place, well-advertised events in Indigenous communities will attract international touring groups. These groups will have greater access to participate in cultural experiences, eliminating the need for rental vehicles and this will enhance the overall experience of the tourists. The National Indigenous Economic Development Board (NIEDB), emphasizes the importance of connectivity and infrastructure development in Indigenous communities. A frequent, reliable and affordable passenger rail system holds immense potential to bridge the infrastructure gap and drive economic growth through tourism (NIEDB, 2019). The federal government's support for Indigenous community connectivity and technological capacity building, as advocated by NIEDB, aligns with the vision of leveraging passenger rail as a catalyst for Indigenous economic development and cultural promotion (NIEDB, 2019). Therefore, by investing in a passenger rail system and promoting Indigenous tourism initiatives, policymakers will simultaneously address infrastructure disparities, stimulate economic activity, and showcase Indigenous cultures to a broader audience, thereby fostering greater inclusivity and prosperity in Alberta's rural communities.

While the potential benefits of a passenger rail system for Indigenous communities in Alberta are evident, there are significant limitations and challenges that need to be addressed. Alexander Littlechild highlighted several key concerns, including funding and jurisdictional issues. Littlechild emphasized that all Reservations are considered federal entities under the jurisdiction of the federal government, which poses challenges in securing funding for rail projects. He confirmed that many First Nations prioritize protecting their treaty rights and are cautious about being treated merely as municipalities. Finding solutions that involve partnerships between federal and provincial entities

while respecting Indigenous sovereignty is paramount (A. Littlechild, personal communication, April 6, 2024).

Frequency of train service is crucial for the integration of rail transportation into people's lives. Littlechild emphasized that the success of a passenger rail system would depend on how well it aligns with the daily routines and needs of Indigenous communities (A. Littlechild, personal communication, April 6, 2024). These limitations underscore the complex interplay of political, jurisdictional, and logistical factors that must be navigated to realize the full potential of a passenger rail system for Indigenous communities. Therefore, any efforts to implement such a system must involve comprehensive consultations with Indigenous stakeholders, careful consideration of jurisdictional issues, and a commitment to addressing the unique needs and concerns of Indigenous communities.

In conclusion, the establishment of a regional passenger rail system in Alberta stands as a transformative solution with far-reaching benefits for Indigenous communities across the province. Via enhanced connectivity and accessibility, such a system will allow residents of remote areas to reach medical facilities more efficiently and effectively, thus improving health outcomes and reduce income disparities.

Simultaneously, the implementation of a passenger rail system will generate employment opportunities, particularly in Indigenous rural communities, by supporting infrastructure development, operational roles, and ancillary services to foster economic growth and empowerment. Integration of Indigenous perspectives and cultural considerations into the rail network's design and operation will ensure that the project aligns with community values and priorities, promoting social cohesion and cultural preservation.

The provision of reliable and safe transportation alternatives to travel when there are hazardous road conditions, a passenger rail system will mitigate the risks associated with travel, enhancing overall safety and well-being to everyone in the region.

Improved connectivity facilitated by rail transport will open up access to educational resources, training programs, and academic institutions, empowering Indigenous youth with greater opportunities for learning and skill development. This will break down barriers to residents to be successive in their pursuits and will foster intergenerational prosperity.

The advent of a passenger rail system will catalyse tourism development in Indigenous rural communities, showcasing the rich cultural heritage and natural beauty of these areas to visitors. The influx of tourism revenue will stimulate local economies and create opportunities for cultural exchange and appreciation that will strengthen the ties between Indigenous and non-Indigenous communities.

By addressing healthcare, employment, education, tourism, and safety concerns, a regional passenger rail system has the potential to usher in a new era of prosperity and well-being for Indigenous communities in Alberta. Through collaboration, consultation, and meaningful engagement with Indigenous stakeholders the development of such a travel system will be inclusive, equitable, and sustainable. These solutions will drive positive change and foster resilience in Indigenous communities for generations to come.

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