

**The Integration of Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion Principles  
into Municipal Transportation and Infrastructure Projects**

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## Introduction

Municipal transportation and infrastructure serve as the foundation of Ontario's communities, shaping mobility, accessibility, and the quality of life for residents. However, to effectively meet the needs of increasingly diverse communities, municipalities must go beyond traditional approaches and embed Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion (EDI) into all phases of a project from planning and design to final implementation. Applying EDI to municipal projects will bring economic benefits, reduce social inequalities, and contribute as a new source of creativity for future projects and their challenges. By considering innovative public consultation methods, developing Community Benefit Agreements (CBAs) that respect input and treaty rights of Indigenous Groups, and ensuring financial sustainability for equitable transit programs, Ontario municipalities can build infrastructure that fosters equity and inclusivity. This essay explores how municipalities can design policies, allocate budgets, and adopt engineering principles to create systems that reflect the values and needs of all citizens, particularly underserved and marginalized communities.

## Policy Frameworks

Municipalities should incorporate EDI strategies in all infrastructure and transportation planning and implementation stages. This is achieved through inclusive public consultation. Public consultation events for major infrastructure projects are traditionally held at municipal offices, community halls, and recreation facilities. While these locations are important gathering points for a community, the attendees may not represent the diversity within a community. Public consultation events should be held in alternate locations such as grocery stores, public libraries, and cultural festivals as these locations are where a more representative cross-section of the community may visit. Where language may be a barrier, project materials should be provided in multiple languages to reflect the diversity within the community.

As an EDI strategy, major infrastructure and transportation projects should include Community Benefit Agreements (CBAs) to ensure local hiring, skills training, and equitable resource distribution. In the Township of Centre Wellington, Indigenous communities such as Six Nations of the Grand River, the Haudenosaunee Confederacy Chiefs Council, and Mississaugas of the New Credit First Nations could be involved in developing a CBA. CBAs are an effective way to capture Indigenous input on project design and allow for municipalities to explore creative ways that Indigenous groups can benefit from the project. As an example, CBAs can address how cultural artifacts are managed and how traditional lands will be respected and protected as part of the infrastructure project. CBAs can also provide ways to benefit Indigenous communities through job creation and skills development.

#### Financial and Budgeting Considerations

It is essential to provide financially responsible public transportation in Ontario while ensuring mobility for residents of all demographics, abilities and incomes. This can be achieved by creating subsidized transit programs for seniors, individuals with a lower income, new Canadians, students, and those with accessibility needs. In Wellington County, the Ontario government provides funding for an on-demand, rural transit rideshare pilot project called RideWell. As shown in Figure 1, RideWell has proven to be extremely well utilized throughout Wellington County with a steady increasing trend in monthly ridership from October 2019 to February 2023.

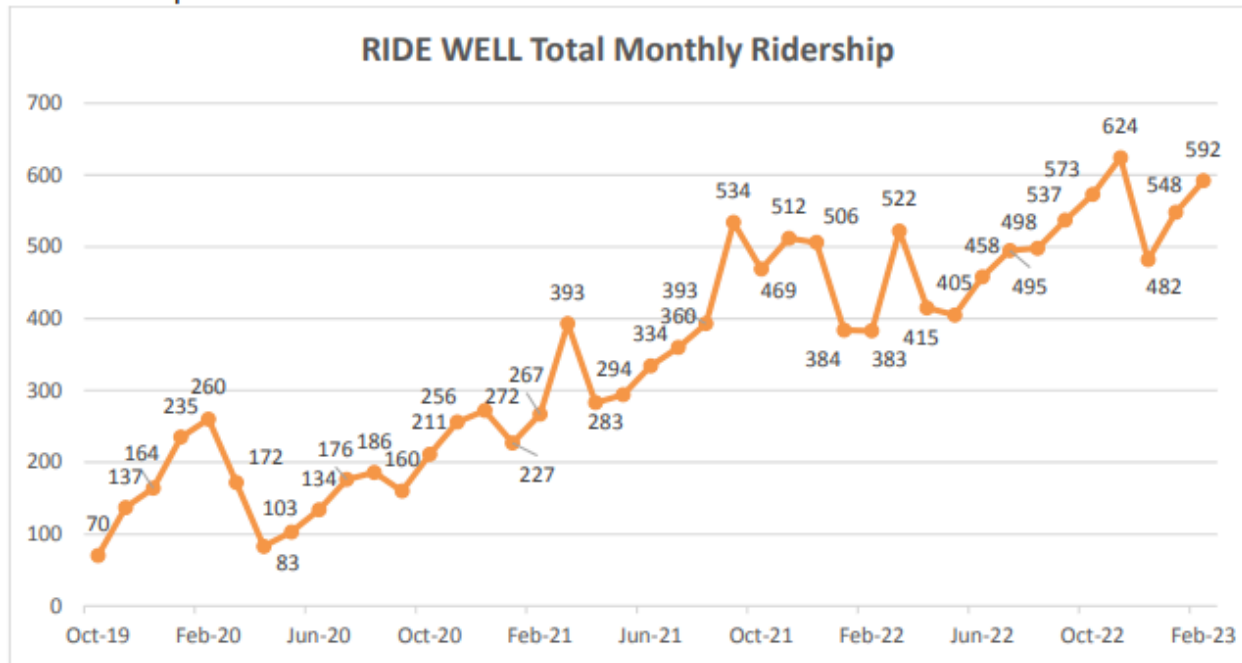


Figure 1 - Wellington County RideWell Total Monthly Ridership (2019-2023) [1]

According to a consultant's report and as shown in Figure 2 below, 40% of those using Ride Well at least three times a week are using it to get to work and another 15% are using it to get to medical appointments [2]. Unfortunately, the future of RideWell is uncertain as provincial funding is running out and the pilot program will expire in March 2025.

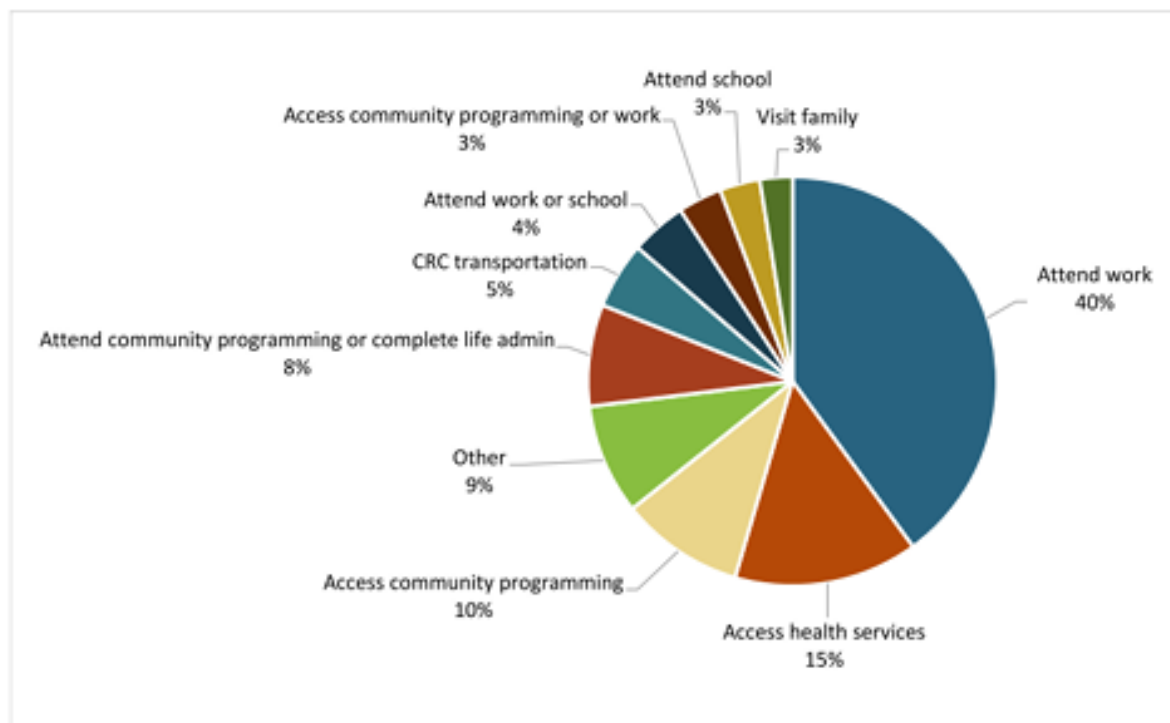


Figure 2: RideWell Trip Purposes for Frequent Users (January 1 to April 14, 2024) [2]

RideWell has provided many benefits for Wellington County residents who do not have other means of transportation. Businesses in underserved communities also benefit from transit programs. TG Minto, an auto parts manufacturer in Palmerston, runs buses from Kitchener (a major centre in a neighbouring municipality) to be able to fill all of their labour positions across three shifts. In addition to new employment opportunities being possible for residents, transit programs allow for better access to social and health services. Social isolation in the aging population continues to rise and a program like RideWell provides a way to reduce its impact. For RideWell, the main issue is the financial sustainability of the program and the municipalities must find a balance between both operational and capital funding with affordable service if the program is to continue.

The total Provincial grant and County funding for RideWell is estimated to be \$1.2 million [3,4]. Based on six years of operation, the annual funding allocation to continue to operate the RideWell program at current service levels is approximately \$200,000. Due to increasing demand for the RideWell service, it is recommended that the annual budget for RideWell increase by \$25,000 annually and that \$35,000 in capital per year be allocated for vehicle replacements. The annual operating and capital budget is presented in Table 1.

<b>Year</b>	<b>2025</b>	<b>2026</b>	<b>2027</b>	<b>2028</b>	<b>2029</b>
Budget (Operating)	\$200,000	\$225,000	\$250,000	\$275,000	\$300,000
Budget (Capital)	\$35,000	\$35,000	\$35,000	\$35,000	\$35,000

Table 1 - Annual Operating and Capital Budget for RideWell

### Engineering and Design Principles

Mobility is a fundamental element within a municipality as it allows people in the community to move freely and easily in one's city or town. This is distinctly exemplified through bike lanes and sidewalks as it increases the number of transportation options for individuals with a lower income. As the cost of living increases due to inflation, it makes it harder for people to afford vehicles or even gasoline and commuting by foot or cycling should be an alternate form of transportation for many. One way to encourage active transportation is through protected bike lanes and pedestrian-friendly streets. For example, in the Township of Centre Wellington, a section of Highway 6 that runs through downtown Fergus is being reconstructed. The design strategically includes features for all users and all modes of travel such as separated bike lanes that can be used for cycling along with other personal mobility devices. Accessible design features such as audible crossings, tactile plates and the replacement of steps into stores with ramps are also incorporated into the design.

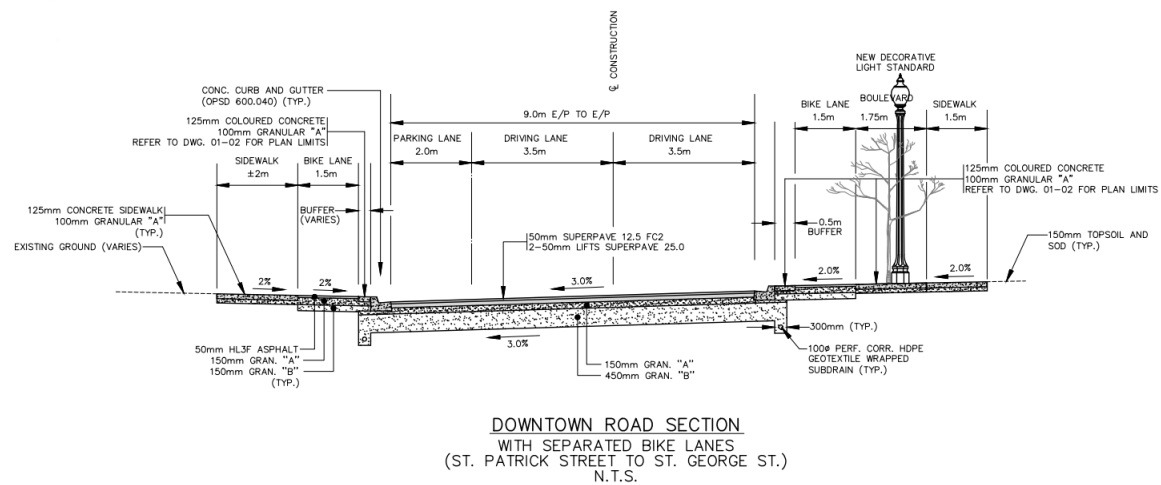


Figure 3 - St. David Street Reconstruction Project - Downtown Fergus Road Cross Section [5]

To design inclusive and equitable transit systems, it is essential to engage diverse communities in planning the transit system, implement universal design for accessibility, ensure service coverage in underserved areas, and enhance safety and security. These design strategies help create transit systems that are accessible, safe, and beneficial for all community members.

Figure 4 below presents a transit stop design that incorporates many of these principles by including separated cycling facilities, tactile surfaces, multi-use paths, and barrier-free paths of travel. Taking EDI into consideration, municipalities should establish engineering standards that encourage the design of public transit and active transportation infrastructure that enhance the user experience for all.

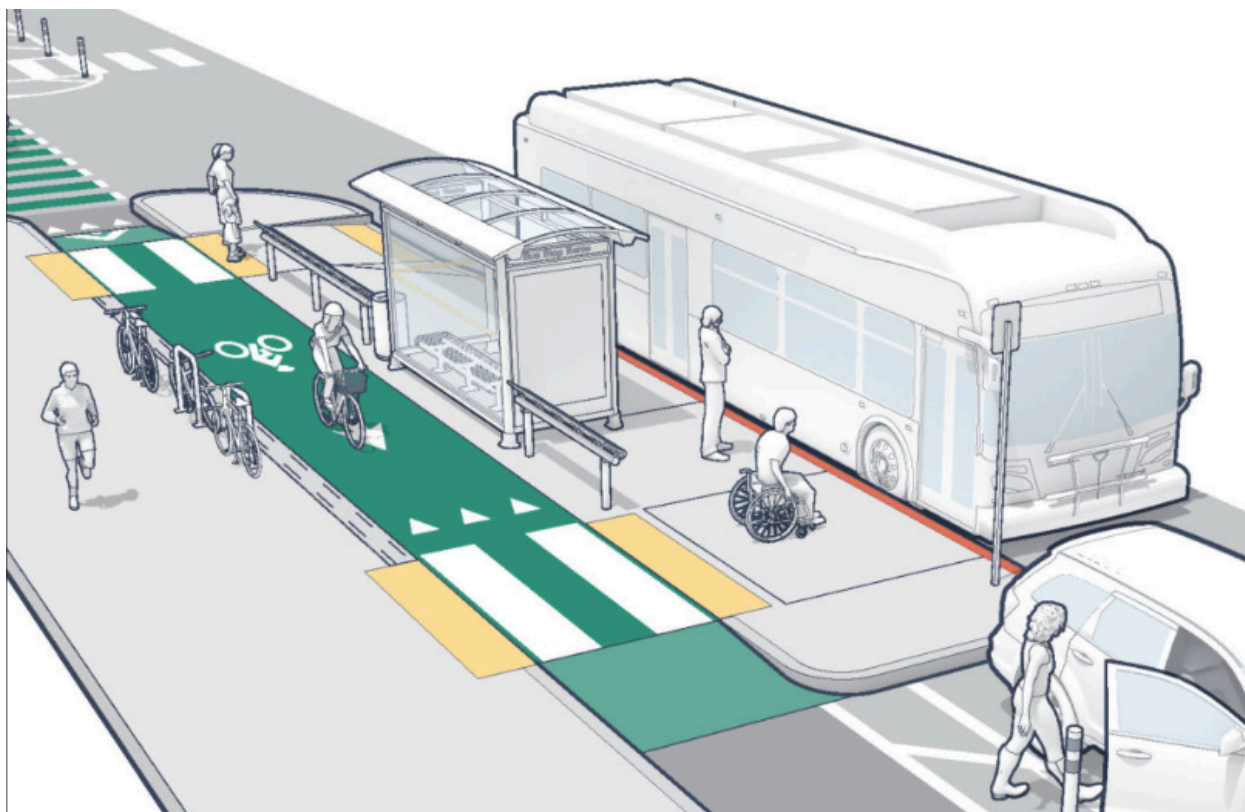


Figure 4 - Accessible Transit and Active Transportation Infrastructure [6]

### Conclusion

Ontario's municipal transportation and infrastructure systems play a crucial role in fostering equitable access and inclusion. By including EDI principles in municipal transportation and infrastructure policy, ensuring financial support for underserved groups, and applying innovative engineering principles, municipalities can create systems that meet the needs of their diverse communities. Using strategies such as Community Benefit Agreements (CBAs) with Indigenous communities, subsidized transit programs, and universally designed infrastructure demonstrates the potential to enhance the quality of life for all residents. With thoughtful implementation and ongoing evaluation, Ontario municipalities can bridge gaps, empower marginalized communities, and build inclusive communities for generations to come.



## References

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