

On-It Summer 2017 Calgary to Banff Transit Pilot ... A Huge Success!

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According to Mayor Karen Sorensen of Banff Alberta, “For the first time in our history, visitors from Calgary had the opportunity to travel to Banff on convenient, inexpensive and comfortable mass transit. We want to ensure this is the way of the future – that more and more visitors will choose to leave their private vehicles at home and hop on a bus, or a train, to travel to and within the Banff National Park and the Town. We were proud to partner with Parks Canada on this transit initiative and collaborate with Calgary Regional Partnership and Town of Canmore to bring [On-It](#) to Banff.”

The [Calgary Regional Partnership](#) (CRP) knew there was pent up demand for regional transit linking the Calgary Region with Canmore and Banff but didn’t know how much demand there actually was until the pilot began running.

In the words of Okotoks Mayor Bill Robertson, “the Okotoks-Calgary -Banff Transit pilot was a huge success this past summer. It allowed residents and visitors from across the Calgary Region to travel to the Banff area for an affordable cost in a sustainable manner. Many 55 passenger buses were sold out on the weekends which meant that far less personal vehicles were traveling on the highways creating less traffic congestion, reducing the carbon footprint, and creating less driving stress. The transit pilot was a huge success which I hope will continue next year!”

We learned “riders liked our advanced purchase ticket system where they could go online and purchase tickets in advance for the day and trip time of their choice, to ensure they had a spot. Riders liked the options of advance ticket purchase that could be viewed on their cell phone or printed out, as well as just buying tickets on the spot”, said Ettore Iannacito, On-It Regional Transportation Manager.

Iannacito also expressed how pleased riders were with how well the On-It buses linked to the Roam Transit system that offered free transfers from On-It buses onto their system for that specific day.

Roam offers transit service around the Town of Banff as well as between Canmore, Banff, and Lake Minnewanka.

There is a Lake Louise free shuttle run by Parks Canada from Banff.

Over the summer, On-It saw hundreds of repeat users, lots of single riders, families and extended families with grandparents, and hikers.



Photo credit: [Mike Morrison, Mike Bloggity Blog](#)

As expected, the service had lots of tourists, but the big surprise was how many day trippers from the Calgary Region On-It served.

Young people who don't drive, or seniors who don't like to drive on the highway.

On-It also saw many reverse trips from Banff, where tourists used On-It to spend a day exploring Calgary's tourist hot spots.

"I can honestly say that I was floored by the public's response to the Calgary/ Banff summer pilot. The media coverage, service offerings, and pricing were instrumental to achieving a successful roll out. It was extraordinary to see the work put in and level of co-operation between the Calgary Regional Partnership and Southland Transportation," said Jonathan Weal, Regional Director at Southland Transportation.

By the Numbers

The total number of On-It Calgary/Banff riders over the summer was 11,706, an average of 450 per day.

It didn't take long for On-It Calgary/Banff to catch on as the numbers doubled from the first weekend to the second and continued to rise each weekend all summer.

The busiest day was Saturday, September 2nd with 677 over the long weekend. In fact, Saturdays were consistently busier than Sundays by about 200 riders.

While there were some riders from Okotoks, Cochrane, and Canmore the vast majority were going from Calgary to Banff.

In fact, the numbers showed five times as many people rode from Crowfoot LRT Station to Banff than from Somerset LRT Station which makes sense as riders could use Calgary Transit to get to the Crowfoot Station which had the most direct trips to Banff.

Interestingly almost 10 times more got off at the Crowfoot Station than at the Somerset Station when traveling from Banff to Calgary.

On-It was definitely a win-win this summer for tourists and Calgarians.

What we heard?



Photo credit: [Mike Morrison, Mike Bloggity Blog](#)

We are currently reviewing the 915 rider surveys that were submitted over the summer, which represents about 20% of the riders over the age of 18.

“This is a fantastic service, I have loved going to Banff almost every weekend these past few months.” Yes, someone used On-It to go to Banff almost every weekend this past summer.

“I really hope they continue this project. How can anyone go wrong at \$10 one way? Even if I owned a car I would take the bus if I was just walking around Banff for the day.”

“It’s great to have a representative on site before the bus got here to guide us and make the boarding process easier.”

“You can’t beat the price! It would definitely cost more to drive.”

“I didn’t feel like driving. I’d much rather sit back and enjoy the view.”

“Your buses are so clean and comfortable.”

“I love that there aren’t a lot stops on route to Banff like other bus services.”

“The cost and convenience made it a great service for the elderly.”

What’s Next?

Perhaps the best evidence of the success of the Calgary to Banff On-It pilot was the fact there were dozens of requests for the service to continue beyond the Labour Day Long Weekend.

In fact, Iannacito estimates that based on the volume of inquiries continuing to come into the On-It call centre, he could continue to fill up several buses every Saturday.

The goal was to run a pilot service that would make Banff and the mountain parks more accessible, while easing the congestion and parking strain over the Canada 150 summer.

The Town of Banff, Town of Canmore and Parks Canada shared in the cost of the service.

The Calgary Regional Partnership planned the service, provided marketing and communications for it along with the other participants and managed the ticketing system operations.

On-It branded coach style buses were utilized, through a private contract agreement with Southland Transportation.

The Calgary to Banff pilot ran from June 17 until Labour Day. “There is a possibility the service will run again next summer which is the busiest time of the year for Banff National Park,” said Iannacito.

Besides the Calgary to Banff pilot, the CRP is running year two of its On-It commuter pilot between Calgary, Okotoks, High River, Black Diamond and Turner Valley using the first ‘debit tap on board’ payment option for public transit in the Region.

“The CRP is also helping Okotoks develop service concepts for local on-demand transit that has the potential to operate as part of the On-It system,” said Iannacito.

Most recently, the CRP supported the Towns of Turner Valley and Black Diamond to [acquire significant funding under the Provincial GreenTRIP program](#) for local transit shuttles and park and ride facilities, that will connect to the On-It regional service.

In the region’s East-West corridor, the goal is to eventually phase Cochrane, Chestermere and Strathmore into the On-it system.

“We are just completing our East / West On-it feasibility study. Research through statistically valid surveys completed in June shows a high level of interest for regional transit from residents in that corridor,” said Iannacito.

Cautiously Optimistic



In spite of these possibilities, Shepherd suggests that caution is required when looking to the future of On-It past March 2018.

“There are many unknowns at this time that are causing us to take pause. We know that the Province is creating a new Calgary Metropolitan Growth Management Board that will assume many, but perhaps not all of the responsibilities the CRP has undertaken since 2004.”

“We know that, as part of that action, as of April 2018 the CRP will no longer receive core funding from Municipal Affairs – the funding that has enabled the CRP to create and underwrite the On-It regional transit system until now. However, as the new Growth Management Board has not actually been established as yet (October 2017), we don’t know if it will eventually choose to take on the funding and operations of On-It beyond March 2018,” said Shepherd.

It is expected that before the end of this fiscal year the CRP Board and member municipalities will consider a number of transition options, with the anticipation that the commuter pilot can be brought to completion and that if deemed successful, On-It can continue to grow and serve the region.

However, Shepherd is emphatic that, “connecting our municipalities through regional transit is essential to attracting new businesses to the Calgary Region that will diversify our economy. The Calgary Region is lagging behind. Go to any vibrant, growing cosmopolitan region in North America or abroad, and you will find a connected regional transit system as the backbone.”

“We’ve been saying for years that regional transit is a must have if we hope to bring global companies like Amazon to the Calgary Region. Large companies require access to the region’s labour force and are demanding better mobility choices for a young active labour pool who choose not to drive, or who want to live in a community of choice outside the larger city,” said Shepherd.

In fact, the CRP recently worked with the Calgary Economic Development team to support the Amazon bid and Regional Transit was one of stated key requirements.

“We’re excited about the momentum On-It has generated. It’s critically important to keep that momentum going. Our region can’t afford to wait another five or ten years”. To quote one of our regular On-It riders, *“It’s about time!”*.

Last Word

Jonathan Weal, Regional Director, Southland Transportation wants everyone to know that, “the On-It Regional Transit Service is a ground-breaking project for Alberta. It has granted us a sustainable public transit system that is designed and operated with the customers at the forefront. The continuation of this pilot and adoption by municipalities is essential if we are to reduce our dependence on personal vehicles and minimize our carbon footprint.

The key to growth for regional public transit is to provide services that are flexible, dependable, and with the user in mind. The relationship between Southland Transportation

and the Calgary Regional Partnership has shown that the public and private sectors can work together to provide innovative solutions for the future of regional public transit.”



Photo credit: [Mike Morrison, Mike Bloggity Blog](#)