

TOWN OF SMITHERS

MINUTES OF THE SMITHERS COMMUNITY TRANSPORTATION MEETING HELD IN THE WEST FRASER ROOM, 1027 ALDOUS STREET, SMITHERS, B.C. ON THURSDAY, NOVEMBER 24, 2022, AT 1:00 PM

<u>Community Attendees:</u>	<u>Town of Smithers:</u>
Sheena Miller, Manager, Chamber of Commerce Daniela Bork, General Manager, Prestige Hudson Bay Lodge Lex Rei-Jones, General Manager, Hudson Bay Mountain Resort & Skeena Cat Skiing Nellie Davis, Manager of Economic Development Regional District of Bulkley Nechako (via ZOOM) Kimberly Martin, Alpine Ridge Industries	Gladys Atrill, Mayor Sam Raven, Councillor
Missy Moure, Upper Skeena Angling Guide Association Julia and Dennis Strain	Rob Blackburn, Airport Manager Ryan Coltura, Director of Community Services Will George, Economic Development Officer Deepa Chandran, Planner
Lianne and Werner Eichstadler, concerned citizens.	Annie Girdler, Planning Technician D. Michan Mendel, Recording Secretary.

Media Present: D. Meissner, Interior News.

1. **CALL TO ORDER AND INTRODUCTIONS**

Mayor Atrill, Chair, called the meeting to order (1:00 p.m.).

2. **ACKNOWLEDGEMENT**

- 2.1. *The Town of Smithers acknowledges the Gidimt'en Clan and the Witsuwit'en people, on whose traditional territory we live, work and play.*

3. **APPROVAL OF AGENDA (Including Late Items)**

4. **BRIEF HISTORY OF TAXI COMPANIES IN SMITHERS**

W. George, Economic Development Officer, stated that the community meeting was called to discuss taxi and ride sharing, and that stakeholders were invited to address concerns. This information will be compiled for businesses reviewing the Smithers market. He provided a summary of BV Taxi business in Smithers and stated that the reasons provided for closing were that the local market was not strong enough. W. George has been in conversations with the Province (Ministry of Transportation) regarding ride sharing and ride hailing companies and corresponding restrictions or pre-

approvals to operate. W. George acknowledged that there is a shortage of rental vehicles in this area and that since BV Taxi has closed, the Town of Smithers has received letters from local businesses and called this meeting to start a community dialogue to find solutions.

G. Atrill added that part of running a taxi business not only includes the business, leisure, and tourism clients but also more challenging clientele that may be under the influence, in harder circumstances, or need rides late at night. G. Atrill agreed that a transportation service is absolutely necessary but may present a challenge for business operators in many aspects.

5. DISCUSSION ON NEED FOR TAXI SERVICE

Community Response and Business Impact:

W. George provided some context including that the Town has received numerous complaints from local businesses that the lack of taxi service is affecting current employees, attracting employees, and transportation to and from the Smithers Regional Airport. He stated that there are currently some grassroots initiatives in town and this meeting may help clarify what the community needs are.

K. Martin, spoke on behalf of Alpine Ridge Industries, a local hauling company that provides industry with crew hauling, groceries, supplies and expediting. She stated that the purpose of her attendance is to speak on the Alpine Ridge experience, the purpose of the company and the company perspective on what service gaps there are in Smithers for transportation right now. Since BV Taxi closed, Alpine Ridge Industries has received calls from cat skiing guests, mining companies, hotels, rental companies, guide and outfit companies, traveling nurses, people stranded at the airport, stranded in hotels, bars and community members, parents that couldn't pick up their children, elderly people that need to get to medical appointments, and VIA Rail passengers left outside the railway stop with nothing open. K. Martin stated that Alpine Ridge Industries charges what they can to recover costs: fuel, vehicle costs, liability insurance, and licensing. The company does what they can for free, especially for late night calls, sometimes in their personal vehicle so nobody is stranded; their phone rings at all hours, and as a local company and community members, they have provided transportation as much as they are able to. They would like to help find solutions; however, their company mandate is to be available 24/7 for emergency necessities or goods, and their company cannot book a ride for a hotel to the airport over a mining request. The company is unable to be available as much as local hotels and the airport needs; they are only able to offer transportation on a last-minute basis. K. Martin stated that their company has received a lot of feedback from passengers in last few months and that they have received 125 calls since June 2022 just for transport within Smithers; the company is only able to offer services to a small percent of those calls. She stated that a ride hailing

business requires a special passenger transport license, and along with the Provincial requirements, would not sustain a viable business model for their company to entertain. She acknowledged the huge need for safe and reliable transport in Smithers, particularly because it is a rural northern town, there are long distances between points, there is a lack of any kind of transportation, an uptick of impaired driving, and no safe rides available. She stated that some tourist feedback is that they are looking at visiting other towns instead of Smithers because of transportation logistics, and that their company hears that local hotels are experiencing a downturn in business. K. Martin suggested that the Town of Smithers incentivize or fund a shuttle service that operates on a daily schedule from 8 am to 8 pm to service hotels, the Smithers Regional Airport, and the general public. She stated that rideshare companies are not required to have special licensing or Class Two drivers; and advised the attendees of the differences between Special Transport Licenses and General Transport Licenses. K. Martin suggested that the Town incentivize a DD service to offer safe rides home and stated that the RCMP have also been getting called for smaller things like transportation/safe rides home.

D. Bork, Hudson Bay Lodge Manager, advised that the hotel guests are often looking for rides to the airport and back and that the hotel staff often give rides, sometimes with personal vehicles. She has observed that tourism conferences would like to book in Smithers however the transportation issues have been discouraging bookings. She mentioned that often the ambulance is now being called for minor things such as rides to the hospital (BVDH).

S. Miller, Chamber of Commerce, advised that their office has heard from temporary foreign workers regarding the struggle with housing and equally with transportation. She stated that there is currently a critical labour shortage, limited housing, and no way to get around for workers here that are unable to get basic needs met. S. Miller stated that the Chamber of Commerce recently wanted to be a host community for an annual convention, however part of the application included a section to fill out regarding taxi services available; Smithers can't be a host venue because it cannot meet basic needs of hosting. She acknowledged that the current situation may require more than one solution or innovative ways to get back on track.

L. Rei-Jones, spoke on behalf of two tourism-based businesses: Hudson Bay Mountain and Skeena Cat Skiing. She advised that transportation has been a huge issue for these businesses with visitors flying in who are immediately frustrated by being forced to rent a car. She stated that in the past, Skeena Cat Skiing would fly in the day before their ski trip, stay in Smithers for the evening, then ski Hudson Bay Mountain, then helicopter out for their ski trip. This has been greatly hindered the inability to get around town; Skeena Cat Skiing guests are often flying directly to Terrace now and are avoiding Smithers altogether. The loss of transportation in Smithers is greatly affecting tourism.

M. Moure, Upper Skeena Angling Guide Association, advised that the group she is representing just wrapped up the steelhead fishing seasons and that a lot of operators rely on Smithers as a base and do not have their own transportation or shuttle services for guests. In the past, they mainly relied on the BV Taxi service and would encourage guests to stay in town and go for dinner then the operators would pick them up from their hotel on first day of fishing. She stated that there have been some challenges in the last few years including shutdowns from the COVID-19 Pandemic and fish numbers last year. M. Moure advised that this is the groups first year of operating normally and transportation has proved to be challenging; the operators cannot afford to buy a vehicle or hire someone to provide transport as they are mostly small operations; this impacts guests that are not keen to return and are often now looking at flying out of Terrace for better options. She stated that other challenges include the lack of food available at the Smithers Regional Airport and fog issues interfering with flights, so the operators have had to go back to the airport to provide food when their guests are stuck in transit. M. Moure thanked the Town for calling the meeting and acknowledged that the lack of transportation affects many aspects in the community.

L. Eichstadler, retired teacher, stated that she is concerned about the isolation of seniors in their homes. She recognized that there is a bus service that offers pickup and drop off, but it has to be pre-planned and booked. She stated that seniors are unable to get to activities and sometimes end up retreating into their homes with no sense of autonomy because of lack of transportation options.

R. Blackburn, Smithers Regional Airport Manager, advised that when there was a taxi service, the taxis were often sitting there waiting for a fare but not being utilized. He agreed that there is a need for transportation but that the costs of running a shuttle service or similar transportation service are unable to be borne by the airport.

W. George thanked everyone for sharing their experiences.

6. DISCUSSION ON OPTIONS

- 6.1.
- PRIVATE TAXI SERVICE
 - RIDE SHARES (I.E., UBER AND LYFT)
 - INCREASED VEHICLE RENTAL OPTIONS
 - SHARED HOTEL / AIRPORT SHUTTLE SERVICE
 - LOCAL GROUPS PROVIDE RIDES
 - BC TRANSIT PUBLIC BUS SERVICE

Discussion:

W. George stated that the Town of Smithers has reached out to regional taxi services to explore providing a taxi service in Smithers, and that one company based out of Terrace has been coming to town a few times a week and may be interested in expanding their service. W. George advised that he is looking at ride share options and has talked to several companies; Uber and Lyft are not approved in Northern BC however there are seven companies that are approved through the Province and he has reached out to them to see if they might be interested in expanding to Smithers. He stated that some of the concerns that he has heard so far from these companies include difficulties attracting drivers, needing a vehicle newer than ten years old, and employees requiring a Class Four drivers' license. He advised that he is in continuous dialogue with them and will also explore the Province's fast track program if anyone wants to move forward with a ride sharing or taxi company in Smithers.

R. Coltura thanked the group for their comments and details of their experience since the BV Taxi service stopped operating. He stated that the Town of Smithers is looking at existing transit services and currently operate the public transit bus system in partnership with other municipalities and regional districts. R. Coltura advised that the Town is looking at what alternate functions the bus services could provide, and that the current services that provide curb to curb are not able to keep up with demand plus the limitations of their schedule. He stated that the bus system in Smithers has limited options to stops and pickup which creates funding and logistics issues. R. Coltura advised that he has looked at schedules and coordinating an attempt to utilize a shuttle system from the airport into town but there are challenges associated with doing that, ie. airline carriers changing the flight schedule which impacts the whole regions schedule. He stated that the Town of Smithers is actively pursuing transportation options and will continue to work in conjunction with all available options.

D. Chandran suggested that while licensing fees are a huge barrier, perhaps there is an opportunity to talk with the Province to reduce that fee where there is limited access. She put forward examples from a similar project in Winnipeg wherein businesses came together to establish a ride share arrangement as a possible option. D. Chandran suggested that perhaps there could be a dialogue with the school district where school buses might be used for public transportation.

G. Atrill stated that over the last few years, there has been an accumulation of decisions that have ultimately resulted in the current issue: the previous taxi service closing, hotels used to do pickups and no longer do that, it is more complex to get insurance than it used to be, and more guides have expediting but some of those services have ceased. She advised that while businesses may want the Town to subsidize or offer transportation services, that would

result in everyone in town paying for it through taxes so not everyone would love it. She stated that even if the Town of Smithers were to provide a shuttle, that wouldn't solve everything either and if this was easy to solve in the private sector, then it would have been done. She suggested that it may take everyone working together to come up with an alternative multi-pronged approach.

K. Martin thanked everyone for bringing up important points especially around the previous taxi service not being a money maker and suggested that perhaps the community is losing more than it would cost with regard to tourism and small businesses. She stated that the price of insurance, cost of fuel, the Canadian economy, and government bureaucracy has made it harder to make a profit on transportation such as taxi and shuttle services and that financial support from the Town would be an investment in the community.

D. Bork stated that there is no one step solution and suggested that perhaps an airport shuttle like the Victoria business model where one calls ahead for pickup and the shuttle services all hotels for a flat fee potentially subsidized through the Town or local businesses might be a solution. She advised that the Hudson Bay Lodge used to run a shuttle until six years ago but got rid of it because of the challenges of having a staff member constantly available, flights cancelled, cost of winter tires, liability, and advised that it was not a feasible model because it sits more than 50 % of the time. She suggested that perhaps a daytime airport shuttle could be run but the Town with an evening DD for emergency calls run by a separate company or rideshare.

S. Miller agreed that it may take several approaches to find solutions, and this doesn't all fall on the Town of Smithers. She suggested that a steering committee to compliment and work with the Town as a task force that are passionate, highly skilled, and high-level thinking could meet together and discuss option.

J. Strain, spoke on behalf of a colleague that owns a taxi company in Alberta, and advised that her colleague is investigating the possibility of coming to Smithers to take on taxi service. She advised that the application to start a taxi service in BC is an overwhelming process.

W. George advised that a fast-track program could be available through the Province if the community is able to demonstrate urgent need.

G. Atrill stated that representatives from the industrial sector were not present at the meeting and advised that the Town is invested in ensuring the success of businesses and community in Smithers, businesses. She reminded the group that the Town is also subject to Provincial regulations and agreed that everyone should work together to come up with recommendations.

K. Martin advised that the Summit Camps Project Manager, M. Sanborn, has multiple employees trapped weekly at hotels and airports with no options for transit and that the company is considering moving their base to Terrace. She stated that the businesses located up Highway 37 have the option to choose Terrace or Smithers for their company base and supplies. K. Martin advised that Alpine Ridge has a bus that is fully licensed, however the company cannot take on what needs to be done in terms of airport/hotel shuttles. She agreed that a task force may be a great way to support finding solutions.

S. Raven thanked everyone for attending the meeting and for their desire to help. She stated that this is a complex issue, particularly with current gas prices, and thanked Town staff for working hard to research options.

8. NEXT STEPS

W. George requested that all of the attendees put their contact information on the sign in sheet to stay connected and advised that the meeting notes would be circulated among the attendees. He thanked everyone for coming and agreed that a multi faceted approach would be the best solution. He stated that he will continue conversations with ride sharing companies and focus on what is currently in place before looking at external options.

10. LATE ITEMS APPROVED FOR DISCUSSION

13. ADJOURNMENT

The meeting was adjourned at 2:16 p.m.

Dianna Plouffe
Chief Administrative Officer

Gladys Atrill
Mayor

Minutes of the Smithers and District Transit Committee Meeting
held on Thursday, November 24, 2022, at 1:00 p.m.

A True and Correct Copy of the minutes
of the Smithers Community Transportation
meeting held Thursday, November 24,
2022, at 1:00 p.m. in the West Fraser
Room, 1027 Aldous Street, Smithers, B.C.

David Schroeter
Corporate Officer