



## County Council

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**Meeting Date:** May 9, 2023

**Submitted by:** Cindy Howard, General Manager of Finance  
and Community Services

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Project Manager

**SUBJECT:** Changes to County Connect Routes

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### **BACKGROUND:**

On April 30, 2018, Middlesex County received a letter confirming our eligibility for funding for the inter-community transit project up to \$1,500,000 for the period commencing on April 30, 2018 and ending on March 31, 2023. A letter was also received on January 30, 2019 confirming that the Government of Ontario would support the County through the advancement of the municipal stream of the Community Transportation Grant Program. The Community Transportation Grant Program Transfer Payment Agreement was received on July 4, 2019. The Parties entered into the Community Transportation Grant Program Transfer Payment Agreement effective as of August 13, 2019. The agreement was later amended and executed on April 13, 2022 to extend the funding period for an additional two (2) years, ending on March 31, 2025. The County will be receiving an additional \$927,944.62 in funding during the extension period increasing total funding to \$2,427,944.62.

Middlesex County launched its intercommunity transit service, Middlesex County Connect, on September 21, 2020 with Voyago being the service provider. The service currently connects Thames Centre to London and Oxford County. While the pandemic did affect ridership, the original fixed routes have remained unchanged to keep a stable and reliable system in place for residents. An on-demand Saturday route was launched in April 2021 and recently discontinued on March 31, 2023 due to low ridership.

In October 2021, Middlesex County applied for Rural Transit Solutions Fund with the goal of conducting a needs assessment and planning for the development of a demand-responsive transportation option for the County. The application was successful and Arcadis IBI Group was retained in July 2022 to conduct a rural transit needs assessment study. The assessment explored peer transit systems, ridership/coverage of existing transit in the County and provincial and municipal policies and initiatives to offer short-term (pre-2025) and long term (post-2025) recommendations. The study was presented to County Council in April 2023.

### **ANALYSIS:**

Mobility and transit are critical for rural communities and their residents. However, sustainable transit systems are a struggle for many communities. Middlesex County finds itself at the intersection of a number of challenges and opportunities faced by rural communities across the country including COVID, a dispersed and aging population, rapid growth, transit barriers, and new technologies. A safe, efficient, and connected transit system would improve basic levels of accessibility and help meet the needs of a changing population, particularly those

that are most vulnerable.

The provision of transit aligns with the County's strategic priorities. The Middlesex County Strategic Plan 2021-2024 highlights the strategic focus of "Cultivating Community Vitality", with an associated objective of "championing and encouraging active transportation and public transit opportunities". The Middlesex County Economic Development Strategy 2021-2025 identifies the lack of a public transportation system as an infrastructure gap, which prevents the County from capitalizing on economic opportunities. The existing Middlesex County Connect service is identified as an example of "Innovation and Readiness" in mitigating such challenges.

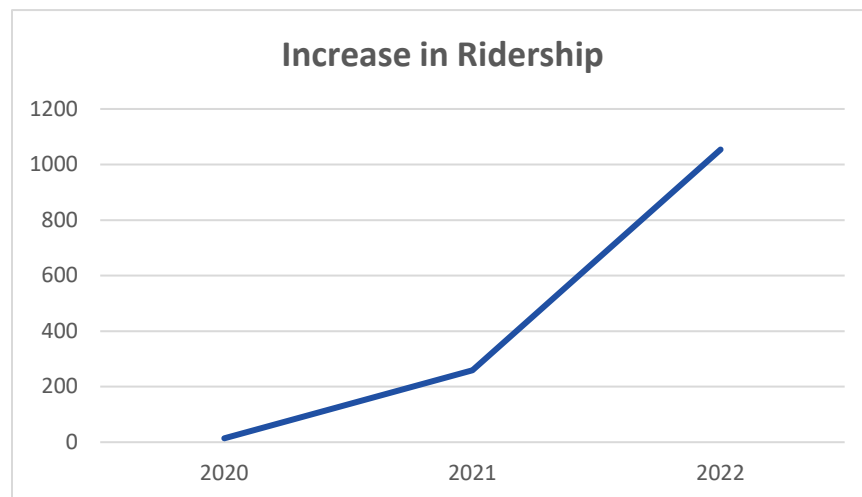
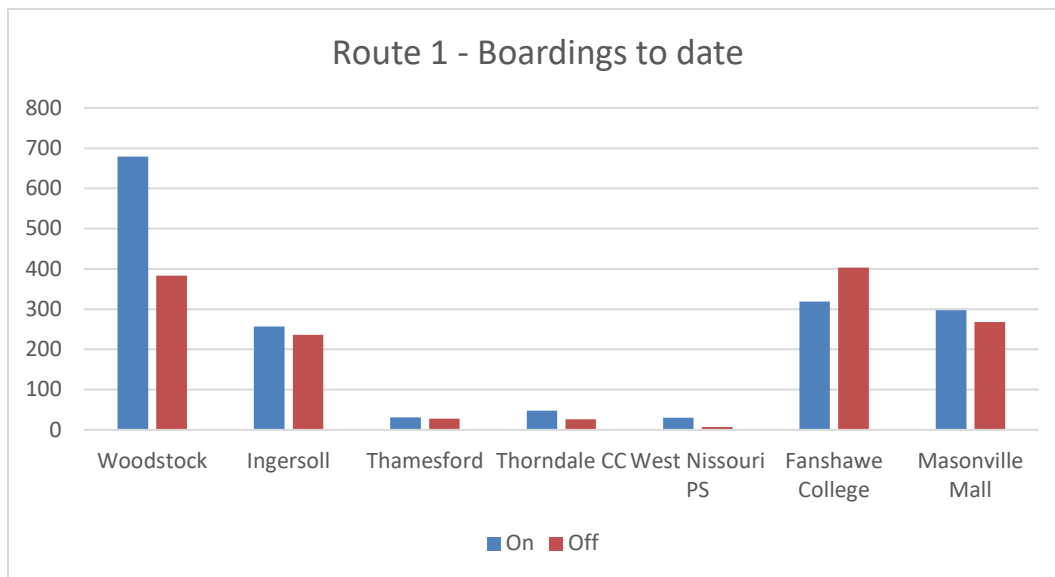
This is the context in which the County elected to conduct a rural transit needs assessment study. An assessment of needs and opportunities determined a strong need for continued transit service provision. The assessment explored the County's demographics, travel demand, and socioeconomics to determine the potential ridership base and prioritization of need. The assessment also considered the performance of peer transit systems, ridership/coverage of existing transit in the County, and provincial and municipal policies and initiatives.

Due to contractual and funding requirements, it was determined that recommendations would be phased. Short-term (pre-2025) recommendations would address immediate needs with the existing Middlesex County Connect service and respect existing obligations with the service operator and the Province, while long-term (post-2025) recommendations would take a "blank slate" approach to provide transit throughout the County. This report focuses on these short-term recommendations. Long-term recommendations will be presented to the Council at a future date.

**Existing service review and findings:**

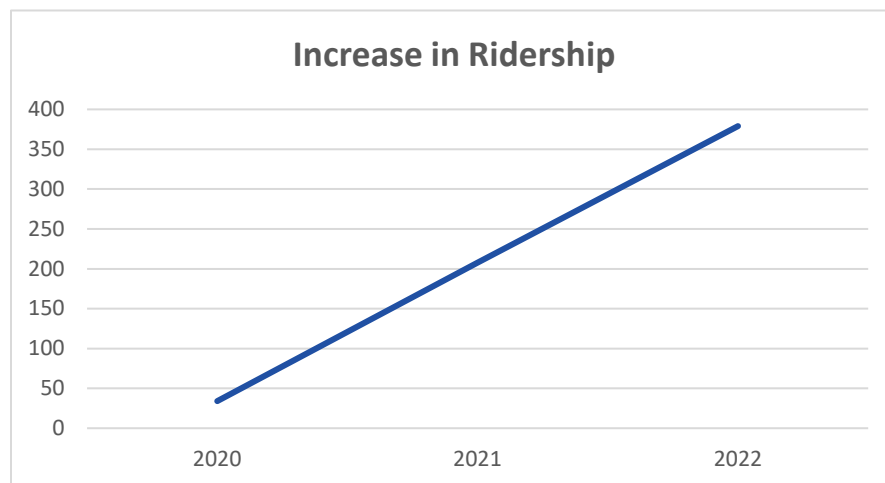
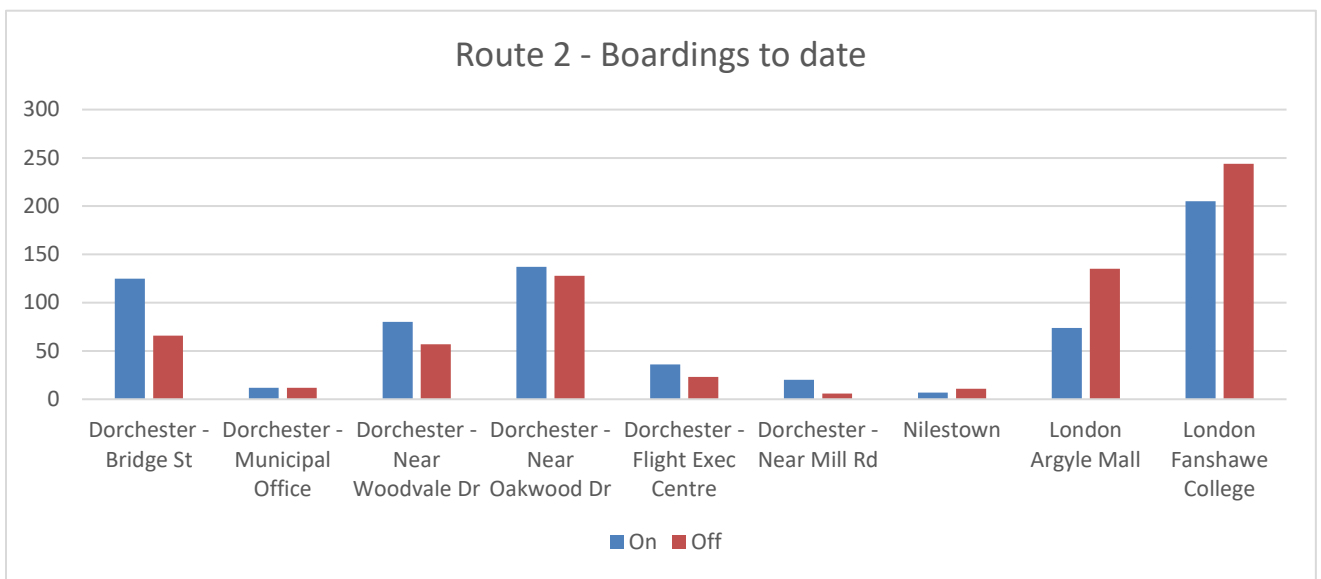
**Route 1: Oxford County → Thorndale → London**

Route 1 currently connects Thorndale to London, Thamesford, Ingersoll, and Woodstock during peak commuting hours on weekdays. This is our highest-performing route, with an average of 9.1 daily boardings in 2023. The communities of Thamesford and Thorndale have minimal observed boardings as seen in the chart below:



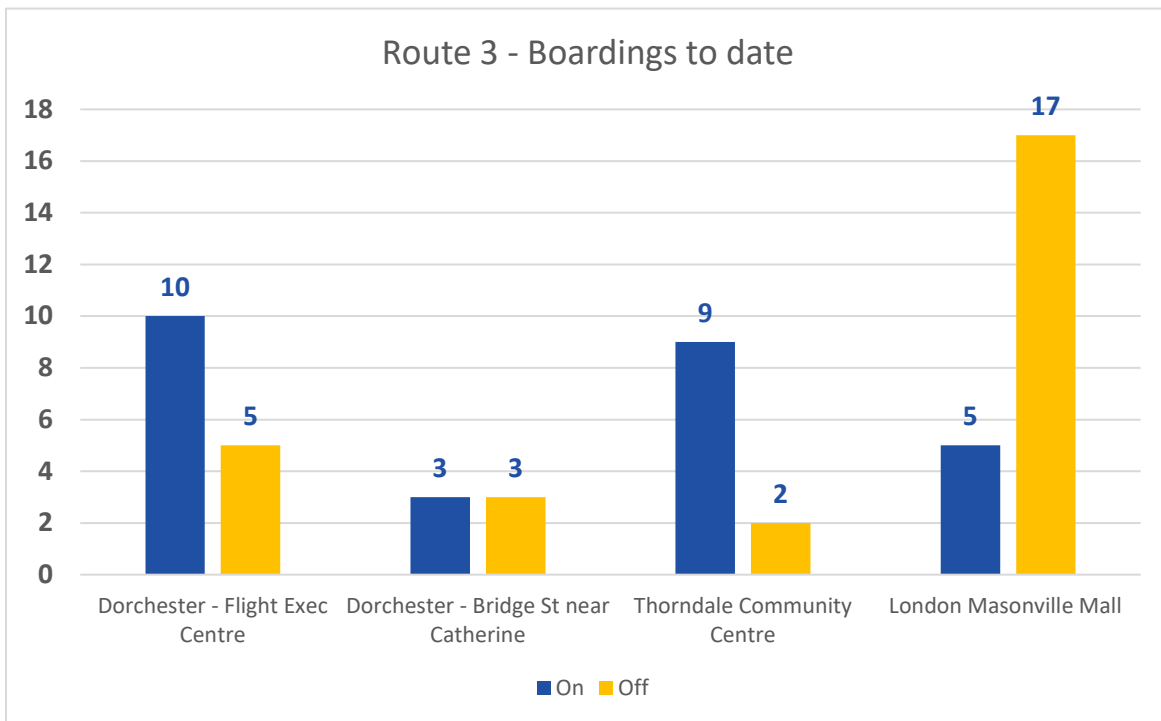
**Route 2: *Dorchester → London***

Route 2 currently connects Dorchester to London during peak commuting hours on weekdays. This route has low ridership, with an average of 1.8 daily boardings in 2023. The bus stops at Bridge St. and Oakwood Drive in Dorchester are the busiest, while the stops at Nilestown, Thames Centre Municipal Office, and near Mill Road have minimal observed boardings as seen in the below chart:



**Route 3: Thames Centre → London**

An on-demand Saturday afternoon route provided direct connections between all Dorchester, Thorndale, and London stops from 11:00 am and 3:00 pm. This route was discontinued on March 31, 2023 due to low ridership.



**COVID-19 impact on ridership and service**

The pandemic declaration in March of 2020 and associated lockdown measures that followed had a significant impact on County Connect service implementation and ridership, consistent with transit systems across the country. Middlesex County Connect launched during the COVID-19 pandemic, negatively affecting ridership levels throughout the first 10 months of service. Ridership levels began to increase in August 2021, as COVID-19 restrictions were eased in Ontario and has been at an upward trend since then.

As mentioned earlier, while the pandemic did affect ridership, the original fixed routes remain unchanged to offer residents a stable and reliable transit service. Recognizing the impact of COVID-19 pandemic, the Ontario government extended funding over two years so that communities across the province have additional time to establish their transportation services as they recover from the pandemic and build transportation services up to a sustainable level.

Given the extension and IBI's evaluation of County's transit needs, the County has an opportunity to make changes to its existing transit service with a view to improving transit access and convenience and, ultimately, increasing ridership.

### **New service recommendations and next steps:**

Based on an internal analysis of County Connect's ridership data and recommendations from the needs assessment study conducted by Arcadis IBI Group, it is proposed that, in the short term:

- Current route that connects Thorndale to Oxford County and London is routed via Dorchester rather than Thorndale and Thamesford.
- A new route is added to provide a peak-hour weekday transit connection between London, Lucan, Ilderton, and Arva.

The proposed routes have been designed around the following parameters:

- Minimize major service changes to ensure continuity of gradual ridership growth in areas with existing transit service
- Prioritize areas with high population growth and equity need

- Integrate with other inter-community transit services and local transportation services in the region.

### **Route 1: Lucan → Ilderton → Arva → London**

The first proposed route will operate between Lucan, Ilderton, Arva, and London. The route will start at the Lucan Community Centre and end at Fanshawe College in London. It will operate five days per week (Monday to Friday) during peak hours from 6:30 am to 9:50 am in the mornings and from 3:30 pm to 6:50 pm in the afternoons. These days and hours of service will ensure access to appointments, employment, post-secondary education, and other necessary programs and services during peak hours of operation

The communities of Lucan, Arva, and Ilderton were selected for service based on estimated travel demand patterns, proximity to the Masonville Mall transit hub, and public consultation feedback. The route will extend to 2,700 more residents along its new alignment.

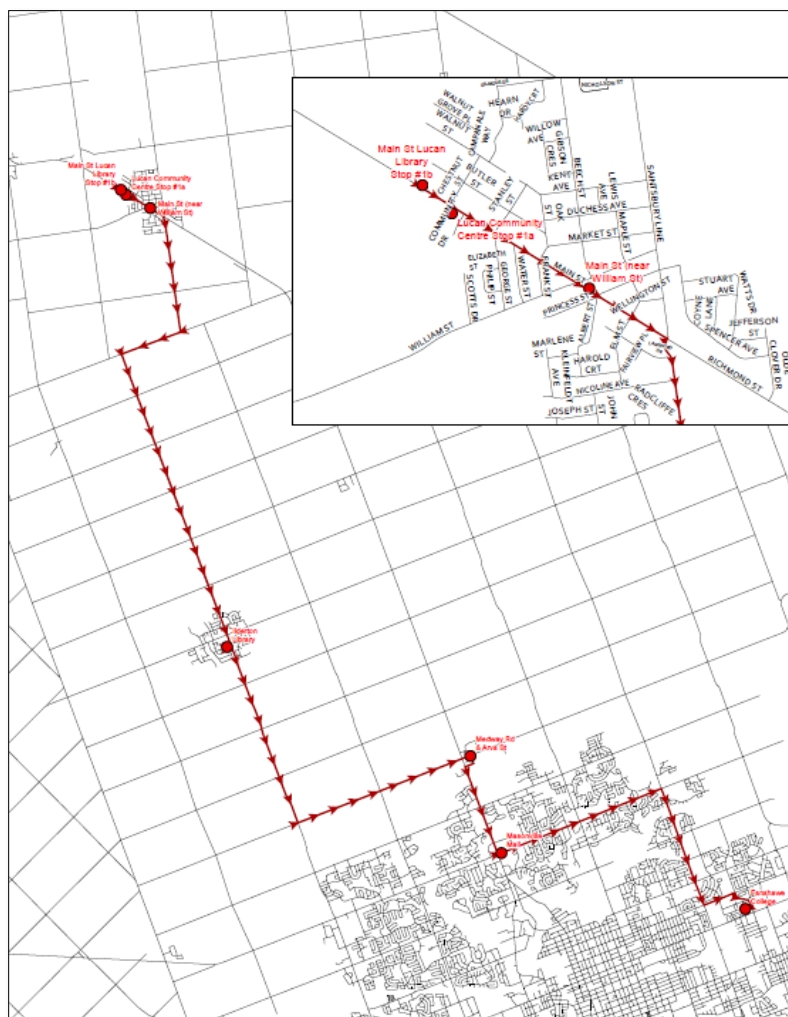
The new route has been aligned with PC Connect Route 3 (London - St. Marys – Stratford) schedule in the peak commuting hours to allow passengers to transfer between the routes at Masonville Mall. This will connect population centres in Lucan Biddulph and Middlesex Centre to the Memorial Hospital and Town Hall in St. Marys and Wright Business Parks and Transit Terminal in Stratford.

Route 1 schedule has been designed to avoid overlapping with the Huron Shores Area Transit schedule and complement its off-peak hour service in Lucan and London.



Below is the schedule and map for Route 1:

		Route 1							
		AM RUN				PM RUN			
Community	STOP	To Lucan	To London	To Lucan	To London	To Lucan	To London	To Lucan	To London
		Run 1: 6:30 AM	Run 2 - 6:50 AM	Run 3 - 7:50 AM	Run 4 - 8:50 AM	Run 5 - 3:30 PM	Run 6 - 4:30 PM	Run 7 - 5:30 PM	Run 8 - 6:30 PM
Lucan	Main St. at Lucan Community Centre/Library	6:50 AM	6:50 AM	8:50 AM	8:50 AM	4:30 PM	4:30 PM	6:30 PM	6:30 PM
	Main St. near William Street	X	6:53 AM	8:47 AM	8:53 AM	4:27 PM	4:33 PM	6:27 PM	X
Ilderton	Ilderton Library	X	7:09 AM	8:31 AM	9:09 AM	4:11 PM	4:49 PM	6:11 PM	X
Arva	Medway Rd. / Arva St.	X	7:20 AM	8:20 AM	9:20 AM	4:00 PM	5:00 PM	6:00 PM	X
London	Fanshawe Pk. Rd. near Masonville Mall	6:30 AM	7:30 AM	8:10 AM	9:30 AM	3:50 PM	5:10 PM	5:50 PM	6:50 PM
	Fanshawe College	X	7:50 AM	7:50 AM	9:50 AM	3:30 PM	5:30 PM	5:30 PM	X



**Route 2: Oxford County → Dorchester → London**

Route 2 will connect Woodstock to Dorchester and London. It will commence at the Woodstock Transit Terminal, continue to make stops in Ingersoll, Putnam, and Dorchester, and end at Masonville Mall in London. The service will operate five days per week (Monday to Friday) during peak hours from 6:30 am to 11:35 am in the mornings and from 3:00 pm to 6:30 pm in the afternoons.

By eliminating service at Thamesford and Thorndale, which have minimal observed boardings, the new route will offer a more direct connection between Woodstock, Dorchester, and London. The route will extend to 1,000 more residents along its revised alignment.

Below is the schedule & map for Route 2:

		Route 2				
		AM RUN		PM RUN		
		To London	Dorchester to London	To Woodstock	To London	To Woodstock
Community	STOP	Run 1 - 6:30 AM	Run 2 - 8:40 AM	Run 3 - 9:50 AM	Run 4 – 3:00 PM	Run 5 - 4:45 PM
Woodstock	Woodstock Transit Terminal	6:30 AM	<del>XXXXXX</del>	11:35 AM	3:00 PM	6:30 PM
Ingersoll	Oxford St. Municipal Lot.	6:50 AM	<del>XXXXXX</del>	11:15 AM	3:20 PM	6:10 PM
Putnam	Hamilton Rd./Putnam Rd.	7:00 AM	<del>XXXXXX</del>	11:05 AM	3:30 PM	6:00 PM
Dorchester	Woodvale Dr./Foxhollow Drive	7:06 AM	8:40 AM	10:59 AM	3:36 PM	5:54 PM
	Oakwood Dr./Byron	<del>XXXXXX</del>	8:45 AM	10:54 AM	3:41 PM	5:49 PM
	Dorchester Terrace Retirement Residence (TBD)	<del>XXXXXX</del>	8:50 AM	10:50 AM	3:45 PM	5:45 PM
	Flight Exec Centre	<del>XXXXXX</del>	8:55 AM	10:45 AM	3:50 PM	5:40 PM
	Catherine St./Bridge St.	7:11 AM	9:00 AM	10:40 AM	3:55 PM	5:35 PM
	Newton Ave./Ludwig St. (TBD)	7:16 AM	9:05 AM	10:35 AM	4:00 PM	5:30 PM
London	Argyle Mall	7:30 AM	9:20 AM	10:20 AM	4:15 PM	5:15 PM
	Fanshawe College	7:40 AM	9:30 AM	10:10 AM	4:25 PM	5:05 PM
	Masonville Mall	8:00 AM	9:50 AM	9:50 AM	4:45 PM	4:45 PM



**RECOMMENDATION:**

That The Corporation of the County of Middlesex supports the changes to the inter-community transit project and is committed to implementing the NEW ROUTES to launch on May 29, 2023.