

# Improving Transit Accessibility Around NORCs

## Executive Summary

Public transit provides older adults with an affordable and accessible way to get to the places they need to visit. However, it's unclear how accessible conventional bus services are to older adults.

Naturally occurring retirement communities (NORCs) are apartments, condos and coops with a significant concentration of older adults. We explore the accessibility of conventional bus services by analyzing the bus stop closest to every NORC building in the City of Toronto and assess its accessibility across two key features: the distance someone needs to walk to their nearest bus stop, and the presence of a shelter and/or bench.

While our findings suggest that the majority of stops closest to a NORC building have a TTC shelter with a bench underneath the shelter, the distance an older adult has to walk to get to their closest bus stop poses challenges. To better support older adults who want to age in the homes of their choosing, we propose that the City of Toronto make public transit accessibility an important facet of the Seniors Strategy 3.0 and offer two key recommendations: reconsider the planning standard related to the distance an individual needs to walk to get to their closest bus stop, and invest in expanding the community bus network by creating new routes that serve the high-density NORC communities.

## Introduction

Accessing medical clinics, grocery stores and recreation centres is an important aspect of healthy aging. When older adults stop driving – either because they choose to or are forced to – it's essential to ensure other forms of accessible transportation are available to them (National Institute on Ageing, 2020).

There are many transportation options available to older adults. While public transit can be considered one of the more affordable modes of transportation available, it seems to be the least relied on (National Institute on Ageing, 2020). Given our aging population, it's

important to consider how public transit is supporting the changing needs in the City.

For older adults who cannot drive or do not have others to rely on for transportation, public transit is one of the more affordable options available, particularly for those with lower-incomes. But how accessible are conventional bus services to older adults living in naturally occurring retirement communities (NORCs) in the City of Toronto? In order to understand how accessible transit is across the City, we analyzed the bus stop closest to every NORC building in the City of Toronto and assessed its accessibility for two key features: the distance someone needs to walk to their nearest bus stop, and the presence of a shelter and/or bench.

### **Naturally Occurring Retirement Communities (NORCs)**

Naturally occurring retirement communities (NORCs) are communities that naturally come to house a high density of older adults over time (Michael & Gunter-Hunt, 1986). NORCs may include rental apartments, condos and co-ops, but do not include communities that were purpose-built to provide care for older adults such as retirement homes, assisted living facilities or long-term care homes.

The [NORC Innovation Centre](#) defines NORCs as buildings where at least 30 percent of residents are 65 years of age and older, with a minimum of 50 older people per building. Based on this definition, there are 489 NORCs housing a total of 70,013 older adults in the City of Toronto ([National Institute on Ageing & NORC Innovation Centre, 2022](#))

## **Project Scope**

There are many factors that determine whether transit is accessible. The distance to a transit stop, the height of curbs at a stop, whether the route to a stop has a steep hill, and whether a subway station has a functioning elevator are just a few factors that need to be considered when it comes to achieving accessible transit.

Some older adults choose not to go outside due to various physical, social and physiological limitations (Madan & Parashar, 2023). The presence of street furnishings like TTC bus shelters and benches help make transit more accessible and can encourage isolated older adults to go outside. For example, if adverse weather conditions are present, transit users are able to stay under a covering with a bus shelter. If a transit user doesn't have a walker but experiences pain from standing for extended periods of time, benches either under a transit shelter or near the stop can help alleviate any pain

associated with waiting for a bus. Accessible street furnishings like the ones mentioned above, that are designed with the concept of active aging in mind, can encourage older adults to go outside more often and reduce the likelihood of social isolation, while providing a method of accessible transportation for them to get around.

For the purposes of this report, we look at accessibility specific to conventional bus stops across two key features: the distance a NORC resident needs to walk to get to their closest bus stop, and whether that stop has a TTC shelter (or covering), and a bench nearby.

## Methods

We drew on publicly available data, interviewed older adults, met with the TTC and consulted with local community organizations to inform the recommendations outlined in this report.

In order to understand whether conventional public transit is accessible near NORCs, we mapped all NORC buildings in Toronto and their nearest bus stop, by distance. We analyzed specific accessibility features of these stops based on publicly available data. These features included analyzing the distance of each NORC's nearest conventional TTC bus stop, and whether there was a shelter and/or bench. As part of this process, we identified the top 15 bus stops that were furthest away from a NORC building. We visited each of these 15 stops to verify the data and understand what the distance looked like in person.

As part of our analysis and to ensure community voices were incorporated in our recommendations, we had one-on-one conversations with NORC residing older adults to understand their public transit experiences. This required us to speak with the property management office and post a flyer on the buildings' notice boards.

In July 2024, we rode the 403 community bus to understand how the bus service was being received by 403 transit users and hear about their experiences with the community bus.

We met with Scarborough Centre for Healthy Communities to learn about their hyper-localized initiative to address inaccessible transit. We also met with different departments within the TTC to learn about their processes for determining bus stop locations and community bus routes. While our project is not affiliated with the TTC, we shared our findings and recommendations with the community bus team at the TTC in November 2024.

The findings from the above-mentioned quantitative and qualitative data informed the recommendations outlined in the report, which includes proposing two new community bus routes. While the routes we propose are conceptual in nature and work will be needed to fully assess the potential and feasibility of our recommendations, the recommendations we outline have the potential to significantly improve transit accessibility around NORCs.

## Overview of Public Transit

There are generally three transit options available to TTC users.

### **Conventional System**

TTC's **conventional system** consists of buses, streetcars & subways that transit users access to reach their destinations. As of 2021, there were 156 conventional bus routes, 9 streetcar routes, and 3 subway routes running across the City (TTC, n.d.). There were a total of 197,842,000 passengers on the TTC in 2021 (TTC, n.d.). Those without any accessibility needs may use the conventional system to get to their destinations.

### **Wheel-Trans**

**Wheel-Trans** is the City's para-transit service that provides a safe and reliable accessible transit option for persons with temporary and/or permanent disabilities (TTC, n.d.). The TTC requires eligible customers to submit a completed application to use the Wheel-Trans service (TTC, n.d.). Eligible Wheel-Trans users can then book trips using the TTC's self-booking website (TTC, n.d.).

The TTC is currently looking to transition to the Family of Services (FoS). Under FoS, the TTC offers three levels of Wheel-Trans eligibility:

- a. *Unconditional service* is provided when a transit user has a disability that prevents them from using TTC's conventional service (TTC, n.d.). If a client is eligible for unconditional services, this means Wheel-Trans will provide door-to-door service for all of their trips (TTC, n.d.).
- b. *Conditional service* is provided when a transit user has a disability that limits their ability to consistently use TTC's conventional service (TTC, n.d.). This means that they may need to use "conventional transit services for all or part of their trip, but may qualify for door-to-door service under specific circumstances (e.g., weather, travel to a non-accessible location)" (TTC, n.d.).
- c. *Temporary service* is provided when a transit user has a temporary disability that prevents them from using TTC's conventional service (TTC, n.d.). In these instances, the transit user requires Wheel-Trans for some or all parts of their trip

for a specific period of time (TTC, n.d.).

## Community Bus

TTC's **community bus** service targets older adults and connects customers to a variety of popular destinations along 5 unique neighbourhood routes. These buses stop directly at the entrances of places older adults are more likely to frequent like medical clinics, community centres, and grocery stores (TTC, n.d.). While community buses have their own designated stops, they can also be flagged down anywhere along the route (TTC, n.d.). The goal of community buses is to divert customers from door-to-door Wheel-Trans services, and serves as a stopgap between conventional buses and Wheel-Trans services (Personal communication, 2024).

## Findings

Based on our analysis of conventional bus stops near NORCs, the majority of the stops we analyzed were furnished. At the time of our analysis, approximately 62% of the stops closest to a NORC building had a TTC shelter with a bench underneath the shelter and approximately 35% of the stops closest to a NORC building had no furnishings, i.e. no shelter or bench in the vicinity of the stop.

Despite the majority of bus stops having street furnishings, we noticed that the distance a resident needed to walk to get to their bus stop might pose challenges to some older adults. In some instances, a bus stop that appeared accessible in our analysis (e.g., within 300–400 metres) felt significantly further during an in-person visit. Some of the routes to a bus stop had hills and uneven curbs; in other cases, the stops were just located too far from the building.

Additionally, the majority of stops identified as being *furthest* away from a NORC building were either in Scarborough or Etobicoke, highlighting a potential service gap in these areas.

When we spoke to the TTC about their processes for determining conventional bus stop locations, they mentioned a number of factors that are considered. We learned that safety principles take priority, among other factors like demographics and stop environments. As a standard rule, the TTC follows a 400–600m standard as an appropriate distance for an individual to travel to get to their closest conventional bus stop (Personal communication, 2024). Based on our analysis, only one NORC in Toronto failed to meet the standard (450 & 452 Scarborough Club Rd, known as Masaryktown Residences).

## Case Study: Masaryktown Residences in Scarborough

450 & 452 Scarborough Club Rd, known as Masaryktown Residences, is a NORC building in Scarborough housing 105 older adults. Approximately 75% of the buildings' residents are older adults.

Based on our analysis, residents of Masaryktown Residences who rely on conventional bus services have to walk approximately 1 km to get to their closest bus stop. There are no buses running on Scarborough Golf Club Rd, which means residents have no choice but to walk to the closest main intersection to access a conventional bus.

*"We live in a transit desert."*

- NORC Resident at Masaryktown Residences

When we visited Masaryktown Residences, we were surprised to see how far the bus stop actually was from the building. Residents have to walk approximately 250 m just to get to Scarborough Golf Club Road and then have to walk approximately 700 m to get to the actual bus stop at the Scarborough Golf Club Rd and Lawrence Ave E intersection.

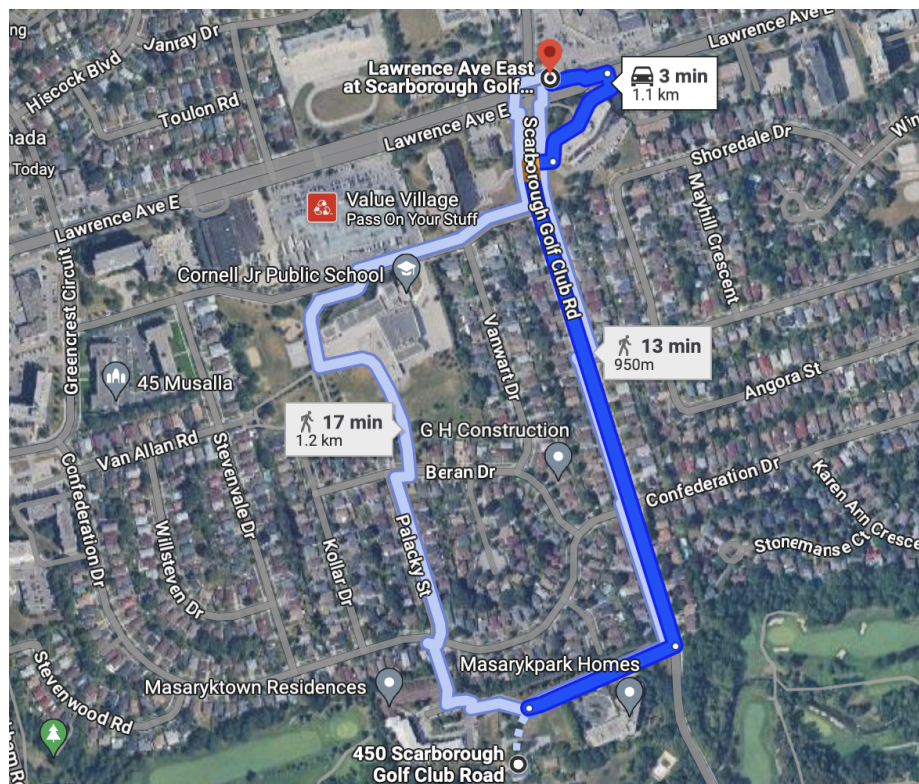


Figure 1: Visual of route from Masaryktown Residences to the closest bus stop  
Source: Google Maps

We spoke to seniors living at this complex to understand their experiences with accessing transit.

*"I can't take transit. I can't walk half an hour to get to my bus stop, especially if I have to carry my work bag or groceries."*

- NORC Resident at Masaryktown Residences

*"When I moved here in 2016 I was able to walk to the bus stop... but I'm not able to do that anymore."*

- NORC Resident at Masaryktown Residences

We heard that many residents of Masaryktown Residences don't take the TTC because of how far the stop is from their home. These residents sometimes rely on an informal network of neighbourly support to offer drives to and from necessary errands and appointments. One of the residents we spoke to mentioned that she frequently assists other residents who need groceries and lack transportation options. During the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, she had plexiglass installed in her car so people could join her for grocery trips in a safe way.

We learned that the inaccessible bus stop not only poses challenges for residents living in the area, but it also affects the delivery of key services that impact their ability to age in place.

*"Personal Support Workers (PSWs) are a significant provider to a senior. Many, many PSWs can't get here... I drive them to their next client or bus stop at times."*

- NORC Resident at Masaryktown Residences

## A Deeper Dive into Community Buses

There are currently five community bus routes that operate in Toronto: the 400 Lawrence Manor, 402 Parkdale, 403 Don Mills South, 404 East York, and the 405 Etobicoke.

The first community bus operated throughout the Lawrence and Bathurst area in the late 1990s (City of Toronto, n.d.). This area continues to be served by what is now the 400 Lawrence Manor bus. The primary goal of community buses were to address travel needs that weren't being met by the existing routes, offer coverage to places like "civic buildings, medical facilities, community centres, plazas, and arenas," and provide an alternative to Wheel-Trans rides that need to be booked in advance. The buses targeted

areas with high areas of seniors, non-working adults, children and single-parent households. The route was so successful that four more community bus routes were launched in 1992 (City of Toronto, n.d.)

Following requests for a community bus in Scarborough to service the Lawrence and Orton Park and Cedarbrae Mall area, the TTC conducted a review of the program at the time in 2014. We learned from calls with residents at Masaryktown that many residents of the building actually petitioned for a community bus service to serve their building with their local councillor. When we followed up with Councillor Paul Ainslie, we were told that the file was still with the TTC.

The TTC recently underwent two rounds of public consultations to evaluate existing community bus routes. Current ridership levels are very low and none of the current buses are meeting TTC's productivity requirements (Personal communication, 2024). According to their public survey, three out of five Community Bus routes carry fewer than three customers per hour (TTC, 2024).

### **The Community Bus Experience**

In July 2024, we rode the 403 Don Mills Community Bus to understand community bus user experiences. The 403 bus stops at a number of buildings and other locations like Shops at Don Mills, Better Living – Thompson House (a long-term care home), Flemingdale Park Shopping Centre, and East York Town Centre.

All the riders that used the bus were older adults. During the ride, three older adults boarded the bus at a single stop. The bus driver mentioned that older adults living at this building use the community bus the most, despite there being a conventional bus stop right on the street in front of the building.

During our own hour ride on the bus, six people used the community bus service. They were either going to East York Town Centre, or finished their shopping at the Centre and were going back home. According to the bus users, it was the main reason they even used the bus.

Our ride on the community bus showed us how valuable this service is to the older adult community. It not only provides older adults with an opportunity to connect with others, but it's a convenient and accessible way for them to get their necessities for daily living.



## **Community organizations' efforts to address transit needs for seniors**

To address gaps in accessible transit, many community organizations have begun to operate their own form of a community bus.

### ***Senior Persons Living Connected (SPLC)***

Senior Persons Living Connected (SPLC) is a community organization based out of Scarborough with a goal of building inclusive communities where all seniors are connected to living their best life (Senior Persons Living Connected, n.d.). SPLC provides a basket of services, including transportation. Older adults living within their service boundaries who are unable to access public transit can use SPLC's transportation service (Senior Persons Living Connected, n.d.). According to SPLC's website, the service is available for older adults who need to get to their medical appointments, SPLC day program appointments and group grocery shopping trips (Senior Persons Living Connected, n.d.). Caregivers are welcome at no additional cost.

However, to be eligible for SPLC's transportation service, older adults must meet the following criteria: they must be: unable to access public transportation, require an escort during trips due to fragility or cognitive impairment, reside in areas where specialized transit or public transportation is unavailable, have no access to transportation from friends or family, and live within their catchment area (Senior Persons Living Connected, n.d.). Transportation fees range between \$7-\$18 depending on where they need to be picked up.

### ***Scarborough Centre for Healthy Communities (SCHC)***

Scarborough Centre for Healthy Communities (SCHC), a community organization with a mission of "providing accessible, equitable and transformational health and social service choices, for the well-being of diverse communities," also offers their own transportation program (Scarborough Centre for Healthy Communities, n.d.). The program provides rides for seniors and people with disabilities living in the community to get to their medical appointments, stores, and family visits (Scarborough Centre for Healthy Communities, n.d.). They service the catchment area of Bayview Avenue in the west and Whitby in the east for medical appointments (Scarborough Centre for Healthy Communities, n.d.). The service also offers rides for clients receiving Hemodialysis who are not eligible for Wheel-Trans and have no family support (Scarborough Centre for Healthy Communities, n.d.). Fees for rides depend on the destination and whether the trip is one-way or a round-trip, but generally range between \$8-16 (Personal communication, 2024).

These buses generally get booked weeks, if not months, in advance. For example, one resident we spoke to at Masaryktown Residences was hoping to book a SCHC bus two weeks in advance, but was told that they didn't have any availability.

The transportation programs offered by SPLC and SCHC are just a few examples of how some organizations are starting to take steps to improve transit accessibility within their communities.

## **Recommendations**

With the understanding that the TTC has limited funding and resources within its existing operating budget, efforts to improve transit accessibility for older adults must be part of a longer-term approach to building a more age-friendly city. As such, we believe that transit accessibility should be an important part of the City of Toronto's development of its upcoming Seniors Strategy 3.0. To that end, we offer the following recommendations:

### ***Recommendation 1: Review the 400–600m standard from the point of view of older adults.***

The TTC currently follows a 400–600m standard as an appropriate distance for an individual to travel to get to their closest bus stop (Personal communication, 2024). While only one NORC in Toronto failed to meet the standard based on our analysis, it's important to reassess whether this distance is suitable for older adults in Toronto who rely on transit to get around.

As part of Seniors Strategy 3.0, the City should review this standard to ensure it is appropriate for the City's growing population of older adults. It should consider lowering the standard to 100–200m in places where more older adults live, like NORCs.

### ***Recommendation 2: Add community bus routes in NORC-dense / transit-poor areas***

The TTC recently reviewed their existing community bus routes as part of their 2025 annual service plan and sought input into the community bus program and how to improve it. However input was confined to existing routes and with finite resources, there are no plans to create new ones.

As part of Seniors Strategy 3.0, the City of Toronto should consider funding for additional community bus routes, particularly in NORC-dense and transit-poor areas of the city.

Expanding the community bus network to reach more older adults improves transit accessibility for not only older adults but care workers who support them on a daily basis. It will help enable more older adults to remain living independently and age in place. Since NORCs already house a high density of older adults, community bus routes that serve them will benefit from their density to improve the productivity of the routes.

To illustrate the potential of this NORC-based approach, we have developed two community bus route concepts in Scarborough, a historically underserved area. Many of the TTC stops identified as furthest away from a NORC building were also located in Scarborough.

It's worth noting that the routes are conceptual and presented here for illustrative purposes only. Additional research and planning considerations are needed to fully assess their potential and feasibility, work that requires the expertise of transit planners like those at the TTC.

### **Our Approach**

As part of our process to determine where these community buses should run, we first manually looked at dense communities in Scarborough with many NORCs. We then cross-referenced these communities with the stops on our list of being the furthest away from a NORC building. We also wanted to include Masaryktown Residences in one of the routes, as there are minimal alternative options available to these conventional bus users. The area coincided with a cluster of NORC buildings which are also located far from their nearest conventional bus stop.

Once we identified the areas in which the proposed community buses could run, we looked for locations that older adults are more likely to access to include on the route: community centres, malls, grocery stores, medical centres, and SALCs, while keeping in mind the distance of the complete routes.

### **Proposed Community Bus Routes**

#### *Route 1: Scarborough Village*

The first new route we propose operates in the Scarborough Village area. The route stops at 11 NORC buildings housing approximately 1863 older adults. Currently, residents living in these buildings have to walk, on average, a distance of 305m to access a bus stop. The shortest distance to a bus stop on this route is 62m, and the longest is 915m.

This route covers a distance of approximately 13.4 km and includes Masarkytown Residences. The route stops at Cedarbrae Public Library, Cedarbrae Mall, Scarborough Centre for Healthy Communities, Skyland Food Mart & Value Village, Momiji Health Care Society, Scarborough Village Recreation Centre, No Frills and so forth.

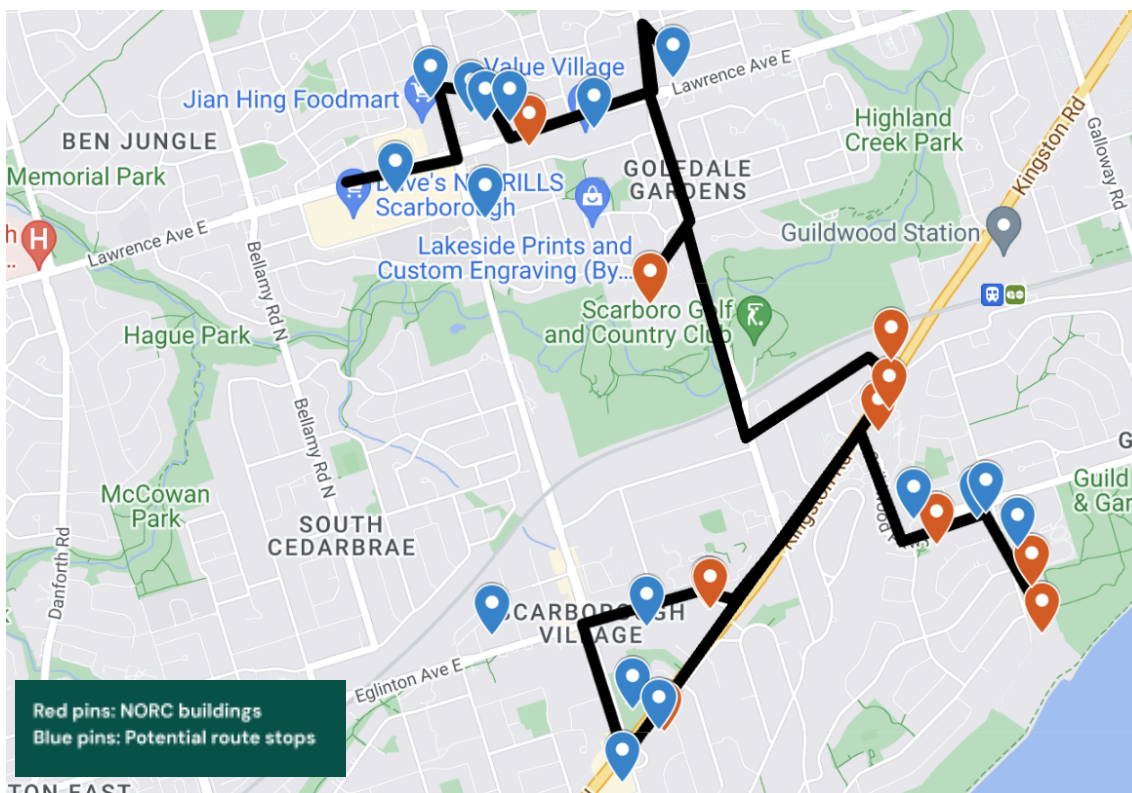


Figure 2: Route of proposed community bus in Scarborough South  
Source: Google Maps

### *Route 2: Scarborough North*

The second new route we propose operates in the L'Amoreaux and Agincourt Area. The route stops at 23 NORC buildings housing approximately 5392 older adults. Currently, residents living in these buildings have to walk, on average, a distance of 241m to access a bus stop. The shortest distance to a bus stop on this route is 69m, and the longest is 464m.

This route covers a distance of approximately 19 km. The route stops at SHN Birchmount Hospital, Stephen Leacock Community Centre, Bridlewood Mall, L'Amoreaux Community Recreation Centre, Seniors Person Living Connected, Agincourt TPL, Agincourt Mall and so on.

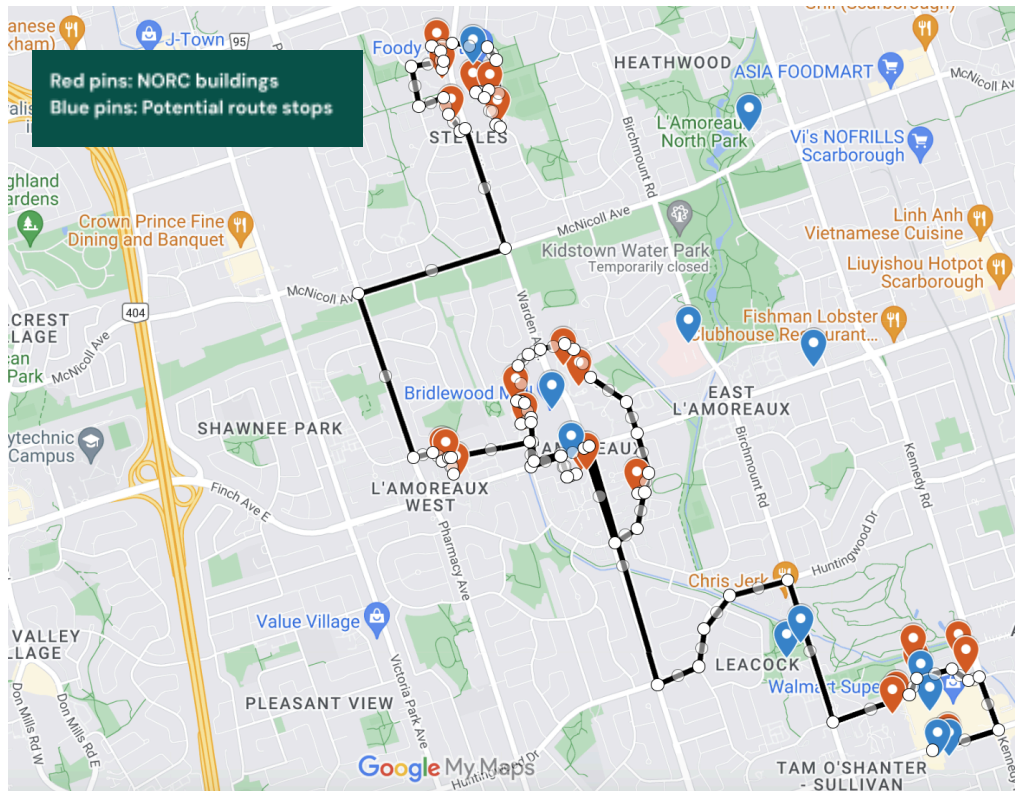


Figure 3: Route of proposed community bus in Scarborough North  
Source: Google Maps

## Conclusion

Toronto’s population of older adults is growing. There are currently more Torontonians aged 65 or older than there are children under the age of 15 (Statistics Canada).

In order to better support older adults who want to age in the homes and communities of their choosing, there is an urgent need to improve transit accessibility. As the City of Toronto embarks on its Seniors Strategy 3.0, there’s an opportunity to make transit accessibility an important facet. We recommend that the Strategy considers what accessibility means for Toronto’s older adults, particularly with respect to the 400–600m standard currently used to plan bus routes. We also recommend that the Strategy considers making investments in expanding the community bus network by creating new routes centered around more NORCs.

## Acknowledgments

We would like to thank Omar Khan and Michael Freeman for their data analysis and visualization of NORC buildings in Toronto and their nearest bus stop, by distance. We would also like to thank residents at Masaryktown Residences, Scarborough Centre for Healthy Communities, and TTC staff members for sharing their time and insights with us.

## **About NORC Innovation Centre at University Health Network**

The NORC Innovation Centre at University Health Network is a first-of-its-kind centre dedicated to advancing a 21st century model of integrated care in naturally occurring retirement communities (NORCs), and developing community-led solutions that provide new options for aging in place with dignity and choice.

University Health Network (UHN) is Canada's leading research hospital. UHN encompasses Toronto General Hospital, Toronto Western Hospital, Princess Margaret Cancer Centre, Toronto Rehabilitation Institute and the Michener Institute of Education at UHN. The breadth of research, the complexity of the cases treated, and the magnitude of its educational enterprise has made UHN a national and international resource for patient care, research and education.

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