

Smart Tourism Committee

Iceberg Homework: Consolidated Findings

1. Parking

PROBLEMS: What is currently happening
• The number of days when Whistler exceeds parking capacity has been growing year on year. This is a trend, not just a series of isolated bad days. • The same lots fill first on every peak day. Drivers route to familiar options regardless of availability, and the pattern is predictable. • Day lots fill first while hotel parkade capacity sits unused nearby. Drivers hunt for spots rather than being guided to available ones. • Confusion about how parking reservations work. Real-time availability is not visible until drivers have already committed to making the trip. • Pay and free parking exist in the same ecosystem and create conflicting incentives. Free lots (6 to 8) are furthest from the village but fill through avoidance of pay zones and convenience. • Unpredictability of snowfall means certain parking lots function very differently depending on time of year. Powder days reduce capacity when snow covers parking lines, and the same lots that work well in dry conditions can become chaotic after a significant snowfall. • Large vehicles and load-in and load-out conflicts are not well managed in day lots. • Bike parking and village storage is limited. • Employee and commuter timing overlaps with visitor arrivals and amplifies congestion on peak days. • Residents underestimate their own contribution to congestion. • Parking frustration is experienced as part of the ski experience. It shapes overall guest satisfaction without being tracked that way. • New housing south of the village (Cheakamus) creates more vehicle trips northward for everyday needs including groceries, childcare, and recreation.
PATTERNS: What keeps repeating
• Drivers repeatedly choose the certainty of a private vehicle over the uncertainty of transit or alternatives. The car is simply quicker and more reliable than any other way of getting here. • Drivers consistently bypass available pay stalls to reach occupied free ones. The free and pay split drives irrational routing. • Drivers meet at the car park rather than carpooling before arrival. • Demand spikes are triggered by weather forecasts and snow reports. The surges are predictable in direction but not always in scale. • Nothing changes operationally on peak days. The resort runs the same way on its busiest days as it does on its quietest, and the system is left to absorb the difference on its own. • Capacity is exceeded on a relatively small number of days, but those days drive planning decisions and shape brand perception year-round. • Community and visitor frustration is growing around requests to change behaviour when no meaningfully better alternative yet exists. • The Squamish and Pemberton workforce commutes almost entirely by single-occupancy vehicle due to limited and schedule-incompatible regional transit.
STRUCTURES: What makes this likely

- Day lot pricing has stayed low while demand has grown significantly. There is no dynamic or demand-responsive pricing, and the gap between supply and price signals has widened over time.
- Hotel parkade rates are high relative to day lots, creating a misalignment that discourages use of available capacity.
- Lack of coordination between adjacent parking areas (Lots 1 to 5, Lots 6 to 8, and Village underground) means shared management is impossible and incentives stay misaligned.
- Parking is managed as a hospitality amenity rather than a demand-management tool. Guests expect access, not a system.
- Whistler has, relatively speaking, plentiful parking compared to many European ski resorts. The question worth asking is whether abundant and inexpensive parking is not a solution to congestion, but part of the cause of it.
- Historical transportation investments have prioritised driver convenience rather than building genuine alternatives.
- End-of-trip facilities like lockers and gear storage are insufficient. Skiing or riding requires carrying a lot of gear. Carrying it on transit, or walking any significant distance with it, is not something most people are willing to do. Until lockers are plentiful, inexpensive, and easy to rent for a day, a week, or a season, transit cannot compete with the car on practical grounds.
- A local monthly bus pass costs more than a monthly day-lot pass. The financial incentive points the wrong way.
- New housing growth in Cheakamus increases the local vehicle load with no viable transit alternative in place.
- Pay parking revenue offsets transit costs, but this relationship is invisible to users and creates a false perception that free parking is neutral.
- Buses are widely perceived as crowded, unreliable, infrequent, and hard to navigate for first-timers travelling with gear. Until transit feels welcoming and service-oriented rather than a compromise, the perception gap will keep working against mode shift regardless of actual service levels.

ASSUMPTIONS: What beliefs keep this in place

- Free parking is a right, for guests and locals alike. Pricing is seen as punitive rather than as a management tool.
- More supply solves the problem. Capacity is the fix, not behaviour.
- Visitors want flexibility and parking on demand is non-negotiable.
- Increasing fees or reducing free parking will reduce congestion. In practice, it is more likely to reduce satisfaction and push back hardest on the weekend and day visitors, who are predominantly local and regional, without meaningfully changing the number of vehicles coming to Whistler.
- Driving solo is part of the culture. For many people in Whistler and the surrounding region, getting in the car alone is not just the most convenient option, it is the default habit and, in many cases, the social norm.
- Whistler is already expensive, paid parking makes it even more so for both locals and visitors – businesses will feel the effect.
- Skiers will not use park-and-ride. This is assumed rather than tested at meaningful scale with genuinely convenient conditions.
- Coordination between lot operators is not realistic. Accepted as given rather than actively pursued.
- If transit were good enough, people would already be using it. This ignores the structural barriers around gear, schedules, cost, and uncertainty that make the comparison unfair.
- Locals do not understand their own contribution to peak-day congestion, and this is rarely communicated to them directly.
- Transit limitations are treated as inherited and unchangeable, rather than as the result of chronic underinvestment.
- We cannot influence when people want to travel. Some timing is genuinely fixed, but demand is more shapeable than this assumption allows.

- Locals happily pay for parking in Vancouver without complaint but resist the same charges in Whistler. The double standard suggests the objection is less about cost and more about expectation and identity.
- Park-and-ride has been assumed to be something skiers will not tolerate. But this assumption has never been tested with a genuinely well-designed version. A service-oriented model, with attendants who load your skis and drop you at the base of the mountain, would be a very different proposition to what most people picture when they hear park-and-ride.

A comment worth sitting with: Whistler has more parking, relatively speaking, than many comparable European mountain resorts. If the problem were simply a lack of supply, those resorts would be worse off, but they are not. This suggests the availability of plentiful and inexpensive parking may itself be a driver of congestion, not a remedy for it.

2. Village Flow

PROBLEMS: What is currently happening

- Commuter and visitor arrival and departure windows compress into the same narrow periods. Everyone moves at once.
- Day lot exits onto main routes block bus movement. Commercial and service vehicle conflicts add to this.
- Taxi and bus loop congestion, combined with the kids drop-off at Spring Lane, adds to peak-time bottlenecks.
- Village Gate Boulevard and Lorimer Road carry bidirectional traffic across multiple merge points, creating desire-line conflicts that slow the whole system.
- Lost Lake and parks are over-subscribed on summer weekends.
- Restaurant reservation capacity is too limited to absorb visitor demand. People disperse from the mountain to their vehicles quickly.
- Whistler's reputation for a difficult exodus means visitors choose to leave immediately after skiing rather than staying. This compresses departure further.
- South-end population growth in Cheakamus adds pressure at Function Junction on peak mornings and delays workforce access to the village.

PATTERNS: What keeps repeating

- Village Gate Boulevard grinds to a standstill at around 4pm every winter peak day. Access from Whistler Way closes off in the afternoons.
- Big snow days bring the village to gridlock. The days with the highest demand are also the hardest to manage.
- Approximately half of village congestion is local traffic, not visitor traffic. The system does not differentiate between them.
- Summer flow is more distributed through the day. Winter exodus is highly compressed. The same infrastructure handles both but is not optimised for either.
- No meaningful "delay-and-play" incentive exists to shift departure timing after skiing.
- Nothing changes on peak days. There are no operational triggers, no scenario plans activated, and no visible response to conditions that are entirely predictable.

STRUCTURES: What makes this likely

- No real-time parking guidance or traffic information system exists. Drivers circulate and hunt rather than being directed.

- Key intersections are managed by stop signs and ineffective traffic control at peak times.
- Exiting lanes from Whistler narrow from two lanes to one and back again. This is a designed pinch point that has not been resolved.
- Transportation planning and tourism marketing operate independently. Peak demand is actively promoted without coordination against transportation capacity.
- There are no standardised operational scenario plans for predictable high-congestion events like major snowfall or peak weekends.
- Limited and expensive real estate constrains infrastructure options for the foreseeable future.
- Buses and commercial vehicles share the same road ecosystem with no priority lanes or separation.
- The impact of daylight saving time on winter arrival and departure timing has not been fully analysed.
- There is no dedicated southbound bus lane serving Cheakamus. Workers heading home at the end of the day sit in the same congestion as everyone else, with no priority routing available.
- Afternoon and night skiing passes on limited terrain have not been seriously explored as a tool to redistribute visitation patterns. Keeping some visitors on the mountain longer would directly reduce the compression of the 4pm departure window.

ASSUMPTIONS: What beliefs keep this in place

- The bus is not for me. Transit is seen as being for tourists or people without cars.
- Tourists are responsible for the congestion. Locals systematically undercount their own contribution.
- Current traffic routes cannot be meaningfully adjusted. Creative redesign is rarely seriously explored.
- All major resorts have congestion and it is the cost of success. This normalises a problem that may be solvable.
- Changing local behaviour is too politically difficult. This is assumed rather than tested.
- Visitor and resident experience are assumed to be in conflict, when many solutions like delay-and-play, real-time information, and better transit would serve both.
- Requests to change behaviour are perceived by locals as concessions to visitors, rather than as improvements that help locals move faster.

3. Highway Pinch Points

PROBLEMS: What is currently happening

- Murrin Park and Britannia merge, Powerline Hill, Lorimer and Village Gate, and Cheakamus and Function Junction are chronic pinch points under pressure on peak days.
- Southbound egress is consistently more problematic than northbound. End-of-day traffic hits the same bottlenecks at the same time.
- Large trucks without chains and unprepared vehicles at Powerline Hill cause preventable delays. There is no systematic intervention before drivers commit to the route.
- Drivers divert through alternative routes like Blueberry Hill and Westside Drive at unsafe speeds when main routes back up.
- A minor incident or significant snowfall can cause system-wide failure. The highway has very low resilience to disruption.
- Visitors frequently commit to travel before checking or understanding current highway conditions.
- Southbound closures at Function Junction trap Cheakamus, Spring Creek, and Creekside residents with no alternative egress.

- The highway has no central concrete barrier separating opposing lanes along much of its length. This increases both accident frequency and the severity of closures when incidents occur, compounding the congestion that follows

PATTERNS: What keeps repeating

- High volumes concentrate into small departure windows. The system regularly exceeds its working capacity of around 1,600 cars per hour at key merges.
- Powder days and peak weekends are predictably over capacity. These are not surprises.
- Accidents south of Whistler and outside municipal boundaries create gridlock that cascades through the entire system, with no protocol for clearing it efficiently.
- Once drivers are in a queue, turning around or rerouting is practically impossible. Gridlock becomes self-reinforcing.
- Strong snow forecasts trigger demand surges that simultaneously exceed every available transportation mode.
- Merge bottlenecks are a chronic infrastructure shortfall. Not a new problem, and getting worse with population growth.

STRUCTURES: What makes this likely

- MOTI budget constraints and institutional inertia mean that key merges remain single-lane despite being a known, chronic problem.
- Growth strategies are measured by skier visits. Volume is incentivised by resort metrics rather than managed against transportation capacity.
- There is no standard protocol for drivers during highway incidents. Unlike approaches used in other countries, there is no established system to maintain emergency access during gridlock.
- There is virtually no driver education on how to behave during a Sea to Sky incident. Secondary accidents during primary incidents are a known and preventable risk.
- Regional transit is not yet competitive with private vehicles for most users. Frequency, gear capacity, and schedule flexibility all fall short.
- Lack of overpasses and underpasses at key pedestrian crossings interrupts vehicle flow.
- Regional and local population growth is increasing the baseline vehicle load. The problem grows without any action.
- The Function Junction southbound closure queuing area is too short. A specific and unaddressed fix.
- DriveBC is the default information source for highway conditions, but updates during incidents are sparse and often unhelpful. Drivers in a queue have no guidance on timing or exit options, and those who have not yet left have no way to make an informed decision about when to travel.

ASSUMPTIONS: What beliefs keep this in place

- MOTI will not act. The advocacy case has been made, but what is missing is more voices at the table, better quantification of the challenge, and visible internal action that demonstrates Whistler is doing its part before asking the Province to do more.
- The Province owns the problem entirely. This framing may be preventing Whistler from building the broader coalition needed to create genuine pressure for action.
- We cannot influence driver behaviour during weather or accident gridlock. Better education, signage, and protocols suggest this is likely untrue.
- Demand management is politically unacceptable. Assumed rather than tested with a well-framed proposal.
- People will always choose to drive. This is a structural outcome, not a fixed preference.
- We cannot be creative about how the highway operates. The Olympic-era contraflow lanes demonstrate this assumption is false. It requires will and coordination, not new infrastructure.

- Congestion is a peak-day problem. This underestimates the growing baseline load from local and regional commuters.
- Destination BC has a target to double provincial tourism revenues by 2036. That ambition and the provincial transportation investment needed to support it are currently treated as separate conversations. There is an opportunity for TW to connect these directly, using the Province's own growth goals to make the case for better highway communications, incident management, and transit support.

4. Problem Statements

The following problem statements reflect the collective perceptions of STC members regarding the challenges facing Whistler through the lens of congestion. They should not be read as established facts, but as a synthesis of the perceived problems, recurring patterns, underlying structures, and assumptions identified by the committee when looking critically at Whistler's main challenges in parking, highway pinch points, and village flow.

Incentives and System Design

1. THE WRONG REWARD

We have set up a system where drivers are rewarded for making congestion worse. Free and pay parking coexist without coordination, so the rational move is always to drive past available space and hunt for the cheapest spot.

2. PARKING AS HOSPITALITY

Whistler treats parking like a guest amenity, not a management tool. So guests expect guaranteed access, and we never use price or supply to influence how they behave.

3. THE PRICING PROBLEM

Day lot pricing has barely moved while demand has grown significantly. The gap between what parking costs and what it is worth keeps widening, and we have never used price as a signal to shape demand.

4. THE INVISIBLE BENEFIT

Pay parking revenue funds transit, but almost nobody knows this. This invisible relationship makes it politically harder to charge more for parking, and easier to keep expecting it for free.

Demand and Timing

5. EVERYONE MOVES AT ONCE

Visitors, residents, and workers are all incentivised to travel at the same time on the same routes. Predictable surges overwhelm the system on a small number of days each year, and nothing is designed to spread that load.

6. THE SAME PLAYBOOK, REPEATED

Whistler runs the same operations on its busiest days as on its quietest. Predictable surges are never intercepted early, so infrastructure absorbs everything and operations absorb nothing.

7. THE 4PM PROBLEM

Visitors leave immediately after skiing because congestion reputation, limited après, and no real incentive to stay have made early departure the default. The biggest daily flow problem is being driven by habit and perception as much as road capacity.

Alternatives and Mode Shift

8. THE CAR CONUNDRUM

Driving is quicker, more reliable, and cheaper than any realistic alternative for most people travelling to Whistler. Until that changes, no amount of encouragement will move meaningful numbers out of their cars.

9. NO CREDIBLE ALTERNATIVES

Individual alternatives exist but none of them work well enough on their own. Lockers, transit, communications, and social proof have never been assembled together into a system that is genuinely easier than driving.

10. THE LAST MILE

Skiing and riding require a lot of gear. Carrying it on transit or walking any real distance with it is not something most people will do. Until lockers are plentiful, cheap, and easy to rent, mode shift will not happen at scale.

11. THE COMMUTER TRAP

Workers commuting from Squamish and Pemberton have no viable transit alternative. They drive alone, not by preference, but because nothing else works for their schedule. They contribute materially to peak-day congestion through no fault of their own.

12. THE SOLO TRAVEL CULTURE

For most residents and visitors, getting in the car alone is not a conscious choice, it is the default. Changing that is not about providing options. It is about shifting a social norm that most people do not even recognize as a norm.

Coordination and Governance

13. NOBODY OWNS THE JOURNEY

Parking, transit, highway operations, marketing, and resort access are all managed by different organizations with different goals. Nobody is responsible for the full trip from home to mountain, so decisions made in one area routinely undermine outcomes in another.

14. ADVOCACY WITHOUT BACKUP

The case has been made to MOTI. What is missing is more voices at the table, better data behind the ask, and visible internal action that shows Whistler is tackling its own contribution before asking the province to do more.

15. REACTIVE, NOT PROACTIVE

Major snow days and peak weekends are predictable. There are no standardized scenario plans for them. So when they arrive, the response is reactive, inconsistent, and slower than it needs to be.

16. IT'S SOMEONE ELSE'S PROBLEM

Congestion is widely understood in Whistler as someone else's responsibility, whether that is visitors, MOTI, or resort operators. This means the community has never collectively owned the problem in a way that generates genuine pressure for solutions, and behaviour change campaigns land as requests rather than as shared calls to action.

Information and Real-Time Management

17. COMMITTED BEFORE THEY KNOW

Visitors do not know travel times, parking availability, or road conditions until after they have already decided to drive. By the time real information is available, the decision is made and the car is on the road.

18. NO UNIFIED PICTURE

Parking, transit, and highway access are managed as separate information systems. There is no unified platform for real-time guidance, pricing signals, or visitor communication. Congestion gets managed reactively even though peak days are entirely predictable.

19. THE NIGHT BEFORE DECISION

The choice to drive is made at home the evening before, when alternatives are hard to find and no friction exists. By the time any real-time information arrives, the car is already packed and the moment to influence the decision has passed.

Values and Visitor Mix

20. ALL TRIPS ARE EQUAL

The transportation system makes no distinction between a high-value destination guest, a local heading to work, and a discretionary day visitor. All face the same congestion, and there is no mechanism to prioritise the trips that matter most to the community.

21. THE HIDDEN COST

Satisfaction data captures visitors who came. It does not capture the ones who came once and never returned, or those who chose a different destination. The true cost of congestion to long-term destination health has never been measured.