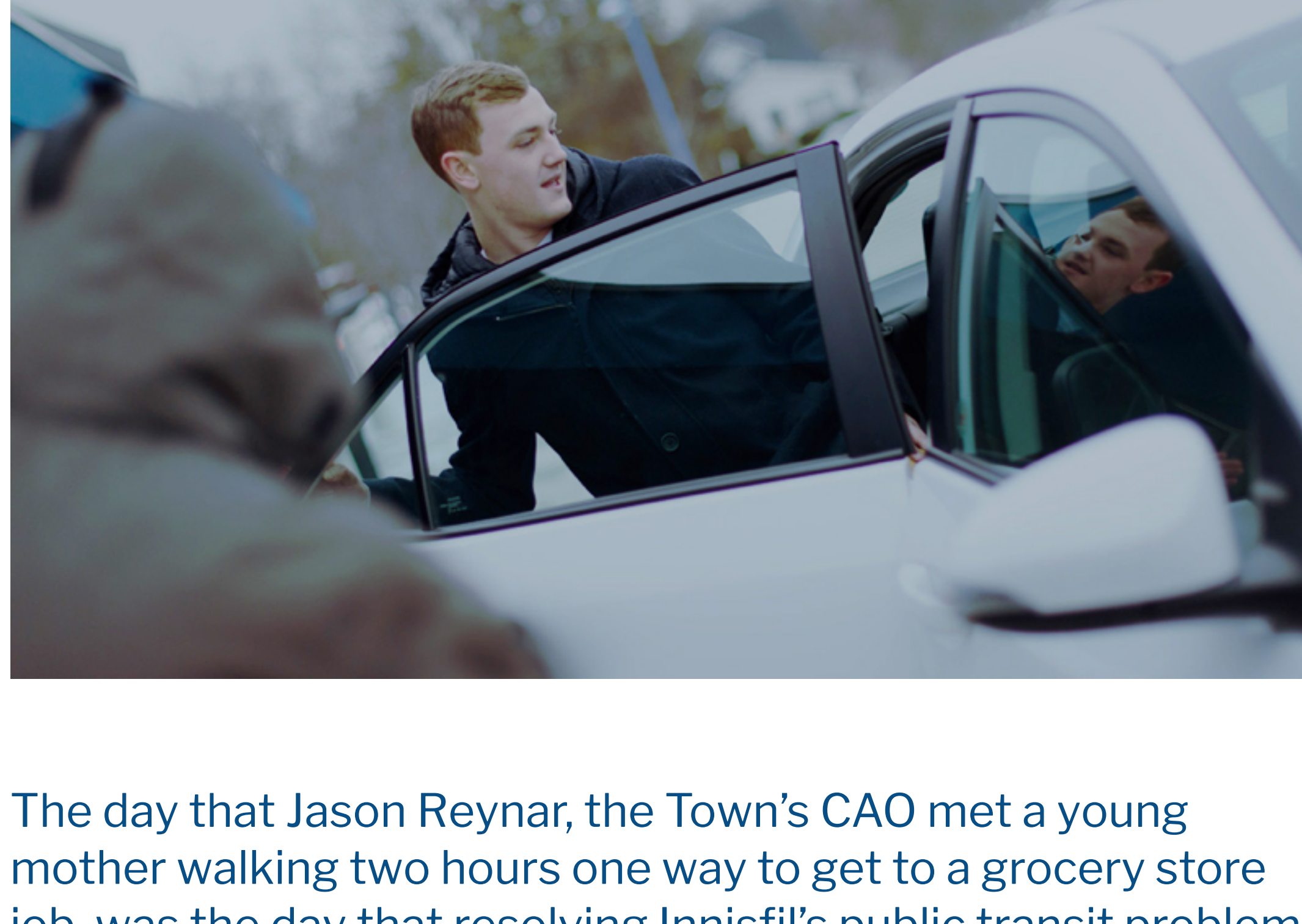


October 2018

UBER, MEET INNISFIL: THE UNLIKELY PARTNERSHIP THAT SPARKED AN INNOVATIVE TRANSIT SOLUTION



The day that Jason Reynar, the Town's CAO met a young mother walking two hours one way to get to a grocery store job, was the day that resolving Innisfil's public transit problem was put to the top of the Town's to-do list.

Innisfil, Ontario, a small rural town in Simcoe County that offers a peaceful existence with green space and fresh air, has quickly become a desirable spot for young families being squeezed out of the Greater Toronto Area (GTA) by the competitive housing market. Innisfil is a more affordable step onto the property ladder and with its strong sense of community, it's an idyllic place to raise kids. However,

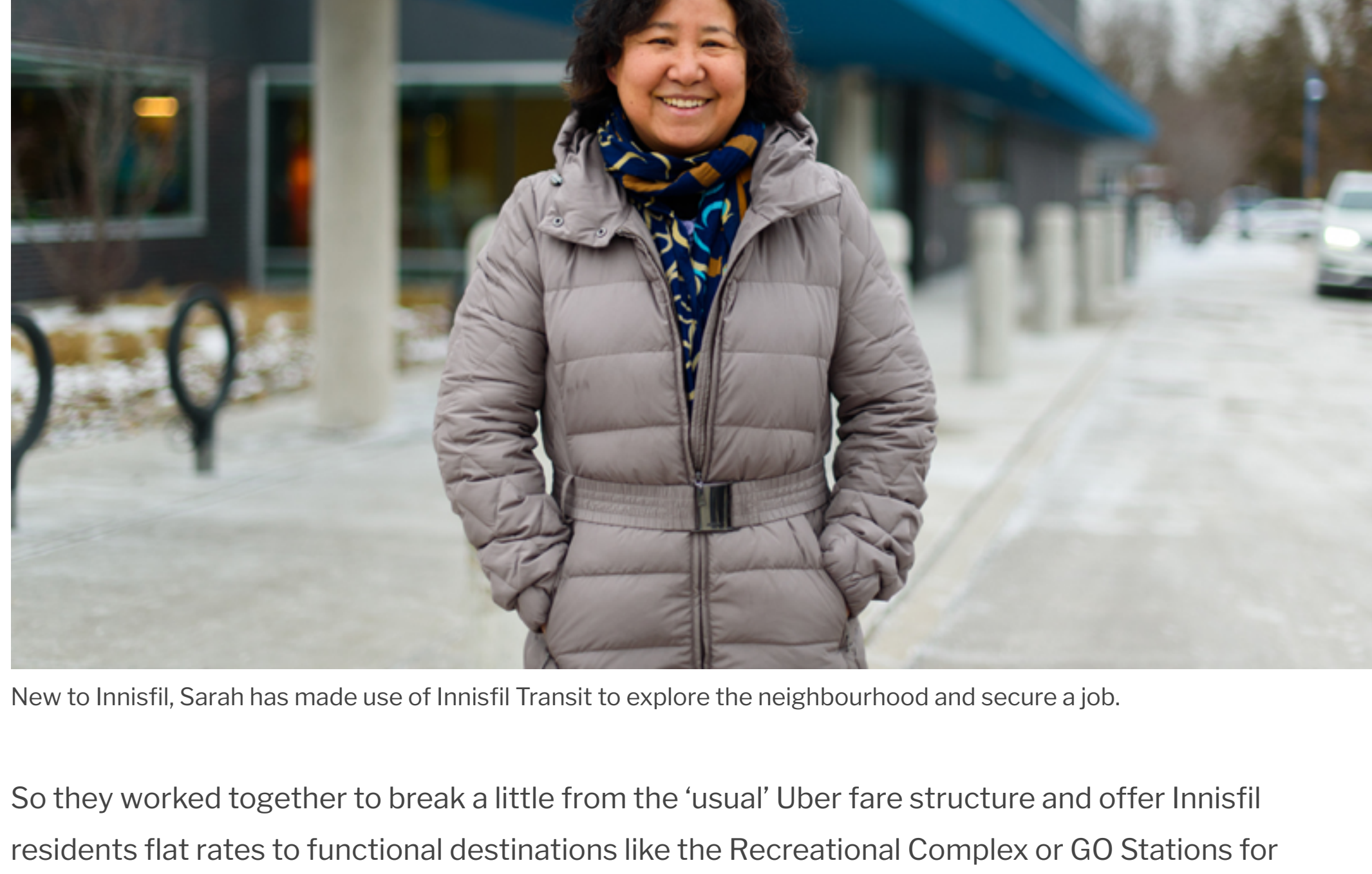
"an influx of people from urban regions brings urban expectations," says Tim Cane, a planner with the Town. So, as Innisfil's population began to rise along with the subsequent greater need for efficient public transportation to move freely around town, the potential solution was going to have to fit this hybrid place of rural space and urban thinking.

Enter Tim Cane and colleague, Paul Pentikainen. As Registered Professional Planners (RPPs) working for the Town of Innisfil as Manager of Land Use Planning and Senior Policy Planner respectively, alleviating issues such as public transit fell to them and their skills in creating sustainable communities. Prioritizing planning projects in Innisfil's best interest is also down to Cane, Pentikainen and their team. "We (Planners) are and should be community driven," says Cane. "Seeing that woman first hand struggling to get to work by foot made transit a bigger issue for the Town." After proposing to Council that transit possibilities and appropriate budgets be researched in the Town's best interest, and the subsequent green light given to do just that, Innisfil's RPPs took on the challenge to find a public transit solution that would work for the community.



They inspected every feasible option to better inform their Council decision-makers of all transit possibilities. But when the idea of partnering with Uber, the ridesharing program that has become a staple app on every smartphone in bigger city centres came up in 2016, they saw a natural fit for his rural-meets-urban or 'rurban' home of Innisfil. Having local residents share already-existing vehicles to get elderly neighbours to medical appointments, kids home safely from parties, or young mothers to work every day, seemed like an innovative use of resources and aligned perfectly with the tight-knit nature of the town. Knowing that it was a little unorthodox and likely an unexpected turn away from the anticipated bus approach, Cane and Pentikainen made sure they kept Council informed of their growing idea early on. "We gave them a head's up in the budget process that [Uber] was something we were exploring, or some form of alternative method would be proposed. They gave complete research and project jurisdiction over to staff, which was a great show of support, but also really helped us get the work done." With that relationship fostering inspired thinking and the freedom to create something customized to the needs of Innisfil's residents, the next step was building a similarly positive working relationship with Uber.

Presenting formally to Council, interacting directly with community residents and then donning an entrepreneurial hat to strike a mutually-beneficial deal with a massively visible, international business brings interesting challenges to a day's work. But Cane quickly found some common ground between Uber and Innisfil's planning department that made the personality switch easier: "Uber likes to disrupt just like we do." Uber saw the opportunity to attempt something no other service of a similar kind was offering in Canada, and to become a community's number one form of public transit. Likewise, Innisfil's RPPs saw a potential moneysaver and the perfect 'rurban' blend of accessible transportation and human interaction.

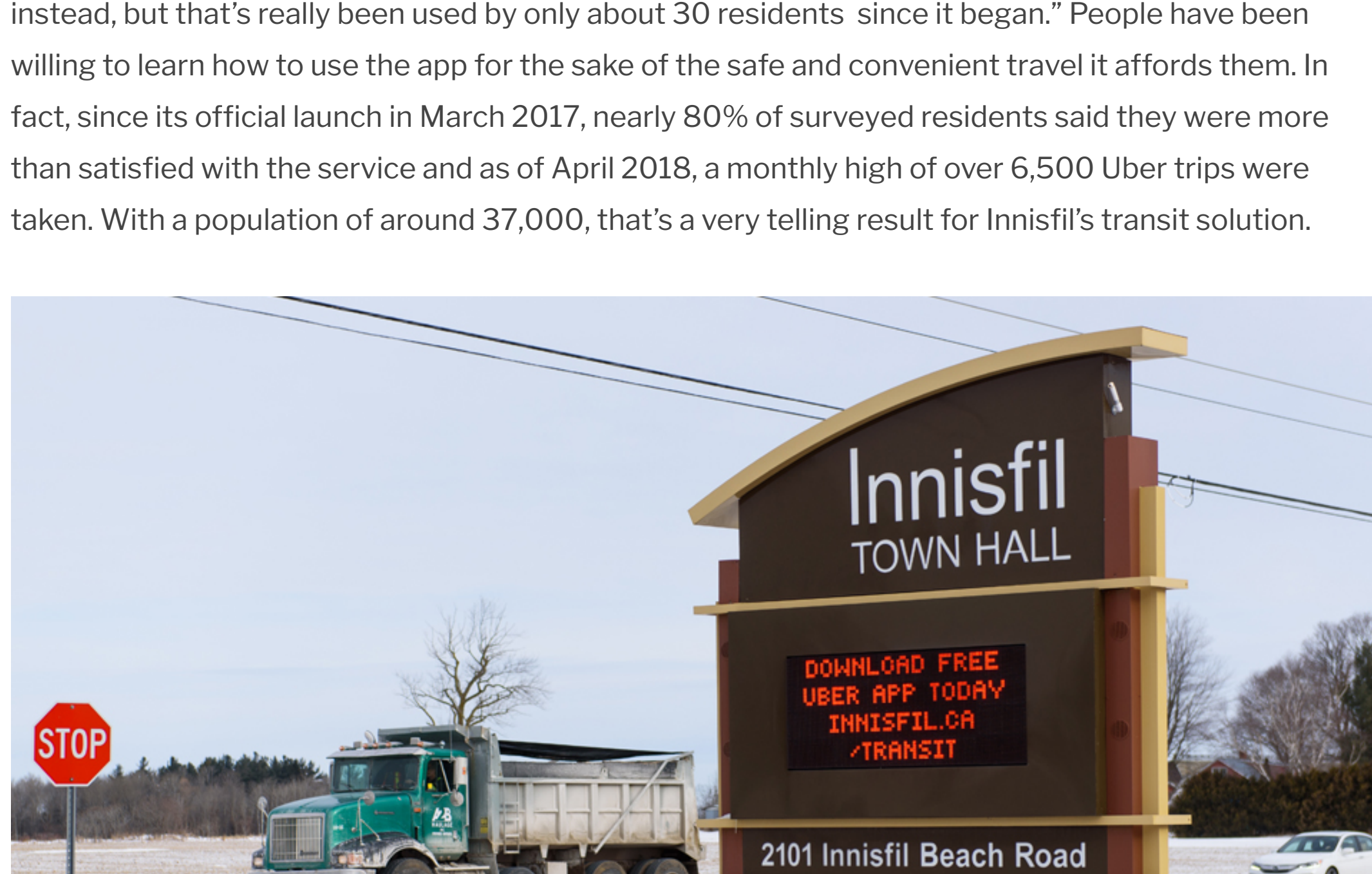


New to Innisfil, Sarah has made use of Innisfil Transit to explore the neighbourhood and secure a job.

So they worked together to break a little from the 'usual' Uber fare structure and offer Innisfil residents flat rates to functional destinations like the Recreational Complex or GO Stations for morning commutes. They worked together to create custom promo codes and Uber happily worked with the Town to use its communications powerhouse to get the word out to residents with flyers, postcards and digital advertising. And the adaptability of RPPs kept the relationship moving forward.

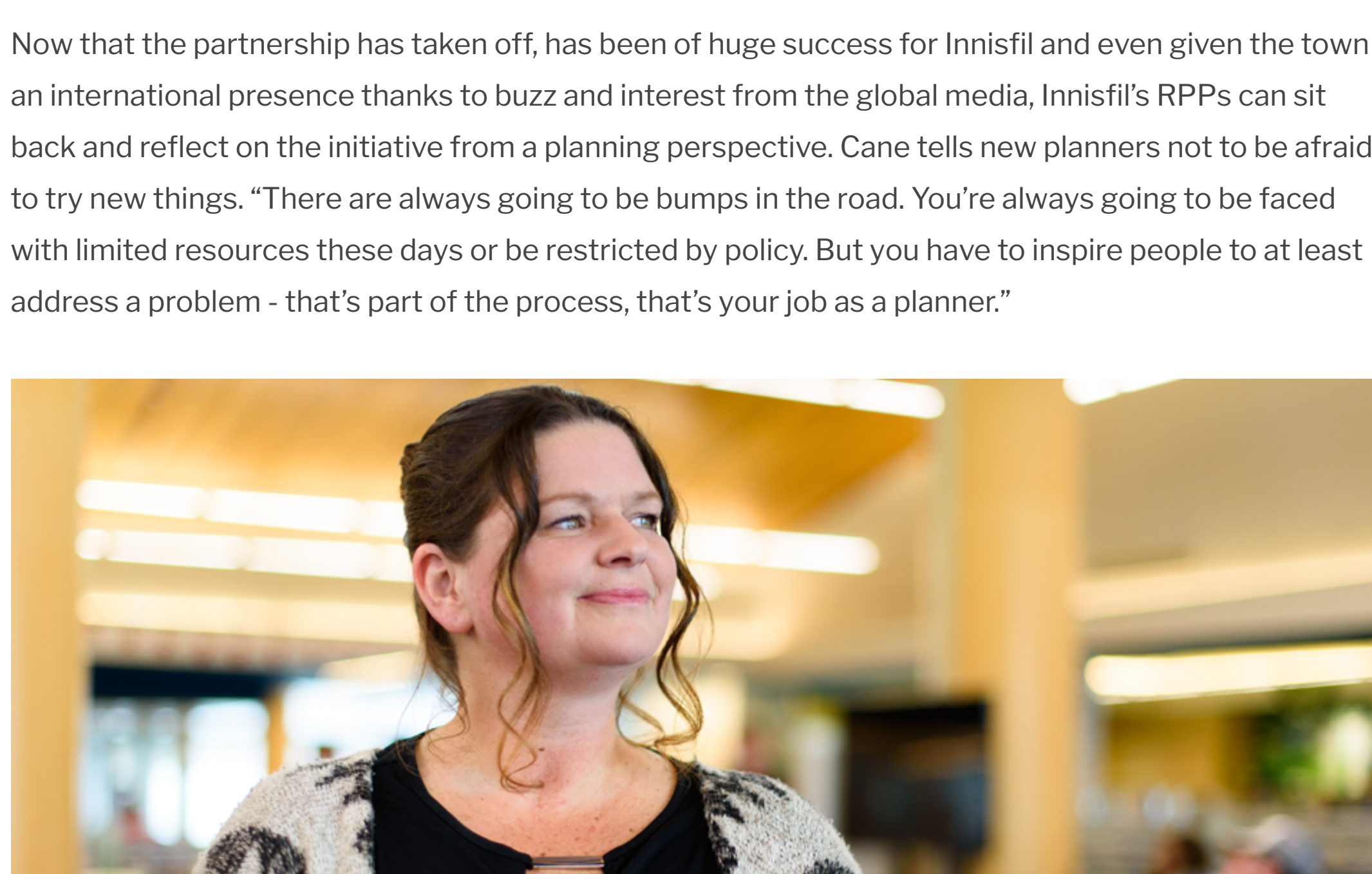
It wasn't a perfectly seamless partnership at the beginning. "We made some mistakes early on, we learned and made changes to the plan. The whole process was a learning experience but staff ability to solve problems was key. Planners are 'grey' - nothing is black and white and you have to be adaptive."

Innisfil residents were, as well. Once Council approved the partnership and plans to launch were publicized, the community was vocally receptive to the idea of something other than fixed-route bus stops popping up along their streets. They welcomed this innovative idea of ride sharing. Staff engaged with a committee of residents to get their input from planning to implementation. "They were excited, we got told how excited they were," says Pentikainen. "We thought the older residents would find the Uber app a struggle so we set up a way for them to contact the town to request a ride instead, but that's really been used by only about 30 residents since it began." People have been willing to learn how to use the app for the sake of the safe and convenient travel it affords them. In fact, since its official launch in March 2017, nearly 80% of surveyed residents said they were more than satisfied with the service and as of April 2018, a monthly high of over 6,500 Uber trips were taken. With a population of around 37,000, that's a very telling result for Innisfil's transit solution.



But for Cane and Pentikainen, it's the anecdotal feedback from happy neighbours that makes them feel it's been a job well done. One thing they hear often is that the ridesharing program enables conversation between people in real time. Says Cane, "I joke that we should take advantage of it and get drivers to ask people about their thoughts or concerns on policies and current projects while they're stuck in the car."

Now that the partnership has taken off, has been of huge success for Innisfil and even given the town an international presence thanks to buzz and interest from the global media, Innisfil's RPPs can sit back and reflect on the initiative from a planning perspective. Cane tells new planners not to be afraid to try new things. "There are always going to be bumps in the road. You're always going to be faced with limited resources these days or be restricted by policy. But you have to inspire people to at least address a problem - that's part of the process, that's your job as a planner."



Lynn, a driver for Innisfil Transit, now has a number of regulars with whom she has built a friendly relationship.

And there will always be more problems; mega-issues that evolve and new ones that arise as communities develop and the face of Ontario changes. So while public transit is an issue that seems to have been mitigated in Innisfil for a while, there's always something else looming. "For example, we're closer to having automated cars on the road than we think," says Pentikainen. "So how will that affect places like Innisfil? How will that affect our policy? We'll have to adapt the program all the time." But Cane feels very confident in the next generation of planners. "Students these days are so passionate. Their projects are more impressive than when I was graduating in the '90s! And we need that passion because of the growing complexity of the world." He emphasizes, again, that good planners are 'grey', they're flexible and open to change. "We're actually going through a name change here in the planning department. 'Planner' doesn't accurately summarize all of the things we do. We're agents of change in all aspects of community, so we're trying to come up with something around that."

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CONTACT US

234 Eglinton Ave. E., Suite 201
Toronto, Ontario M4P 1K5
Telephone: 416-483-1873 or
1-800-568-1448
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