

Georgia Statewide Transit Plan

Improving Access and Mobility through 2050

Existing Conditions and Future Trends Analysis

Part II - Best Practices Report

Final Report

May 2020

The preparation of this report has been financed in part through a grant from the U.S. Department of Transportation, Federal Transit Administration, under the Urban Mass Transportation Act of 1964, as amended, and in part by the taxes of the citizens of the State of Georgia.



Page Intentionally Left Blank

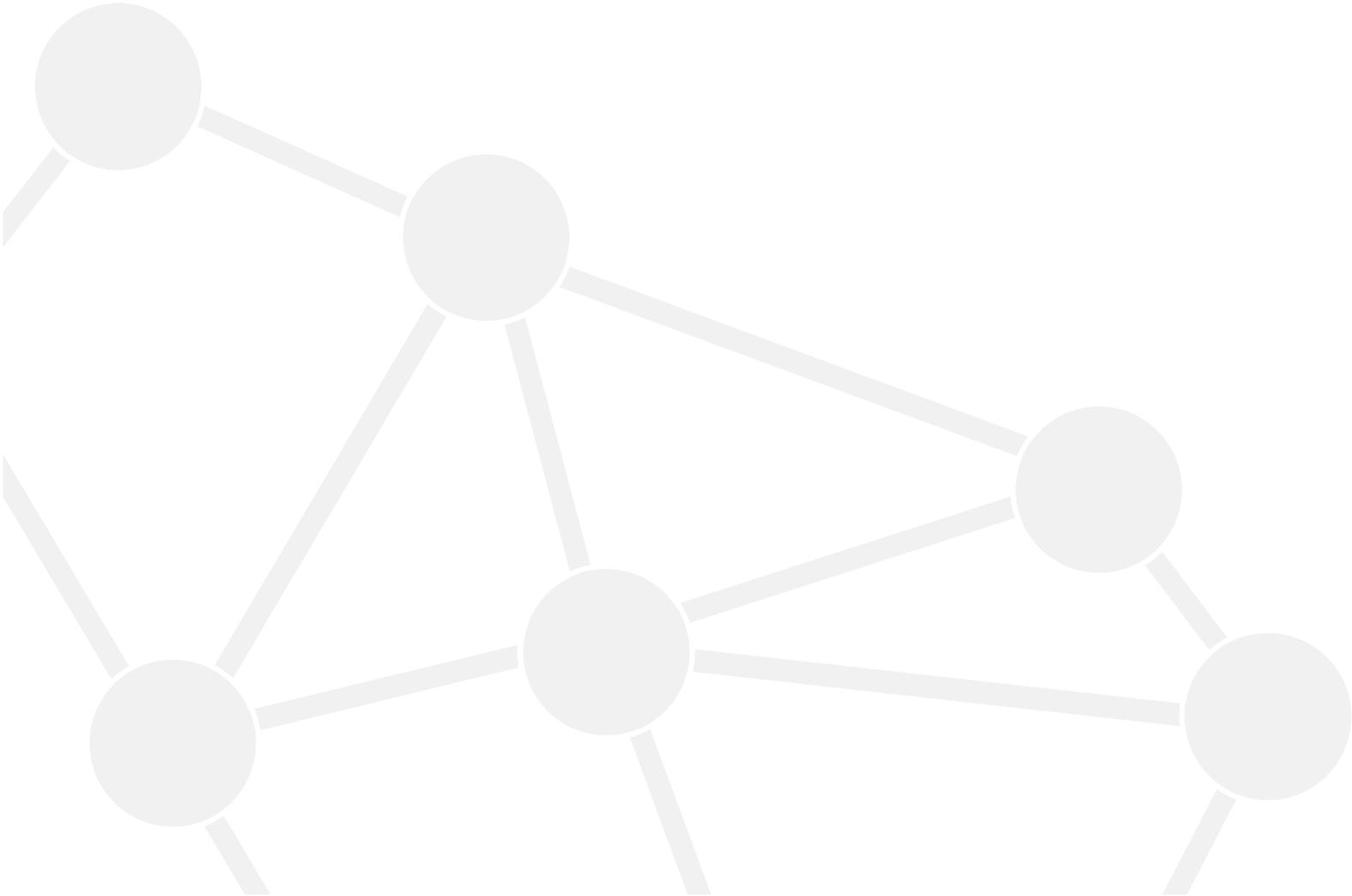


Table of Contents

- 1.0 Executive Summary 1-1
- 2.0 Overview & Methodology 2-1
- 3.0 Best Practices 3-1
 - 3.1 Cost Effective Service..... 3-1
 - 3.2 Private Sector Coordination 3-2
 - 3.3 Regional Coordination 3-3
 - 3.4 Educational Coordination..... 3-6
 - 3.5 Intercity Bus Coordination..... 3-7
 - 3.6 Fare-Free Transit for Youth and Seniors..... 3-8
 - 3.7 Marketing..... 3-9

List of Figures

Figure 1: Rural Providers' Cost per Trip – Quartiles by Total Ridership 3-1

Figure 2: Part of the Wayne County Transit Fleet 3-2

Figure 3: One of Coastal Regional Coaches' Fleet..... 3-5

Figure 4: CAT's Joe Murray Rivers, Jr. Intermodal Transit Center 3-8

Figure 5: ATS Daily Youth Ridership After Switch to Fare-Free 3-9

Figure 6: Levels of Awareness..... 3-10

Figure 7: Tift Lift Vehicle with System Branding 3-10

List of Acronyms

ATS	Athens Transit System
CRC	Coastal Regional Commission
DCA	Georgia Department of Community Affairs
DCH	Georgia Department of Community Health
DHS	Georgia Department of Human Services
FTA	Federal Transit Administration
GDOT	Georgia Department of Transportation
GMA	Georgia Municipal Association
GRTA	Georgia Regional Transportation Authority
HCT	Hall County Transit
HST	Human Services Transportation
LCRTA	Lower Chattahoochee Regional Transportation Authority

MARTA	Metropolitan Atlanta Rapid Transit Authority
MATS	Mountain Area Transportation System
MPO	Metropolitan Planning Organization
MTA	Macon-Bibb County Transit Authority
NTD	National Transit Database
RC	Regional Commission
RTAP	Rural Transit Assistance Program
SGRC	Southern Georgia Regional Commission
STIC	Small Transit Intensive Cities
SWTRP	Statewide Transit Plan
TPO	Third Party Operators
UGA	University of Georgia
WCT	Wayne County Transit

Page Intentionally Left Blank



1.0 Executive Summary

As a part of the Statewide Transit Plan public involvement process, the Georgia Department of Transportation (GDOT) conducted an extensive public and stakeholder outreach effort. Transit providers participated in GDOT's Technical Advisory Committee and were surveyed through a Provider Questionnaire. The project team also conducted one-on-one interviews with representatives from several transit agencies and stakeholder groups from across Georgia.

The project team sought out interviewees from transit agencies of all types from various regions in the state. Both rural and urban agencies were interviewed, including county operated and regional transit providers. Each interviewee was selected in order to gather information and input regarding organizational or operational characteristics that could benefit other agencies.

This report represents a synthesis of this information; interview results are presented as a series of Best Practices, with details of how results have been achieved in sample systems.

1.1 Cost Effective Service

Cost-effectiveness is a perpetual concern for transit systems, especially in small urban and rural areas where populations are more dispersed and trip distances may be longer. While cost-effectiveness can be driven through budget controls, statewide data shows that increasing ridership is a more effective approach, while also furthering the mission of local transit agencies. By making sure operational characteristics such as service hours conform to the needs of all potential riders, not just medical trips, transit agencies can increase ridership and efficiencies.

Wayne County Transit (WCT) provides an example of how a rural transit agency can provide wide service hours while maximizing cost-effectiveness. WCT provides demand-response transit 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. These hours allow WCT to serve the entire community, including workers with off-peak shifts. Employment trips are a major share of ridership for WCT.

1.2 Private Sector Coordination

Employers in Georgia understand the importance of transportation to their employees. There is increasing interest in transit from the business community, and Georgia transit agencies are taking efforts to coordinate with employers.

The Coastal Regional Commission (CRC) has been successful in providing shuttle service for several large regional employers, including service for employees of the hotels, shops, and restaurants on Jekyll Island. These contracted routes provide steady income into the system and benefit the economic health of the region but come with some operational caveats. FTA regulations do not allow the use of Federally-funded vehicles for charter service, so agencies must use vehicles procured with local funds. CRC has had success acquiring used vehicles to provide these services.

1.3 Regional Coordination

Demand-response transit services are a crucial mobility lifeline for many residents in Georgia's rural communities. Riders may need to access destinations in other counties, but intercounty service is not available in all parts of the state. Regionally coordinated transit service can provide improved mobility for rural Georgians while also allowing for economies of scale that transit systems in smaller counties may not be able to achieve.

Four regional rural transit services currently operate in Georgia. The Mountain Area Transportation System (MATS) serves four counties in the Georgia Mountains region. The Lower Chattahoochee Regional Transportation Authority provides demand-response service in three counties in Georgia's River Valley region. Finally, Southwest Georgia and Coastal Georgia are both serviced by regional transit systems operated by their respective regional commissions.

Southern Georgia Regional Commission (SGRC) is currently studying the feasibility of launching its own regional rural public transit system. SGRC already has experience operating its area's Human Services Transportation system and adding rural public transit to its portfolio of services would bring additional value to the people of the region while easing the administrative burden that providing transit can place on the individual counties. Coordination activities between the Regional Commission and its constituent counties are on-going, with both groups working to organize the potential system in a way that benefits all parties and stakeholders.

1.4 Educational Coordination

Georgia's post-secondary education institutions provide transit agencies with coordination opportunities to increase their ridership base. Students benefit by gaining a new mobility option at no cost to them. Coordination helps universities and colleges extend the range of their own transit systems and can also help to reduce the amount of land dedicated to parking. Transit agencies leverage coordination to gain a new ridership base and a dedicated income stream.

Hall County Transit currently provides service to students through a contract with three area institutions. Macon-Bibb Transit Authority operates a route from the campus of Mercer University to downtown Macon, providing students with a safe and accessible route to restaurants and entertainment destinations. Athens Transit System (ATS) coordinates extensively with the University of Georgia. The University's transit system contracts with ATS to provide rides at no cost to students and staff, and also reports their ridership to FTA, allowing ATS to leverage additional Federal funds.

1.5 Intercity Bus Coordination

Co-locating public transit intercity bus stations with intercity bus lines such as Greyhound and Southeastern Stages provides riders with greater mobility option. Greyhound, the nation's largest intercity bus company, has identified these intermodal hubs as their optimal station location, and several cities in Georgia have such facilities in operation.

Albany, Augusta, Macon, and Savannah all have intercity bus stations located at major transfer points of their fixed-route bus network. Albany is currently moving forward on construction of a new multimodal hub to further improve the rider experience. Macon recently completed a restoration of the historic downtown train station, converting the facility into a fixed-route and intercity bus hub. Users gain the convenience of easy transfers between the systems and benefit from the site's walkability and direct access to the amenities of downtown Macon.

1.6 Fare-Free Transit for Youth and Seniors

Providing fare-free transit for certain segments of the population, such as youth and seniors, can be an effective investment in the livelihoods of age cohorts that often face mobility challenges.

The Athens Transit System (ATS) instituted a fare-free program for youth, seniors, and those with disabilities. This program has led to ridership increases in these demographic categories, especially among riders younger than 18, with ATS staff reporting an 800% increase in youth riders. Providing this service results in a minor loss of revenue for the system, but ATS and the County Commission view this as a small cost compared to the positive effects such a service has in the lives of its users and the community as a whole.

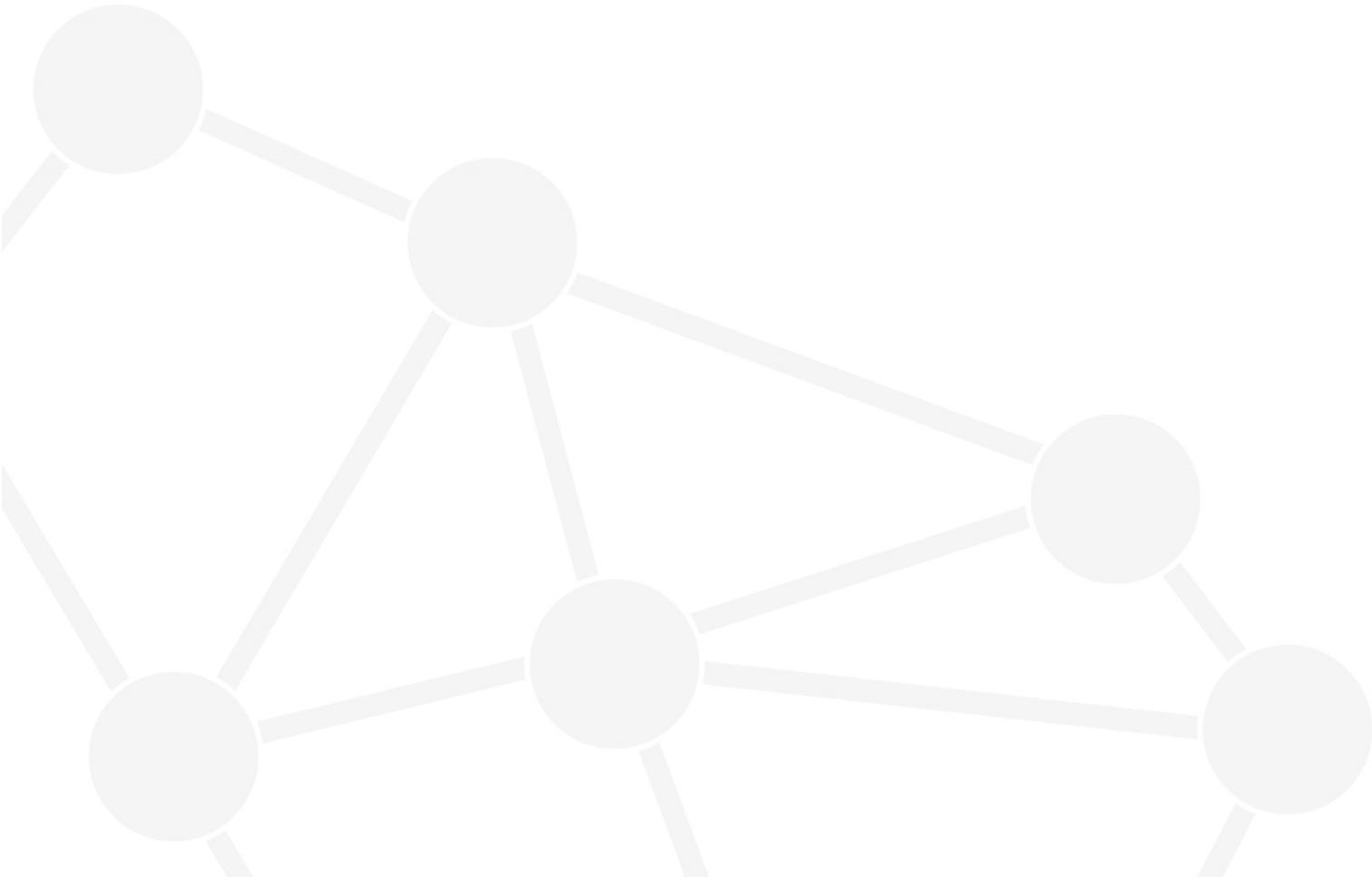
1.7 Marketing

Public transit systems in rural and small urban areas may not have the visibility of larger systems. Marketing programs can help raise awareness among the public as to the services offered in their community. GDOT surveyed over 2,000 public transit riders during the creation of the Statewide Transit Plan. 506 respondents said their primary reason for not taking transit is that service is not available in their community, even though 86% of these people live in communities with public transit systems. Marketing programs can help reach these potential customers while building support in the greater community.

The Tift Lift is an example of a service that has used marketing and branding to boost its local profile. Vehicle wraps, along with matching flyers and brochures, create a crisp, unified look that catches the eye and public attention, allowing each vehicle to function as a “rolling billboard” for the transit services offered.

FTA’s National Rural Transit Assistance Program offers a Marketing Toolkit to rural transit operators free of charge. This online collection of templates, graphics, stock photos, and statistics can help rural agencies create their own branding and marketing programs without substantial fiscal investment.

Page Intentionally Left Blank



2.0 Overview & Methodology

The best practices included in this report were assembled through a series of interviews conducted around the state, input from transit provider questionnaires, and feedback received during stakeholder and Technical Advisory Committee meetings. During the development of the SWTRP *Existing Conditions and Future Trends Part I Report*, the project team gathered information on the 92 transit agencies in the State of Georgia. These data, along with intra-agency discussions with GDOT's District Transit Project Managers, allowed for the identification of agencies with unique characteristics to be profiled in this report.

Each transit system interviewee was selected for a specific reason typically relating to that system's operating characteristics or geographic reach. Other interviewees, including state agencies and non-profit organizations, were selected for a specific reason relating to the role transit plays in furthering that agency's core mission(s).

Following this identification step, interviews were scheduled with representatives. The project team generated a list of questions and discussion topics unique to each interview, which were used to guide the discussion. The intent of each interview was to better understand the needs and demands of the organizations represented, and to gather information about operational practices to be profiled in this report.

Below is a list of the selected interviewees and the specific characteristics of their organizations.

Organization	Unique Characteristic
Athens Transit System	Small urban system with major university presence
Carroll County Transit	Georgia's newest transit system
Coastal Regional Commission	Operates a major regional and coordinated transit system, provides employment shuttles
Hall County Transit	Rural & urban system, rapidly growing county with implications for FTA funding
City of Hinesville / Liberty Transit	Newest fixed-route urban system in Georgia, currently reevaluating service plan
Macon-Bibb County Transit Authority	Urban system, recently converted historic facility to multimodal hub
Wayne County	Cost-effective system providing service 24/7
Georgia Municipal Association (GMA)	Perspective of state municipalities
Georgia Department of Community Affairs	Perspective of DCA, comprehensive planning perspective
Georgia Department of Community Health & Georgia Department of Human Services	Joint interview to discuss coordination with DCH and DHS on human services transportation and non-emergency medical transportation
Southern Georgia RC	Discuss efforts to expand system, RC/MPO perspective.
Georgia Department of Economic Development	Economic development perspective, relay concerns of business community
Statewide Independent Living Council	Organization representing Georgian's living with disabilities

Page Intentionally Left Blank



3.0 Best Practices

The project team used interviews, Technical Advisory Committee meetings, and its provider questionnaire to gather information on operational practices of various transit agencies and stakeholder groups throughout Georgia. Using these findings, the project team has compiled a series of practices that may benefit transit operators throughout the state should they move forward in implementing similar programs and practices.

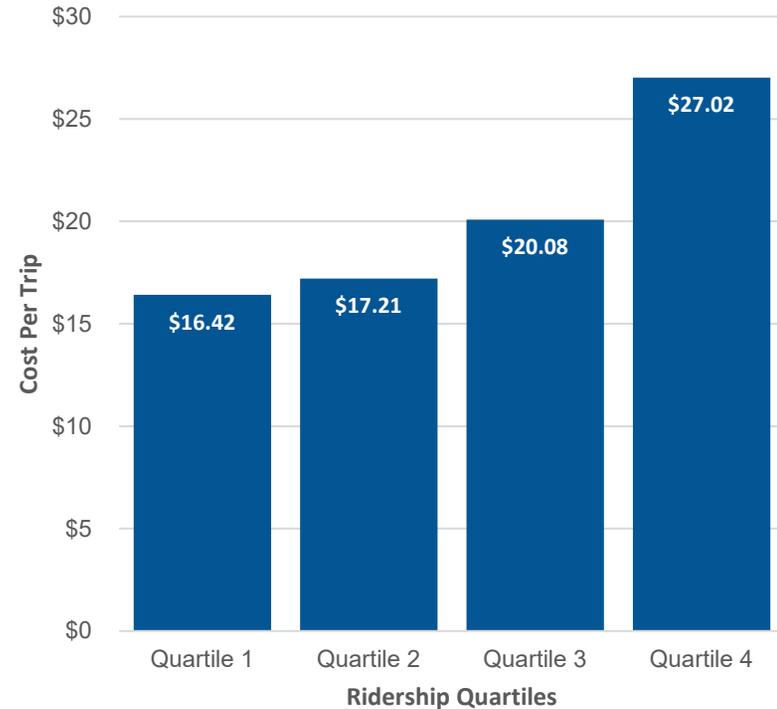
3.1 Cost Effective Service

Providing cost-effective transportation is both priority and a challenge for all transit programs in Georgia. Cost effectiveness, defined as an agency’s total operating budget divided by its total ridership, depends on a number of factors, including some that are outside an agency’s control. Rural systems may have lower demand, more geographically dispersed ridership, longer distances to travel, and smaller budgets than their urban counterparts, making cost-effectiveness an area of particular focus for these systems.

Rural transit agencies had a wide range of average costs per trip in 2017, with a low of \$6.95 per trip for one agency and a high of over \$50 at another. Altogether, the state’s rural transit agencies had a mean cost per trip of \$20.14, and a median of \$17.47.

Presenting these cost-effectiveness measures in quartiles shows correlation between ridership and cost-effectiveness, as shown in **Figure 1**. The top 25% of systems by ridership (Quartile 1) have an average cost per trip of \$16.42, while the bottom 25% of systems (Quartile 4) average cost per tip is \$27.02. Higher levels of ridership allow agencies to spread out the fixed overhead, yielding more efficient service.

Figure 1: Rural Providers’ Cost per Trip – Quartiles by Total Ridership



Wayne County Transit (WCT), centered in Jesup, ranks as one of Georgia’s most cost-effective rural transit systems. In 2017, WCT provided 42,345 trips on an operating budget of \$405,000, giving a cost per trip of \$9.59. WCT has been successful at maintaining trip volume by appealing to as many potential riders as possible with 24-hour service, seven days per week to any destination, even beyond Wayne County.

Staff at WCT credit their flexible hours and the varied nature of their riders for their sustained trip volume. Many trips are medical trips, but workforce makes up a large part of their weekly ridership, as well. The system's flexible hours mean the service is available to a variety of workers, even those with non-standard hours, and WCT's guaranteed-ride-home policy makes the service even more appealing. WCT staff says Wal-Mart and other retail employees make up one of their largest rider cohorts; a bus is dispatched regularly at 11:00 PM to transport these riders home.

Figure 2: Part of the Wayne County Transit Fleet



Another way WCT serves its community while boosting ridership is through regular coordination with churches in the area. Each Sunday, WCT transports senior members from area nursing homes to church services and back. At the end of the month, WCT bills each participating church directly, simplifying the fare collection process for everyone involved.

WCT manages labor costs associated with 24-hour service by employing a number of part-time drivers, allowing coverage during times with a large number of bookings with a lower amount of slack time than would come from a team of all full-time drivers. While more efficient, this larger labor force does come with some administrative difficulties. Part-time employees are not eligible for benefits, so the system has difficulty with retention. Many WCT drivers are retired from their first careers, making benefits less of a concern, but younger drivers often leave the system for full-time prospects in the private sector. To alleviate this, WCT is exploring creating several full-time driver positions, and using the part-time drivers to supplement this core group.

3.2 Private Sector Coordination

Employers in Georgia understand the importance of transportation to both their business and their employees. There is increasing interest in transit from the business community, and Georgia transit agencies are taking efforts to coordinate with employers.

Coastal Regional Coaches, the regional transit system provided by Coastal Regional Commission (CRC), currently has three contracts with area employers to provide shuttle service, including a bus to transport service workers to the hotels and restaurants on Glynn County's Jekyll Island. Other employers have expressed interest in similar contracts, and CRC hopes to bring more shuttle routes online as additional resources and vehicles become available. As more and more jobs move outside of urban cores, these contracts provide an essential transportation service, as well as steady income for CRC.

However, there are precautions that must be taken to ensure that such shuttles do not violate FTA's Charter Bus Rule. All transit agencies that receive FTA funding have signed and agreed to FTA's Charter Service Agreement, which states that any assets purchased with FTA funds cannot be used to provide service that is not open to the public. These regulations are intended to protect private charter transportation operators from competition from Federally-funded agencies while ensuring that Federal funds are used for their intended, public purpose. Note that public transit operators may provide charter service for qualified human services organizations. Please see FTA's Charter Service Regulations ([49 CFR Part 604](#)) for specific details on the Charter Service Agreement and exceptions to these rules, as well as [FTA's website](#) for additional guidance.

Coastal Regional Coaches has acquired several buses using local funding. These are the only vehicles used to provide shuttle service for area employers. This separation ensures compliance with the FTA Charter Service Agreement. CRC staff emphasized the importance of finding reliable vehicles for these shuttle services; in the event of a breakdown, FTA-funded vehicles cannot be used to cover the service gap.

CRC also emphasized the importance that contracted services are self-sustaining. Before entering into a contract with an employer, CRC calculates the fully-allocated cost of the proposed service, including fuel, labor, and compensation for vehicle purchase and depreciation. This way, CRC staff can be sure FTA funds and other taxpayer dollars are not being used to indirectly subsidize charter service.

3.3 Regional Coordination

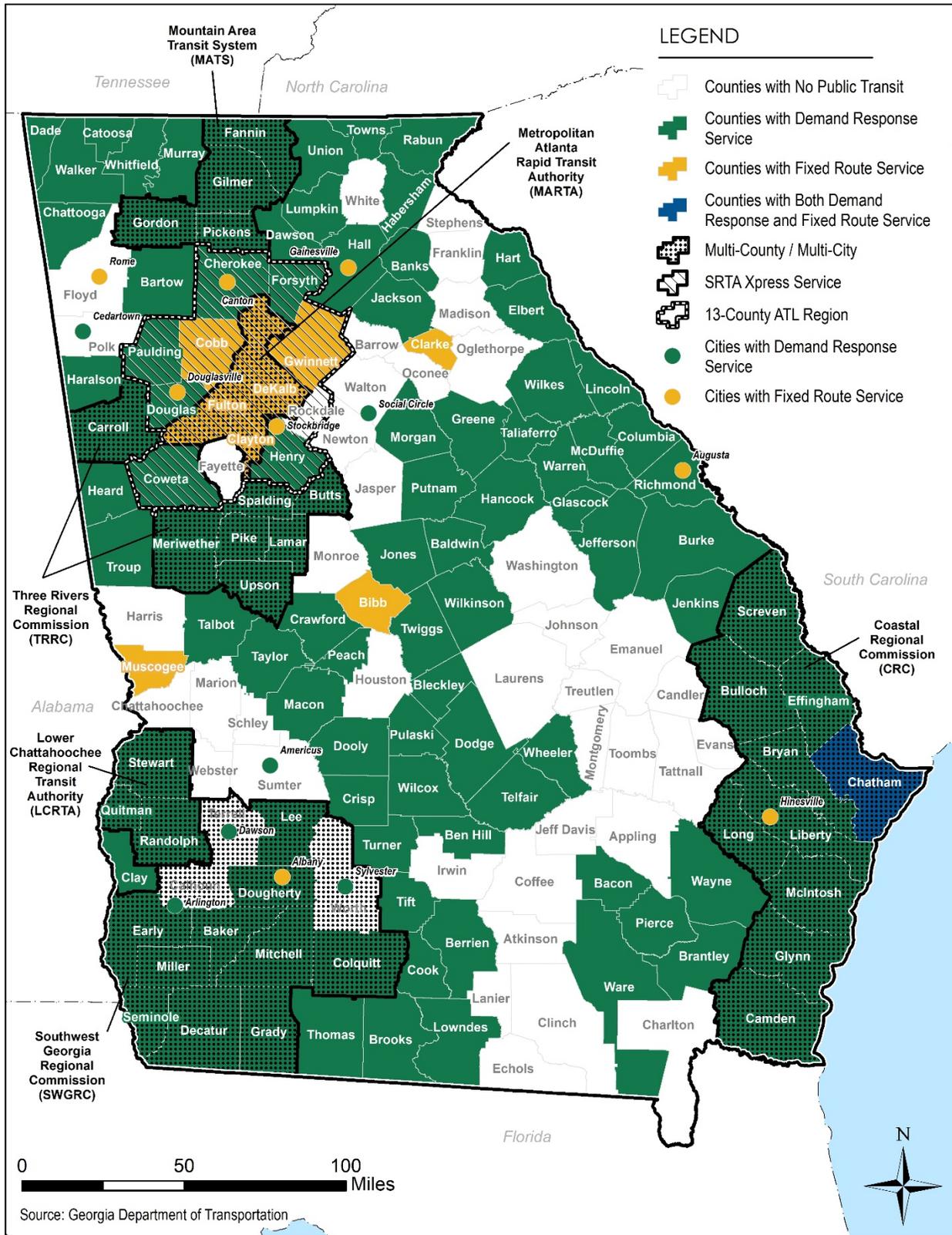
While most transit systems in Georgia serve only single counties, several areas have had success with regional transit systems. Within metro Atlanta, MARTA provides public transit in Clayton, DeKalb, and Fulton counties, while commuter service is provided to the 13 metro counties by the GRTA Xpress commuter bus program. Additionally, the Atlanta-Region Transit Link Authority provides oversight and planning support to all transit agencies in the metro area.

Rural transit agencies have also benefited from coordination. There are currently four rural transit agencies providing service to more than one county. The Mountain Area Transportation System (MATS) serves Gilmer, Gordon, Fannin, and Pickens counties in Northwest Georgia and is operated by North Georgia Community Action, a 501(c)(3) non-profit organization on behalf of the counties served.

Quitman, Randolph, and Stewart counties are served by the Lower Chattahoochee Regional Transportation Authority (LCRTA). LCRTA, created by the Georgia General Assembly in 2012, is an independent transit authority governed by a board of representatives from each county in the service area. The board contracts with a third-party operator to provide service. These are rural counties with smaller populations, and so pooling resources for service allows for economies of scale that would be unavailable if the counties were to operate individual systems. Additionally, the three-county service area offers a greater number of destinations for the residents of these counties.

Figure 3 shows these agencies, along with Georgia's multicounty urban systems, MARTA and GRTA Xpress.

Figure 3. Regional and Multicounty Transit Agencies in Georgia



Larger regional systems currently serve both Coastal and Southwest Georgia. These systems, operated by their respective Regional Commissions, cover a large area and are serviced by a single vehicle fleet. Southwest Georgia Regional Transit provides demand-response service in Baker, Colquitt, Decatur, Dougherty, Early, Grady, Lee, Miller, Mitchell and Seminole counties, plus the cities of Arlington, Dawson, and Sylvester. Thomas County currently operates its own rural transit system.

Figure 4: One of Coastal Regional Coaches' Fleet



Coastal Regional Coaches provides demand-response service in Bryan, Bulloch, Camden, Chatham, Effingham, Glynn, Liberty, Long, McIntosh, and Screven counties. Each year, representatives of the 10 counties in Coastal Georgia sign a memo agreeing to cost-sharing throughout the CRC rural transit system, with each county contributing \$1.30 for each member of their rural population. According to CRC staff, spreading out costs like this allows for more effective and efficient service. CRC previously contracted operations with a TPO, but has begun operating their fleet directly, allowing them to emphasize efficient use of their current fleet, which is always a priority over such a large service area.

The Southern Georgia Regional Commission (SGRC) has recently begun examining the feasibility of instituting regional rural transit. SGRC currently administers the region's Section 5310 human services transportation (HST), so adding public transit could add increased efficiencies and coordination activities. Many of these HST trips cross county lines, and regionalizing area's public transit would allow this sort of regional mobility to reach the general public, as well. Launching such a service will require counties to opt into the system. SGRC staff understands that the required financial contribution may be burdensome for some jurisdictions. Additionally, some counties have expressed concern service consolidation, being worried that their employees may not be guaranteed jobs in the new system.

SGRC is aware that such a system would be a large undertaking for their organization; regional public transit is expected to cost \$4.5 million annually against the agency's total budget of \$17 million. SGRC expects to contract day-to-day operations with a third-party operator, similar to many county systems currently operating in Southern Georgia.

3.4 Educational Coordination

Students in post-secondary education can regularly face mobility issues due to prohibitive costs of car ownership. Additionally, parking on college and university campuses may have unaffordable rates for students, or the institutions may restrict student parking in other ways. Educational institutions understand the importance of transit in the lives of their student body. At a 2018 meeting of the Georgia House of Representatives' Transit Governance and Funding Commission, representatives from Georgia's technical college system reported that around five percent of students will drop out each year, with transportation issues being a major contributor. Many post-secondary institutions are seeking to coordinate with local public transit agencies to alleviate these mobility issues.

A number of Georgia transit agencies have had success coordinating with local post-secondary institutions. Transit agencies can benefit from coordination with educational institutions as these contracts can be a steady source of fare revenue, and some trips may be leveraged with FTA programs to generate additional Federal funding.

Post-secondary institutions can benefit from transit coordination in multiple ways. Coordinating with an existing agency may be more feasible than the institution operating their own transportation service, or coordination with public transit can be used to extend the reach of existing campus systems. Transit access may also allow universities to allocate less land area to parking, allowing more productive use of campus grounds.

Hall County Transit (HCT) currently contracts to provide transit service for three post-secondary institutions within its service area. Students, staff, and faculty at the University of North Georgia, Lanier Tech, and Brenau University ride the Gainesville Connection fare-free. These riders present their school ID to the driver, who manually records the trip. Each month, HCT sends an invoice to each school for the trips taken.

Athens Transit System (ATS) works closely with the University of Georgia and its transit system, University Transit. ATS coordinates route planning with University Transit, ensuring thorough coverage with minimal overlap. Both University Transit and ATS are fare-free for students and employees of the University, allowing easy transfers between the services. Students use their university IDs as a transit pass; each swipe is recorded and later billed to UGA. The university pays \$1.425 to ATS for each student and employee trip. This has been a consistent source of fare revenue for ATS since its inception. Even though student trips have declined since 2015, these trips still generate a major segment of ATS ridership revenue.

ATS also coordinates with the University of Georgia Transit system to maximize its FTA's Small Transit Intensive Cities (STIC) grant program. This set-aside from the Section 5307 program grants additional funding to small urban areas that excel in at least one of six performance metrics. University transit systems are not statutorily required to report ridership to NTD; however, because University Transit is a voluntary reporter, trips on their system can be counted toward ATS' STIC apportionment. This allows ATS to leverage a substantial amount of additional FTA dollars that would not otherwise be available to ATS.

Macon-Bibb County Transit Authority (MTA) has been successful in coordinating with Mercer University. MTA operates the “Bear Bus” downtown shuttle Wednesdays through Saturdays. This service travels between the Mercer Campus and Macon’s downtown entertainment district. The bus is open to the public and funded through a Purchase of Service contract between Mercer University and MTA.

MTA also provides shuttle service for a number of Mercer athletic events; representatives from MTA see the benefits of this service as two-fold. In addition to generating contract revenue for the system, the shuttles serve as an introduction to public transit for residents that may not have used the system. Shuttle services such as these can be beneficial to all parties but must be open to the public and publicized on the operator’s website to conform with FTA’s Charter Bus Rule.

3.5 Intercity Bus Coordination

Co-location of intercity transportation hubs with public transit facilities is an important priority for improving the usability of both services. These two services are likely to share a user base, especially in Georgia’s rural and small urban communities where intercity bus transportation may be a person’s only route to other parts of the state. Creating true multimodal hubs have become a priority for intercity bus providers. During GDOT’s annual intercity bus provider coordination meeting, representatives from Georgia’s intercity bus providers said that transit centers have become their preferred station locations, assuming operational needs are met at these facilities.

Such co-location requires local transit agencies to actively partner with the state’s intercity bus providers (primarily Greyhound and Southeastern Stages, though there are other providers that may service a smaller number of cities). Intercity bus providers have different operational and service requirements, so both parties must proactively work to ensure compatibility. For example, the over-the-road coaches used by intercity bus companies are both longer and taller than the buses usually operated by public transit providers. Existing facilities may need to be retrofitted to accommodate these vehicles.

Intercity bus riders also have different needs than transit users. Intercity passengers may have to spend a substantial amount of time waiting at the station, so a higher level of amenities may be needed beyond the benches of a typical transit station. This could include improved seating, restroom facilities, and available refreshment options. Additionally, Greyhound and Southeastern Stages typically require that stations be staffed with ticketing agents, requiring additional facilities and employees.

Four cities in Georgia have multimodal facilities where intercity bus stations and public transit transfer hubs are collocated. Savannah’s Joe Murray Rivers, Jr. Intermodal Transit Center, the Augusta Public Transit Transfer Facility, and the Albany Transportation Center all provide intercity and public transportation access from the same facility. The downtown Atlanta Greyhound is located across the street from the Garnett MARTA heavy rail station, though the two are not housed within the same facility. Albany Transit is currently in the planning process to replace their existing transfer center with a modern intermodal facility to better meet the needs of its riders.

Figure 5: CAT’s Joe Murray Rivers, Jr. Intermodal Transit Center



Most recently, Macon has collocated services in its downtown Terminal Station. This historic train station is the central transfer hub for MTA’s fixed-route bus system. As of 2019, it is also the home to Greyhound’s intercity bus station. This co-location agreement ensures that riders can easily transfer between transit and intercity bus services, creating a virtuous cycle that benefits the user and both services.

In early 2019, Greyhound signed a two-year agreement with MTA for shared use of the facility, including space for ticketing operations. MTA is currently working with GDOT to secure funding for the construction of a new staging area to better accommodate Greyhound passengers and buses.

3.6 Fare-Free Transit for Youth and Seniors

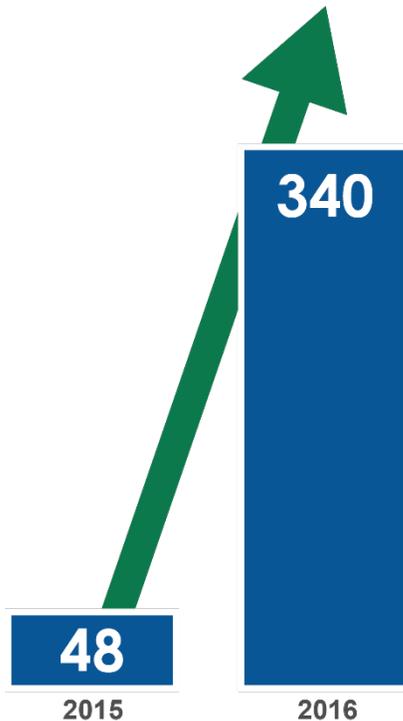
Georgia’s youth and senior populations can struggle with mobility in ways that working-age adults may not. Younger Georgians may not yet be able to obtain a driver’s license, and the cost of an extra vehicle is outside the budget of many families. Older Georgians may have difficulties driving, and the cost of vehicle ownership can also be a drain for those on a fixed income. Providing fare-free transit for these age cohorts can be a boon to their mobility, offering community benefits that may not cost much to local transit systems.

Fare-free transit can be life-changing for teenagers that can often be mobility-limited. Transit gives younger riders independence to move between home, school, work, and shopping locations without relying on parents or friends for rides. Fare-free youth programs also acclimate young residents to transit, potentially creating life-long riders. Additionally, fare-free transit can benefit the greater community by improving customer access to businesses and services, which can in turn increase the local tax base.

A fare-free transit program can be viewed as an investment made in the community. Though the cost of the fare collection may exceed revenues for some very small systems, providing fare-free transit, whether for a whole system or a segment of the population, will usually subtract some degree of revenue from the system. However, systems can expect substantial ridership increases. In 2012, the Transit Cooperative Research Program identified 40 systems in the United States that had adopted fare-free policies. Every system reported an increase in ridership after adopting fare-free policies.¹

This trend was observed in Georgia, as Athens Transit System (ATS) enacted a fare-free policy for youth in 2016 and has recently begun offering fare-free trips for riders over 60 as well as those with disabilities. As a result, transit has become increasingly popular with these cohorts, especially younger Athens residents. Fare-free transit for youth began in summer 2016 as a pilot project. Youth ridership immediately jumped 600%. Since the program was made permanent, ridership increased further to 800% of ATS’s 2015 youth ridership.

Figure 6: ATS Daily Youth Ridership After Switch to Fare-Free



Source: Athens Transit System Transit Development Plan Update – May 2018

According to ATS, youth ridership had been accounting for approximately \$40,000 in annual fare revenue. Giving up revenue can be difficult for any system, but representatives from ATS believe the benefits seen in the community more than offset the lost revenue. “The cost benefit is not to the transit system, but to the community as a whole,” according to ATS staff. “[ATS] may lose some revenue, but that money is being reinvested elsewhere in the community.”

Implementation of the fare-free policy was straightforward; when a rider from the relevant cohort gets on the bus, the driver manually records the trip on the farebox. Drivers are given discretion in determining who is eligible for free transit but may ask for an ID if there is uncertainty. ATS provides free ID cards for those that do not have another form of government-issued identification.

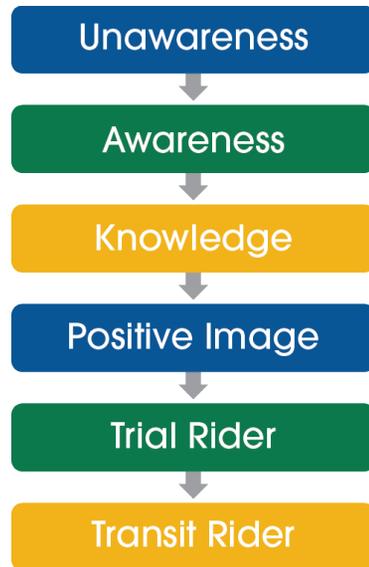
3.7 Marketing

Marketing can play a major role in the operation of any transit system, especially in rural or small urban areas where public transit is not as visible as in major cities. Residents in these areas may not know how to use transit services or may not be aware that service is open to the public. FTA’s National Rural Transit Assistance Program (RTAP) recommends marketing as means to achieving four major objectives:

- Build visibility for transit and the important role it plays in a community;
- Build support for the system among decision makers and tax payers;
- Educate potential riders about what the system has to offer; and,
- Generate ridership among those groups with transportation needs that the transit system can meet.

Improving transit’s public visibility and educating potential users have been identified as a statewide need during the planning process. As a part of the Statewide Transit Plan, GDOT conducted a public survey that was completed by over 2,900 residents across Georgia. When asked what barriers prevented them from using transit, 506 respondents said that “transit is not provided in my community.” However, when sorting these answers by county of residence, 87% riders that chose this response live in communities with public transit services. These are the potential riders that marketing and education can reach.

Figure 7: Levels of Awareness



Initiating a marketing program requires an investment of labor and resources that smaller systems may have trouble funding. To help remedy this, National RTAP maintains a marketing toolkit that can assist rural transit systems prepare and implement a marketing plan. In addition to guidance on the principles and process of marketing a transit system, the toolkit contains resources such as templates for flyers, passenger guides, and signage; a database of compelling statistics for use in presentations, and a library of photos and graphics. Transit operators can find the RTAP Marketing Toolkit at <http://nationalrtap.org/Toolkits/Marketing-Toolkit>.

The Tift Transit System has branded its demand-response service the “Tift Lift” and recently updated their vehicles with enhanced graphics that imply mobility and promote the Tift Lift brand. These eye-catching vehicle wraps, as shown in **Figure 8**, turn each vehicle into a rolling billboard, spreading awareness of the system in a way that a more generic, unbranded vehicle may not. Tift’s transit brochures and flyers use graphics similar to the vehicle design, creating a unified brand. Tift Lift vehicle branding was introduced in 2018. Though such branding is not the only driver of ridership, it is worth noting that Tift Lift ridership increased by 3,899 riders (35%) between 2017 and 2018.

Figure 8: Tift Lift Vehicle with System Branding



Efforts toward marketing a public transit system extend beyond branding. During interviews with transit providers, staff members from several systems stressed the importance of word-of-mouth promotion. Having directors and staff engage directly with county commissioners or city officials as well as key stakeholders in areas of education or employment, can create important support networks for transit within communities. Hall County's Transit Director credits face-to-face networking with much of their system's success. Having a presence at local events or meetings helps create an organic support network for the transit system, raising the system's profile and helping to generate more riders and increased institutional backing.

i TCRP Synthesis 101: Implementation and Outcomes of Fare-Free Transit Systems 2012.