

Regional Transit Development Plan

Northwest Georgia Regional Commission

Executive Summary

October 2024



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List of Acronyms

ARC	Atlanta Regional Commission
ATL	Atlanta-Region Transit Link Authority
DCH	Georgia Department of Community Health
DHS	Georgia Department of Human Services
FTA	Federal Transit Administration
GDOT	Georgia Department of Transportation
MATS	Mountain Area Transportation System

MPO	Metropolitan Planning Organization
NWGRC	Northwest Georgia Regional Commission
PAC	Project Advisory Committee
POS	Purchase of Service
SWTRP	Statewide Transit Plan
TDP	Transit Development Plan

1.0 Overview

The Northwest Georgia Regional Transit Development Plan (TDP) is a guide for the Northwest Georgia Regional Commission (NWGRC) and the 15 counties within Northwest Georgia, along with other regional and local partners, to work together to advance a regional transit system that aligns with the regional transit vision and goals. The plan provides robust documentation of mobility conditions within the region and identifies next steps to advance specific transit service recommendations and, where relevant, alternative service options that require further regional consideration. The overarching goal of the TDP is to ensure public transit accessibility to all in the region with particular focus on residents who are transit dependent.

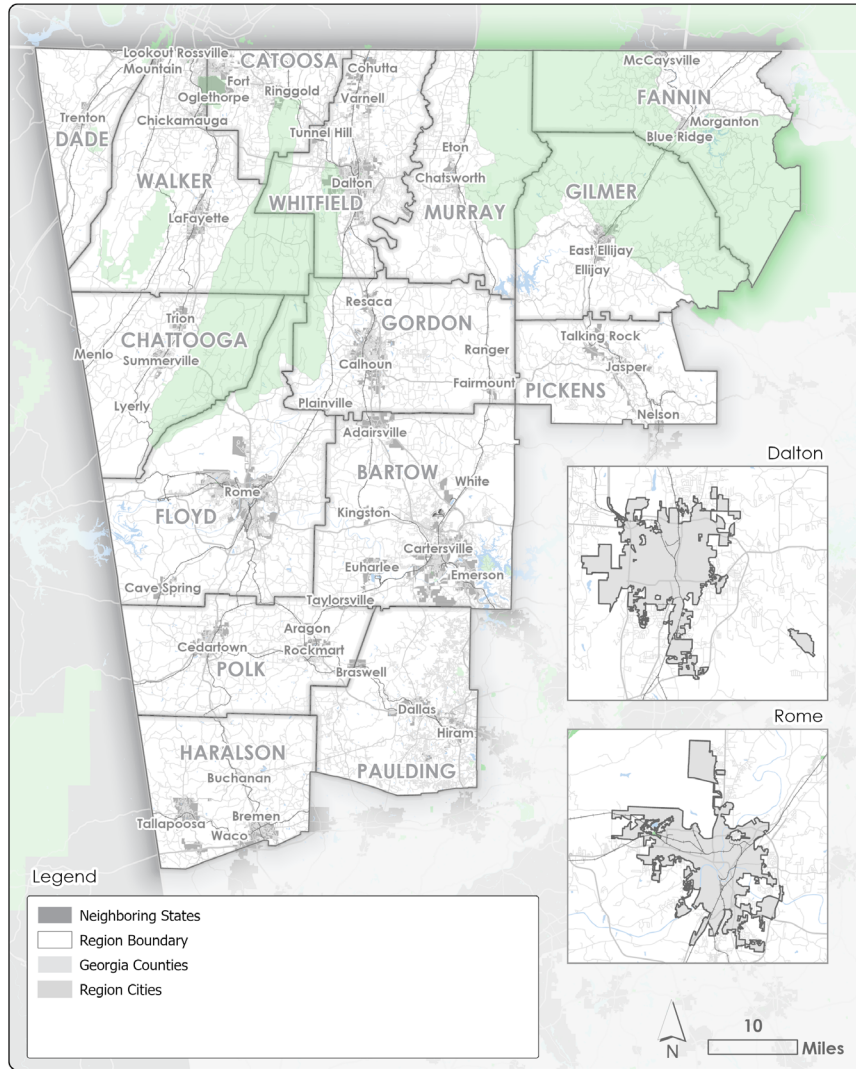
This Executive Summary provides an overview of the Northwest Georgia Regional TDP planning process and key components, including the existing conditions assessment, needs analysis and alternatives assessment, and implementation recommendations. Companion plan documents include the **Existing Conditions Report, Vision and Goals Statement, Alternatives Analysis and Recommendations Report**, and the supporting Appendix documenting stakeholder and public input and activities.

1.1 Regional Context

The NWGRC is a multi-county organization tasked with regional transportation and community planning in accordance with the Georgia Planning Act of 1989. The NWGRC assists local members with comprehensive plans, transportation plans, and meeting economic, community, land use, and natural resource goals. NWGRC membership includes 15 counties, five metropolitan planning organizations (MPOs), and 48 municipalities all located in the northwest region of Georgia, along the state borders of Alabama, Tennessee, and North Carolina. Major cities respective to population size and economic activity include the cities of Cartersville, Dalton, and Rome. The regional study area is displayed in **Figure 1**.

The NWGRC participates in the transportation planning activities of the five MPOs in the region including Chattanooga-Hamilton County/North Georgia MPO, the Floyd County-Rome MPO, the Greater Dalton MPO, the Cartersville-Bartow County MPO, and the Atlanta Regional Commission (ARC). The regional coordination allows the NWGRC to maintain a position of providing both regional guidance and granular support for planning initiatives.

Figure 1: Northwest Georgia



Source: NWGRC

1.2 Impetus for Regional TDP

The Georgia Department of Transportation’s (GDOT) Statewide Transit Plan (SWTRP) and its TDP Guidebook laid the groundwork for the Northwest Georgia Regional TDP, as shown in **Figure 2**. A primary recommendation of the SWTRP was the development of regional transit plans throughout the state of Georgia to comprehensively identify transit needs, coordination, and implementation actions across county boundaries. The NWGRC is one of seven regions to concurrently go through the regional TDP process as a GDOT-funded project, and, therefore, is coordinating with other regional commissions and GDOT staff to ensure consistency in the analysis and planning process.

Figure 2: SWTRP Planning Context

Statewide Transit Planning Context






Georgia Statewide Transit Plan (SWTRP)

The SWTRP was an extensive effort to document and assess existing transit conditions and needs throughout the state and develop a set of implementable recommendations. The SWTRP included a long-term vision statement and five overarching goals for the future of transit in Georgia. As champions of the SWTRP, local and regional transit agencies each play a role in bringing the vision to fruition.

Vision Statement

Improve the quality of life and economic opportunities for all Georgians by supporting an innovative, connected, reliable, and accessible multimodal public transportation network.

Goals

-  Provide a safe and sustainable public transit network
-  Optimize public transit programs to best meet public transit systems' and travelers' needs
-  Ensure public transit coverage across the state to support mobility and access for all
-  Connect rural transit to regional and urban centers
-  Leverage innovation and technology to support public transit ridership and performance

GDOT Transit Development Plan Guidebook

The Georgia Department of Transportation TDP Guidebook is a resource to help transit agencies, regional commissions, Metropolitan Planning Organizations, and other organizations with their long-term planning for transit investments. The Guidebook provides detailed direction regarding processes and analyses that make up a robust transit plan. The TDP Guidebook laid the foundation for the Northwest Georgia Regional Commission TDP process and content.



1.3 Planning Process

The NWGRC TDP project commenced in June 2023 and spanned a 16-month period. A project team, comprised of GDOT, NWGRC, and a consultant team, led the process from start to finish with monthly meetings to keep the project on schedule. The planning process kicked off with the establishment of a schedule, a public and stakeholder engagement plan, and a review of existing conditions and trends. **Figure 3** shows the five key phases of the planning process.

Figure 3: Planning Phases



The first months of the planning process included the launch of outward-facing project communications and a GDOT-hosted website, data collection and existing conditions analysis, and the identification of key stakeholders to participate in a Project Advisory Committee (PAC) and stakeholder interviews. Interviews verified current transit services within jurisdictions, uncovered unmet mobility needs, and identified challenges or barriers to improving access to transit across the region.

From October 2023 to March 2024, several project milestones occurred:

1. GDOT and NWGRC held the first round of public and stakeholder input in the form of an in-person PAC meeting and public meeting, followed by an online input period and survey. The input period introduced people to the planning process and goals, helped identify needs and opportunities, and expanded upon data analysis. A total of 195 people responded to the survey.
2. The project team finalized the Existing Conditions Report, which included a detailed profile of each of the GDOT-administered transit systems in the region.
3. The project team drafted the regional transit vision and goals statements.

The following activities occurred in late spring and summer 2024:

1. The project team finalized the regional transit vision and goals statement.

2. GDOT and NWGRC held a second round of public and stakeholder input via various stakeholder meetings, a virtual PAC meeting, and an in-person public meeting, followed by an online input period and survey. The input period vetted the priority of different regional transit goals and collected input on potential alternatives and implementation opportunities. A total of 151 people responded to the survey.
3. The project team conducted several analyses to evaluate transit needs and inform the alternatives development. These analyses considered population density, areas with higher-than-average proportions of vulnerable populations, unmet transit demand of the existing transit systems, and commuter trip demand. The project team developed several alternatives that address system performance, commuting, and administration of transit programs. Alternatives were refined into a prioritized list of recommendations. The needs assessment, alternatives analysis and evaluation, and final recommendations are captured in the **Alternatives Analysis and Recommendations Report**.

The planning process culminated with a 30-day public review period which began September 13, 2024, and closed October 14, 2024. No comments were received during the 30-day comment period. The Plan was adopted by the NWGRC Council on October 17, 2024 during the scheduled NWGRC Council Meeting. Following adoption, the plan serves as an implementation guide and tool to access additional funding to implement the plan.

2.0 Existing Transit Services

There are currently 11 public transit services operating within the Northwest Georgia region and one non-profit shared regional transportation system. The public services include one regional commuter bus service, one urbanized service including a fixed route, and nine rural demand-response services. Eight of these demand-response services are countywide, with occasional trips to areas outside the service county, and the ninth includes a semi-fixed route for senior centers. The transit agencies that provide these services are detailed in the sections below.

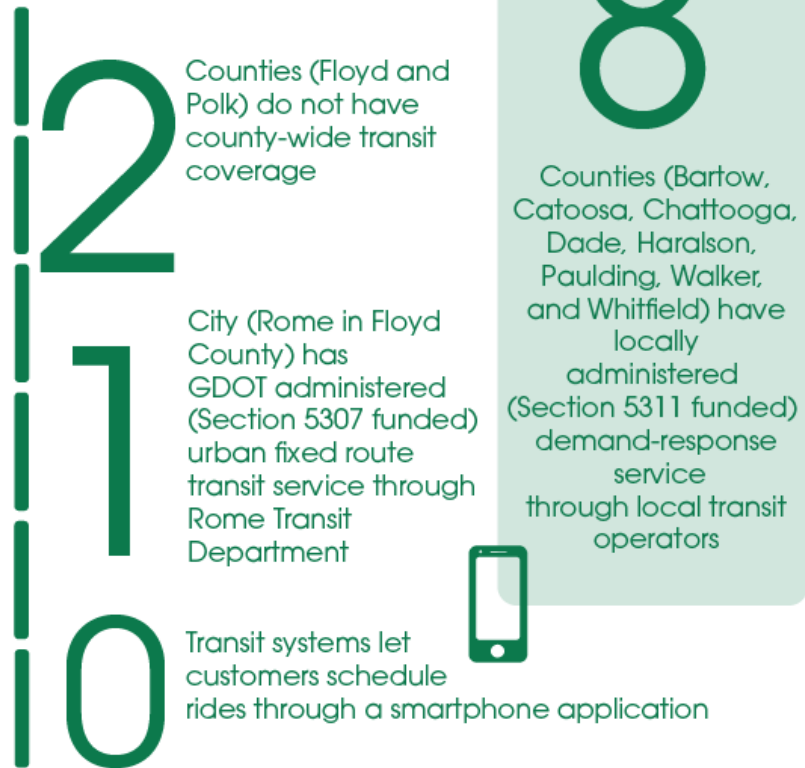
- The Atlanta-Region Transit Link Authority (ATL) operates the Xpress commuter bus service, which has one stop in the city of Hiram in Paulding County.
- Rome Transit Department operates an urbanized transit system in the city of Rome. The system offers both fixed-route and demand-response service.
- Bartow County Transit System, Catoosa County Trans-Aid, Chattooga County Transit, Dade County Transit, Haralson County Transit, Paulding County Transit, Walker County Transit, and Whitfield County Transit offer county-wide demand-response service. City of Cedartown Transit provides demand-response service in Cedartown city limits within Polk County.
- Mountain Area Transportation System (MATS) serves Gilmer, Gordon, Fannin, Murray, and Pickens Counties with regional demand-response service.

Weekday hours of service vary by system. ATL Xpress operates during peak morning and evening commute hours. Most demand-response operators are available during business hours; Dade County Transit has extended morning hours. Rome Transit Department's fixed-route service begins in the early morning hours. No transit operators provide service on weekends. Most demand-response services must be booked at least 24 hours in advance (sometimes earlier); Catoosa County Trans-Aid and Paulding County Transit offer service on a first-come, first-served basis.

Most operators in Northwest Georgia receive funding through the Federal Transit Administration's (FTA) Section 5311 rural area formula grant program. Since Rome is classified as a "small urbanized area" according to the FTA, Rome Transit Department received funding through the Section 5307 urbanized area formula grant. As ATL Xpress operates in the Atlanta metro area, it receives funding from the FTA's Section 5307 urbanized area funds, Section 5309 capital program funds, and Section 5337 state of good repair funds. **Figure 4** depicts the types of transit systems in the Northwest Georgia Region. **Table 1** provides an overview of the existing transit systems.

Figure 4: Existing Transit Service by County

Transit Service AT A GLANCE



The Georgia Department of Community Health (DCH) and Georgia Department of Human Services (DHS) also provide transit services in the Northwest Georgia Region. These services are available only to specific groups, such as low-income families, seniors, and individuals with disabilities. These services play a critical role in helping residents access jobs, healthcare, and other essential needs. In many instances, public transit services contract with DHS to provide these specialized services which is referred to as purchase of service (POS). GDOT’s mission is to expand mobility options for all members of the public, so this TDP primarily focuses on public transit services available to all residents.

Table 1: Northwest Georgia Existing Transit Services Overview

Name of Agency	Unlinked Transit Trips (2022)	Operating Hours	Fleet Size	Service Area
Atlanta-Region Transit Link Authority (Xpress)	371,158	M-F 5:30 AM – 9:00 AM 3:00 PM – 8:00 PM	239 vehicles	Cherokee, Clayton, Cobb, Coweta, DeKalb, Douglas, Forsyth, Fulton, Gwinnett, Hall, Henry, Paulding, and Rockdale Counties
Bartow County Transit System	35,024	M-F 7:00 AM – 5:50 PM	12 vehicles	Bartow County, Cities of Rome and Acworth
Catoosa County Trans-Aid	14,663	M-F 8:00 AM – 4:30 PM	11 vehicles	Catoosa County, City of Chattanooga
Chattooga County Transit	7,597	M-F 6:30 AM – 4:00 PM	4 vehicles	Chattooga County, City of Rome
Dade County Transit	8,539	M-F 4:30 AM – 3:00 PM	7 vehicles	Dade County; Cities of Fort Oglethorpe, Chattanooga, and Lookout Valley
Haralson County Transit	4,770	M-F 8:00 AM – 5:00 PM	6 vehicles	Haralson County; Cities of Carrollton, Villa Rica, and Rome
Paulding County Transit	12,527	M-F 7:30 AM – 4:00 PM	7 vehicles	Paulding County
Walker County Transit	22,969	M-F 6:00 AM – 7:00 PM	14 vehicles	Walker County
Whitfield County Transit	16,604	M-F 6:30 AM – 6:00 PM	10 vehicles	Whitfield County
City of Cedartown Transit	3,975	M-F 8:00 AM – 3:30 PM	11 vehicles	City of Cedartown
Rome Transit Department	165,010	M-F 5:40 AM – 6:30 PM	12 vehicles	City of Rome
Mountain Area Transportation System	40,629	M-F 7:00 AM – 4:30 PM	27 vehicles	Gilmer, Gordon, Fannin, Murray, and Pickens Counties

Source: National Transit Database, 2022; County and transit websites

3.0 Existing Conditions Overview

To prepare the **Existing Conditions Report**, the project team identified trends and opportunities that will shape the future of transit in the region. The project team evaluated relevant plans and studies, demographic and socioeconomic trends, transportation and transit system characteristics, and current funding allocations.

3.1 Existing and Future Trends Analysis

Due to the Northwest Georgia Region’s growing population in the last few decades, the population has also become older and more diverse. Relative to the state of Georgia percentages, the region contains higher-than-average proportions of persons with disabilities and senior citizens. Each of these groups are considered transit-dependent populations. Additionally, minority groups comprise almost a quarter of the regional population and live in communities with higher numbers of zero-car households. **Table 2** shows the percentages of each transit-dependent demographic compared to the Georgia statewide average.

Of all the NWGRC counties, Paulding County makes up the largest percentage of the region’s population and total labor force. Medical, industrial, and commercial industries provide the most jobs across the region, accounting for 57.2 percent of the region’s jobs. Education and government are also notable industries, at 11.8 percent and 4.4 percent, respectively.

The highest concentrations of jobs are near larger cities such as Dalton, Rome, Calhoun, Dallas, Hiram, Cartersville, and the southern edge of Chattanooga, TN in Walker and Catoosa Counties. Medical facilities are most prevalent in Rome, which also includes the region’s largest medical center. Major industrial and manufacturing facilities are clustered in Whitfield County, which supports the carpet industry and is expected to continue growing. There are other major manufacturing companies in the region, such as Budweiser in Bartow County.

Table 2: Northwest Georgia Transit-Dependent Populations Compared to State

Demographic Category	Regional Average	Statewide Statistic	Regional Average Above or Below State Statistic
Minority Individuals	24.1%	48.6%	Below
Households Below the Poverty Line	12.9%	13.9%	Below
Individuals with Limited English Proficiency (LEP)	4.2%	5.4%	Below
Disabled Persons	14.4%	12.4%	Above
Zero-Car Households	4.9%	6.0%	Below
Seniors	22.0%	1.8%	Above

Source: U.S. Census Bureau 2021 American Community Survey 5-Year Data

3.2 Key Destinations and Development Patterns

Types of key destinations in Northwest Georgia include places of employment, medical facilities, and retail and grocery centers, as highlighted in **Figure 5**. Hospitals are in major cities, like Cartersville, Rome, Calhoun, and Dalton. There are limited supermarkets across the region, therefore patrons likely travel farther distances in more rural areas for basic shopping needs. Essential services, like social, education, public safety, recreation, or governmental offices, are clustered in the region's cities, with the greatest concentrations of services provided in Dalton, Rome, and Cartersville. Paulding County has more services scattered in the eastern half of the county, closer to the Atlanta metro area.

3.3 Comparison to Peer Transit Agencies

To provide a point of comparison with peer transit agencies, the project team analyzed service characteristics of various peer transit systems outside the Northwest Georgia Region. Peer systems were chosen based on the service area and service type comparable to existing services in the Northwest Georgia Region. In addition to service characteristics, the comparative analysis looked at several performance measures, such as total vehicle revenue miles and cost per trip for both NWGRC and peer transit systems. This analysis indicated that the counties of the Northwest Georgia Region are performing on par with comparable transit agencies. More details on this analysis are available in the **Existing Conditions Report**.

Figure 5: Major Destinations



4.0 Regional Transit Vision and Goals

The regional transit vision and goals resulted from an extensive analysis of existing conditions, a thorough engagement of the public and stakeholders, and an understanding of the larger regional and state context for transit development.

Levels of participation varied between PAC meetings, public meetings, and online surveys, but the feedback gleaned from these tools led to the following conclusions:

- Transit operators are interested in cross-county coordination for trips to key destinations such as medical facilities and places of employment.
- Operators would like to expand service areas and hours of service but are unable to do so due to staffing and administration challenges.
- Communication with the public about transit opportunities is limited, so the public is not aware that transit services are readily available.
- Operators believe that transit is most needed for the aging population to get to medical appointments.
- Workforce trips are challenging to provide because of the distance and coordination between where people live and work, and the early-morning or late-evening hours of shift workers.

With these considerations in mind, the project team developed the vision statement shown in **Figure 6**.

Figure 6: Northwest Georgia TDP Vision Statement



To guide the implementation of the TDP and ensure progress towards this vision, the team also created the goals listed and described in **Figure 7**.

Figure 7: Northwest Georgia TDP Goals

Goal 1: Connect to Essential Services

Provide local and regional transit connections to essential services and daily needs, including jobs, hospitals and medical facilities, and activity centers.

Goal 2: Build Awareness

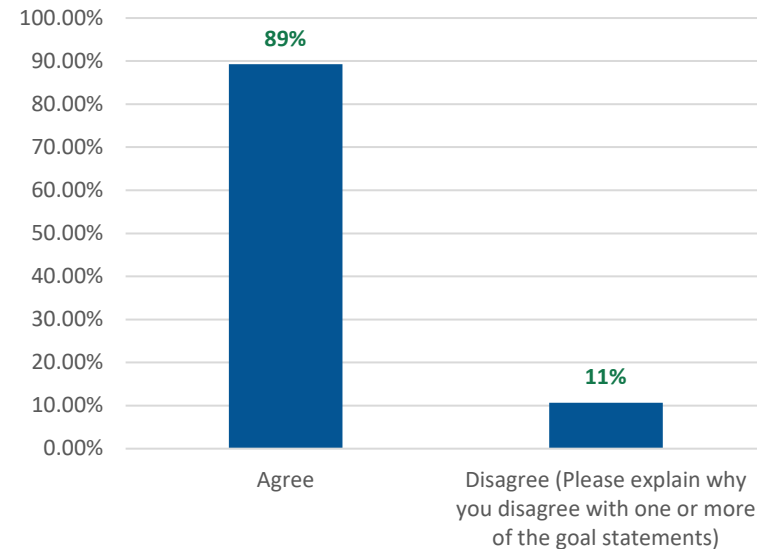
Coordinate with area transit providers, major employers, and other agencies to promote public awareness of available transit options.

Goal 3: Meet Future Service Demand

Ensure system capacity meets the transportation needs of the region's growing senior population.

These goals were presented to the PAC at a virtual meeting and to the public in the second meeting, as well as on the second online survey. PAC members and project stakeholders indicated support for the vision statement and TDP goals through the various meetings and opportunities to provide comments. The public also expressed support for the vision statement and TDP goals in the second online survey, as shown in **Figure 8**.

Figure 8: Satisfaction with TDP Goals



Disagreements with the goals expressed the desire for rail service, efficient and timely service, education as an essential service, and broadening goal focus to all residents of the region, rather than focusing on target groups.

5.0 Needs, Recommendations, and Implementation

The project team developed a range of alternatives to improve transit service and coverage around the Northwest Georgia Region based on a needs analysis.

Transit needs were identified through qualitative and quantitative methods, including stakeholder and public input, reviewing previous plans, such as the SWTRP, Rural and Human Services Transportation Plan, Northwest Georgia Regional Vanpool Study, and several technical analyses. Using methodologies established by the Transportation Research Board's Transit Cooperative Research Program, the project team evaluated several indicators of transit need, such as population density, transit-dependent populations, unmet demand of the existing transit services, and demand for commuter trips. The needs assessment helped the project team understand the landscape of current and potential transit users in the region. Ideas for increasing ridership are covered in detail in the **Alternatives Analysis and Recommendations Report**.

The PAC played an integral role in helping to evaluate the merits and feasibility of each transit alternative. Public feedback collected via the project's in-person public meeting and online survey open throughout Summer 2024 helped further vet alternatives. Feedback from the PAC and the public factored into the scoring methodology that was utilized to rank and prioritize the final list of recommendations. The scoring criteria included:

- Improving transit connections to essential services and daily needs;
- Improving administration efficiencies;
- Improving coordination amongst stakeholders towards regionalization; and
- Community and stakeholder feedback.

5.1 Strategy Framework and Implementation Tiers

The majority of transit alternatives received a composite score, which is the total score from the four criteria. The maximum composite score is four, and the alternatives have been organized into "high impact" and "mid impact" recommendation tiers with guidance from the composite score and feasibility. An additional tier of recommendations, characterized as the "fundamental tier," consists of a set of administrative tools and initiatives. The tiers are highlighted in **Figure 9**. The fundamental recommendations are considered critical steps for the implementation of the TDP and likely need to be implemented before high or mid impact projects or programs.

While high impact recommendations are anticipated to have the greatest impact and reach to meet the TDP goals, mid impact recommendations may be easier to implement in the short term since they may not require as much coordination between multiple jurisdictions or other partners. All recommendations will require local government endorsement and administrative capacity building to move forward.

Figure 9: Implementation Tiers



High Impact Tier: The top recommendations are recognized as having a regional or multi-county coordination component and received support from NWGRC stakeholders and community members. These alternatives have been advanced as the top priorities for the Northwest Georgia region.

Mid Impact Tier: The mid impact recommendations are important for advancing transit service across the region, but they may not have as large of an effect based on the scoring criteria. However, in some cases, these recommendations may be easier and faster to implement than the High Impact Tier, as some recommendations are smaller in scale.

Fundamental Tier: The fundamental recommendations are critical steps for the implementation of the TDP. Since they are not projects like the other two categories, these recommendations were more broadly scored and determined to be of significant interest by transit operators and project stakeholders.

5.2 Expansion Recommendations

Transit Service Expansion strategies aim to meet GDOT’s goal of providing public transit service statewide. Service expansion could take the form of capacity improvements and the creation of a fully regionalized rural transit service. Expansion recommendations are the most prevalent for the Northwest Georgia region. **Table 3** shows high impact expansion recommendations, and **Table 4** shows mid impact expansion recommendations.

Table 3: High Impact Expansion Recommendations

Project ID	Recommendation
EX-01	Service Expansion
EX-03	Vanpool/Commuter Program
EX-04	Public Private Partnerships
EX-05	Coordinate with Statewide Agencies

Table 4: Mid Impact Expansion Recommendations

Project ID	Recommendation
EX-02	Innovative Transit – Microtransit

5.3 Enhancement Recommendations

Transit Service Enhancement recommendations are geared toward increasing the efficiency, reliability, ease-of-use, and safety of public transit service. Recommendations include expanding the span of service, vehicle purchases and assignments based on terrain, and implementing transportation demand management programs. **Table 5** shows high impact enhancement recommendations and **Table 6** shows mid impact recommendations.

Table 5: High Impact Enhancement Recommendations

Project ID	Recommendation
EN-04	Vehicle Assignments
EN-01	Regional Transit System

Table 6: Mid Impact Enhancement Recommendations

Project ID	Recommendation
EN-02	Transportation Demand Management
EN-03	Service Hour Expansion

5.4 Administrative Tools and Guidance

Recommendations related to administrative tools and guidance that fall into the Fundamental Tier are listed in **Table 7**. These recommendations identify ways that GDOT and NWGRC can provide support to local transit agencies on planning, marketing, and funding. This TDP carries forward a key recommendation from the SWTRP, which is the creation of a new “Regional Mobility Manager” position at the NWGRC. The person serving in this role would support implementation of the TDP, coordinate future stakeholder meetings, and facilitate best practice sharing. This recommendation should be a high priority for implementation, given its importance to the execution of remaining recommendations.

Table 7: Fundamental Tier Administrative Tools and Guidance Recommendations

Project ID	Recommendation
A-01	Hire a Regional Mobility Manager
A-03	Educational Programming
A-04	Transit Operators Group
A-10	Consolidate Resources and Guidance

The other recommendations for administrative tools and guidance fall into the High Impact and Mid Impact Tiers for implementation as soon as feasible. These recommendations are presented in **Tables 8** and **9**.

Table 8: High Impact Administrative Tools and Guidance Recommendations

Project ID	Recommendation
A-07	Case Studies and Best Practices
A-05	Coordinated System Business Case
A-09	Work with Non-Profits/Third Parties
A-06	Support from Elected Officials
A-02	Transit Hubs

Table 9: Mid Impact Administrative Tools and Guidance Recommendations

Project ID	Recommendation
A-12	Grant Writing
A-08	New Funding Sources
A-13	Succession Planning
A-11	Vehicle Inspections
A-14	Developer Negotiations

5.5 Funding

Funding is an essential factor for TDP implementation. Federal funding (FTA Section 5311 and Section 5307) makes up the largest single source of funding for most transit agencies in the Northwest Georgia region. State and local sources of funding may also be available, such as GDOT contributions to capital expenditures, local general funds, special transportation taxes, fares, leveraged income from other transportation programs, and others.

Some of the alternatives identified considered looking to alternative funding sources, such as grant programs and public-private partnerships with employers or developers, to fund transit. **Table 10** lists funding-related recommendations, which were also included in **Section 5.4**.

Table 10: Funding Recommendations

Project ID	Recommendation
A-08	New Funding Sources
A-09	Work with Non-Profits/Third Parties
A-12	Grant Writing
EX-04	Public-Private Partnerships

5.6 Next Steps

This TDP provides a framework for the Northwest Georgia region to advance its regional transit vision and goals. It is not a mandated “work plan,” nor are the recommendations currently funded. As a result, furthering the TDP recommendations will require ongoing coordination among stakeholders, including GDOT, NWGRC, and county transit agencies within the Northwest Georgia region. This TDP’s primary recommendation is to establish a framework for effective region-wide coordination amongst transit operators. TDP stakeholders should prioritize taking steps towards implementation of Fundamental Tier recommendations identified in the “One-Year Action Plan” section of the **Alternatives Analysis and Recommendations Report**. As plan implementation advances, all TDP initiatives should be monitored to track progress and effectiveness and to facilitate plan refinement in the future.