

Regional Transit Development Plan

Northwest Georgia Region

Vision and Goals

January 2024



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List of Acronyms

ACS	American Community Survey
DCH	Department of Community Health
DHS	Department of Human Services
GDOT	Georgia Department of Transportation
GIS	Geographic Information Systems
LEP	Limited English Proficiency
MPO	Metropolitan Planning Organization
NWGRC	Northwest Georgia Regional Commission
PAC	Project Advisory Committee
SR	State Route
SWTRP	Statewide Transit Plan
TDP	Transit Development Plan
TPO	Transportation Planning Organization

1.0 Introduction

Visioning is a collaborative, creative part of the Regional Transit Development Plan (TDP) process which allows community members to reach consensus on a desired future state for transit in the community. Visioning often begins the public participation process and may be conducted utilizing public and agency stakeholder engagement tools.

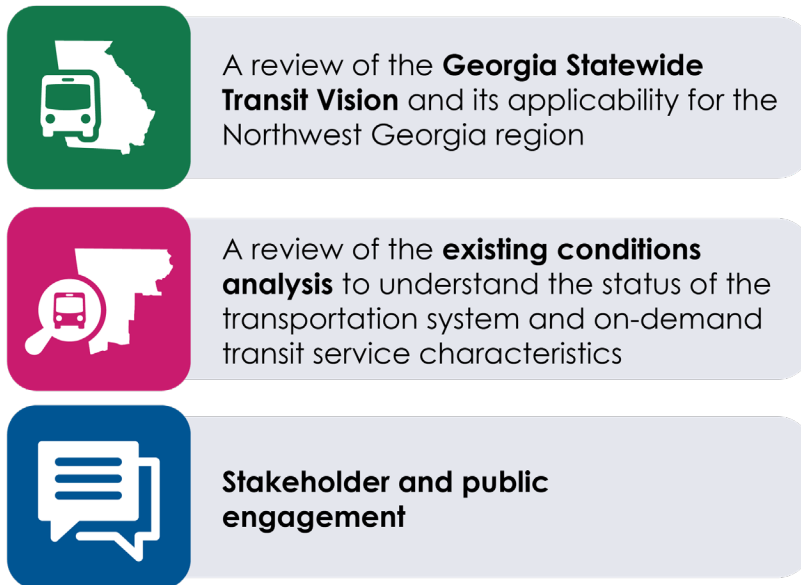
In the case of a Regional TDP, the aspirational vision created by this process should focus on the overarching future purpose and status of public transportation. Creating a vision with the community allows for multiple perspectives to coalesce on one idea for the future state of transit in the community and to create buy-in from community members and stakeholders.

The Northwest Georgia visioning process included the tasks outlined in **Figure 1**.

Chapters 1 through 5 provide major findings from the above activities and coalesce the information into a final vision and big-picture goals for the Northwest Georgia region public transit system.

This Vision and Goals document is available on the project website at <https://regionaltdp-gdot.hub.arcgis.com/pages/nwgrc>.

Figure 1. TDP Visioning Process



2.0 Statewide Transit Plan and Impetus for Regional TDP

2.1 Statewide Transit Plan Vision

The Georgia Department of Transportation (GDOT) 2020 Georgia Statewide Transit Plan (SWTRP) includes the following vision statement for all transit agencies to follow:

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

The SWTRP also includes goals to help transit agencies fulfill this long-range vision. The five SWTRP goals, found in **Figure 2**, are applicable throughout the state, including within the Northwest Georgia region.

2.2 Regional TDP Impetus

A primary recommendation of the Statewide Transit Plan is the development of regional transit plans to comprehensively identify transit needs, coordination, and implementation actions and initiatives across county boundaries. As a result of this recommendation, GDOT is funding TDPs throughout the state, and the Northwest Georgia Regional Commission (NWGRC) is one of several regions to commence their plan.

Figure 2. Statewide Transit Plan Goals



3.0 Insights Gleaned from Technical Analysis

3.1 Overview

Understanding existing characteristics and anticipated trends in regional demographics, employment, land use, travel patterns, and mobility conditions offers insight into potential transit needs and existing opportunities. The Northwest Georgia Regional TDP project team conducted an extensive existing conditions analysis – looking into travel trends, transit networks, unemployment, job concentrations, major employers, traffic volumes, and regional demographics and underserved communities including zero-car households, low-income populations, elderly and youth concentrations, populations with disabilities, minority populations, and Limited English Proficiency (LEP) populations.

The planning team used the data to perform a variety of analyses and identify areas that currently have access to transit, areas that do not, and areas that are in the greatest need for transit service. These analyses included Geographic Information Systems (GIS), which examines data across a geography in map form. An inventory of existing transit funding sources, fares, fleet, and current operating conditions was collected to better understand the financial landscape of the Northwest Georgia region's transit service. Finally, future land use maps and comprehensive plans were analyzed across the region to identify what development patterns could look like in the coming years.

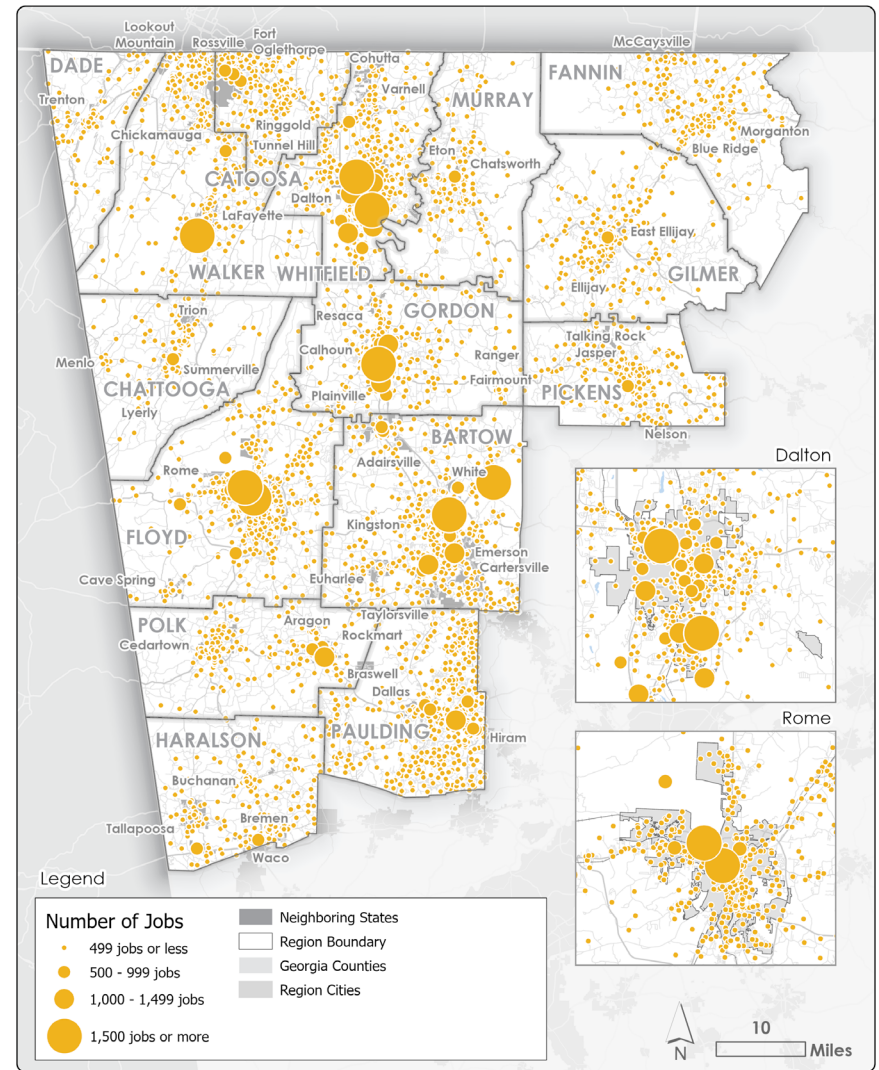
The Existing Conditions Report compiles this information from a variety of sources, including existing plans and studies and the latest data from agencies such as the Georgia Department of Labor, GDOT, the United States Census Bureau and American Community Services (ACS), and area transit agencies. This report documents demographic and employment trends, travel patterns, transportation options, and land use and development for the Northwest Georgia region. The document also includes a performance review of the region's current transit providers, their funding availability, and a comparison of transit providers within the region to peer systems in the state. The report provides a foundation to identify and prioritize the transit needs of the Northwest Georgia region and each of its counties, which will be utilized in the Alternatives Analysis and Recommendations Report.

3.2 Summary of Findings

3.2.1.1 Demographics and Employment

- Northwest Georgia continues to grow nearly as fast as the state’s growth decade over decade. Population growth slowed to 6.1 percent from 2010–2020, compared to the state’s growth of 10.6 percent during the same period.
- Paulding County experienced the highest growth, followed by Bartow, Catoosa, Gordon, and Whitfield Counties.
- The region’s population is most dense near cities, particularly in eastern Paulding County near Hiram and Dallas, as well as near Rome in Floyd County and near Dalton in Whitfield County.
- Populations below the poverty line live in more rural parts of the region including central Haralson, east Polk, north Chattooga, southwest Whitfield, and east Gordon Counties.
- Elderly populations tend to be spread across the region with a higher concentration in the northwest mountainous areas of Pickens, Gilmer, and Fannin Counties.
- There are 2,500 students enrolled at Berry College, accounting for the dense youth population in Floyd County.
- Zero-car households are primarily located in the cities of Rome, Blue Ridge, and Summerville.
- The region has a higher percentage of people with a disability (14.4 percent) compared to the state (12.4 percent).
- LEP populations are concentrated in western Polk County (no transit service) and near the cities of Calhoun and Rome.
- Jobs are concentrated in cities, particularly Dalton, Rome, Calhoun, Dallas, Hiram, Cartersville, and near Chattanooga, Tennessee. **Figure 3** illustrates job concentrations throughout the region.
- The largest employment industries are medical, industrial, and commercial.

Figure 3. Job Locations



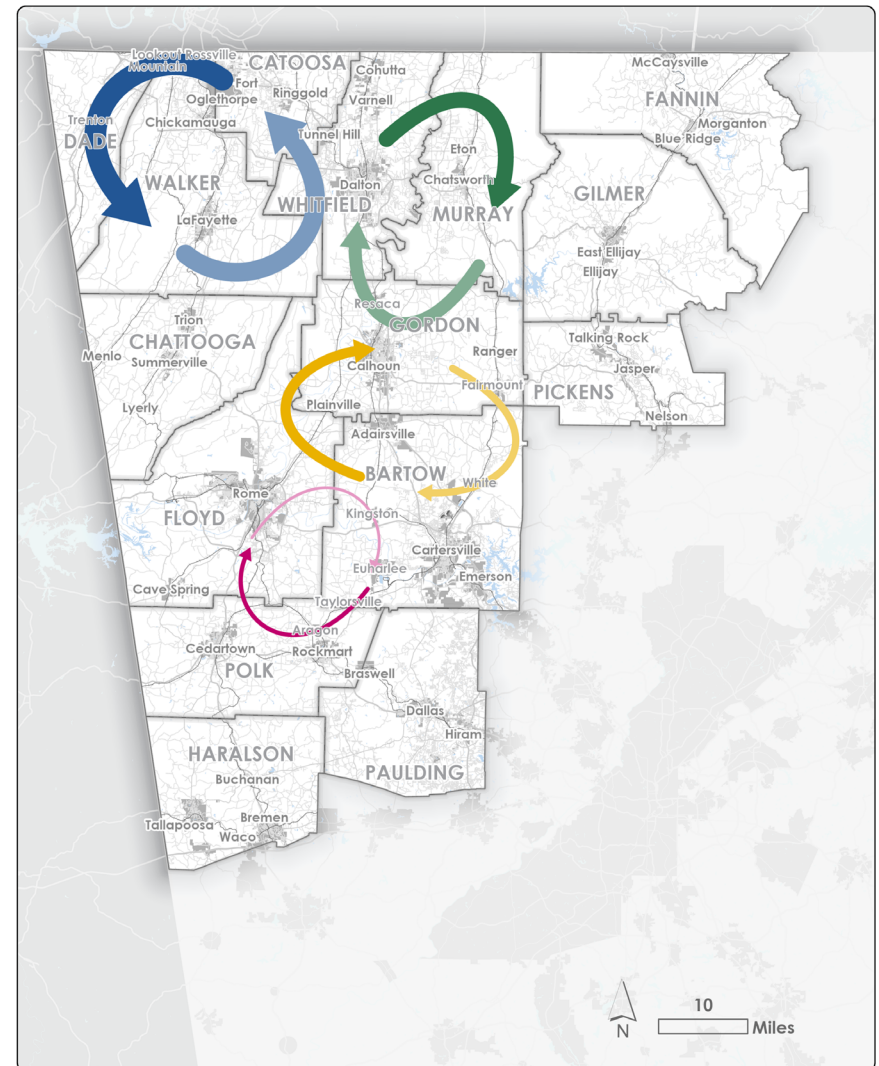
3.2.1.2 Potential Transit Destinations

- Major activity centers, being areas of concentrated community services, and commercial and institutional developments, are clustered around urban areas including Dalton, Rome, Cartersville, Hiram, and Dallas.
- Full-service healthcare facilities, including emergency services, are in high demand, especially considering the region’s sizable elderly and disabled populations. Healthcare facilities are located primarily in the cities of Cartersville, Rome, Calhoun, and Dalton, and near the region in Chattanooga, Tennessee. Much of the region must travel long distances to these destinations for healthcare needs.

3.2.1.3 Travel Trends

- Approximately 85 percent of all trips are intra-county, which are trips that originate and end within the same county.
- The most common county-to-county trips occur between Walker and Catoosa, Whitfield and Murray, Bartow and Gordon, and Bartow and Floyd Counties. **Figure 4** illustrates these trends.
- The most common destinations outside Northwest Georgia are Cobb and Cherokee Counties in Georgia, and Hamilton County in Tennessee. There is a similar pattern for trips coming from outside the region.
- The following corridors have been identified as primary corridors due to the number of destinations and traffic volumes: I-75, State Route (SR) 515 / SR 5, US 411 / US 20 / SR 20, US 278 / SR 6, US 27 / SR 1, US 41 / SR 3 / SR 52, SR 120.
- Most of the region does not experience daily congestion. Areas that do have congestion include Bartow, Gordon, Whitfield, and Catoosa counties along the I-75 corridor.
- Nine park and ride lots are located throughout the region along major corridors.

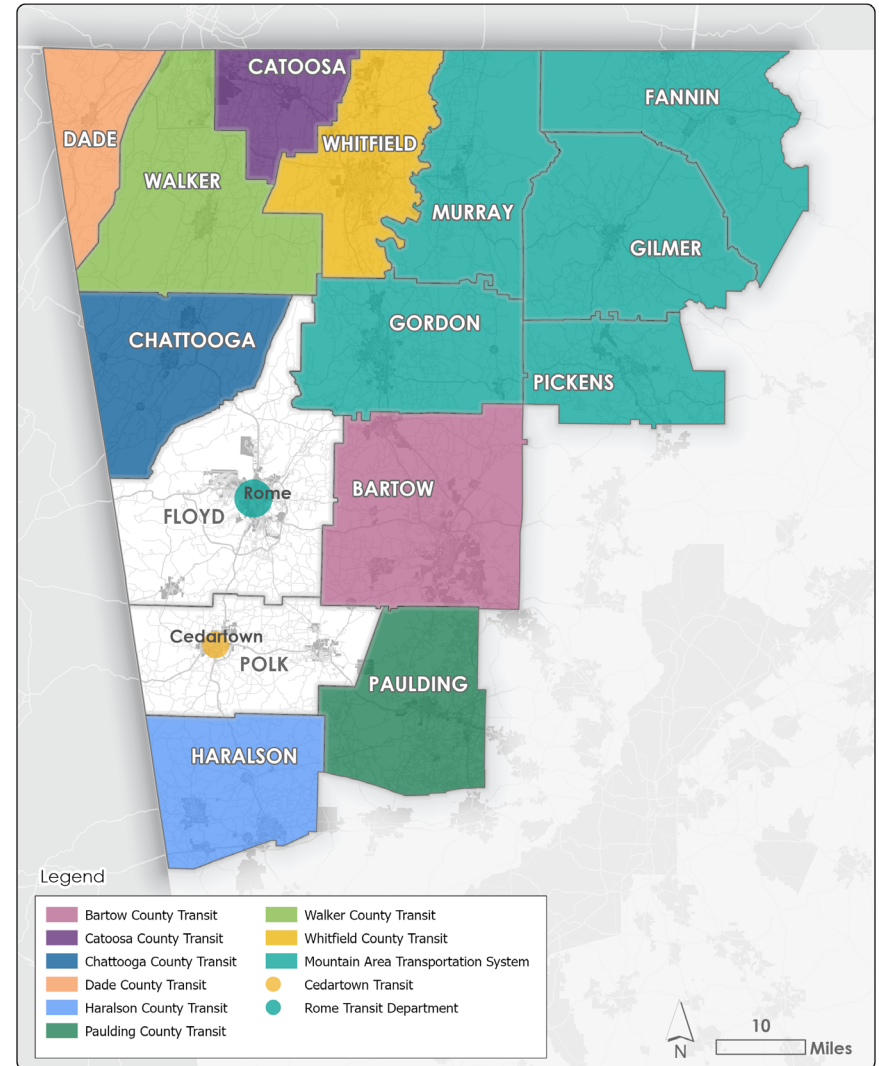
Figure 4. Intra-County Travel Trends



3.2.1.4 Transit Services

- There are currently 11 public transit services operating within the Northwest Georgia region, including ATL Xpress, and one non-profit, shared regional transportation system (Mountain Area Transportation System). Transit service is illustrated in **Figure 5**.
- Floyd and Polk Counties do not offer county-wide transit services. The cities of Rome (Floyd County) and Cedartown (Polk County) offer transit within the city limits, with the Rome Transit Department offering six fixed routes. This is the only fixed route system in the region.
- There is one regional commuter bus service, the ATL Xpress, which serves a single park and ride in the City of Hiram within Paulding County.
- All the transit services in the region are weekday only, and do not serve third-shift or weekend workers. For most services, trips must be booked at least 24 hours in advance.
- Most services prioritize seniors and people with disabilities for medical and shopping trips. Some services exclude trips to jobs because the demand would exceed the available service.
- Some local transit operators provide cross-county trips, primarily for medical and shopping trips, but the trip must originate in the operator’s county.
- Smartphone applications are not currently utilized for transit trip reservations and scheduling in the region.
- Some operators are evaluating potential microtransit services, including the City of Rome and Whitfield County.

Figure 5. Existing Transit Services



4.0 Stakeholder and the Community Input

4.1 Stakeholder Input

4.1.1 Stakeholder Involvement Overview

Northwest Georgia Regional TDP team members sought input from key stakeholders and community members regarding transit needs, vision, and goals both within their own county and regionwide. **Figure 6** outlines the stakeholder engagements that have occurred as of December 2023. The Project Advisory Committee (PAC) includes representatives from the region’s rural and urban transit systems, GDOT, the Georgia Departments of Human Services (DHS) and Community Health (DCH), NWGRC, metropolitan planning organizations (MPOs), and Georgia Council on Aging. Interviewees included a mix of county/city staff, transportation providers that serve NWGRC populations, education interests, economic development interests, senior services, and MPOs/Transportation Planning Organizations (TPOs).

Figure 6. Stakeholder Involvement Overview

October 4, 2023 Project Advisory Committee (PAC) Meeting

This initial meeting covered the project background, the PAC’s function in the process, and preliminary existing conditions findings.

Fall 2023 Stakeholder Interviews

The project team scheduled virtual interviews with as many community interests as possible, including area transit agencies, human services transportation providers, MPO/TPOs, education interests, economic interests, and senior services.

4.1.2 Findings – PAC Meeting #1, October 4, 2023

The PAC meeting included a project background and study area, regional TDP overview, PAC roles and responsibilities, initial existing conditions findings, and a group visioning discussion. Committee members provided updates to and insights from each participant’s respective transit system during the presentation of current transit offerings. Attendees were generally supportive of the study and willing to participate in the PAC. Additional takeaways from stakeholders during the PAC Meeting #1 included:

- Support for the development of a Regional TDP to foster coordination and collaboration across the region.
- Desire for a transit system that is accessible, affordable, connected, and efficient.
- Identification of goals such as cross-county trips, reducing administrative burdens on operators, providing more reliable service, and making transit affordable.
- Identification of operational challenges including expanding services in rural areas, and administrative challenges related to federal and state regulations.
- Confirmation of the existing conditions information including how people travel and trip types.

4.1.3 Input from Stakeholder Interviews

The Northwest Georgia Regional TDP project team carried out a stakeholder interview process, as detailed in **Figure 7**. County and city transit operators and state and county transit service leaders spoke with the project team. In all, the project team interviewed 16 stakeholders representing a broad range of involvement in providing transit service. A survey was sent to other stakeholders for their input and is still ongoing at the time of this report.

Figure 7. Overview of Stakeholder Interview Process

Overview of Stakeholder Interview Process

The project team conducted seven virtual interviews with several members of the PAC, senior services, higher education institutions, economic development interests, MPOs/TPOs, and transit providers in Fall 2023. These virtual interview sessions included informal discussion topics related to the Regional TDP and gauged how the plan's implementation would affect stakeholders and community members. Project team members asked questions related to transportation needs, improvement in respective areas, region-specific needs, and how the Regional TDP would address those needs and concerns.

The following were key themes from the interviews:

- Most trips are for medical appointments, food, shopping, and to senior centers. Work and education trips are typically lower priority and not provided due to limited resources.
- Operators are challenged with providing service despite several competing priorities for small staff. Demand typically is greater than capacity (vehicles and drivers).
- Transit operators are frustrated with the number of administrative requirements they are required to fulfill, which ultimately prevents them from focusing on providing and expanding services. Specific comments were received from small operators with only a couple of employees and providers that are considering using both Federal Section 5311 (Rural Area) and Section 5307 (Urbanized Area) funding.
- Most of the region's transit riders are taking public transit to access medical facilities.
- Cross-county trips are requested frequently within the region, typically for medical appointments. Five of the county operators accommodate cross-county trips but are limited to certain days of the week.
- Operators would like to expand service areas and hours of operation, but their limited numbers of drivers and vehicles prevent that expansion. Trip distances are also a challenge to expanding service areas due to traffic congestion and scheduling delays that would tie up the limited number of vehicles and prevent additional trips.
- Obtaining new vehicles has been delayed for years due to COVID-19 and the recent supply chain delays. Operators are frustrated that there is not any information available to provide the estimated time of arrival of purchased vehicles.

- Some believe Let's Ride, GDOT's transit trip planning app, would be beneficial, but there is concern that the older population would not use it. Operators prefer scheduling trips manually to optimize schedules and are hesitant to rely on an app.¹
- People in the region are not aware of public transportation options until they need it. Most people believe it is exclusively for seniors or individuals living with a disability.
- There is not much coordination among the counties or between providers, but more coordination could be helpful.
- More coordination and communication between providers and GDOT would be beneficial.
- Some at-home providers for seniors provide trips and get reimbursed through DHS.
- Elected officials will prefer specific solutions for transit rather than general recommendations, meaning the recommendations should be as detailed as possible with implementation steps.
- Providing workforce trips is challenging because of the distance and coordination between where people live and work, and the early morning or late evening hours of shift-workers.
- Some communities are challenged by language barriers (Spanish).
- More urbanized areas would like to expand to provide fixed-route services.
- There is an opportunity to provide more education/training-on-the-job trips for students.

¹<https://letsride-gdot.hub.arcgis.com/>

4.2 Public Input

4.2.1 Public Input Overview

The project team held the first public meeting on October 19, 2023, at the Northwest Georgia Regional Council meeting. The public meeting included a presentation to council leadership and was followed up with an open house format to speak with attendees. As of December 2023, input from the community has been given via the following forums shown in **Figure 8**. The in-person public meeting is shown in **Figure 9**.

Figure 8. Overview of Public Involvement Activities

Public Meeting, October 19, 2023

The first public meeting was held in person at the Lake Point complex in Emerson, GA. The project team presented an overview of the Regional TDP and study area and public outreach opportunities. Two project boards were displayed before, during, and after the presentation in which project team members spoke with meeting attendees. Public meeting materials were uploaded to the project website.

Project Website

A project website was created to provide an overview of the Regional TDP, study area, and contact information. As documents are finalized, they are uploaded to the project website. The website was advertised to the PAC and during stakeholder interviews.

Project Email Address

A project email address is available for community members to submit comments to the project team.

Figure 9. Public Meeting



5.0 Vision and Goals for Transit in the Northwest Georgia Region

5.1 Vision

Residents of Northwest Georgia travel primarily by car; however, trends over recent decades have shown that the region has a growing transit-dependent population, such as aging populations, zero-car households, and individuals living with disabilities. To accommodate these needs, the NWGRC will adopt a TDP that is appropriate in its scope and effective in its impact. Transit solutions will provide regional connections, offering additional options for accessing jobs and essential services to improve the quality of life for all who live and work in Northwest Georgia.

The NWGRC is currently updating their Regional Plan. The draft vision and goals for that plan were reviewed and incorporated into the TDP Vision and Goals.

Figure 10. Northwest Georgia Regional TDP Vision

**Northwest Georgia
Regional TDP
Vision Statement**

Transit service will improve the quality of life for residents and employees of Northwest Georgia by offering safe and reliable connections and access to healthcare, senior services, jobs, and education and training while increasing opportunities for transit providers to operate efficiently and expand service to every corner of the region.

5.2 Goals

Three core transit goals (bolded below) will guide TDP implementation. The italicized text that follows expands upon each goal, providing supporting rationale and notes.

- 1. Provide local and regional transit connections to essential services and daily needs, including hospitals and medical facilities, senior services, shopping, jobs, and education and training facilities.**

Transit service coverage should ensure that essential local and regional needs for medical, senior services, food access, employment, and education/training can be served. Stakeholder and public input indicated that there is a regional demand for more transit to access medical facilities, food, senior services, jobs, and education/training facilities.

- 2. Identify administrative efficiencies that allow for more focus on providing current service and expanding services.**

Transit operators expressed a need to reduce administrative burdens to enable more resources devoted to optimizing current services and expanding services to rural areas.

- 3. Coordination among transit operators, counties, cities, the NWGRC, GDOT, and federal agencies to promote more cross-county trips to provide access region-wide.**

The Northwest Georgia region covers a large geographic area with varying transit needs for residents and employees. Greater coordination among agencies could help identify opportunities to expand services to more areas, especially rural areas where trip distances pose challenges.

5.3 Next Steps

As the plan progresses, the planning team will establish objectives, performance measures, and metrics for each goal as a part of the Alternatives Analysis and Recommendations task. These will provide greater specificity regarding how the goals will be achieved. GDOT, the NWGRC, and local governments are all implementing actors, so these entities will be involved as these targets are developed.