

## **6. Full-Coverage Transit System**

### **OneAthens Transportation Implementation Team: Local Transit Needs**

This document is based upon the recommendations of the PPA Transportation Subcommittee and the Athens Transit System's Transit Development Plan (TDP). The OneAthens Transportation Implementation Team found that the PPA recommendations and the TDP are closely aligned. This is not too surprising, since the input of transit users was critical in crafting both documents.

Athens Transit currently operates 3 services:

- *The Bus*: fixed-route service with 17 routes and 28 accessible buses. Hours are from 6:00 am to 7:00 pm for all routes, continuing to 11:00 pm on selected routes Monday through Friday, and 7:30 am to 11:00 pm on Saturdays on selected routes. Adult fare is \$1.25 one way.
- *The Lift*: curb-to-curb paratransit service for people with mobility impairments, operating with 3 accessible vans, within 1 mile of fixed routes. Hours are from 6:00 am to 11:00 pm Monday through Friday and 7:00 am to 11:00 pm on Saturdays. Fare is \$2.50 one way.
- *The Link*: demand-response circulator service for the general public, operating with 2 accessible vans in rural areas of western and northeastern ACC. Hours are from 6:50 am to 10:05 am and from 4:05 pm to 6:20 pm (western route) and from 5:55 am to 8:45 am and 4:50 pm to 6:45 pm (northeastern route.) Fare is \$1.50 one way.

Funding for Athens Transit comes from a mix of federal, state, and local government sources as well as farebox revenues. Capital costs are generally split with federal sources covering 80%, state sources 10%, and local sources (SPLOST 2005) 10%. Operating costs are split between federal sources (15% in 2006), farebox revenues (41% in 2006) and the ACC general fund (44% in 2006). Georgia is one of only 9 states (and the only one of the 10 most populous states) that does not provide any operating funds for public transit.

### **Recommendations**

We have made an effort to estimate operating and capital costs associated with each of these recommendations. The operating costs include fuel, salary and benefits, service and maintenance of vehicles, and inflation. Also, note that SPLOST 2005 included \$1.8 million to serve as local match for transit vehicles. This will allow ATS to purchase 1 – 2 buses per year for the next 10 years. Excluding SPLOST and anticipated revenue, the Transit Team's proposed new Routes and Outreach will require approximately \$1 million annually. We assumed no costs to Athens-Clarke County for advocacy efforts.

## Routes:

1. Increase frequency of 2 fixed routes per year, until all routes operate at a minimum of once every 30 minutes. Note that increases in fixed route service include proportional increases in “The Lift” paratransit service and supporting staff.

### *Approximate cost to ACC*

- *Operating expenses:* \$250,000 for 2 routes per year, increasing by 4-6% annually for out years;
  - *Capital expenses:* \$120,000 (local match) from SPLOST funds for 2 routes in the first year (this is the 10% required local match; most of the capital cost is covered by federal and state funds); \$350,000 per bus (100% costs) for each route added in out years, above the two buses currently programmed annually.
  - *New revenue generated:* Income from fareboxes is estimated to cover 35% of the cost of increasing the frequency of routes.
2. Begin early morning service (starting at 5 am) and create Sunday and holiday service. Note that increases in fixed route service include proportional increases in “The Lift” paratransit service.

### *Approximate cost to ACC*

- *Operating expenses:* \$250,000 for the first year, increasing by 4-6% annually for out years.
  - *Capital expenses:* none, other than currently programmed capital maintenance.
  - *New revenue generated:* Income from fareboxes is estimated to cover 10-15% of the cost of increasing the hours of The Bus and The Lift; this percentage is expected to rise as riders become used to the new service.
3. Increase the operating hours of “The Link” to match those of fixed route service.

### *Approximate cost to ACC*

- *Operating expenses:* \$250,000 for first year, increase by 4-6% annually for out years.
  - *Capital expenses:* none, if only two current vehicles are used, other than currently programmed capital maintenance.
  - *New revenue generated:* Income from fareboxes is estimated to cover 10-15% of the cost of increasing the hours of The Link; this percentage is expected to rise as riders become used to the new service.
4. Increase the service area of “The Link” to county-wide.

### *Approximate cost to ACC*

- *Operating expenses:* \$250,000 for first year, increase by 4-6% annually for out years.
- *Capital expenses:* \$400,000 to add 4 vans in the first year, if ACC must pay the entire cost. ATS could apply for federal funds to cover 80% of the cost, and state funds to cover 10%, so if additional capital funding is approved the actual cost to ACC is likely to be \$40,000; vans are 5-year life cycle vehicles.
- *New revenue generated:* Income from fareboxes is estimated to cover 10-15% of the cost of increasing the routes of The Link in the first year; this percentage is expected to rise as riders become used to the new service.

## Outreach:

1. Develop and implement a Marketing and Public Awareness program with paid staff, targeted to help identified segments of the population. Specific outreach programs should include:
  - A. Develop a Community Outreach program that will work with employers, community groups, and service providers on discounted pass sales and teach staff “Travel Training/Trip Planning.”
  - B. Allow agencies like East Athens Development Corporation and Hancock Community Development Corporation to administer program to purchase and distribute discounted passes to clients with verified need.
  - C. Promotion of new routes and hours.

Approximate cost to ACC

- Operating expenses: *\$75,000 annually (\$50,000 salary and benefits and \$25,000 in additional marketing expenses above current annual marketing budget of \$30,000)*
  - Capital expenses: *none*
  - New revenue generated: *Income from increased ridership*
2. Explore outdoor advertising on buses, bus shelters, and trash receptacles at shelters as a source of revenue to cover the entire marketing budget and other operating expenses.

**Approximate cost to ACC**

- *Operating expenses:* none (included in Marketing & Public Awareness Program, above)
- *Capital expenses:* none (included in Marketing & Public Awareness Program, above)
- *New revenue generated:* Estimated \$75-100,000 annually.

\*\*\*\* Excluding SPLOST and anticipated revenue, the Transit Team’s proposed new Routes and Outreach will require approximately \$1 million annually. We assumed no costs to Athens-Clarke County for advocacy efforts.

**Advocacy:**

1. Continue to pursue additional and alternative funding sources at the local, state, and federal level for expansion of all transportation services.
2. Encourage local elected officials to discuss regional transportation options at the policy-maker level.
3. Encourage local elected officials and business leaders to lobby our federal delegation for increased federal operating funds for transit.
4. Form a transit advocacy organization, starting with an email alert system to mobilize transit supporters to lobby elected officials about transit issues.

## **OneAthens Transportation Implementation Team: Regional Transit Needs**

Establish a regional public transportation system. Expanding the geographical scope of public transportation to include our neighboring counties, as well as access to the Atlanta area, would expand the economic opportunities of those who rely on public transportation to get to work, shopping, and services.

Regional transit does exist in Northeast Georgia, although not in the way that the PPA Transportation Subcommittee envisioned. Existing transit systems within the region include rural public transit programs that operate chiefly within individual counties and frequently cross county lines; public transportation services for clients of human services providers that operate within individual counties and also cross county lines; and private bus service to Atlanta. These transportation services, however, are not coordinated and do not address the needs of ACC residents who live in or near poverty. For example, ACC residents cannot rely on public transportation to access jobs in neighboring counties or in Atlanta. This report makes recommendations about next steps for expanding and coordinating the existing transit programs and exploring options for Athens to Atlanta public transportation.

### **Neighboring Counties**

#### *Transportation for Clients of the Georgia Department of Human Resources*

The Region 5 office of the Georgia Department of Human Resources (DHR) coordinates transportation services for area residents who are clients of its Division of Aging; Division of Family and Children's Services' (DFCS) Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF) program; and Division of Mental Health, Developmental Disabilities and Addictive Diseases (MHDDAD); and also serves clients affiliated with the Department of Labor's Vocational Rehabilitation Services (DOL/VR) program. (Region 5 consists of 12 Northeast Georgia counties including Clarke and our neighbors Barrow, Elbert, Greene, Jackson, Madison, Oconee, and Oglethorpe.) DHR contracts with Advantage Behavioral Health Systems (ABHS) to provide the transportation services in these counties. Unlike Athens Transit's The Bus, which is a fixed route service running on a set schedule, DHR's is a "demand-response" van service.

In order for a DHR client to access these transportation services, the client's DHR service provider determines the client's eligibility and contacts ABHS to schedule the trip. ABHS then bills DHR for the cost of the trip. These door-to-door trips can cross county lines. Athens Transit participates with DHR indirectly, by selling passes for The Bus to DHR for its clients' use.

#### *Rural "5311" Transportation Programs*

In addition to transportation services specifically for DHR clients, several local Region 5 counties (Elbert, Greene, and Jackson) operate Rural Public Transportation programs (also called "5311 programs" for the section of U.S. Code that authorizes funding for them.) 5311 programs are not restricted to DHR clients, but are open to any resident of the county. They too are demand-response door-to-door van services. ABHS runs Greene County's 5311 program as well as its DHR program. The Elbert County 5311 program contracts with DHR, but the Jackson County program does not.

Athens Transit's The Link, which serves the rural areas of ACC, is also funded through Section 5311 but operates a bit differently. Instead of door-to-door service, The Link connects riders to The Bus, the fixed-route service, which allows more people to access more locations than if the service ran in the traditional door-to-door manner.

## *Funding and the Need for DHR and Rural Transportation Programs*

DHR's transportation services for its clients are funded with a combination of program funds, DHR funds, state funds, and federal funds. These funds are not sufficient to provide all the trips needed by DHR's clients.

DHR Region 5's most recent assessment of available transportation services finds many gaps, not only for its clients but for the public in general. As part of this assessment, DHR conducted a survey of non-DHR clients and DHR clients with non-DHR program transportation needs. There were 388 responses. The survey found that in Region 5, 40% of respondents do not have transportation; 74% would use public transportation for a fee; and 65% required out-of-county travel.

The OneAthens Transportation Implementation Team decided to start our efforts at establishing a regional transportation system by working with the existing 5311 programs in nearby counties. We took a first step by organizing Try Transit Day.

### *Try Transit Day*

Try Transit Day was an attempt to coordinate the existing local 5311 programs and Athens Transit. The plan was for residents of Banks, Elbert, Greene and Jackson counties to ride to the Athens Multimodal Transportation Center on their county 5311 program van in the morning. There they were each to receive a free pass to ride The Bus all day, allowing them to visit shops, restaurants, or other services throughout Athens. At the end of the day they would take their 5311 van back to their own county from the MMTC. Try Transit Day was planned for August 3, 2007, a state sales tax holiday. It was advertised in each county's local newspaper, received publicity on local radio, and was promoted by each county's 5311 program, but did not succeed in drawing any participants.

Team member Andrew Neighbors of ABHS spoke with the managers of the 5311 programs to find out why Try Transit Day attracted no riders. According to his report, the underlying reason was that the typical rural transit rider's income is below the median level and therefore they don't shop in Athens. Specifically, reasons cited by the 5311 program managers included:

- No demand for trips to the mall or Athens to shop
- Riders shop in other rural communities where it is cheaper
- Riders typically do not plan trips for shopping – a shopping trip to Athens would be a spur of the moment event
- Plans for shopping could be changed by anything, major or minor
- Riders did not want to be in Athens without a ride other than the Bus

Nevertheless, the managers thought Try Transit Day was a good idea and would consider participating again. They all agreed that the effort should not be focused on shopping, however.

### *Athens Transit and Regional Transportation*

Athens Transit provides public transportation within ACC. It is funded with a mix of federal, state, and ACC government dollars as well as farebox revenues. In order for Athens Transit to carry passengers beyond the county line, agreements between ACC and those counties would need to be worked out by the respective governing bodies. Preliminary conversations suggest that while ACC is interested in such an arrangement, our neighboring counties are not. Oconee, Oglethorpe, and Madison Counties do not participate in the federal 5311 program.

### *A Model for Regional Rural Transportation Programs*

Two of Georgia's Regional Development Centers (RDCs), McIntosh Trail and SouthWest Georgia (SWGRDC), operate regional transit systems using 5311 funds, and the Coastal Georgia RDC (CGRDC) is in the process of implementing a regional system. The OneAthens Transportation Implementation Team invited Dan Bollinger, Executive Director of the SWGRDC and Barbara Foster, Coordinated Transportation Manager

of the CGRDC, to speak with us and provide an overview of their programs to help us determine whether something similar might work here.

## SouthWest Georgia RDC

SWGRDC's coordinated rural transportation program consolidates the previously-existing transportation programs in the region, namely the 5311 programs of its member jurisdictions, DHR client transportation services, and Medicaid non-emergency transportation services. The consolidation of these programs results in improved service to riders, greater efficiency, and reduced costs. The inclusion of Medicaid transportation makes the system quite complicated. The SWGRDC program provides Medicaid transportation for a 40-county region and uses 23 contractors as well as volunteer drivers, while the program's DHR and 5311 services cover just the 14-county SWGRDC region, and use 4 main contractors. The savings and efficiency resulting from the inclusion of Medicaid transportation are, according to Dan Bollinger, however, well worth the extra effort.

SWGRDC operates 73 vehicles serving 14 counties, with most exceeding 20% public (i.e. non-DHR or Medicaid) ridership. The service is demand-response, though they are considering adding a few fixed routes. They use 4 main contractors for most of the trips within their RDC 14-county region, and several smaller ones to handle long-distance medical trips, e.g. to Atlanta and Augusta, for Medicaid riders. The RDC also coordinates with the City of Albany's transit system, which provides them with Albany Transit tokens at a reduced cost for DHR and Medicaid riders. The complete annual operating budget is currently \$15 million. A little overhead is built into the cost of each trip; this overhead is put into escrow and used for capital costs and to provide local match for federal funds.

Motivation for consolidating the transit programs was chiefly to improve the efficiency and service of existing programs, but also came from RDC member counties who wanted to offer 5311 service but couldn't come up with the required local matching funds. SWGRDC stepped up and offered to handle the administration and management of the program, and the counties passed resolutions authorizing SWGRDC to apply for the 5311 funds on behalf of the entire region. The program is also supported by major businesses in the region, such as some of the poultry plants, because they want the transportation available to their workers, many of whom do not own cars. Some businesses deduct the transportation fees directly from workers' pay.

## Coastal Georgia RDC

CGRDC is in the process of developing a coordinated regional transportation program. Like SWGRDC's, the program builds upon existing transportation services. Three of the 10 counties in the region have 5311 programs, and the RDC has been coordinating DHR transportation (approximately 150,000 trips per year.) Having heard of the other regional programs, the RDC approached DOT and received a grant to conduct a feasibility study to ascertain the need for a regional rural public transportation system that would coordinate with human services transportation. CGRDC received the grant and validated the need through the study. They are submitting a regional application for funding to DOT and hope to start running vehicles in 2008.

There was citizen demand for transit services throughout the region, but the local match requirement (10%) was a stumbling block preventing many of the counties from applying for 5311 funds. The RDC came up with a plan to use the DHR payments for transit services to offset some of the local match and net operations costs.

First, CGRDC used 2000 census data to determine the percentage of the population considered rural in each county. This determined the amount of the 5311 grant, which is based on the rural population in the region, and also what percentage of the total cost each county would be responsible for.

In Phase I of the Regional Plan study conducted in 2005, the first year operating budget was determined to be \$1.99 million.

Next, they applied the amount CGRDC receives from DHR each year for providing trips to DHR clients: \$1.49 million. This leaves a net deficit of \$500,000.

Cities/counties are responsible for a 10% local match (farebox) after DHR Purchase of Service has been applied to the total cost of operations. Therefore, a 10% local match on \$500,000 would be \$50,000; each county is responsible for paying their percentage of the \$50,000 local match based on their percentage of rural population.

DOT then splits the responsibility for covering the net deficit with the local governments 50/50, so DOT owes \$225,000 and the counties (as a group) owe \$225,000.

Each county is responsible for a different amount of the net deficit plus match, based on its rural population.

Example:\*

Total cost of operations for one year	1,900,000
Less DHR Purchase of Service (as revenue)	<u>1,400,000</u>
	500,000
Less “regional” 10% local match	<u>50,000</u>
Net Deficit	450,000
50% DOT and 50% region/(counties) @ \$225,000 each	450,000
Bryan County share @ 10% [\$50,000 local match x 10%]	5,000
Bryan County share @ 10% [\$225,000 operations x 10%]	<u>22,500</u>
Total Cost for Bryan County	27,500

*\*These figures are used for demonstration purposes*

For example, Bryan County is responsible for a total of \$27,500 for the net deficit, plus 10% for the local match. The net deficit amount is split 50/50 with the DOT, so Bryan county owes \$22,500 (net deficit share) + \$5,000 (10% match) for a total of \$27,500. This is significantly less than the county would pay to cover the cost of 5311 service on its own, without the help of the RDC and the DHR payments.

Even with such a reduced cost of service as an incentive, the program has taken some time to come to fruition. Some counties hadn’t yet budgeted any transit funds, even at such “bargain basement” prices, so the program will be phased in over 5 years. Also, some counties were afraid that DOT would cut funding, but those fears have been addressed. Ultimately, the economic development benefits are so major that the skeptics decided it was worthwhile to participate.

DHR is allowing CGRDC to keep back some of the fees each year to use for 5311 start-up costs and to help the counties with capital costs. They will eventually have 89 vehicles on the road. They are currently looking into setting up an 800 number dispatch system and researching software programs to coordinate trips.

The program will also tie into Savannah’s fixed route transit system (Chatham Area Transit, known as CAT) with shuttle stops at the edges of the CAT service area.

CGRDC is also considering creating a regional vanpool program geared toward commuters, since so many of them travel to Savannah. This would include a guaranteed free ride home if a worker needs to leave early due to illness, which makes it attractive to employees. There has been a great deal of interest from businesses, including some in South Carolina and Florida – many people in the area cross state lines to work – in offering this as an employee benefit. For counties, such a program – like all public transportation – would be a way to reduce maintenance costs for roads and bridges, by reducing traffic volume. CGRDC is looking for federal and state funds to help offset the costs.

In starting up the coordinated regional transit program, Barbara Foster emphasized that education, outreach and marketing are important. For example, many local governments may not realize the demand for transportation from their citizens, especially senior citizens. Also, the appearance of the vehicles themselves will be an important form of marketing – the vehicles need to be attractive – and there needs to be a PR campaign. Also, as far as organization and administration of the system, the RDC as a non-profit is the entity best positioned to apply for state and federal funding and administer the program.

## **Atlanta**

### *Atlanta Commuter rail*

Establishing commuter rail between Athens and Atlanta has been discussed for more than a decade. The OneAthens Transportation Implementation Team wholeheartedly supports this idea but recognizes that it is dependent upon action by the General Assembly, and that even with such action it will be years before a rail system is functional. The Team therefore urges the co-conveners to join and support advocacy efforts already underway by commuter rail supporters while at the same time exploring other (temporary, we hope) options.

### *Atlanta Commuter bus*

A potential stop-gap measure would be a commuter bus between Athens and Atlanta. This idea was originally proposed by the Georgia Regional Transportation Authority (GRTA) to ACC several years ago. GRTA suggested partnering with ACC to start an express bus service from Athens to Atlanta. This would have required a \$350,000 per year commitment from ACC for the first 2 years, splitting the cost with GRTA, and \$700,000 per year after that to cover the entire cost without GRTA's help. At that time, ACC had other public transportation priorities and decided not to participate.

Team member Ron Hamlin, of UGA Campus Transit, suggested that a public/private partnership might be a feasible model, and cited the example of commuter bus service in Massachusetts that is run by a private company but receives some state funding.

The Team approached GRTA and found that they are no longer interested in pursuing the idea (chiefly because they use Clean Air Act Congestion Mitigation for Air Quality funds; ACC is in compliance with air quality standards and therefore CMAQ funds could not be used for this route.)

The Team feels, however, that this idea is worth pursuing. Southeastern Stages currently runs buses between Athens and Atlanta, but not on a commuter schedule. ACC and possibly UGA could partner with Southeastern Stages on a commuter bus route from the MMTC to one or two locations in Atlanta. There are many details to be worked out before determining whether this is a feasible plan, such as capital and operating costs, destination point(s) in Atlanta, whether there are federal and/or state funding sources for capital and operating expenses, rider demand, and interest on the part of Southeastern Stages.

## ***Recommendations***

Much work remains to be done to design and implement a regional public transportation system that would meet the needs of ACC's residents living at or near the poverty line. Challenges include lack of interest by some neighboring county governments and funding. Next steps should be:

- Work with Northeast Georgia Regional Development Center to assess the feasibility of coordinating transit programs in the area using the coordinated-transportation models of the Coastal Georgia RDC and Southwest Georgia RDC
  - Define the scope of the regional transportation system
  - Continue discussion with neighboring counties about regional transportation
- Conduct a feasibility study of a public/private commuter bus between Athens and Atlanta
- Continue advocacy for the Athens to Atlanta commuter rail line
- Continue advocacy for federal and state funding for public transportation