



Georgia



Overview

In Georgia, which is home to more rural transit systems than nearly all other states, rural transit has both direct connections – via district-level public transportation coordinators (PTCs) – and indirect connections – via Regional Commissions (RCs) – to planning and technical assistance from the Georgia Department of Transportation (GDOT). There is also extensive coordination between human services and rural public transportation planning and services at the local level as well as the State and regional levels. As part of this coordination, GDOT and the Department of Human Services (DHS) have jointly supported the development of three demonstration projects that provide multi-county regional transit systems in rural areas. Such coordination has resulted in decreased costs and improved services. In addition, the Georgia State Legislature recently passed a bill that contains a number of actions that hold promise for improving funding and coordination of rural transit in the future. Finally, perceptions of transit in rural areas of Georgia are becoming more positive as transit is becoming associated with economic development, quality of life, and air quality. As a result, there is increasing support for growing rural communities to establish fixed route services and other improvements to transit.

Context

Rural Transit

GDOT provides funding it receives from the Federal Transit Administration (FTA) Section 5311 (Formula grants for other than urbanized areas) program to approximately 112 entities (see Figure 1). The majority of these systems are managed by counties, although a few are managed by cities, in particular cities in counties without county-wide systems. In addition, several are operated under three demonstration regional transportation systems, which are discussed in more detail later in this case study. The rural systems are demand response except for six rural city (under 50,000) fixed-route systems. Where feasible, human transportation services paid for by the State and Section 5310 (Transportation for Elderly Persons and Persons with Disabilities) are provided by Section 5311 operators rather than separate entities.

Institutional Structure

GDOT has undergone several recent reorganizations. Under the resulting [organization](#), transportation planning with a focus on highway planning is conducted primarily by the Division of Planning, while transit operations and planning are covered by the [Transit Program Unit](#) within the Division of Intermodal. Other programs within the Division of Intermodal are waterways, aviation, and rail. The Transit Program Unit consists of six staff, including the program manager, four transit planners, and a PTC. The PTC is one of seven PTCs, the other six of whom are located at GDOT District Offices with the PTC at headquarters serving District 7, or the Atlanta metro area, and also providing oversight and technical assistance to the other PTCs, who are all considered as headquarter staff.

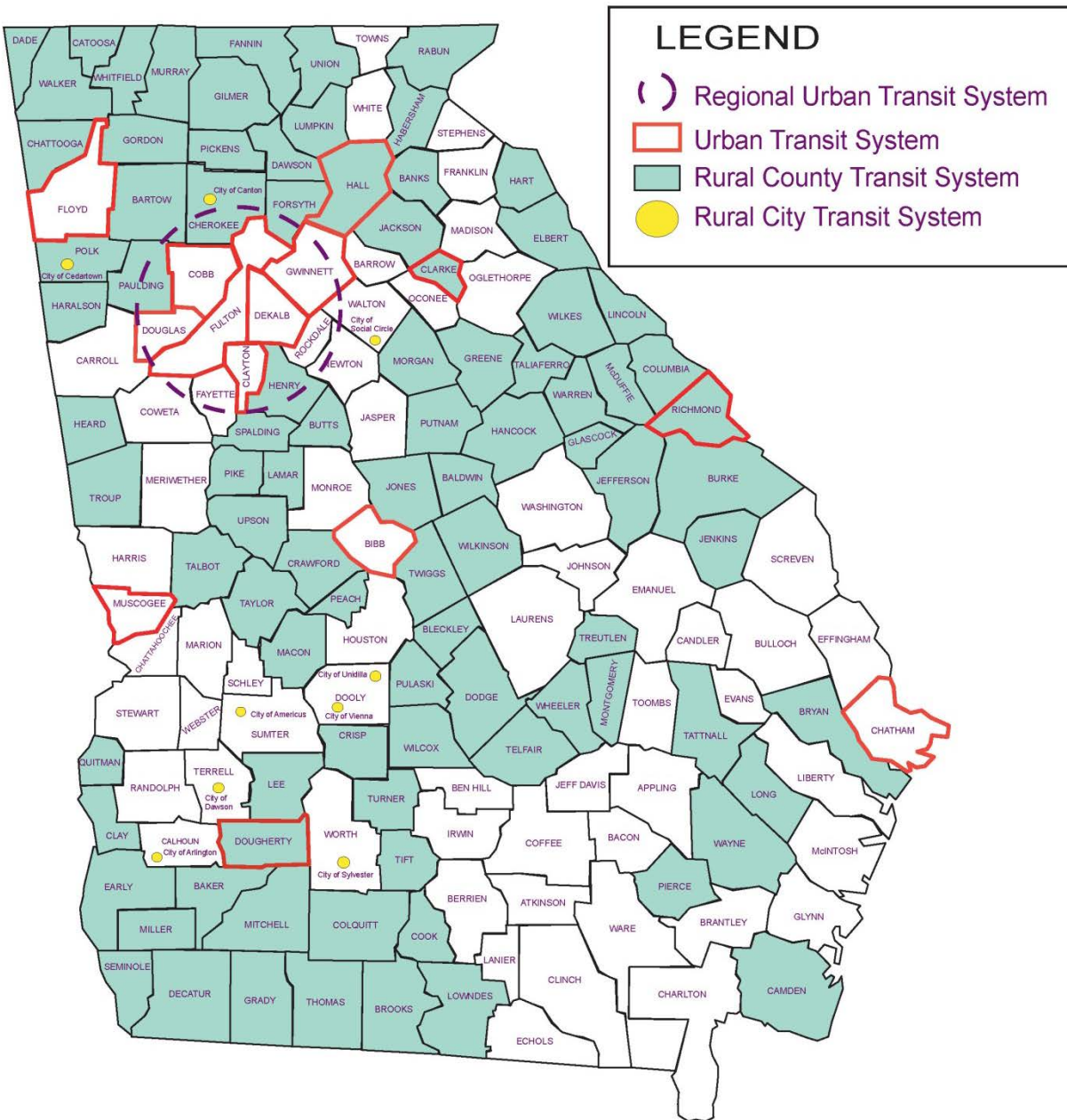
GDOT works closely with the [DHS](#), formerly known as the Department of Human Resources (DHR) until 2009. Human services transportation in Georgia consists of transportation to various services such as counseling, medical appointments, and meals for elderly, mentally and physically disabled, and/or low-income clients of several DHS and related agencies.^{1,2} Since 1988, DHS has managed the FTA Section 5310 program. Other departments, such as the Department of Labor, contract with DHS to provide transportation services for their clients. Initially, DHS focused on purchasing vehicles to provide service but it has since changed to purchasing services from existing providers, including Section 5311 and Section 5307 (Urbanized Area Formula) systems. Similar to the GDOT Districts, DHS also has regions, the boundaries of which correspond with the 12 Regional Commissions (Figure 2 below), as well as district-level Regional Transportation Coordinators (RTC) and Regional Transportation Coordinating Committees.

Georgia has 12 RCs (see Figure 2), previously known as Regional Development Centers (RDCs). The RDCs were created by the [Planning Act of 1989](#) in an effort to promote more comprehensive and long-term planning and a greater coordination of growth strategies and community and economic development. Many RDCs were created from existing regional councils of government and similar entities. In 2008, [House Bill \(HB\) 1216](#) amended Georgia's State Code to rename the entities, alter boundaries, and increase responsibilities and provision of services. RCs provide transportation planning and technical assistance to local governments, which are automatically members of the RC. Each RC has a Board of Directors responsible for RC policy with representatives from the counties, private sector, and largest city.

¹ Divisions of Aging Services, Child Support Services, and Family and Children Services, as well as the Department of Behavioral Health and Development, Department of Community Health, and the Department of Labor.

² Georgia Department of Human Resources. Fact Sheet: Coordinated Transportation System. 2006. http://dhs.georgia.gov/DHR/DHR_FactSheets/FS_TransportationFY06R.pdf

Figure 1: Transit in Georgia



Source: [GDOT Transit Program Unit](#).

Figure 2: Georgia Regional Commissions



Source: [Georgia Association of Regional Commissions](http://www.georgiaassociationofregionalcommissions.com)

Funding

Table 1 summarizes Federal, State, and local funding for transit in the State. Georgia provides capital and planning funding to transit systems but no funding for operations. The State also provides half of the non-Federal match (20 percent) required for Federal capital programs. According to GDOT and within the context of current economic conditions, the prioritization of State capital transit funding is currently as follows (in order of priority):

1. To continue the 10 percent match for metropolitan planning organizations (MPOs);
2. To continue the 10 percent local match for rural agencies for vehicle acquisition; and
3. To support small urban systems.

Any remaining funds will be used to assist large transit agencies as these systems have dedicated tax sources.

Table 1: Transit Funding in Fiscal Year 2009 (in millions)

Funding Program	Operating	Capital	Planning
Section 5311 (Formula Grants for Other than Urbanized Areas)			
Rural	\$18.9	\$5.3	
Intercity bus		\$2.6	
Section 5310 (Transportation for Elderly Persons and Persons with Disabilities)		\$1.7	
Section 5309 (Bus and Bus Facilities)		\$4.2	
Section 5316 (Job Access and Reverse Commute)	\$0.6	\$1.0	
Section 5317 (New Freedom)	\$0.5	\$0.3	
Section 5303 (Metropolitan Planning)			\$2.9
Section 5304 (Statewide Planning)			\$0.2
Section 5307 (Urbanized Area Formula)	\$18.5	\$6.2	
Federal Total		\$62.9	

The citizens of Georgia recently gained the ability to leverage local taxes to fund transit and other transportation projects through [HB 277](#), the Transportation Investment Act of 2010. This legislation allows voters to vote in a referendum on a list of compiled and vetted transportation projects (transportation investment list) and the introduction of a one-percent regional transportation sales and use tax to pay for those projects over a period of 10 years in 12 newly created special districts. The geographical boundaries of these districts correspond with the geographical boundaries of the 12 RCs. The transportation investment list and its evaluation criteria will be developed and vetted by roundtable councils and executive committees set up within each district as well as by the GDOT Planning Director according to a set schedule, culminating in a referendum in 2012. This new legislation may positively impact the funding situation for rural transit agencies in the near future.

GDOT uses FTA Rural Transit Assistance Program (RTAP) funds to support the GDOT RTAP Center, which provides information and technical assistance in the areas of driving training, grants management, Federal and State regulations, funding, and vehicle maintenance among others. GDOT offers RTAP scholarships to sections 5311 and 5310 providers to attend training.

Participation of Rural Transit in Statewide Planning Process

State DOT

GDOT headquarter and District staff provides rural transit agencies with technical assistance, Section 5311 grant process assistance, compliance reviews, vehicle inspections, and drug/alcohol reviews. GDOT requires all Section 5311 providers to submit a monthly report that includes passenger trips per month, fare box recovery, and days of service, all of which have associated requirements or targets. All Section 5311 providers must have a 10 percent fare box recovery, although the amount can be a combination of fare box revenue and local contribution. To be eligible for capital funding for additional or replacement vehicles, providers must demonstrate that they have provided at least 500 passenger trips per month. In addition, any vehicle to be replaced must be at least five years old and have at least 100,000 miles. GDOT has established 20 days of service per month per vehicle as a goal, with the understanding that in some months a vehicle may be out of service due to major repairs.

The GDOT headquarters staff is involved in planning for small urban areas and small MPOs. Staff transit planners help represent the transit perspective in transportation improvements programs (TIPs), Unified Planning Work Programs (UPWPs), and long-range transportation plans (LRTPs) and ensure that transit projects are incorporated into the State transportation improvement plan (STIP).

PTCs are the main point of contact between GDOT and rural transit agencies for technical assistance and grant administration. PTCs review the monthly reports and can check in with an agency if there is a problem. PTCs can also provide immediate technical or administrative assistance, such as contacting GDOT to request a lease vehicle if an agency vehicle is out of commission temporarily. PTCs also play a role in reaching out to areas without transit. To encourage the provision of transit, especially in rural areas, GDOT sends an annual letter to all county governments not participating in the Section 5311 program to provide an opportunity to contact the PTC in their region to discuss starting a Section 5311 program. GDOT requires each PTC to conduct a follow-up phone call. This effort has resulted in an increase in Section 5311 programs from 82 in 2005 to 112 in 2010, although some preexisting programs have stopped services due to funding challenges.

“The bottom line is that even with regulations and compliance reviews we’re providing wonderful transportation service to all of our customers rain or shine or whatever, everyday Monday through Friday and sometimes Saturday as well. And that’s what is important.”
– GDOT official

Rural Transit Agencies

Rural transit agencies that participated in the study report coordinating closely with their respective PTC and RC contacts as well as with their DHS coordinator. Rural transit agencies contact GDOT for support with funding and operations and contact DHS for support with coordinating services. Some rural transit agencies also work with adjacent MPOs on the TIP and long-range planning.

Regional Commissions

The RCs have planning contracts with GDOT that include requirements to develop rural transit development plans, which each RC approaches differently. For example, Three Rivers RC develops

individual transit development plans for each of the five counties in its regional system within a six-year cycle with one county per year followed by a regional plan and then back to the individual county level plans. The plan covers demographics, transit system characteristics, and a five-year forecast of operating and capital outlays. This effort is funded by the Office of Planning for \$25,000 a year, which is sufficient to complete the plan but does not allow for other related efforts. As another example, the Coastal Georgia RC receives significant funding and technical assistance support from GDOT's Transit Program Unit to support its demonstration regional transit system. It uses some of this funding to direct comprehensive planning assistance to counties in greatest need and to complete environmental compliance for transit facilities.

RCs also report working closely on operations and grants with their GDOT PTC. For RCs that have less direct management of transit within their multi-county regions, the transit providers (the counties and cities), rather than the RCs, commonly have direct contact with the GDOT PTC and the transit planners at headquarters.

RCs work with local transit providers and governments in several ways, which vary by region. In areas with regional systems, the connection is direct since the RCs manage transit for member counties. Other interactions and outreach between RCs and transit providers include monthly or quarterly updates at the RC Board meetings, attendance at county commission and city council meetings upon request, and updating of authorizing resolutions with providers either annually or as requested. Three Rivers RC has a transit policy group that meets on an as-needed basis while Coastal Georgia RC is working to establish a transit advisory committee that was recommended by a 2005 study.

DHS

DHS and GDOT, in particular the Transit Program Unit, communicate fairly often and work together on a number of initiatives. Another result of HB 277 is the creation of the Georgia Coordinating Committee for Rural and Human Services Transportation, which will involve both DHS and GDOT as well as other agencies. The Committee is required to submit an annual report on the existing conditions and recommendations on how to improve current practices. HB 277 stipulates that the Committee must consider strategies for vehicle sharing, route coordination, consolidation, funding restrictions, and cost reduction. The Governor's Office of Highway Safety [Older Driver Task Force](#) and the DHS' [Division of Aging Services](#) a one-day informational [workshop](#) in August 2010 to publicize and promote the Committee.

At the regional and local level, DHS RTCs communicate regularly with RCs, especially those with demonstration regional systems, and transit providers to coordinate services. For example, the DHS RTC contracts directly with the Three Rivers RC for services within its regional system but also contracts with three other counties outside the Three Rivers RC boundaries. RTCs do not communicate as often with PTCs or GDOT headquarters.

The main GDOT point of contact for DHS is the DOT PTC and the DOT PTCs serve on the DHS Regional Transportation Coordinating Committees. Through this relationship, DHS RTCs work with PTCs to develop individual regional coordination plans and identify public transit projects for the region.

“[Coordinating human services transportation with 5311 programs is] one of the best things we could have done. It cut down on backtracking and the number of vehicles and the amount of money the community or DHS has to spend.” – DHS official

Intercity Bus Services

GDOT contracts with two intercity bus providers, Greyhound Lines, Inc. and Southeastern Stages, Inc., to provide intercity services in-state. GDOT purchases buses developed by Motor Coach Industries from a State contract and provides them to the two providers under a lease agreement with certain stipulations such as limitations on out-of-state hours and the requirement of quarterly maintenance and ridership reports. Once a bus reaches the end of its useful life, the Georgia Department of Administrative Services holds an auction; and the two providers often buy the buses to use for spare parts. GDOT's current Intercity Bus Plan has three recommended projects for implementation: marketing, a statewide signage program, and the purchase of new intercity bus coaches to lease to intercity bus providers. GDOT is planning to update its Statewide Intercity Bus Plan, funded out of the Section 5311 program, within the next year.

Others

Other key agencies involved in rural and statewide transportation planning in Georgia are MPOs, the Georgia Transit Association, and other advocacy organizations. Georgia does not have any Federally recognized tribes.

RCs and many transit providers interface with MPOs. In Gainesville and Augusta, the Section 5307 operator is also the Section 5311 operator so there is seamless coordination of the systems.

Although the [Georgia Association of Regional Commissions](#) (GARC) plays a role in coordinating RCs and providing advocacy on a number of issues, it no longer plays a direct role in transportation. Instead, members of the GARC Human Services Transportation Subcommittee have participated in the [Georgia Transit Association](#) (GTA) since the mid-2000s in recognition that there was a need for unity among transit advocates. GTA is a nonprofit membership organization representing public transportation providers in Georgia. GTA offers a discounted membership rate for rural systems. GTA provides legislative advocacy with a focus on securing stable and adequate funding and facilities a forum for information exchange. GTA developed a [transit analysis and recommendations document](#) in 2008 that outlined current funding sources, presented a business case for transit, and offered several recommendations.

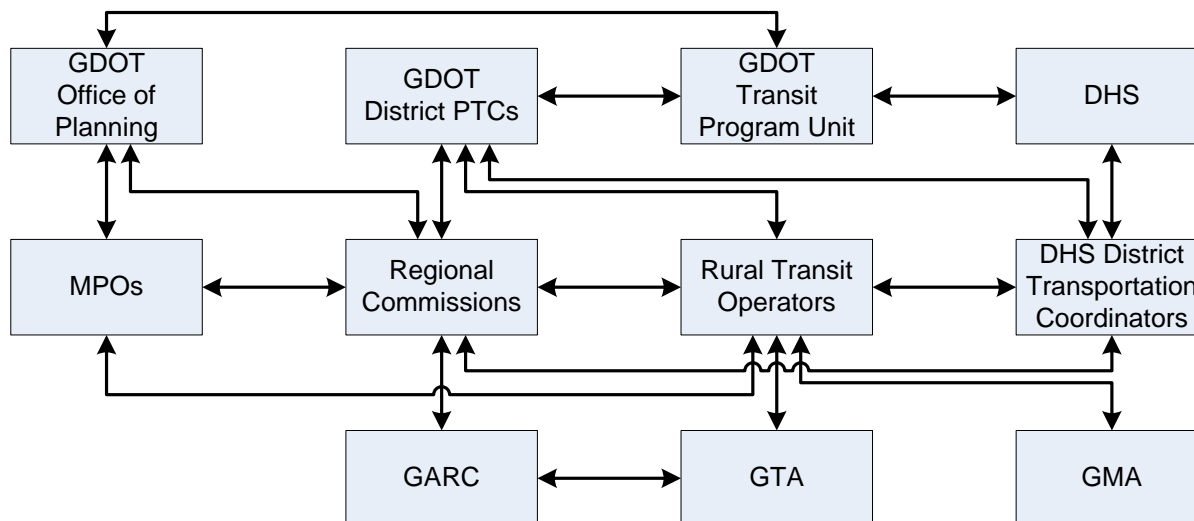
“There were several groups lobbying for transit, all saying slightly different things, and thus providing an excuse for legislators to do nothing.” – RC official

Another advocacy organization with rural transit ties is the [Georgia Municipal Association](#) (GMA), a non-profit membership organization representing municipal governments that provides legislative advocacy, educational, and technical services to its members. As part of its advocacy efforts, the GMA has a transportation policy committee, which has developed [2011 legislative policy](#) recommendations that include transportation finance, passenger rail service, and improvement of communications and relations between GDOT and municipalities.

Summary

Figure 3 is a summary diagram of the relationships described in this section. Overall, Georgia has a complex system of interactions between rural transit and the State DOT and DHS. However, the most significant interaction occurs between rural transit and district-level representatives of both State agencies as well as the RCs.

Figure 3: Relationships between Agencies Involved in Rural Transportation Planning



Major Planning and Project Initiatives

Statewide Plans

In terms of statewide planning, the primary plans relevant to rural transit are the new statewide strategic transportation plan, the statewide coordinated transportation plan, the STIP, and the statewide LRTP. At the regional level, there are regional LRTPs and regional coordinated transportation plans for each RC as well as TIPs for the MPOs. At the local level, RCs work with counties to develop rural transit development plans as described above. Rural transit provider participants in this study generally acknowledged that there are multiple layers involved in the statewide planning process.

The [Statewide Strategic Transportation Plan 2010-2030](#) (April 2010) is a new report that highlights Georgia's current transportation accomplishments, in particular its extensive rural transit network, as well as its challenges in terms of historic underinvestment in transportation. The Plan lays out a new investment priority plan for freight, mobility in Metro Atlanta, and mobility in the rest of the State. The Plan, similar to the Georgia Statewide Transportation Plan (described below), identifies two major actions for rural transit: maintain existing services and expand services to a consistent level throughout the State. The Plan also identifies a long-term need for intercity and commuter rail.

The [Coordinated Public Transit Human Services Transportation Plan](#) (2006) was developed jointly by GDOT and DHS, drawing upon the regional coordinated transportation plans. The Plan describes the history and organization of human service transportation in the State and provides a region-by-region needs assessment and list of projects. In 2010, the State of Georgia received American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA) funding to update the State coordination plan; the update is expected to be complete in 2012.

The STIP provides a list of Federally-funded transportation projects that are located outside MPO boundaries and references the MPO TIPs. RCs and rural transit providers reported familiarity with the STIP process, although the level of involvement varied and, for the most part, was focused at the district level.

Participants in this study were not as familiar with the [Georgia Statewide Transportation Plan](#) (SWTP) 2005-2035, which is the State's LRTP that was last updated in January 2006 by GDOT's Office of Planning. While the Plan does not set forth new policy initiatives or project priorities, it identifies goals and provides a programmatic assessment of the State transportation system and projections for future costs based on two scenarios: No Build and Build/Financially Unconstrained. The plan identified economic development as GDOT's primary goal; but other goals included safety, environmental protection and energy conservation, and preservation of the existing system. For rural transit, the two scenarios translated into maintaining the existing service (No Build) or expanding rural transit service to all rural counties at current per capita service level (Build). The plan concluded that there was a funding gap of \$74 billion when comparing forecast revenues and the total costs of the Build/Financially Unconstrained scenario. The SWTP helped with the success of HB 277, which may improve funding and coordination of transit regionally.

Regional Demonstration Projects

GDOT and DHS have three regional transportation system demonstration projects in which the RC in each (Coastal, Southwest Georgia, and Three Rivers) manages public and human services transportation for multiple counties (see text box). The oldest of the three systems has been in existence for 10 years, but GDOT intends to eventually develop 12 regional systems. The benefits of regional systems were identified in a 2004 study by the KFH Group that GDOT funded to conduct a statewide review of the State's Section 5311 systems. The study concluded that GDOT would need to look at a competitive grant application that rewards regionalization and/or mandate more regionally-based programs due to the financial and administrative burden of overseeing 100 systems. One RC official notes that many of these systems operate two to three buses and use pencil and paper to track funding and operating characteristics. Such conditions create data input and uniformity challenges for GDOT, especially in reporting to FTA. In addition to the study's conclusions, GDOT officials report that the State's goal is to move to regionalizing transportation service to focus on the service that citizens need rather than be restricted by boundaries. In addition, DHS and GDOT recognize the benefits to users of coordinating public and human service transportation.

Regional Rural and Coordinated Public Transportation Demonstration Projects: Three Rivers and Coastal Georgia RCs

Three Rivers RC oversees a 10-county region with a population of 500,000. Each of the 10 counties has human services transportation, which is funded through Three Rivers RC; and eight of the 10 counties have public transportation. Three Rivers RC manages the transit systems for the five counties that were previously part of the McIntosh RDC before its consolidation with the Chattahoochee-Flint RDC. The five counties chose to regionalize for a number of reasons, including cost-effectiveness; the desire to avoid county transfers when traveling across county lines; and facilitate RC contracting with GDOT to provide policy oversight and budget management, compliance monitoring, and contracting for dispatch. The counties provide insurance and vehicle match funding. The relationship is defined through authorizing resolutions. The RC also administers another county separately while the remaining three counties contract directly with GDOT.

Coastal RC was the third regional demonstration project to start, after Three Rivers and Southwest Georgia RCs. Coastal RC also has a 10-county area. After regionalization, transit within the RC increased from three public transportation systems and one urban fixed route to human service and public transportation in all 10 counties. The RC has also implemented a regional vanpool for commuting that crosses county lines using FTA 5316 (Job Access and Reverse Commute) and 5317 (New Freedom) funds. All 10 counties decided to regionalize after a 2006 feasibility study³ by the KFH Group and funded by GDOT and DHS determined that only 60 percent of the need – in terms of services for elderly and people with disabilities and also low-income households – was being met and that, additionally, there was unmet commuter transportation needs. The counties were also motivated by cost and the desire to eliminate county boundaries and make transit seamless. In addition, the RC has made sure not to displace any existing providers in the process. The RC is currently conducting outreach to businesses and industries and also hopes to improve upon rural and urban connections in the future.

“Coordination between human services and public transit is much more cost effective and streamlined so it makes sense. All agency transportation services are on one bus rather than half-empty buses passing each other.” – RC official

“Regional rural transit planning has helped to move the ball forward (for lack of a better word) in rural areas because by coordinating services and spreading overhead cost over the region, it makes services a whole lot more affordable and accessible to more people” – Coastal Georgia RC Transportation Director

As mentioned above, public and human service transportation coordination is a key part of these regional demonstration projects. Examples of the resulting coordination are that in Coastal Georgia RC, requests for both services go through either a central dispatch while in Three Rivers RC, all requests go to a 1-800 number that is directed to the appropriate provider based on origin location.

³ KFH Group, Inc. Technical Report for the Regional Plan for Rural and Coordinated Public Transportation. April 18, 2006.

Figure 4: Coastal Regional Coaches vehicle and Georgia Regional Transportation Authority commuter bus

Sources: Coastal Regional Coaches brochure / USDOT Volpe Center (July 2010)

State and National Priorities

GDOT staff report interest and activity in national priorities such as climate change and livability but is currently focusing on economic development and air quality in partnership with GTA. There was general consensus among transit agencies that transit benefits air quality, aging populations, accessibility, population growth (and related congestion), and mobility. One county's changing perspective of transit is described in the text box below. DHS officials note that transit plays an important role in resolving the return of low-income citizens to welfare due to the difficulty in accessing jobs from where they live.

Change in Perspective on Transit: Coweta County

Coweta County attributes its new Section 5311 system, which began in July 2009, to a change in local perspective. The public had a very positive reception of the Georgia Regional Transportation Authority (GRTA) "Xpress" commuter bus to Atlanta. As a result, county citizens recognized that there could be value in having a local transit service. County officials stated that benefits of the new demand response system include mobility, quality of life, and air quality. Officials also expressed interest in developing a circulator/fixed route service in its urban areas because of the growth the county is facing and the interest and demand from its citizens. Troup County citizens have also interested in a fixed route system for intercity commuting connections between three cities but the county has not yet identified a funding source.

"Transit plays a role in air quality in terms of getting cars off the road and gives options for citizens who are aging . . . When the 5311 program began, [the County] received tons of phone calls saying thank goodness and that it was allowing people to be independent and not have to rely on someone else for a ride." – Coweta County official.

Observations and Challenges

Funding

GDOT identified the non-Federal match (20 percent) required for Federal programs and shared equally between the State and local governments as a significant challenge for local governments. Rural transit providers identified the delay and uncertainty in FTA funds due to the reauthorization delay as an issue. Funding in general, especially for operations and maintenance, is a concern.

At the regional and local levels, despite the close service coordination for public and human services transportation, transit providers noted that they are required to track trips by program and funding source, resulting in separate bills, invoices, and monthly reports. However, transit providers also reported that GDOT is currently working with DHS and other agencies to better streamline and coordinate such processes.

Staffing

GDOT reports that it has limited staff to accomplish its responsibilities but that it works to prioritize service provision. Transit providers reported that mandatory GDOT and RC meetings are difficult to cover, in particular if advance notice is not given.

Regionalization

GDOT and transit agencies that participated in the discussions report that rural transit service is often restricted by county boundaries and that statewide coordination is often challenged by the number and diversity of different rural transit systems. Counties not participating in a regional system report either only providing service within the county, transferring customers to other county's systems at the border or other determined site, or providing service outside the county for county residents only, which results in long-distance travel and makes a vehicle and driver unavailable for a long period of time.

Conclusions

- Public and human service transportation is coordinated at the State, region or district, and local levels. This coordination has resulted in three regional transportation system demonstration projects, which may represent the future trend in statewide rural transit provision and planning in Georgia. The coordination has also resulted in collaboration in planning efforts and ensuring that transit services are used efficiently for both public transportation and human services passengers.
- GDOT does specific outreach to Section 5311 providers, including requiring monthly reports and conducting an annual invitation to consider implementing a Section 5311 program where none exist. The monthly reports are used to evaluate whether agencies qualify for future capital funding based on established criteria. The annual invitation has resulted in increases in the number of Section 5311 programs.

- A recently passed bill (HB 277) introduces several changes in terms of funding and coordination to the statewide transportation system that may have positive impacts on rural transit in the long term.
- The perception of transit appears to be changing in non-urban areas as citizens experience the benefits of intercity and commuter services and start to recognize the role transit plays in accessing jobs, medical services, and other destinations.