

OneAthens Public Transportation Implementation Team
November 1, 2007, Multimodal Transportation Center

Team Members Present: Beth Gavrilles (Chair), John Devine (RDC), Butch McDuffie (ATS), Andrew Neighbors (ABHS), Alice Kinman (ACC Commission), Peggy Hackett (DHR), Dick Field (ACC Environmental Coordinator), Ron Hamlin (UGA Transit)

Presenters: Dan Bollinger (Southwest Georgia RDC), Barbara Foster (Coastal Georgia RDC)

Staff: Delene Porter

- I. Beth welcomed group and had Team review and approve minutes from October 4.
- II. Team approved Local Transit Needs (See Appendix A)
- III. Team reviewed Regional Transit Needs (See Appendix B)
- IV. Presentation from Southwest Georgia RDC- Dan Bollinger
 - A. SW GA RDC's transit program covers 14 counties
 - B. The took the DHR portion of the rural transit program over because the old human resource transport service was cumbersome and inefficient
 - C. They streamlined the system by having the agencies contact the providers (companies that do the driving) directly rather than going through a central clearinghouse
 - D. The system is a demand and response system
 - E. The RDC builds in cost for overhead into each trip which it escrows. This money is saved up to buy new equipment and to provide the match required to receive federal 5311 transit grants
 - F. Counties were interested in having the 5311 tranist program but could not come up with the federal match. The RDC took over administration and was able to apply for the federal 5311 grants on a regional basis. Commissions passed resolutions that allow the RDC to submit this grant on their behalf.
 - G. Counties are not the operators- the RDC is- so they can cross county lines with no problem
 - H. Now the RDC manages the DHR funds, the federal 5311 funds, and the Medicaid non emergency transit system from the Dept of Community Health
 - I. All three sources reimburse differently, but it is better to do all of them so that there is seamless service
 - J. They've also had good support from businesses who have them pick up employees and make it easy for them to pay for their rides by doing payroll deduction
 - K. If you're going to do a good job, you have to coordinate all the systems- volume allows for efficiency
- V. Presentation from Coastal Georgia RDC- Barbara Foster
 - A. Coastal GA RDC's transit program serves 10 counties

- B. They had 3 small 5311 transit programs that worked with DHR but were independent systems and 3 only worked within their specific county- They needed to eliminate the county boundaries
- C. The barrier to getting more counties to participate was the county match requirement so they used DHR funding to make it more of an incentive
- D. DHR and DOT helped pay for a feasibility study
- E. They used the 2000 census to determine the size of the rural population in each county. From this they estimated the cost of operations- for 10 counties they estimated a cost of \$1,999,200. DOT requires a 10% match so they applied their DHR money to this. They took the net deficit and divided it into the percentage of the rural population in each county- this brought the cost to the county down.
- F. They figured out how to further reduce the cost to the counties by applying DHR purchase of service money to the net deficit as well
- G. With the greatly reduced cost to each county, they hope to have everyone bought in and be up and running by July 2008
- H. They're looking into having an 1 800 # dispatch system
- I. They're also looking for a good software program to help coordinate
- J. DHR has allowed them to bank money to save up for vehicles for the new program
- K. They're going to create shuttle stops on the fringe of Savannah's system so people can connect to that existing system
- L. The main hesitation from counties has been a fear that DOT will take funding away, but those fears have been addressed and the pros- economic development- are so large
- M. Considering creating a regional van pool program geared toward commuters- quite a few people commute into Savannah
- N. The other guarantee that helps workers buy into this model is that they guarantee a ride home- so even if you took a van in, if you have an emergency and need to get home before the end of the work day, they will get you home by van or taxi.
- O. The first phase of the initial design is at www.coastalgeorgiadc.org

VI. Next steps:

- A. Information provided by Dan and Barbara will be added to the Regional Transit plan and sent to Team for approval
- B. Team will present recommendations to the Steering Committee and the Community at upcoming meetings. A prep meeting will be scheduled as soon as the dates are confirmed.

APPENDIX A:

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. 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:*
- *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.

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.

APPENDIX B:

OneAthens Transportation Implementation Team: Regional Transit Needs

PPA Transportation Subcommittee recommendation on Regional Transit:

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 people do not have transportation; 74% would use public transportation for a fee; and 65% required out-of-county travel. Census figures show that only 34.9% of households in Region 5 have cars (35.8% of households in Clarke County.)

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.

Next Steps: A Model for Regional Rural Transportation Programs

Two of Georgia's Regional Development Centers (RDCs), the McIntosh Trail and Southwest Georgia RDCs, operate regional transit systems using 5311 funds. The OneAthens Transportation Implementation Team will study these models to determine whether something similar might work here.

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:

- Define the scope of the regional transportation system
- A feasibility study of a public/private commuter bus between Athens and Atlanta
- Continuing to develop coordination of existing transit programs in the area
- Continuing discussion with neighboring counties about regional transportation
- Continuing advocacy for the Athens to Atlanta commuter rail line
- Continuing advocacy for federal and state funding for public transportation