

## **OneAthens Public Transportation Implementation Committee**

Athens Area Chamber of Commerce, May 21, 2007

**Present:** Beth Gavrilles, Butch McDuffie, Ed Graham, Dick Field, Andrew Neighbors, John Devine, Ron Hamlin, Alice Kinman, Peggy Hackett, Delene Porter

The Team approved meeting minutes from April 30th. These minutes will be posted to the website.

Beth gave a quick update on OneAthens progress. Most of the teams have met and each Team has been asked to define a Team Product by June 4. The Transportation Initiative recommends a dramatic increase in Athens Transit (AT) and the development of a regional transit system by January 2009, but the team needs to come up with specific products to reach the goals of this initiative.

### **AT expansion within ACC**

This is the first goal of the initiative. Butch gave a report on AT's expansion priorities:

Butch was charged by the ACC Manager's office to look at PPA initiatives and to see what AT could do to help meet those goals. AT staff's working group sent a list of priorities to the manager last Thursday and expect a reply in about a week.

The priorities were chosen using demographic data. AT staff started by looking at residents at 80% or below area median income (AMI), and matched those households to geographic areas. Because college students can appear, if judged solely on income, to be part of the target population that PPA aims to help, AT considered more than just income, such as whether the head of household was over 25 years old, race, enrollment in a public university, and whether children under 18 years old were present and considered to be in poverty.

Geographically, the working group excluded student corridors like Barnett Shoals and College Station Roads. They found that most citizens below 80% of AMI live within .5 miles of transit service, with 2 or 3 pockets that are exceptions, such as Stonehenge, Newton Bridge Road, N.E. Athens (Danielsville Rd/Hwy 29). In these areas there are residents at or below 80% AMI but there is no AT coverage.

For most AT users, the major problem is not access, but frequency. Most of the routes run once every hour. AT wants to increase the frequency for all routes to at least once every 30 minutes. 50-60% of the current routes would need to be increased to meet this frequency standard.

Many of these priorities have been laid out in the Transit Development Plan (TDP) and the approved MACORTS Transportation Improvement Plan (TIP). Unfortunately, due to lack of funding, AT is falling behind on meeting the goals of these plans and PPA. For instance, the TIP says that for FY 08, AT should have 22 buses at 30-minute frequency or better, but with the proposed ACC budget will only be able to have 19. The TDP calls

for all buses to move to the 30-minute or better frequency before expanding routes. It also calls for earlier weekday service (to allow UGA food service workers, among others, to use transit), increasing Saturday service and adding Sunday service, extending current routes, and adding new routes.

The current routes have been essentially the same for 14 years, but growth in ACC continues to add residents to areas without AT service. It is time to look into extending current routes and adding new ones. AT has seen growth in ridership, but not in routes. Examples of areas that have grown and could benefit from new or expanded routes include the far end of Barnett Shoals Rd., west Athens, north on 441, and northeast toward Winterville.

For outlying areas, demand-response or neighborhood circulators would be better solutions than just extending fixed-route service. It would be more efficient to use Link service to get people to the fixed routes, perhaps with circulators in each sector (N, S, E, and W.)

To improve service, AT also has to plan based on where people work as well as where they live. Currently there are employment centers not served by fixed routes. Link service or an employer-operated (or funded) shuttle could work to get employees from fixed routes to work. For instance, a regularly scheduled Link shuttle could operate on Olympic Drive.

AT also is considering route realignment; not all routes necessarily need to go to the MMTC.

#### Discussion:

It was suggested that we ask large employers for the zip codes on their payrolls so that we can figure out where employees are traveling from – this would help in developing regional public transportation.

Ed suggested that shuttles would likely work better for employees on regular (day) work schedules than those on shift work, since the shifts change.

There was a question about frequency and ridership – would service every 15 minutes attract many more riders? The American Public Transit Association probably has studies on that. The opinion of the group was that 30 minute frequency would make transit better for people who have to use it but won't necessarily attract people on who don't.

There are federal tax incentives available to employers who subsidize public transportation for their employees. Businesses can write off \$120 a month per employee for supplying bus passes, etc. Or employees can buy bus passes using pre-tax dollars through their employer. Ed said that the Chamber might be willing to host a workshop for employers on this topic. He suggested that small and medium sized businesses will be hard to reach because of the substantial paperwork involved; and large employers don't really need to do it, but they'll at least be likely to come to

the meeting. He suggested targeting HR people; a transit pass would be an employee benefit they could offer, and since they want their employees to be on time, it is in their interest to help them access reliable transportation. If the OneAthens Transportation Team puts together a questionnaire to gauge interest in offering transit passes, the Chamber is willing to send it out although not too hopeful about results.

It was also suggested that we talk to ARMC and UGA which already help their employees with transit. ACC government is the logical next employer to involve.

We need to continue the educational effort about public transportation for elected officials and citizens. We also need to help riders know what services are already available, and we need to reach out to particular groups, like Hispanic population, to help overcome their barriers (real and perceived) to using AT.

Work Product: Butch will create a short version of the recommendations outlined in the TDP, the TIP, and the report to the Manager's office. These will be weighed by the Transportation Team as the product for increasing local transit. Team will work to balance what can be currently provided with the ideal.

### **Regional public transportation system**

Peggy Hackett, Georgia Department of Human Resources Regional Transportation Coordinator for Region 5, gave a brief overview of her program. Region 5 is a 12-county area including Athens and surrounding counties. 8 years ago the state realized it needed to pull its different departments together- aging, health, addictive services, DFCS, public health, etc. – to coordinate their transportation efforts. DHR has a contract with 2 providers for Region 5. Advantage Behavioral Health Services (ABHS) handles 11 of those counties. They provide transport to all DHR programs in the region, they cross county lines, and they have to provide needed trips 24/7.

There is still great need for trips they can't do or don't have funding or vehicles for. ABHS has ridership restrictions – the human service centers determine eligibility of people who can ride, so most who ride are DHR clients, a few public trips are given to those who fall through cracks of Medicaid non-emergency trips (e.g. for dialysis).

DHR is working on the Coordinated Public and Human Services Plan 5316, and looking at covering other transportation purposes. For instance, DFCS clients who go off TANF still may need rides to work if they're going keep their jobs and stay off TANF. Also there are developmentally disabled clients who need to get to work. Many times people come into Athens to work or get services.

DHR did a transportation study and found that about 60% of people in outlying counties would use public transportation if it were available.

Peggy will write up a one page summary of DHR's transportation model.

Andrew reported on ABHS service in Greene County, as well as the different Federal funding programs for rural transportation (see attached.)

The Greene County manager wants to be kept informed, and is willing to participate in a regional transportation system as long as there are clear benefits for Greene County residents. Funding would need to come from all the counties involved. Currently, Madison and Barrow do not have rural public transportation programs. Elbert, Jackson, Greene, Morgan Counties and City of Social Circle do have programs.

We need an assessment of demand for transportation by people with low incomes. The key issue is to identify the people who need transportation and figure out where the gaps are. Some of the vehicles that serve DHR clients are not always full – there must be a way to put the paying public on those buses, regardless of who is operating them.

5203 is a federal transportation planning grant. Seven states have been selected for statewide transportation planning grants; we should be able to get some of this funding.

John reported that the NE GA RDC is willing to host a workshop/summit on regional transportation. The RDC is eligible for 5311 rural transportation funds, and there are successful models of this in south Georgia such as McIntosh Trail. Letters of interest for 5311 funding just went out.

If RDC hosts a workshop it would need to take place after July 1. The group made suggestions for the workshop:

- Talk about the Federal funding sources
- Success stories – Robert Hyatt of McIntosh Trail; SW GA RDC director
- What local match is required
- Benefits of public transportation to the community (Butch offered to do this part)
- Gauging interest in regional plan

The workshop would be for elected officials, planners, county managers. We will ask ACCG and GMA for help in funding the workshop. Alice is on the ACCG Transportation and Economic Development Committee. There is an ACCG staff person, Beth Taylor, who lives in Athens.)

We will ask for the Mayor's help in inviting her counterparts within the 12-county region. It will be important especially to keep Madison and Oconee County in the loop. Alice will work on this.

John also informed the group that the RDC will have funding via GDOT for transit planning. He will see if he can get permission for this to be used for regional transit planning rather than for just two counties in the region. John will talk to RDC about doing the regional plan for the Athens region. Butch mentioned that he is trying to get funding to update the TDP for MACORTS, and could coordinate with the RDC planning process so that they aren't duplicating efforts. Peggy said that other RDCs have been able to do regional plans.

It would help to have a GIS intern through UGA; Beth is looking into this.

Ron reported that he researched some case studies of regional transportation systems. He will bring write-ups to the next meeting or send them via email. Triangle transit area in NC is a good example. Piedmont Area Regional Transit (PART) is another. Regional transportation requires coordinating between university/DHR/city transit. Ron will also talk to Robert about state of GA. Another group member also suggested that the Team look at the system that runs through Franklin and Murphy in TN.

The group agreed to invite Prof. Jack Crowley in to help us with our regional transportation vision/plan. Prof. Crowley told Beth about the NE GA Regional Transportation Authority, which has been enabled by the GA General Assembly, intended to be an airport authority, but hasn't been active. It is being revived by proponents of the Brain Train. Butch said he would look into whether it can they levy taxes. EH Culpepper is knowledgeable about it but is in poor health. Beth will ask the UGA Land Use Clinic if they can look into it.

Our goal is to develop a regional system (not just a plan for a regional system) by 2009. We'll need to figure out the price tag, get buy-in from regional partners, and develop particulars of the plan. We need to determine what the coordinating entity will be. We need a framework for defining the plan. We need to set ground rules about what we think a regional transit system is before we hold the workshop.

#### **Other**

Chamber of Commerce "After Hours" at Multimodal Transportation Center: August 17<sup>th</sup>

**Next meeting** will focus on regional planning.

June 4 at 2pm at the Multimodal Transportation Center conference room.