

Gulf Coast Regionally Coordinated Transportation Plan Update



Executive Summary

Houston-Galveston Area Council

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The Gulf Coast Regionally Coordinated Transportation Plan was approved by the Regional Transit Coordination Subcommittee on August 17, 2017. It was accepted by the H-GAC Transportation Policy Council on September 22, 2017.



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The greater Houston area is the fifth largest metropolitan region in the United States. Between 2014 and 2015 the Houston region led the nation with a population increase of over 159,000: a growth rate of 2.4%. Between 2010 and 2015 more than 700,000 people and over 440,000 jobs were added to the region. Current forecasts indicate that by 2040 the region will be home to 10 million people and over 4 million jobs. Additionally, there is an increasing population of elderly persons (65 and older) which was reported at 9% of the population in 2010 and is estimated to double to 18% by 2040.¹ The combined effect of that recent growth and changes in other regional demographic factors has resulted in the need to provide more transportation options for local residents.

The regionally coordinated transportation planning process is designed to improve the mobility options for persons with disabilities, individuals aged 65 and older, individuals with lower incomes, persons with limited English skills, youth and veterans, among others. The benefits of identifying transportation related needs and gaps and addressing them helps all residents. The value added to society related to better access to medical care, employment and training opportunities for people who don't or cannot drive should also be considered. A local stakeholder stated recently that all trips begin and end as pedestrian trips and it is critical that all needed infrastructure improvements benefit the general population.

The Gulf Coast Region reported close to 90 million annual transit trips (boardings) with annual operations and capital costs close to \$855 million.² Approximately 96% of the regional transit ridership and associated investment and expenditures are under the jurisdiction of the Metropolitan Transit Authority of Harris County (METRO). All regional transit coordination initiatives and related activities should be coordinated with METRO in a proactive manner to be successful.

During his opening remarks at a local transportation symposium, Jack Steele, Executive Director of the Houston-Galveston Area Council (H-GAC), pointed out the purpose of the meeting; “to talk about *partnerships* and *collaboration*, not just because partnerships are good, which they are, and collaboration is more efficient, which it is, but because partnerships and collaborations are essential in providing more transit service, especially for those areas not served by the region's major transit provider.”³

The smaller transit operators in the region face multiple challenges including the lack of a dedicated transit funding source, lower population densities than Harris County and the need to

¹ Source Houston-Galveston Area Council (H-GAC) Community and Environmental Planning at www.h-gac.com.

² Source: Federal Transit Administration National Transit Database, 2014.

³ Gulf Coast Assessment of Unmet Transportation Needs, H-GAC, October 2016.

provide longer trips for many of their customers. Preliminary estimates of the funding gap for the smaller transit operators range between \$3 million and \$16 million per year depending on federal and state funding levels. Funding priorities for larger scale transit projects are being developed through a parallel planning process that will be part of the 2045 Regional Transportation Plan.

The vulnerable population groups noted above are the core groups whose transportation needs are the special focus of the Regionally Coordinated Transportation Plan (RCTP). However, the RCTP provides an important role in the Gulf Coast Region to focus upon the gaps, needs, best practices and challenges faced in the rapidly growing region for all its residents. The RCTP is developed by H-GAC in close coordination with the region's transit providers through the Regional Transit Coordination Subcommittee (RTCS).

Addressing transit gaps and needs requires four distinct strategies. First, consistent with the 2040 Regional Transportation Plan (RTP), is the need for **broad regional connectivity** of transportation services along major travel corridors. Second is the development of **new and innovative local transit services** in urban as well as rural locations that are currently unserved or underserved. Third is the continuous **improvement and expansion of existing services** by current transit and human service agencies. Finally, is the enhancement of **coordination between adjacent agencies** to build coordinated services at the sub-regional level.

To implement those strategies, "best practice" examples of partnerships and collaboration between transit agencies in the Gulf Coast region were highlighted by Texas Transportation Institute researcher, Linda Cherrington and include the following:

- Southern Brazoria County Transit
- Woodlands and the City of Conroe- Conroe Connections
- METRO and Harris County Transit (HCT) Baytown Park and Ride
- HCT- East Harris County and the City of Baytown
- Fort Bend Express
- Island Transit and Gulf Coast Center Connect Transit
- METRO Star Vanpool⁴

Rapid continued growth in the Gulf Coast Planning Region (especially in the Urban and Suburban Counties) increases the need for transit service. It places great stress upon existing transportation services and increases demand for new transit services. Funding is stretched further as needs increase beyond currently-available resources. Existing funding is inadequate to meet current transit needs in future years.

⁴ Power of Transit Symposium, H-GAC, June 2016

“We’re not going to be able to build highways and roadways fast enough to reduce the congestion we already have, much less accommodate the growth that is coming” stated Lex Frieden, a member of the METRO Board of Directors, during a recent RCTP panel discussion.

Improving transit service for the vulnerable populations listed above also improves transit service for the general population. Most seniors and persons with disabilities in cities with fixed route service travel by bus (or rail) if they are ambulatory, rather than by paratransit or dial-a-ride service. As mentioned in the RCTP agency survey of public transit and human service providers, the two greatest needs are for additional funding and expanded fixed route bus service. Designing solutions to address regional mobility problems should consider fixed route bus service as a primary alternative that may have a lower per-passenger cost with a higher volume of ridership than demand responsive services.

A recent regional transportation opinion survey revealed some interesting results concerning needs and attitudes toward transit by the public within the region. Among the over 2,000 respondents throughout the region who participated, 81% supported the addition of transit services in areas that do not currently have them. When questioned regarding the need for additional local revenue to fund general transit service, 79%, either strongly or somewhat favored that option. Additional funding for commuter rail was either strongly or somewhat favored by 76% of respondents, more funding for regular bus service by 72%, and additional funding for park and ride service by 77% of those who answered the survey. While responses were slightly more favorable in Harris County, all areas of the region expressed significantly positive sentiments towards transit.⁵

This report includes several recommendations to address identified transit service gaps. The recommendations are based on transit needs that include factors such as: median household income, senior population, persons with disabilities, households without automobiles and population density.

Among the primary recommendations emerging from the gap analysis were the following:

- Development of additional revenue sources for transit;⁶
- Enhanced regional and intercity connectivity to improve mobility for all riders in travelling to and between locations throughout the Gulf Coast Region;
- The implementation of new transit services in communities that have no or relatively limited transit services such as: Alvin, Pasadena, Channelview, Chambers County, Liberty County, Waller County and Walker County/Huntsville;
- New transit in areas of growth and emerging demographic change such as League City, Webster and other Bay Area communities straddling Harris and Galveston Counties;

⁵ Regional Community Transportation Needs Assessment Survey Conducted by Community Development Strategies (CDS) for H-GAC (March 2017)

⁶ For more details see the RCTP Financial Plan, Appendix G.

Mission Bend, Four Corners, Missouri City and Stafford in northern and eastern Fort Bend County; and communities in western Harris County, specifically the Highway 6 corridor north of the Barker/Cypress Reservoir.

The Federal Transit Administration (FTA) requires each state to engage in the development of a regionally coordinated transportation planning process every five years. The Texas Department of Transportation-Public Transportation Division (TxDOT-PTN) leads that process for the 24 regions throughout the state of Texas that results in coordinated transit plans in each region. TxDOT Region 16, the Gulf Coast Planning Region, is comprised of 13 counties: Austin, Brazoria, Chambers, Colorado, Fort Bend, Galveston, Harris, Liberty, Matagorda, Montgomery, Walker, Waller and Wharton. See **Map 1**.

MAP 1
13- COUNTY GULF COAST PLANNING REGION

