

# Rural Public Transit in Southern Georgia

A State of Public Transit Report

June 2013



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## Introduction

The primary purpose of the Southern Georgia Regional Commission's (SGRC) Report of Rural Public Transit in Southern Georgia is to present viable transportation alternatives and recommendations on how best to achieve the mobility goals and objectives identified by the communities. The SGRC is a multi-disciplinary service delivery agency working for local, member governments and serves the counties of Atkinson, Berrien, Brooks, Brantley, Ben Hill, Cook, Charlton, Clinch, Coffee, Echols, Irwin, Bacon, Lanier, Lowndes, Pierce, Turner, Tift and Ware.



*Figure 1 Typical Transit Vehicle in Southern Georgia*

According to the Community Transportation Association of America (CTAA), more than one third of America's population lives outside of urbanized areas. Nearly 40 percent of the country's transit dependent population – primarily senior citizens, persons with disabilities and low-income individuals – reside in rural areas. Yet in many rural communities, public and community transportation are extremely limited or absent. The demographics, mobility needs and resources of rural areas are much different than those of urban areas. Currently nine counties (Berrien, Brooks, Lowndes, Cook, Tift, Turner, Ware,

Bacon, and Pierce) in southern Georgia provide rural public transit services to their residents. This service is delivered through the Federal Transit Administration 5311 Rural Public Transit Program in each of the counties. Eight of the counties have chosen to use a third-party operator to deliver the service, while another operates the service in-house.

This report is the state of rural public transit in the Southern Georgia Regional Commission (SGRC) area. The report includes an evaluation of existing services, a review of demographic and travel behavior characteristics of the service area (includes all eighteen counties), a review of transit related goals and objectives, a demand estimation and needs assessment, and recommendations to the existing rural public transit systems in the region.

Mobility is a vital component in most rural communities, with the SGRC area being no different. The availability of public transportation provides options to senior citizens, those without vehicles, and those who are physically or economically disadvantaged. The ability to provide a transportation alternative for those who live in a rural area is as important as for those who live in a high-density, metropolitan setting. The availability of reliable public transportation improves the quality of life in rural communities across the region by providing safe, efficient and economical service. It also serves as a vital component necessary for a healthy economy.

## Demographic Analysis

The Southern Georgia Regional Commission spans a large rural region of the state with 45 cities and small towns in 18 counties. Counties in the Southern Georgia Regional Commission area include: Atkinson, Bacon, Ben Hill, Berrien, Brantley, Brooks, Charlton, Clinch, Coffee, Cook, Echols, Irwin, Lanier, Lowndes, Pierce, Tift, Turner, and Ware.

Four distinct regional economies exist grouped around the larger economic centers: Valdosta, the regions' only Metropolitan Area in the region; Waycross; Douglas; and Tifton.

The total population for the southern Georgia region increased from 366,956 in 2001 to 410,520 in 2011, a 1.2% annual population change in 10 years.

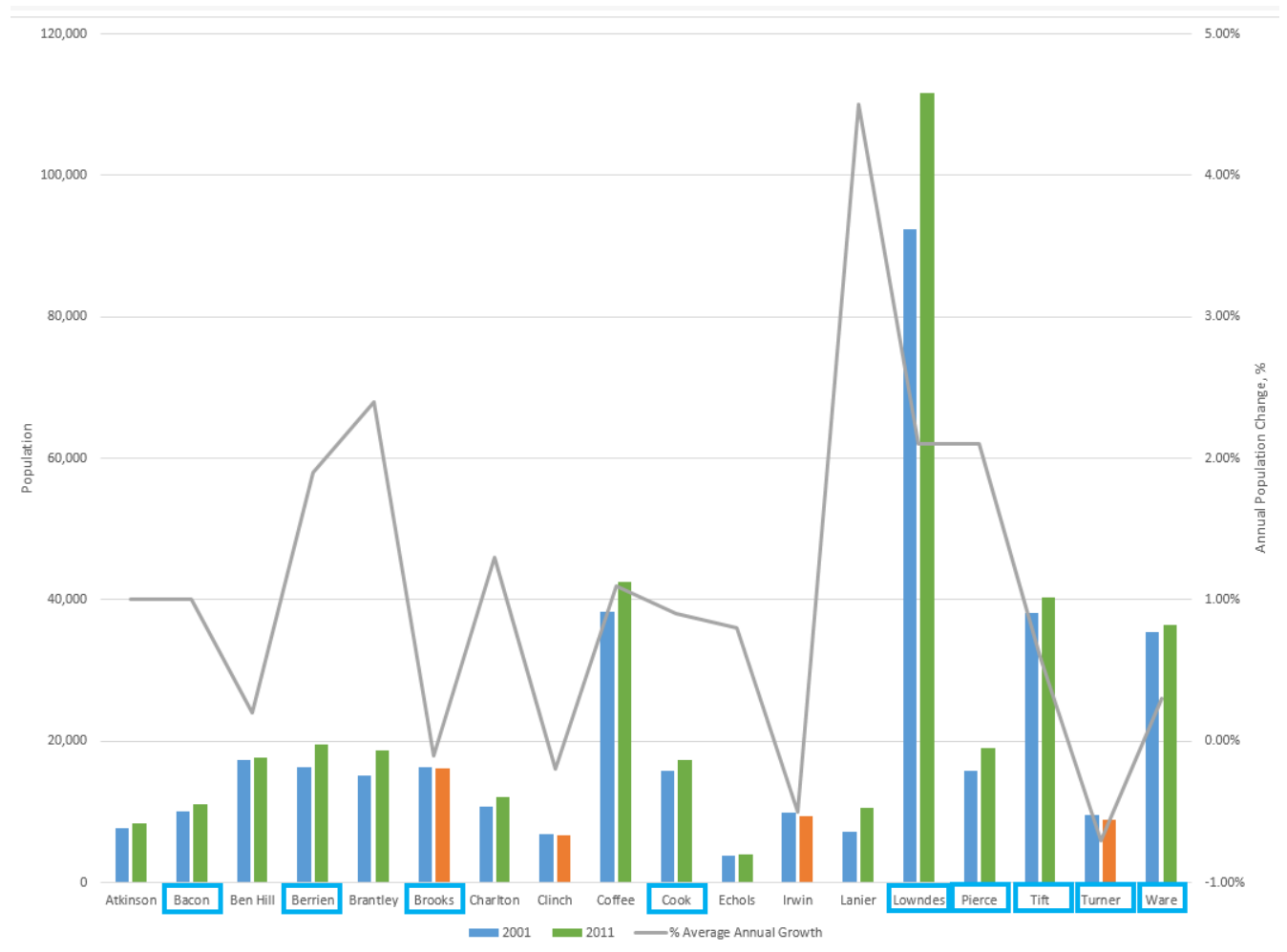


Figure 2 Population Change. Counties with boxes indicate transit providers. Counties with 'red' population indicates a loss since 2001.

Growth centers within the region account for much of the population increase. Lanier County had the largest percentage increase in population (7,241 in 2000 to 10,078 in 2010) at 39.2% percent, due primarily to its proximity to Moody Air Force Base (MAFB), and the Valdosta Metropolitan Area, among other factors. Moody AFB also contributed to population increases in Lowndes and Berrien Counties.

The growth in the counties near Waycross included an influx from Florida, near the Jacksonville Metropolitan Area. For example, the second largest population increase of 25.9% occurred in Brantley County from 14,629 in 2000 to 18,411 in 2010. Large population increases also occurred in Pierce and Charlton County due to these nearby economic centers.

Four of the eighteen counties in the region experienced a loss in population between 2000 and 2010. Turner County experienced the highest loss with 6%, followed by Irwin County with a 4.0% population decrease. Both Irwin and Turner are near the Tifton and Douglas regional economic centers. In addition, Clinch and Brooks Counties had a 1% population decline. The loss in population is due in part to the lack of job growth. Lack of job opportunities fails to attract new residents to these counties. While it is not a definitive analysis, in general, where population has increased in the past decade is where rural public transit is provided.

In the SGRC region the 65 years and older population is nearly 12.4% of the population, and is expected to continue to grow as the baby boom generation ages. In rural communities, many seniors rely heavily on rural public transportation for basic mobility needs and the transit services in Southern Georgia work to meet some of this need..

	65+	65+ % of Total
Atkinson	890	10.63%
Bacon	1,480	13.34%
Ben Hill	2,468	14.00%
Berrien	2,664	13.88%
Brantley	2,260	12.28%
Brooks	2,560	15.76%
Charlton	2,543	19.31%
Clinch	868	12.77%
Coffee	4,691	10.04%
Cook	2,320	13.48%
Echols	398	9.87%
Irwin	1,485	15.57%
Lanier	1,104	10.95%
Lowndes	10,693	9.79%
Pierce	2,631	14.03%
Tift	5,123	12.77%
Turner	1,401	15.69%
Ware	5,531	15.23%
Region	51,110	12.41%
Without Transit		12.82%
With Transit		13.77%

*Figure 3 Senior-aged Population in Southern Georgia Region, 2010 Census*

The age data above shows that, in general, counties with rural public transportation have a higher percentage of persons aged 65 and above. This is not the only factor in seniors living in these communities, but it is an indication that there is a potential pool of ridership in these communities.

	Median Income	Individuals below Poverty Level	Unemployment Rate
Atkinson	\$ 33,834	2,331	14.00%
Bacon	\$ 31,429	1,723	9.90%
Ben Hill	\$ 30,134	4,635	13.80%
Berrien	\$ 32,202	4,145	12.00%
Brantley	\$ 37,343	3,730	11.50%
Brooks	\$ 41,309	2,687	9.40%
Charlton	\$ 40,850	2,261	11.50%
Clinch	\$ 31,963	1,732	11.50%
Coffee	\$ 35,202	8,274	14.40%
Cook	\$ 31,390	3,854	12.70%
Echols	\$ 32,390	1,274	7.30%
Irwin	\$ 38,376	2,344	13.20%
Lanier	\$ 37,522	1,858	8.50%
Lowndes	\$ 39,096	21,690	9.30%
Pierce	\$ 37,062	2,767	9.80%
Tift	\$ 36,847	8,919	11.50%
Turner	\$ 30,763	2,130	11.60%
Ware	\$ 35,517	6,869	11.70%
Region	\$ 35,179	83,223	11.31%
Without Transit	\$ 35,290	3160	11.74%
With Transit	\$ 35,068	6087	10.88%

*Figure 4 Income and Economic Demographics in Southern Georgia Region*

Income has traditionally been an indicator of need for alternative forms of mobility, usually provided through public transit services. In this region, the communities with transit have a slightly lower median household income, a significantly higher number of people living below the poverty level, and a lower unemployment rate. While each of these indicators appears to say different things about access to public transit the following may be surmised, noting that these are not the only influences on each of the communities.

- Need is greater in those communities with lower median household incomes
- Need is greater in those communities with more individuals under the poverty level

- Public transportation may be one of the reasons individuals are able to find work in these communities

While rural public transit is not the only factor for low income, poverty rates, and unemployment, it can help people access jobs which will increase income, remove poverty barriers and decrease the unemployment rate.

## Transit Goals and Objectives

Over the past several years the SGRC has worked with counties throughout our region to develop transit development plans (Atkinson, Ben Hill, Brooks, Charlton, Clinch, Coffee, Cook, Echols, Irwin, Lanier, Lowndes, Tift, and Turner). These plans were prepared for both counties with and without existing transit services. Some reports have recommended the implementation of public transit services, others have found that it would not be beneficial in some communities. Each plan, however, developed goals and objectives to be addressed by a public transit service if one were implemented or to strive toward if one was in existence. For the most part, these goals are the same across all of the counties where a plan has been implemented with the exception of Tift and Lowndes.

In Tift County the transit development plan was prepared differently, but included the below goals and objectives although some of them were slightly modified to work better in the local circumstances of that community. In Lowndes County, an urban, fixed-route transit feasibility study and implementation plan were developed to work alongside the existing rural public transit system. This urban transit system was not implemented due to inadequate funding, however, the goals and objectives were quite different for this county compared to the rural transit systems in the other counties.

**Goal 1:** *Provide safe efficient, reliable and affordable transportation for all citizens,*

*enabling access to medical, educational, economic, and social activities, especially for those who have no alternative mode of transportation.*

In every county in the region providing transit except Tift, MIDS, Inc. provides third-party operator services to the local government to operate the rural public transit services. MIDS, Inc. is also the current third-party operator of coordinated transportation services for the SGRC and the Georgia Department of Human Services. By using one provider the counties are able to see a cost savings for all residents regardless of their individual transportation needs as they all ride the same vehicles regardless of what federal or state agency is sponsoring their trip.

**Objective 1:** *Provide the most cost-effective service possible for both riders and the county by exploring alternative funding options such as Purchase of Service contracts.*

Counties in southern Georgia use the purchase of service model where the Georgia Department of Human Services through the SGRC purchases trips for their clients on the public transit vehicles. These trips often pay for the local share of operating costs required by the Federal Transit Administration, while keeping the costs low for public riders and for local governments.

**Objective 2:** *Work with communities that already operate services to develop a transportation system based on experience and effectiveness.*

The SGRC currently works with the Georgia Department of Transportation (GDOT) and the Georgia Governors Development Council (GDC) on a Coordinated Rural and Human Services Transportation Plan as required by federal and state laws. Through trip coordination with MIDS, Inc. as noted above, many cost savings and efficiencies are realized by riders sharing trips on vehicles.

**Goal 2:** *Maximize ridership through community outreach efforts including increased advertisement and increased efforts to reach the population of highest need.*

**Objective 1:** *Increase funding for advertising and marketing to explore new options for increasing community awareness of the rural public transit system.*

**Objective 2:** *Develop public education and marketing strategies to promote the use of existing transportation options and encourage the development of new options.*

**Objective 3:** *Explore new image (marketing) options to revitalize the local transit system.*

Many local governments have struggled to provide marketing and outreach to the community to advertise the rural public transit services. The reasons for which they struggle are two fold, in several cases transit vehicles run at near capacity and any advertising of the system will cause riders to be denied trips. On the other hand the public cannot know about these services if they are not advertised.

**Goal 3:** Coordinate transportation planning activities between local governments,

regional planning organizations, and State and Federal authorities.

The SGRC has worked with the local governments, GDOT, GDC and MIDS, Inc. to deliver a coordinated transportation system throughout the region as described earlier. Coordination efforts continue both at the local and state level to find efficiencies in delivering these services.

**Objective 1:** *Maximize service while meeting the needs of the community and developing a sustainable system that meets comprehensive planning goals.*

All local governments develop a local comprehensive plan and many include support for rural public transit services. The most recently adopted regional comprehensive plan includes an identified need for public transportation and has included the development of public transportation systems as a goal in each county.

**Objective 2:** *Keep transit plans up to date and develop a new Transit Development Plan every five years.*

The SGRC will kick-off a new round of Transit Development Plans that will address all counties in FY2014. Over a 5-year period SGRC staff will write a plan for each county that desires one.

**Goal 4:** *Ensure public support for public transportation by involving citizens in planning efforts and decision –making.*

**Objective 1:** *Hold regular public meetings to discuss transportation systems growth and development steps.*



The SGRC works with local governments and MIDS, Inc. to provide information about rural public transit in each county in the region. Currently the SGRC staff provides a regional website for resources regarding public transportation and works with each county to implement and discuss rural public transportation.

## Existing Transit Services

Eight (Bacon, Berrien, Brooks, Lowndes, Cook, Turner, Ware, and Pierce) of the nine counties that provide rural public transit use a third-party operator, MIDS, Inc., the ninth county, Tift, operates the Tift Lift system in house.

As noted previously, the Georgia Department of Human Services contracts with the SGRC to provide trips to various clients using various funding programs. In this region SGRC uses MIDS, Inc. as a third-party operator to provide trips on rural public transit vehicles in the eight counties mentioned above. MIDS, Inc. and other providers serve clients in the other 10 counties that do not have public transit services or do not contract with MIDS, Inc. (Tift County).

Typically, the counties apply for the funds from GDOT, provide vehicle insurance, monitor the transit system and hire companies like MIDS, Inc. to provide daily operations of the transit services. Vans and buses are maintained by MIDS, Inc., who also employ staff such as drivers, dispatchers, maintenance workers, a finance department and trainers to provide high quality service to the riders.

Currently rural public transit services are provided to the public in a demand-response basis, meaning that a rider must call the dispatcher at least 24-hours in advance to schedule a trip. The dispatcher then coordinates this trip on a vehicle for the next

day. Rural transit services are provided from 7:30 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. (Tift County is 8:00 a.m. to 4:00 p.m.). The driver then collects any fare due that is not provided by an agency (GDOT, DHS, etc.) and files the appropriate paperwork with the respective agencies for billing and payment purposes. The Counties generally do not have any interaction with billing the clients or the state or regional agencies, all of these services are provided by the third-party operator.



*Figure 5 Typical Transit Vehicle in Southern Georgia*

The size of the transit fleets in the region have risen slowly over the past few years. Several of the counties have added one or two vehicles as demand necessitates more capacity for riders.

Transit vehicles in this region traveled an average of 26,000 miles a year in 2011, which is down from over 33,000 in 2007. As can be seen in the charts on the following page the capacity of the vehicles has increased as well as the number of vehicles. This allows more coordination of trips by the third-party operator and more people are riding on each vehicle at any given time.

The Federal Transit Administration has a recommended useful life for light-duty transit vehicles, like the ones in use in this region. The recommended useful life is 4-years or 100,000 miles. In 2007 the average transit vehicle in this region was 4 years old, meaning that it had an average of 132,000 miles on it (given the average miles driven per vehicle at that time). As any vehicle ages, maintenance costs increase and it is more cost effective to purchase a new vehicle than to continue maintaining an older one.

As will be noted later, persons with physical disabilities are a key demographic of transit riders. The number of vehicles in the fleet that are ADA accessible has continued to grow over the years to approximately 60 vehicles being accessible by ADA standards. Accessible vehicles allow this demographic more mobility and options when getting to and from work, appointments and other day-to-day activities.

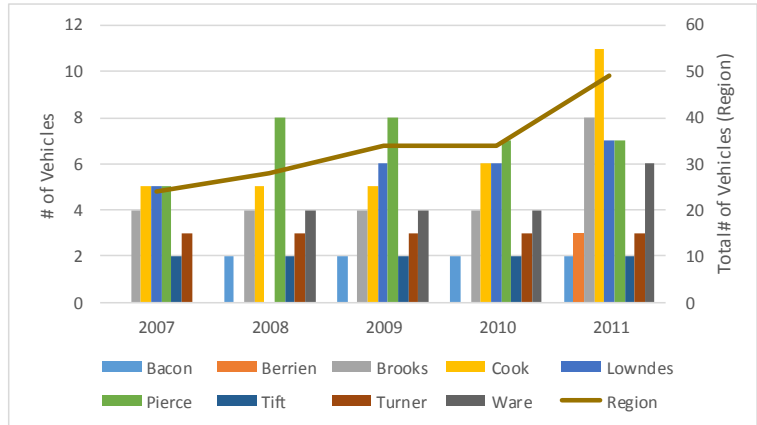


Figure 6 Transit Fleet Size by County. (Not all counties appear to be reporting. In some counties (Cook, 2011) vehicles may be counted twice since some replacements were made that year, so both the old and new vehicles are counted).

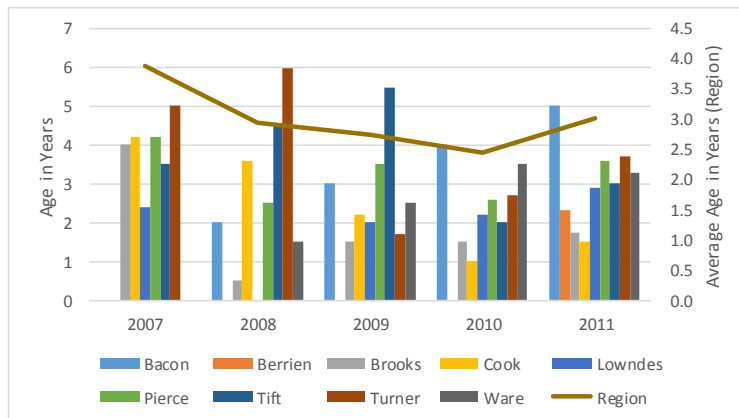


Figure 7 Transit Fleet Age by County

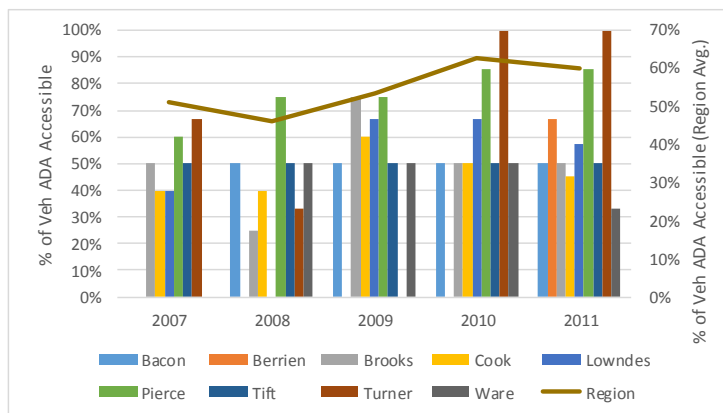


Figure 8 ADA Accessible Vehicles in Transit Fleets

Rural public transit systems in Southern Georgia have delivered more than 200,000 trips from 2007-2011. Because of the rural nature of this region, more than 850,000 miles are driven every year by transit vehicles over the course of 54,000 hours a year.

This is all done as safely as possible. Since 2007, there have been four major incidents reported and only one injury on the transit systems in the region.

What makes the rural transit cost effective and viable in Southern Georgia is that the counties, the SGRC and MIDS, Inc. are able to work together to provide a coordinated transit service to the public through various federal and state funding programs. Through the SGRC coordinated transit program, more than 110,000 additional trips (in addition to public trips) were provided on the rural public transit system vehicles in 2011. The traditional (not paid for by a contracted agency) public transit rider accounts for an average of 23% of total

ridership of the rural transit fleet.

The coordinated transit trips provided through the SGRC are also called 'contracted trips' or 'contracted revenue' and is considered a local match to federal funds. As can be seen in the charts below, more than \$138,000 (annual average) is collected as fare revenue for transit riders, the Federal Transit Administration 5311 program provides more than \$500,000 (annual average) at up to 50% of the net operating deficit for each county, local funds and contracted revenue account for the additional funds to support the rural public transit system in each county at more than \$760,000 (annual average) throughout the region.

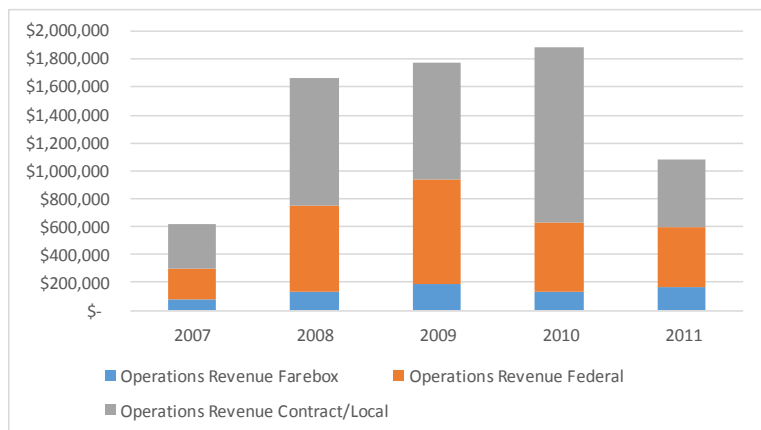


Figure 9 Annual Operating Revenue (region wide)

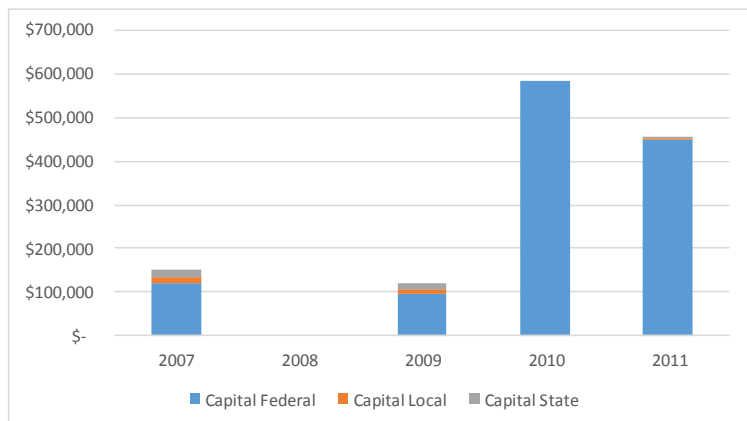


Figure 10 Annual Capital Expenditures (region wide)

As noted previously, the transit fleet in the region has become younger over the past several years. The American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009 (ARRA, or ‘stimulus’) provided a significant investment of capital funds into the transit fleets of the region. In 2010 and 2011 capital investment in the region has more than quadruple what it had been in each of the previous three years.

While each county is generally the same in how the transportation and mobility services are delivered by their rural public transit systems, the federal and state agencies that provide funding and trips for the transit systems varies by county. Below is a chart that describes the various services by county.

	General Public	Elderly and Disabled	DFCS, TANF, etc.	Developmental Disabilities
Bacon	X	X	X	
Berrien	X	X	X	X
Brooks	X	X	X	X
Cook	X	X	X	X
Lowndes	X	X	X	
Pierce	X	X	X	
Tift	X			
Turner	X	X	X	
Ware	X	X	X	

Figure 11 Public and Contracted Rider by Funding Source

Annually the SGRC conducts a ridership survey in coordination with MIDS, Inc. for the coordinated (contracted) trips funded through the SGRC. While this survey does not include public transit riders, it is given to the clients who use the same third-party operator and ride the same vehicles as the general public riders. Presented here is a summary of the results from the most recent survey.

- 90% are very satisfied with the transit experience
- 85% are likely to recommend the service
- 90% are somewhat satisfied or satisfied with the drivers
- 80% are very satisfied with the responsiveness of MIDS, Inc.
- 100% are satisfied with the professionalism of MIDS, Inc.
- 81% are satisfied that their needs are understood
- 100% are satisfied with their safety on transit vehicles
- 88% are somewhat satisfied or satisfied about the timeliness of transit service, while 12% are dissatisfied

Overall the county rural public transit systems appear to be delivering a quality product for residents of the region based on this survey.

## Transit Needs Assessment

In order to determine the necessity or feasibility of a public transportation program in a community it is important to determine the overall need for those services as well as potential demand for the transportation service. Transit need is different from transit demand in that transit need exists whether a service is provided or not, whereas; transit demand is defined as “the number of passenger-trips that will be taken when a given level of passenger transportation service is available”. The need for public transportation services can be determined by exploring a number of factors, such as the transit dependent population of a community, including the elderly, persons with disabilities, and those in the community without access to transportation (typically those with the lowest income). Also, other transportation services provided, or lack thereof, can be a sign of need.

In the Southern Georgia region an average of 10% of the population has a mobility limiting disability. Persons in the region over the age of 65 average 13% of the population with this number expected to grow as the baby-boom generation enters retirement age over the next few decades. The highest typical transit dependent population in the region is the low-income persons, with nearly 25% of the population living under the poverty level.

When considering all the potential riders we find that in relation to the overall population

of the region, there exists a high population of potentially transit dependent residents. Unfortunately only 9 of the 18-counties in the area: Bacon, Berrien, Brooks, Cook, Lowndes, Pierce, Tift, Turner, and Ware offer public transit services. The SGRC has noted in its recent Regional Comprehensive Plan that supporting the development of transit systems in the communities is important and can lead to a greater quality of life and prosperity for the region.

## Recommendations

Nine of the eighteen counties in Southern Georgia currently provide public transit services to their residents. While public transit services are important, no local government should enter into providing this service without great thought and consideration of the financial cost the program can have and the impact it can have on the community.

The Federal Transit Administration 5311 Rural Transit Program currently provides 80% of the cost of capital equipment (the state and local governments split the rest), and up to 50% of the net operating deficit (after fares are collected). The local government is responsible for the remaining 50%. Eight of the nine counties that provide transit currently work with MIDS, Inc. and the SGRC to use SGRC purchased trips to fulfill the local share requirements. Tift County is the only county that pays for the local share out of its county general funds to support the Tift Lift Transit System.

It is recommended that any county that starts a transit system in the region work with the SGRC and a third-party operator to include contracted trips on public transit fleets to maximize the cost efficiencies to the local governments.

While coordinated transportation from different agencies provides some cost efficiencies there are still a large number of trips that are greater in distance due to the definition of rural transit. Many riders may live in a remote, rural location yet need transportation to an urban center for medical appointments, jobs or other services. The sheer distance that must be travelled can be cost prohibitive to both

riders and the local government providing the local match for the trips. As the local and regional economies have consolidated over the years into regional and metropolitan centers (Tifton, Douglas, Waycross and Valdosta) the need to travel further distances from rural areas is becoming more significant. Counties may find cost efficiencies by working together in sub-regions (3-4 counties together) to provide transit services amongst themselves if ridership demand is relatively low, versus the demonstrated need for those riders in each community.

The SGRC and local governments need to continue to make the general public and service providers (medical offices, schools, senior centers, etc.) aware of the rural public transit services available in the region. While many of the transit services may be stretched thin and near capacity for ridership, it is important to make people aware of the services that are available in the community and how their tax dollars are being spent.

The SGRC annually develops 2-3 county level transit development plans that address the specific needs of that community. With the completion of this report the SGRC will begin a process to revisit each of the counties in the region over the next 5 years and develop transit plans for those that desire one. The SGRC will also provide staff technical assistance to local governments and GDOT about the intricacies of the rural public transit systems in Southern Georgia.