

# South East Texas Regional Public Transportation Coordination Plan

## Executive Summary

Approved by Steering Committee: August 23, 2011



# Introduction

The ability to access goods, services, and social interaction is essential to an individual's high quality of life. Some people may take their transportation options for granted, rarely considering *how* they are able to get to a doctor's appointment, the grocery store, place of employment, or friend's house. Others, however, do not have the luxury of indifference when it comes to transportation concerns. Persons with disabilities, the elderly, and those with low incomes can be particularly affected by a lack of transportation options available to assist them, significantly impacting their mobility. Fortunately southeast Texas, like all other regions in Texas, has established a coordinated transportation system that plans for and provides transportation services to those who are transportation disadvantaged, improving efficiencies and increasing mobility options. To supplement past coordination, and to better understand and match resident needs with transportation resources, the South East Texas Regional Planning Commission has developed this plan to provide an update of its regional coordination efforts.



## THE PLANNING PROCESS

The methodology to develop this plan is centered on the following concepts:

- Conducting extensive stakeholder involvement and public outreach
- Documenting existing transportation conditions
- Conducting a needs assessment
- Identifying and prioritizing strategies to address the unmet needs
- Identifying a preferred organizational model to promote coordination

Three main steps were taken to develop recommendations to further implement coordination.

### Public Involvement

A major focus of developing a coordinated transportation plan is public input and stakeholders' input. A plan review committee was created to oversee the creation of this plan and initiate discussions about coordination opportunities. Two rounds of public workshops generated helpful input on needs and coordination strategies.

### Needs Assessment

An analysis was conducted of the existing service to assess the region's needs, gaps and redundancies. Needs come in the form of areas needing transit service, areas needing better coordination, areas where redundancy can be eliminated and other forms as established.

### Strategies and Recommendations

Strategies for addressing the region's needs were established by drawing from the current needs, current practices in the state and best practices across the country. These strategies are formed around the three main concepts of *communications*, *resources* and *connectivity*.

# Public Involvement

Pursuant to development of the plan update, the SETRPC sponsored an inclusive public outreach process. This process included two public meeting series and focus group participation to gather public and stakeholder input on the needs for improved transportation options. Public meetings and focus groups create information that is at the core of the coordination effort. Following are the methods that were used to publicize meetings:



- Public service announcements were distributed to media in the three-county region.
- Posters were displayed in public libraries.
- Flyers were delivered to public libraries, places of worship, Fletcher School, public gathering places, and religious organizations.
- Posters were displayed in Port Arthur Transit vehicles and at the Beaumont Municipal Transit central transfer center.
- Flyers were sent via electronic mail to economic development organizations, human service agencies, and religious organizations.
- The public meeting schedule was published on the South East Texas Regional Planning Commission website.

## PUBLIC MEETINGS

All public meetings were convened in public facilities, i.e. public libraries, city halls, and elementary school. One of the public meetings in Jefferson County was held in a neighborhood where there is a concentration of Hispanic persons and a translator was present to accommodate potential translation needs.

Three focus group sessions were held, two at nonprofit agencies and one at a public library. These sessions were held at Resource Information Support Empowerment Center (RISE), a human services agency that addresses the needs of disabled citizens; the Beaumont Housing Authority, which addresses the housing and social services needs of low-moderate income residents; and the Port Arthur Public Library, where a focus group session for the Regional Public Transportation Coordination Plan Steering Committee was convened to give members an opportunity to provide input.

## INTERVIEWS AND SURVEYS

Since they have regular contact with under-served populations, a survey instrument was developed to gather input from human services providers in the region. A similar survey



instrument was developed for economic development corporations since they address workforce issues. During the period beginning December 2010 and ending February 1, 2011, 19 agencies completed these surveys, either via telephone or by completing the survey form and transmitting it via electronic mail.

## SUMMARY OF INPUT RECEIVED

- Improve Hours of Service for Existing Services
- Intra-regional Bus Transportation Linkages
- Additional Buses
- Expanded Transportation Options (i.e. taxi, express bus service, and train service)
- Expand Bus Transportation Coverage
- Increase/Improve Public Awareness
- Affordability of Existing Services
- Enhance Bus Transportation Facilities
- Service to Un-served Areas.
- Cross-Regional Service
- Transportation to the Southeast Texas Regional Airport
- Public Education
- More Use of Technology

## PUBLIC INPUT CONCLUSION



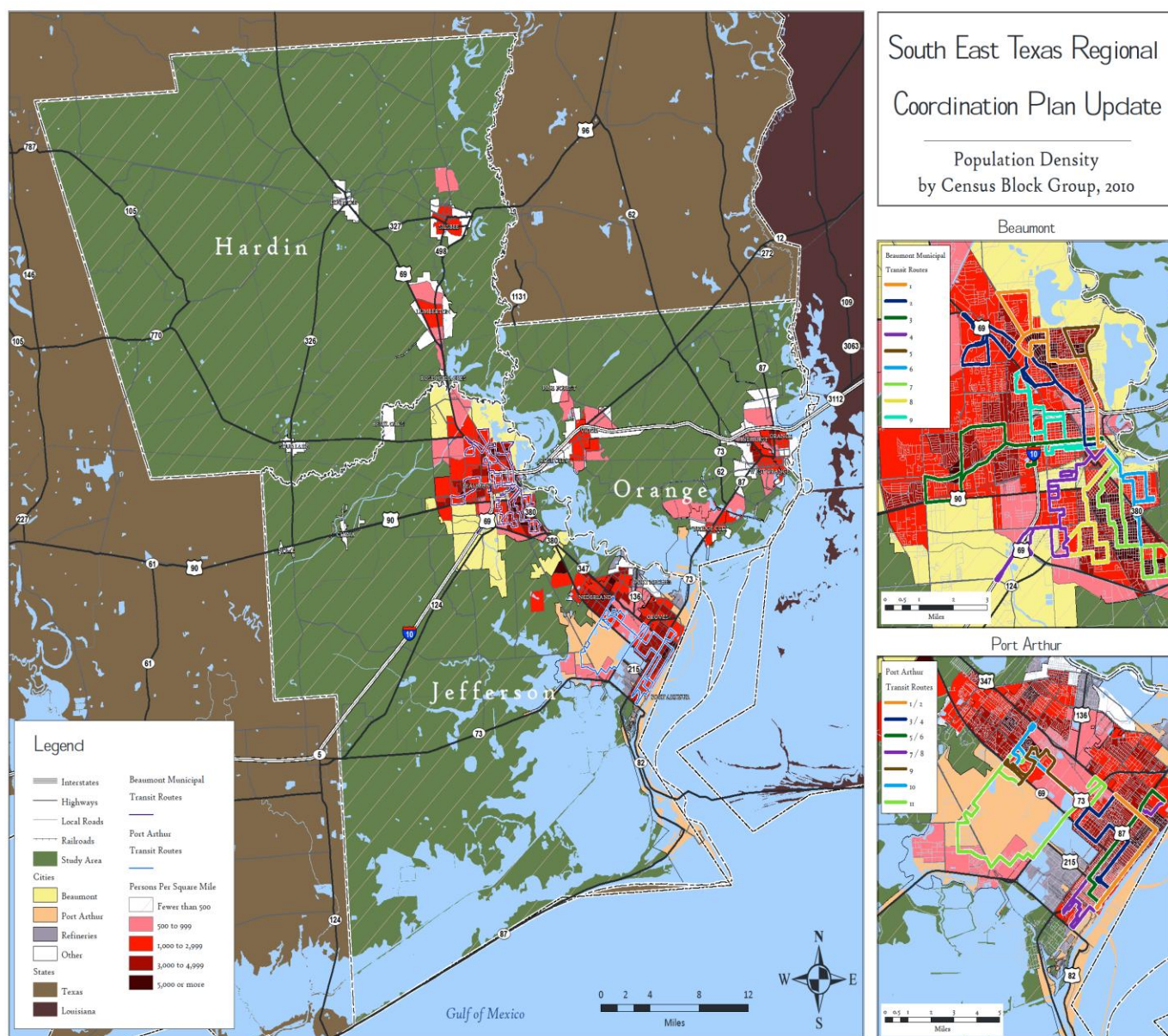
A broad cross-section of persons took part in the public outreach process for the South East Texas Regional Public Transportation Coordination Plan Update. Neighborhood associations, transportation advocacy groups, human service providers, economic development corporations, public housing agency clients, transit providers, and other concerned citizens participated by attending meetings and completing surveys.

Expanded hours of service, cross-regional service, and more buses were the highest priorities for participants. Many expressed an awareness of the constraints under which transportation agencies in the three-county area are operating, the greatest of these being funding constraints and comparatively low population densities, especially outside of the urban areas. Nevertheless, a strong desire for improved access to employment and essential services manifested itself throughout the process.

Expanded hours of service, cross-regional service, and more buses were the highest

# Needs Assessment

Transit dependent populations are spread throughout the three-county region. Transit dependency means “having to rely on transit services instead of the private automobile to meet one's travel needs.” Transit dependent persons generally either do not have access to a vehicle or are unable to operate a vehicle. The elderly (65 years of age and over), the young (under 16 years of age), persons with disabilities, and low-income families are more likely to be transit dependent.



A key step in coordinating transportation services is a careful analysis of the mobility needs of various segments of the population and the potential needs of transit services. While Beaumont Municipal Transit (BMT), Port Arthur Transit (PAT), and South East Texas Transit (SETT) serve the public and a large number of different populations within the three-county area, this particular plan focuses on specific groups of transit dependent populations.



## UNMET NEEDS

Almost all of the participants identified that providing more geographic coverage of transportation for persons of low income, elderly and disabled, increasing hours of service for the existing transit services, and centralizing sources of information as the main areas of unmet needs. Some specific comments regarding unmet needs included:

- Providing more direct service to workforce worksites
- Timely delivery of clients to worksites
- More reliable vehicles
- The need for regional transit connectivity between Hardin, Jefferson and Orange Counties
- The issues of unmet needs are associated with the gaps in communication and some factors of access, such as flexible hours and lower fees (issues commonly associated with the level of funding available)



Human service agencies indicated that more service in the rural areas and increased service hours in the urban areas were needed.

## CONSTRAINTS AND OBSTACLES

Participants in the survey and discussions identified several areas that present constraints and obstacles to establishing a complete coordination system. The information gathered is summarized into three main areas of focus that form the basis of recommendations formed in the coordination plan: Regional Connectivity, Resources, and Communications.

### Regional Connectivity

The need for residents to access destinations outside of their communities is a common comment from stakeholders and the public. This is especially an issue for low-income residents and the elderly. The SETRPC, human service agencies, and transportation providers continuously work on this issue to identify ways to provide seamless travel across the region.

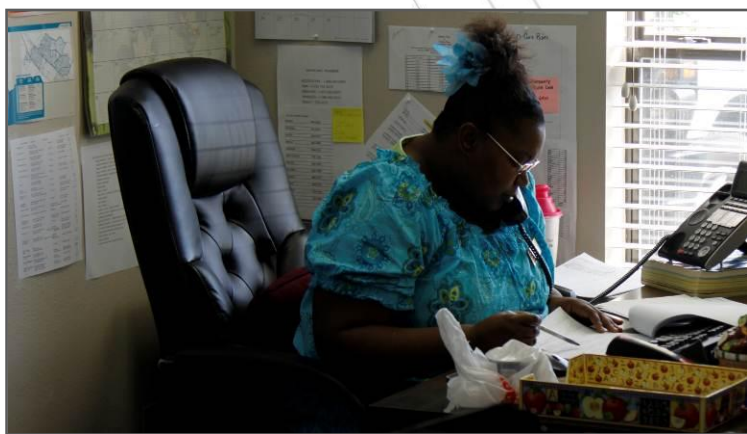


## Resources

Ten to 20 years of sprawled population growth that once depended on automobiles, has begun to look to transit as a transportation option. This demand has placed a large burden on existing resources. Sprawled growth and limited funding makes it difficult for transit to allocate enough resources to serve all residents. As a result, localities must choose where to allocate resources most effectively, charge fares that help recover expenses, limit hours of service to the core times when service is needed the most, and limit destinations to those that are most commonly and conveniently accessed.

## Communications

Participants in the survey and discussions believe that transportation providers in southeast Texas are doing the best with what resources they have. The South East Texas Regional Planning Commission does a good job planning and coordinating transportation services. It is perceived that one missing link is the communities' awareness of these transportation programs and options. No single strategy will be successful unless it can be effectively communicated to the intended market groups. Coordination strategies should include clear and effective understandings of how to best communicate with the intended audiences. These audiences may be residents who need transportation services or even human service agencies who help educate communities.



# Strategies and Recommendations

The fundamental purpose of planning for public transportation coordination is to define transportation needs and resources that, when unified, create increased mobility and access for those with limited transportation options. Unfortunately, planning in general is a long process, and transportation planning truly embodies the complexities of analysis, discussion, decision making and prioritization. Because of this, planning for coordination seeks to address both short-term needs and create a framework to ensure future opportunities for community mobility and accessibility. The Plan outlines strategies built on the anticipation for immediate change and expectations for creating a strong framework for emerging opportunities.

## **Mission and Vision**

The mission and vision statements offer the context in which coordinated human service public transportation service strategies are developed and implemented in the Jefferson, Orange, and Hardin County region. The mission statement identifies the purpose defined for the coordination plan and the outcomes. The vision statement identifies the eventual effect reached when the goals and objectives of this plan are being achieved.

### ***Mission:***

Promote, coordinate, and sustain human services and transportation for the Jefferson, Hardin and Orange County area through the use of technology, communication, and the creation of a coordination council representing diverse perspectives.

### ***Vision:***

To develop and sustain a coordinated transportation system offering dependable, accessible, affordable, and convenient transportation options. Establish a coordination of transportation resources and services that respond to unmet needs and offer service to every resident, especially those who have limited transportation options.



## Recommendations and Strategies

The goals and objectives are built on several core principles developed through the outreach and input processes. They reflect short and long term needs for transportation services and coordination initiatives. Each goal is intended to provide specific direction, and its associated objectives can be measured and implemented according to an anticipated schedule or timeline.

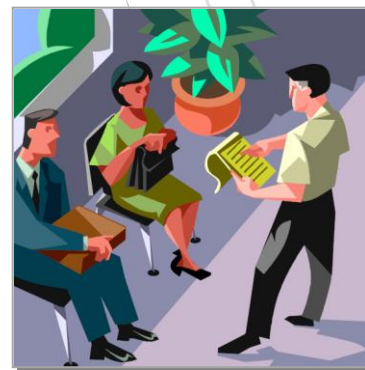
### I. Enhance Communications

To be effective, the transportation services and resources available must be accurately communicated to the targeted markets. Further, the intent of information must be modified according to the use and audience. With multiple transportation providers and human service agencies, it is unreasonable to expect and rely on each entity to coordinate communication and information. Therefore, it is critical that information be coordinated regionally. A single entity should serve as a repository for transportation related information.

#### Communication Recommendations

##### 1) *Regional Mobility Coordinator*

A regional mobility coordinator can provide services ranging from data analysis to travel training. In context of communication, this position would coordinate the communication of the various transportation services so that residents of the region can best understand their transportation options.

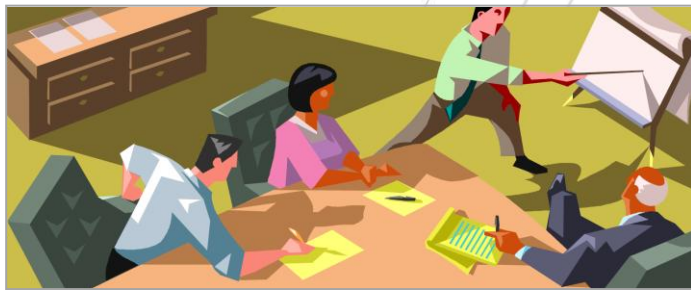


##### 2) *Define Central Source of Transportation Information*

Whether it is a resident, caregiver, or stakeholder, information about transportation services at a regional level would greatly improve the awareness of an individual's transportation options. SETRPC should explore new ways of conveying the information to residents. This approach will require an understanding of each audience group, what transportation information they seek most, and how they access information.

##### 3) *Stakeholder Communication Engagement*

Stakeholder communication engagement is centered on the idea of developing a forum for how stakeholders can share with the region the information they provide to their constituents, how some information can be unified for regional communication purposes, how to ensure the structure of such communication can benefit stated goals and objectives, and how best to take ownership and help disseminate information as needed. Communication engagement would allow each stakeholder to understand what information is available, how they can contribute, and how they can benefit from communication coordination. A Regional Mobility Coordinator could serve as the moderator for this coordination council function.



## II. Establish Connectivity

Connectivity can be achieved two ways; operationally and logistically. Operationally, connectivity can be achieved with the creation of expanded or new services that serve unmet needs and gaps in service coverage. New services can be specific to targeted areas (such as Silsbee) or more regionally focused (a regional commuter transit route). Logistically, current services that already overlap or are planned to be overlapped can be coordinated for better connectivity with managing operational logistics. This ranges from timing of transfers between routes and transportation systems, to providing facilities for safe and secure transfers, to providing technology that provides a seamless method of accessing services.



### **Connectivity Recommendations**

#### 1) *Regional "Backbone" Transit Service*

One of the highest concerns expressed throughout the region has been the development of a regional transit service connecting the municipalities of Port Arthur, Beaumont, Lumberton, Silsbee, and Orange. This also proves to be the most challenging due to jurisdictional and funding issues. Regardless, it should be the priority of the region to develop a "backbone" type service extending from each end of the region. To create this route, there are three key steps that would need to be undertaken: 1) identify the major and minor transit-oriented destinations, 2) determine service overlap that would occur, and 3) develop infrastructure that facilitates safe and reliable transfers between services.

#### 2) *Regional Smart Card Program*

The discussion and implementation of a smart card program has been on-going for many years now. As part of this coordination plan update, a further in-depth analysis was conducted to determine the feasibility of implementing a regional smart card program. The determination is that it is feasible for all transportation providers to share a single smart card technology that allows passengers universal access to all transportation resources. A smart card program will undoubtedly break down the barriers of using multiple systems. When coupled with the recommendation for a backbone type service, it becomes critical for facilitating transfers.

#### 3) *Transfer Facility Planning*

The region should examine locations for facilitating transfers between different transportation systems. This is currently done to some extent within municipal boundaries and between rural services. Building on that foundation and the knowledge of primary transit-oriented travel corridors, the region should identify the primary locations that best promote transfers between multiple modes of transit and between pedestrian, bicycle and automobile systems. Transfer locations could be stand-alone facilities or joint use.

### III. Coordination of Resources

The costs of providing public transportation and human service transportation services are indeed rising. Cost containment, however, cannot only be achieved at the expense of service delivery. Fortunately, coordination of transportation programs and services offers the potential to improve service delivery by reducing duplication, making use of available capacity elsewhere in the system, and achieving economies of scale in providing these services. Currently, transportation providers in the region are continuously balancing demand, need, and resources to achieve



efficiency and effectiveness. The use of a coordination council and regional discussions of resources can aid in the decision making processes that define how resources are deployed.

#### **Resource Recommendations**

##### *1) Regional Coordination Council*

The idea of a council provides a framework for coordinating resources that help improve residents' mobility. The initial formation of the council should be built on three main concepts: 1) creating a forum for exchanging ideas and information, 2) developing ownership of idea implementation, and 3) understanding and monitoring coordination performance. The coordination plan identifies a variety of tasks that the coordination council can perform, and there seems to be no shortage of desire for participation. The Regional Mobility Coordinator could serve as the council's facilitator, moderating the forum of exchange, providing information and performance reporting, and exploring ideas.

##### *2) Transportation Coordination Data*

To effectively plan and implement transportation coordination initiatives, the region should create a central database of information regarding services and needs, and coordinate the collection of information on an on-going basis. A central source of information for planning purposes serves multiple purposes. A database allows for planning efforts to be more efficient, information to be consistent regionally, and for an on-going analysis of effectiveness. The SETRPC should serve as the central source, working with each stakeholder and partner to identify data, and create a conduit for information.

##### *3) Unification of Data and Analysis*

The power of accurate and timely information can never be overstated when it comes to effectively planning for transportation coordination. The time and energy consumed unifying data for each region planning project can be avoided, at least for the transit perspective, if there is a common repository of information. This would be the responsibility of a Regional Mobility Coordinator and a function of the regional coordination council. The information gathered would evolve over time, and as needs become evident, but would initially entail GIS data, detailed ridership, demand, performance, inventory and resources, and financials.



## CONTINUING COORDINATION

The coordination plan not only addresses the immediate needs for transportation, but also defines a framework for ensuring continual evaluation and development of coordination initiatives. To accomplish this, a lead agency and lead staff would be established to perform key activities that move coordination efforts forward into implementation and successful outcomes. Such activities include designing services, overseeing or performing tasks such as training, public outreach, marketing, and implementation of other key coordination activities. The concept of the framework to support coordination of a regional coordination council supported by a mobility coordinator is built on three main concepts:



**Leadership** – Establish leadership within stakeholders that advocates, generates support, and institutes mechanisms for coordination at the highest level;

**Participation** – Establish a forum to bring and keep at the table the right state, regional, and local stakeholders; and

**Continuity** - Ensure an ongoing forum and leadership that stays focused on overall transportation goals and responds to ever-changing needs.

### Organizational Structure

Sustaining coordination for transportation in the Jefferson, Hardin and Orange County region will require a two-point approach. The first is the establishment of regional staff that can lead and assist with implementing coordination strategies. This would best be achieved by establishing the position of a mobility manager. A mobility manager would be able to work with each stakeholder one-on-one, work to overcome barriers, gain detailed understanding of resources and needs, ensure implementation of coordination initiatives, and work to demonstrate coordination success. The second is the establishment of a coordination group that can exchange ideas, discuss impacts and barriers of coordination, and assist regional staff with implementation.

The proposed structure fosters coordination primarily at a regional coordination council level. The mobility manager position has been extensively discussed in the coordination plan update. This includes composition and regional staffing needed to ensure the exchange necessary to promote coordination.