

Appendix F:
Public Transportation Coordination

Gulf Coast Region Coordinated Regional Public Transportation Plan



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Houston-Galveston Area Council

Prepared by

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In association with

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Executive Summary

The Houston-Galveston region is home to 5.4 million people, including many persons that do not have access to an automobile or have other mobility limitations. For the most part, these people depend on public transportation to meet their transportation needs to employment, shopping, and medical trips. Certain parts of the region are served by public transportation providers, such as the Metropolitan Transit Authority of Harris County (METRO) whose service area includes two-thirds of Harris County; however, many other parts of the 13-county Gulf Coast Planning Region have limited or no public transportation services. In some instances, basic transportation service is provided by social service agencies for clients that meet financial and/or medical eligibility criteria. In other cases, churches and private companies offer limited services. When considering all categories of transportation providers in the region, there are still unmet transit needs.

The leadership of the State of Texas realized that there were inadequacies in the area of public transportation and took action to rectify the situation with House Bill 3588, passed during the 78th Texas Legislature. It includes a statewide mandate to coordinate public transportation services and funding among Health and Human Service agencies, Texas Workforce Commission, and the Texas Department of Transportation (TxDOT). Although this is a statewide mandate, planning and coordination take place at the regional and local levels. As such, the Houston-Galveston Area Council (H-GAC) was designated the lead agency for these coordination efforts in the 13-county Gulf Coast Region, which includes Austin, Brazoria, Chambers, Colorado, Fort Bend, Galveston, Harris, Liberty, Matagorda, Montgomery, Walker, Waller, Wharton counties. TxDOT has provided the following coordination goals:

- Reduce Congestion
- Enhance Safety
- Expand Economic Opportunity
- Improve Air Quality
- Increase Value of Transportation Assets

Transportation stakeholders, health and human services stakeholders, and public transportation advocates convened at H-GAC for the first regional meeting on coordination in September 2005. More than 200 persons attended and expressed a desire to participate in the regional initiative to coordinate services among transportation providers. Since that time, H-GAC continued the coordination effort by developing a steering committee and hiring a consulting team to assist in developing the regional public transportation coordination plan.



The project team, consisting of The Goodman Corporation (TGC), Nelson|Nygaard, and Center for Transportation Training and Research of Texas Southern University (TSU), pursued this initiative in several steps as follows:

- Surveyed public and private transportation agencies regarding the types of service they provide.
- Interviewed social service agencies to determine the barriers that prohibit transportation coordination, which areas have transportation needs, and how to best serve the needs.
- Conducted public meetings in each of the 13 counties. These meetings offered the general public an opportunity to comment on transportation services throughout the region.
- Conducted consumer and business surveys to further receive input from the public.
- Conducted a detailed demographic data analysis and transportation needs assessment.
- Compiled a package outlining barriers and constraints to effective coordination that was provided to TxDOT as an early indicator of key issues to be addressed by the Commission and the legislature in the coming 80th Legislature.
- Worked with a steering committee including representatives from each of the 13 counties, key social services providers, key transit providers, TxDOT district representatives, and others to develop an action plan and proposed pilot projects.

Although H.B. 3588 was designed to mandate the coordination of public transportation activities throughout Texas, this mandate does not suggest that coordination activities are non-existent, but strives to identify further coordination opportunities. In fact, within the Gulf Coast Region there are well-established public transportation service projects and support services that coordinate financial costs, vehicles, service areas, and other resources on a daily basis. Existing programs include the following:

- **Project Access.** Houston METRO's partnership with several Houston-area homeless care providers for reduced-fare public transportation.
- **Harris County RIDES Program.** Harris County's program to coordinate many transportation providers to deliver basic mobility for people with disabilities, seniors, and low-income residents. RIDES fills in the gaps to provide non-emergency transportation service.
- **Baytown Senior/Disabled Transportation Program.** The Senior and Disabled Transportation Programs provide non-emergency transportation services to eligible low/moderate-income senior and/or disabled citizens within the city limits of Baytown. The service also makes trips to Houston for medical appointments.
- **United Way of the Texas Gulf Coast Initiatives.** From 2003 to 2006, United Way of the Texas Gulf Coast has funded 14 social service agencies to provide transportation services through a shared-ride and gas voucher program

coordinated by the American Red Cross; introduced social service agencies to the RIDES Program; funded three agencies in the Bay Area that serve seniors, persons with disabilities, and low-income families; funded four social service agencies in Waller County to allow seniors, persons with disabilities, and low-income families to access demand-response services through Colorado Valley Transit and the use of gas vouchers for travel in private vehicles.

Regional Profile. Chapter 2 presents a profile of the Gulf Coast Region and each of its 13 counties. This profile includes demographic information (from the U.S. Census 2000) about its citizens, a county-by-county listing of the providers of public transportation services identified through this study and a description of each counties notable cities and geography. Also included is a map, shown in *Figure ES.1*, which demonstrates the coverage areas and service types of the transportation providers included in this report.

There are more detailed descriptions of the providers, including information about service type, typical destination, fare information, eligibility requirements, yearly ridership estimates, vehicle fleet descriptions, contact information, as well as other useful data.

The demographic data highlighted several significant conclusions about the residents of the Gulf Coast Region. Some of them are listed below:

- **Rate of Population Growth**

- o The population of the Gulf Coast Region increased over 25% between 1990 and 2000.
- o Fort Bend (57.2%), Waller (39.7%), Montgomery (61.2%) and Liberty (33.1%) Counties all experienced phenomenal growth rates between 1990 and 2000, totaling over 400,000 persons in these counties; Harris County also had a growth rate over 20% (680,000+ persons).
- o In the same time period, several other counties experienced population growth rates of over 20%; while only Wharton and Matagorda Counties had rates of growth less than 10%.

This demonstrates the recent rapid rates of growth experienced in much of the Gulf Coast Region. Most of the preliminary data shows that these trends are expected to increase at roughly the same rates in the near future. This presents a challenge to the entire region to increase the availability of public transportation to serve this rapidly increasing population.

- **Population Density**

- o The regional average for population density (persons per square mile) is just shy of 400.
- o There are however five counties in the region (Austin, Chambers, Colorado, Matagorda, and Wharton) that have density levels of less than 50.

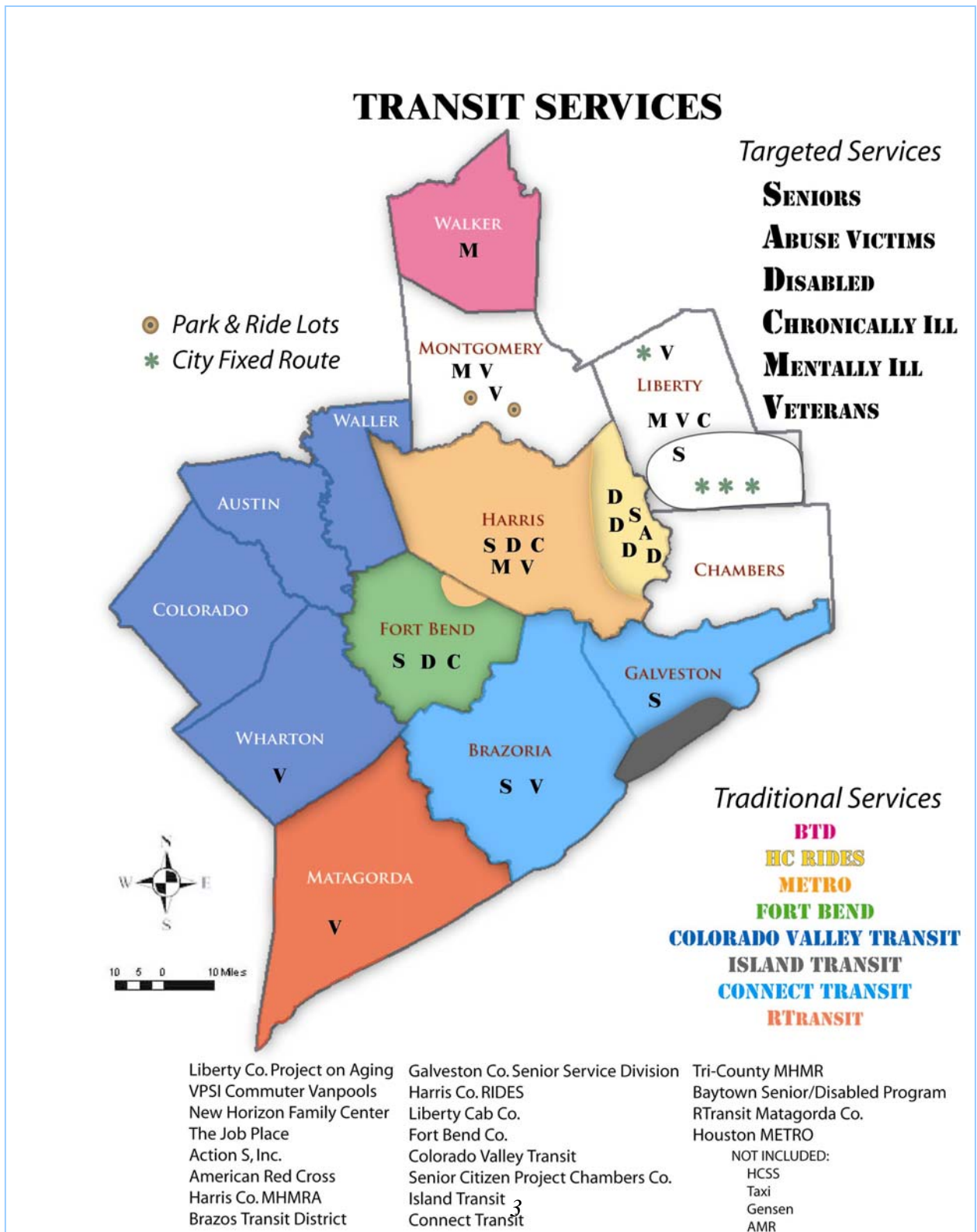


Figure ES.1 – Transportation Providers in Gulf Coast Region

- o Conversely, the combined populations of Harris, Fort Bend, and Montgomery counties contain over 80% of the region's total population, while only accounting for less than one-third of the total land area.

This identifies great disparities of population density throughout the region. Existing and future transportation service providers will be required to offer different types of services to accommodate areas with different levels of population densities.

- **Persons with Special Needs**

- o Every county in the Gulf Coast Region has a population of persons with disabilities exceeding 15%, with the exception of Fort Bend County, which has 14%.
- o Austin, Colorado, Galveston, Liberty, Matagorda, and Wharton counties have populations of persons over the age of 65 exceeding 10%.
- o Colorado, Harris, Matagorda, Walker, Waller, and Wharton counties have populations below the poverty line in excess of 15%.

Since all of these groups, low-income elderly and disabled, traditionally require a special level of service through public transportation, it will be necessary for providers throughout the region to be sensitive and accommodating of these situations. This data also outlines the importance that social service agencies of the region target these sections of the population.

Public Transportation Services. Chapter 3 focuses on an overview of the existing state of public transportation services throughout the Gulf Coast Region. Two tools are used to assist in the analyses presented: the application of a Transit Needs Index (TNI) and the use of Journey-to-Work (JTW) data available from the U.S. Census 2000. The first tool, TNI, was developed by a consulting firm (LKC Consulting Services Inc.) for H-GAC several years ago. The TNI takes the demographic characteristics of the targeted region or county and multiplies a predetermined weighting factor to each of them. The results of this step are then totaled, creating a figure that is representative of the targeted area. The higher the number is, the greater the need for transit services. *Figure ES.2* shows the regional scope of TNI.

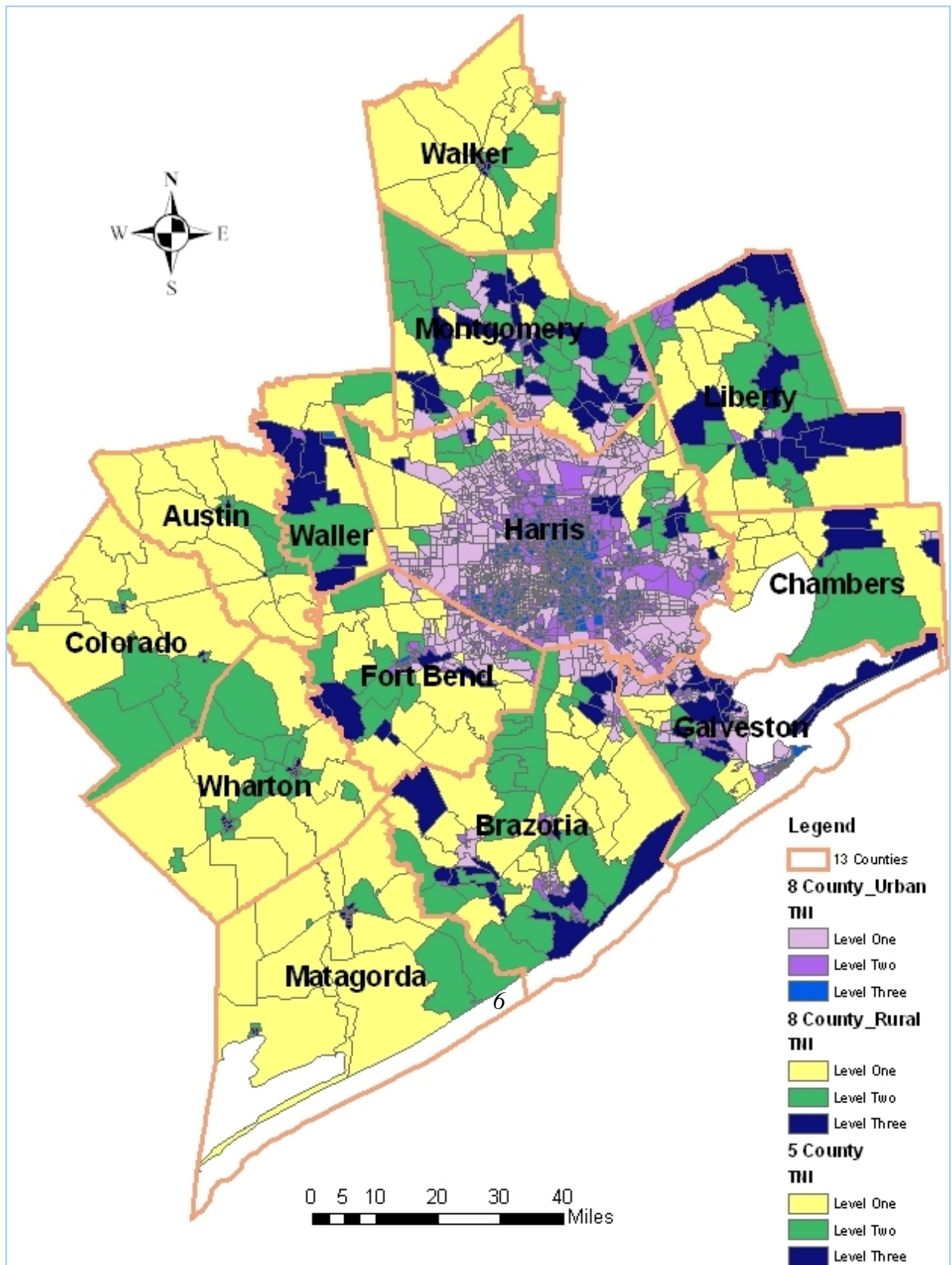


Figure ES.2 – H-GAC 13-County Region TNI, 2000

The second tool, JTW, focuses on the daily vehicle trips made between counties of the region. This data identifies the travel patterns of workers in the Gulf Coast Region. However, it is understood that there are many other trips made between counties in the region, but unfortunately there was no data available to make assumptions regarding the frequency of these types of trips. However, the data provide through the JTW figures provides a tool with which to estimate the demand for inter-county commuter services in the Gulf Coast Region. *Figure ES.3* shows the JTW data for the region.

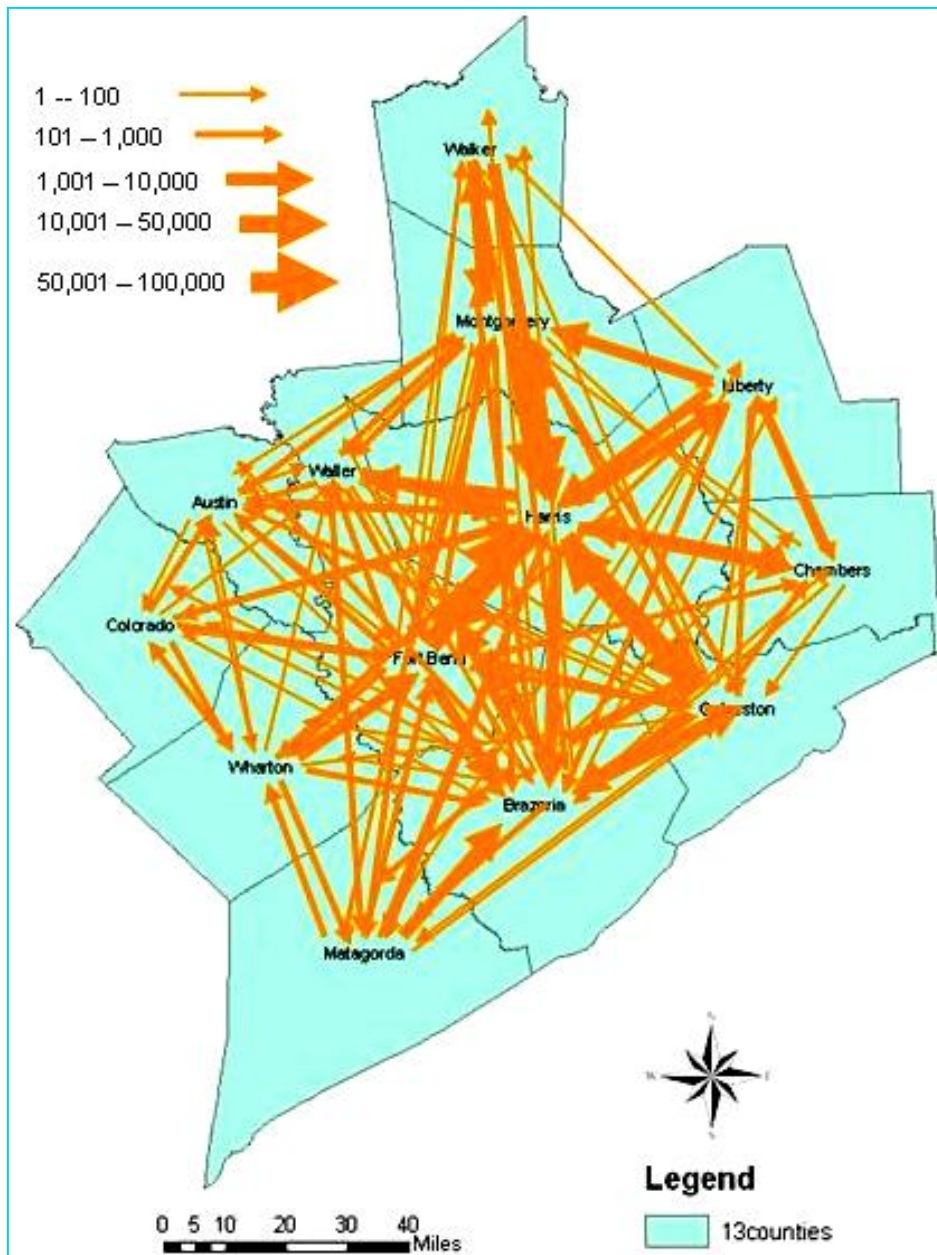


Figure ES.3 – Journey-to-Work Flows

The data provided from both of these means, TNI and JTW, are used in concert with a description of the transportation services that are offered to the general public on a county-by-county basis. This presents the opportunity for service gaps, areas that are underserved or no service currently exists, to be identified. The service gaps that are identified within this chapter begin to serve as the basis for some of the recommended actions and pilot projects developed in ensuing chapters.

With all of these different needs and obstacles, it is apparent that the Gulf Coast Region will not benefit from a “one size fits all” approach to public transportation services. There will be cases when the most effective services will not be efficient and the seemingly most efficient services might not be the most effective. It will be up to the leadership of the region to determine the best path for action in providing public transportation services throughout the vast region. The coordination of this region’s leadership, as well as the transportation providers operating within the region, will be needed to realize this goal.

Public Involvement Process. Chapter four details the different forms of public involvement that were present throughout this planning process including the formation and ongoing meeting of a project steering committee, public meetings, and multiple surveys. Each of these facets of public outreach brought a unique, constructive addition to the project. In concert, they provided a viable snapshot of the region’s perception of existing public transportation services and the needs for new ones.

The project steering committee was made up of 43 stakeholders of public transportation throughout the Gulf Coast Region. There were representatives from each of the 13 counties, many of whom operated in different aspects of public transportation such as staff of transportation service providers, governmental agencies, transportation advocacy groups, social service agencies, public officials and community representatives. The group met monthly to discuss the progress of the project, offer additional data and comments about the service overview of their respective areas, and lay out new directions for the project to continue.

This committee also worked to help the project team setting up the facilitation of 19 public meetings conducted throughout the region, as well as the development of three different surveys. The public meetings were set up in a town hall format, with a brief presentation about the project at the beginning and then an open discussion about the current state of public transportation in each community. The consumer survey, economic development survey and the social service survey were distributed through social service agencies to their clients, at the public meetings, through email and other methods. A fourth survey concerning the inventory of public transportation providers in the region, was created by the Texas Transportation Institute, and distributed by the project team. Both the public meetings and the surveys were to get feedback from members of the public including current and potential transit riders, transit service providers, local officials, business owners, social service agencies, and others.

The attendees of the public meetings, a total of more than 350 persons, which included members of the general public, transportation providers, business owners, local elected officials, and others were given an open forum in which to express their needs, desires, and ideas regarding public transportation services in their communities. While many

indicated their appreciation of the services that were currently being offered, most agreed that there were further transit services necessary to completely meet their areas' needs. Comments were heard that people desired public transportation to be available on nights and weekends in order to meet the needs of second shift workers, recreational trips and other purposes. The single item that was expressed at every public meeting was that the general public had a lack of information available to them about the public transportation services that were operating within their communities. These and many other comments are detailed throughout Chapter 4 in the main body of the report.

The surveys distributed throughout the process also provided valuable input from different aspects of the community. The consumer survey solicited responses from the general public, the end users of transportation services; the social service agency survey gave an opportunity to those agencies that provide services to targeted demographic groups of the region to express their clients' needs regarding public transportation; and the economic development survey was designed for local business owners to express their concerns and ideas for how transportation services impact their enterprises. The public transportation inventory survey was directed toward existing providers of public transportation services; and sought to better understand their respective operations.

Some of the more notable findings of the survey are listed below, although further important findings and more detailed discussions are contained within Chapter 4.

- **Consumer Survey – 1,286 Respondents**

- Lack of service availability, inconvenient service hours, and lack of service to desired destinations were top among users reasons for not using transit.
- Over half of respondents could recall a trip in the last six months for which they wanted to take public transportation, but none was available.
- Most desired destinations for users of public transportation are shopping and medical appointments; while recreational/social trips and work trips are close behind.

- **Social Service Agency Survey – 136 Respondents**

- Nearly all respondents expressed need for transportation for their clients; but only about 1/3 are able to provide transportation for clients themselves.
- A majority of responding agencies stated they were unaware of any other form (other than the services they offered) of public transportation that could meet the needs of their clients; this could be because there are no services offered in their area or that existing services in the area are not well advertised.
- Nearly all agencies indicated that they would be willing to coordinate services with other agencies, given the right opportunity, however, a strong majority are not currently participating in any forms of coordination; this presents an opportunity in the current situation of the

region that social service agencies are willing to coordinate if they can identify situations that would be beneficial to their operations.

- **Economic Development Survey – 146 Respondents**

- Nearly half of employers feel that their employees do not have adequate means of getting to work.
- However, very few employers indicated they would be willing to invest in a vanpool for their employees.
- Respondents ranked transit circulation, business marketing and pedestrian improvements among their highest concerns for local downtown redevelopment; another concern is marketing for local businesses.

- **Public Transportation Inventory Survey – 23 Respondents**

- The overwhelming majority of respondents, three out of four, offer services only during the daytime hours of weekdays (Monday-Friday) and non-holidays. These results are further magnified if the respondents who provide taxicab services are omitted. This exhibits, that without the services of taxi companies (which are not available throughout every county in the H-GAC region) there is little or no public transportation available on weeknights, weekends and holidays.
- Elderly and disabled passengers are among the groups that are most highly targeted by the responding agencies; other major target groups include the general public, clients of various social service agencies and students.

- **United Way of the Texas Gulf Coast/Texas Citizens Fund Complementary Efforts**

- Hosted 12 additional workshops in United Way's area (Harris, Fort Bend, Waller and Montgomery Counties) in which 115 attendees discussed their concerns about public transportation in their areas.
- Distributed the Consumer Survey to residents of United Way's service area, receiving over 4,300 respondents.
- Used their extensive network of over 1,400 community groups to distribute information about the project.

Through the results of all facets of the public involvement process, the project team was able to develop a clearer understanding of the current situation of public transportation services existing in the Gulf Coast Region. Many gaps in service were also identified and creative solutions were offered through public comment on how to address the needs that are currently unmet in individual communities.

Coordination Action Plan. An action plan was developed from data analysis, public involvement, and extensive input by the steering committee. The plan includes nine categories of actions to be adopted as a blueprint to better coordination in the region with its attendant service and efficiency benefits. The categories include the following:

- **Consumer Information Program.** Although not all of the 12,000 square miles of the region are covered by transportation services, the study found that many citizens are not aware of the services that do exist. Potential pilot projects to assess this need include establishing a transportation specialist within the local 211 program and establishing a regional mobility manager.
- **Business and Public Officials Information Program.** The study found that business leaders, employers, and public officials are uninformed about the transportation services that affect them, their employees, and their constituents. In addition they are uninformed of the advantages and benefits associated with utilizing public transportation. A potential pilot project to address this need includes developing a regional transportation alliance to identify transit champions and share information.
- **Cooperative Resource Development.** At the heart of good coordination practices are multiple agencies working together to share the burden of mundane activities to reduce costs and spread knowledge and expertise. This region has several excellent models to emulate throughout the region and beyond. Potential pilot project to address this need include expansion and publicizing H-GAC's cooperative purchasing program; developing universal certification standards for training of several staff functions such as drivers, mechanics, dispatchers; expansion of the Brazos Transit District's shared maintenance program; establishing a regional training coordinator; and establishing a regional transportation ambassador program. In addition, through the transportation inventory, the project team compiled a cross reference between agencies that have the capability to provide six categories of services to others and agencies that requested assistance with those same six categories of services. An action item will be to hold a service providers' fair where these two groups can come together.
- **Revised Rules and Regulations.** In developing the barriers and constraints report and other discussions with the steering committee and other providers, there were many suggestions for streamlining the rules and the way they are interpreted and/or put into practice. Direct actions are limited, but regional activists individually and as a group can urge the lawmakers and rule makers to ease regulations which inhibit trip chaining, trip sharing, encourage ineffective gatekeeping, and abruptly terminate experimentation. Potential pilot projects to demonstrate the impact of rule modifications include short-term Medicaid dispatching modifications, use of school buses during off-school peak times for health and human service transportation; development of a capital replacement strategy for the regionwide vehicle fleet which averages 5 years old; and collaborating on better matching of medical services to transportation need.

- **Overall Coordination Body.** The activities through H-GAC during the last year have been useful in bringing agencies together and highlighting great local examples of coordination. The resulting plan includes many actions that will further increase coordination and improve services to the citizens. A continuation strategy is needed to ensure that the initial progress is not lost and that the recommendations are implemented. Thus a permanent coordination body is recommended to keep the process moving.
- **Establish New Services.** In examining the needs of communities throughout the region, many service gaps were identified along with existing services that are lacking in sufficient coverage (area, hours, days). Thus 31 service recommendations were made. These include all funding categories, rural, urban, and categories of service.
- **Flexible Insurance.** Insurance costs are ¹² a large portion of transportation providers' budgets. The constant on-the-road exposure to potential liability requires extensive coverage. There are some good examples of insurance pool participation in the region and some legislative relief through the Tort Claims Act. Ongoing research into improved insurance practices, pooling and other resources is recommended.
- **Equipment and Technology.** There are many advances in this category that can greatly facilitate coordination and that can save money. There are also unfunded mandates, such as in relation to alternatively fueled vehicles that present challenges to ongoing operations. Pilot projects recommended to address equipment and technology issues include developing a rational strategy for reducing transit vehicle pollution in the region; developing policies and procedures for fare sharing, transfers, and the electronic media (smart cards) to support their seamless implementation; and improved communications between the drivers and passengers.
- **Access to Public Transportation.** One of the important outcomes of the public meetings, surveys, and focus groups, was the magnitude of the challenges to individual in accessing and using public transportation. Leaving home, getting to the bus stop, and returning can all be fraught with impediments. Pilot projects recommended to address this problem include travel counseling; individual home improvements; neighborhood improvements; and trip assistance.

Funding Strategy. Chapter 7 provides a detailed description of the funding resources that may assist in implementation of the action plan and the pilot projects suggested in this report. The funding sources are divided into two major categories: Federal and State. Within the description of federal funding resources, they are further segregated by funding sources available directly from the federal government (such as Federal Surface Transportation Program [STP] funds and Congestion Mitigation and Air Quality [CMAQ] Improvement Program funds) and those funding sources administered by the state (such as Small Urbanized Grants, Section 5307, Elderly and Disabled, and Section 5310). Also included with the federal funding sources are brief discussions of other

federal funding tools (such as Livable Communities Initiative [LCI] and Capital Cost of Contracting [CCC]), as well as others.

The description of state funding resources includes those sources that originate within the State of Texas. Discussions of these items include descriptions of the source and details of grant eligibility. Complementing both the federal and state grants is a discussion concerning the optimal use of local funding resources through leverage. This describes the ways of using local resources to serve as monetary match for state and federal grants, providing the local area to maximize the amount of money they receive for individual projects.

Finally, a strategy and action plan specific to funding the recommendations of this report is described. There are six main points laid out in this discussion:

- Coordinated pursuit of grant funds by H-GAC and four TxDOT Districts of the Gulf Coast Region
- Combining resources of traditionally separate funding streams
- Include funding concerns on legislative agendas at the local, state and federal levels
- Establish a detailed financial plan for each pilot project that is pursued in the Gulf Coast Region
- Create a position that would serve as a liaison specializing in the pursuit of state and federal grants for the entire region
- Actively pursue funding sources outside of state and federal grants

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