

Montgomery County

TRANSIT PLAN

April 2008



Executive Summary



MONTGOMERY COUNTY TRANSIT PLAN Executive Summary

By the Houston-Galveston Area Council Transportation Department
in association with
the Texas Transportation Institute, URS Corporation

April 2008
for the Citizens of Montgomery County



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DISCLAIMER

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Table of Contents

	Page
List of Tables and Figures	2
Acknowledgements	3
Executive Summary – Questions and Answers	5
1. Why does Montgomery County need a transit plan?	5
2. What can be done about it?	5
3. How much would the options cost?	6
4. Is the recommended plan feasible?	8
5. What about a longer range transit plan?	10

List of Tables and Figures

Tables	Page
ES 1. Montgomery County Transit Service Program	6
ES 2. Available Public Transportation Resources	7

Figures	Page
ES 1. Montgomery County Population Density	9
ES 2. Transit Needs Index	10

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Montgomery County Transit Plan

Executive Summary

This Executive Summary is organized around several key questions that are answered more completely in the full text of the Montgomery County Transit Plan document. The questions are highlighted here for the ease of the quick reader.

Keep in mind that Montgomery County has one of the premier express bus systems in the nation, which provides adequate commuter transportation for those traveling into Houston regularly.¹ This transit plan addresses the urgent need for better public transportation options for other residents in the County that have different travel needs.

1. Why does Montgomery County need a transit plan? Is there a problem? What is the problem?

Seniors, disabled and low income individuals that live within Montgomery County are mobility limited. They have very few viable travel options. The primary organization that has provided limited transportation services for seniors in the past, The Friendship Center, is in a period of transition due to staff turnover and budget constraints. Parts of the county are urbanizing very quickly, while other parts are retaining their rural character.

As discussed in Chapters 1 and 2, a significant population exists in the County who by reason of age, income, and/ or physical disabilities require additional transportation options for daily life needs such as medical, education, grocery shopping, and employment. This situation is further exacerbated by the spiraling cost of gasoline which discourages many of these trips even if an automobile is available. This, coupled with the fact that the number of transportation deficient individuals in the County who are elderly, disabled, or low income are becoming a larger segment of the total population, accentuates the need for additional transportation options above and beyond those currently provided by various agencies in the County.

2. What can be done about it?

There are several options available to the leadership in Montgomery County. Assuming that doing nothing is not a likely option there are a range of possible investment strategies that could be implemented incrementally. The recommended transit plan includes three elements summarized as:

- 1) Better coordination of existing services;
- 2) expansion of demand response services county-wide; and

¹ Based on the farebox recovery ratio, the Woodlands Express services to Houston's major employment centers is very successful by industry standards for similar services. The Brazos Transit District contracts with Coach USA to provide those services.

- 3) The establishment of a northbound express commuter route between The Woodlands and Sam Houston State University (SHSU) in Huntsville, with interim stops at Conroe, Montgomery College and others to be determined.

3. How much would the various options cost?

The total service program costs would be approximately \$6.8 million per year as outlined in the table below. This financial plan summary assumes that currently available vehicles would be used to enhance existing operations and does not include capital purchases.

Current estimates indicate that more than half of the total needed funding is available within the county today from local, state, and federal sources. Moreover, a large portion of the local funds for the existing public transportation services are being provided by various agencies within Montgomery County including the United Way and Community Development Block Grant funds.

The locally generated portion of those funds could be consolidated and leveraged as the local match necessary to attract additional transportation funds from federal and state programs to permit the expansion of transit services in the area. A financial strategy to support that expansion is discussed at the end of Chapter 5 in the plan document.

Table ES 1 – Montgomery County Transit Service Program (2007 \$)

Period	Elements	Annual Cost (\$ mil.)
Short term	Rural Demand Response	1.82
Mid term	County-wide Demand Response	4.82
	SHSU Shuttle	0.37
	TOTAL	5.20
Long term	County-wide Demand Response	6.37
	SHSU Shuttle	0.37
	TOTAL	6.75

The following Table ES 2 identifies the primary funding by agencies providing public transportation services in Montgomery County. Additional sources for local revenues to match federal and/or state funds should be considered in the development of a viable funding strategy. Other potential funding sources are presented in Appendix D of the full report.

Based on the Financial Plan and the information in Table 10 (in the full document) approximately \$3.8 million, or more than half of the needed \$6.75 million for the total cost of the recommended projects (at maturity) could be available through the combination of programmed federal, state and local funds assuming that other revenue

sources are available to fund the other existing transportation services (such as the Woodlands Express Commuter services).

An implementation plan is needed next that will coordinate the **consolidation of the local transportation funds** and allow them to be used to leverage new federal funding in the future. Recent developments with the TxDOT Commission to restore funding to rural transit operators and coordination efforts between the Brazos Transit District and the Friendship Center indicate that county-wide demand response services for the general public will be implemented sooner than anticipated in this plan. Nevertheless, as the various components of the Montgomery County transit system are implemented over time, there will be a growing need to expand that core system which will require additional revenues in the future to be **sustainable**. A financial strategy to increase the magnitude of funds available to Montgomery County for transit expansion is outlined in Chapter 5.

Table ES 2 – Available Public Transportation Resources

Agency	Source of Funds (\$ FY 2008)	Urban 5307	Elderly 5310	Rural 5311	Other	Comments
Brazos Transit District (Operating Expenses)	Federal State Local Total	1,138,336 254,734 <u>828,523</u> 2,221,593			1,200,000	The Woodlands Small Urban Area + TxDOT Rural
Montgomery County Committee on Aging (dba) The Friendship Center	Federal State Local Total		TBD		158,000 118,000 109,000 <u>45,000</u> 430,000	AAA TxDOT, United Way TCID

Financial Plan Summary

- Incremental expansion.
- Available transit funds \$ 3.8 million.
 - The Woodlands Express, Mall Circulator, Water Taxi, Friendship Center (seniors).
- Total transit plan costs \$6.75 million.
 - At 100% maturity.
 - County wide demand response.
 - SHSU Shuttle.

4. Is the recommended transit plan feasible?

The recommended transit plan is feasible and makes good business sense from an economic development perspective. The diverse businesses within Montgomery County rely on the availability of a diverse and mobile workforce within relatively close proximity. The first priority activity, coordination of services among and between the various agencies providing transportation services, should commence immediately. In the absence of formal agreements which define clients, service areas, trip type, hours and days of service, etc., there will invariably be a duplication of services among the various client groups. This results in a less than optimal utilization of resources which reduces the efficiency of services provided and/or results in unmet trip needs.

As indicated in the population density map (on the next page) there are several areas with current population densities exceeding 1000 people per square mile in areas nearby The Woodlands, south Montgomery County and Conroe. That level of population density suggests that the expansion of demand response transit services would be viable within and connecting to those areas *today*. Furthermore, the 2000 Census reported that a large volume of *daily work trips, about 69,000, remain within the County*.

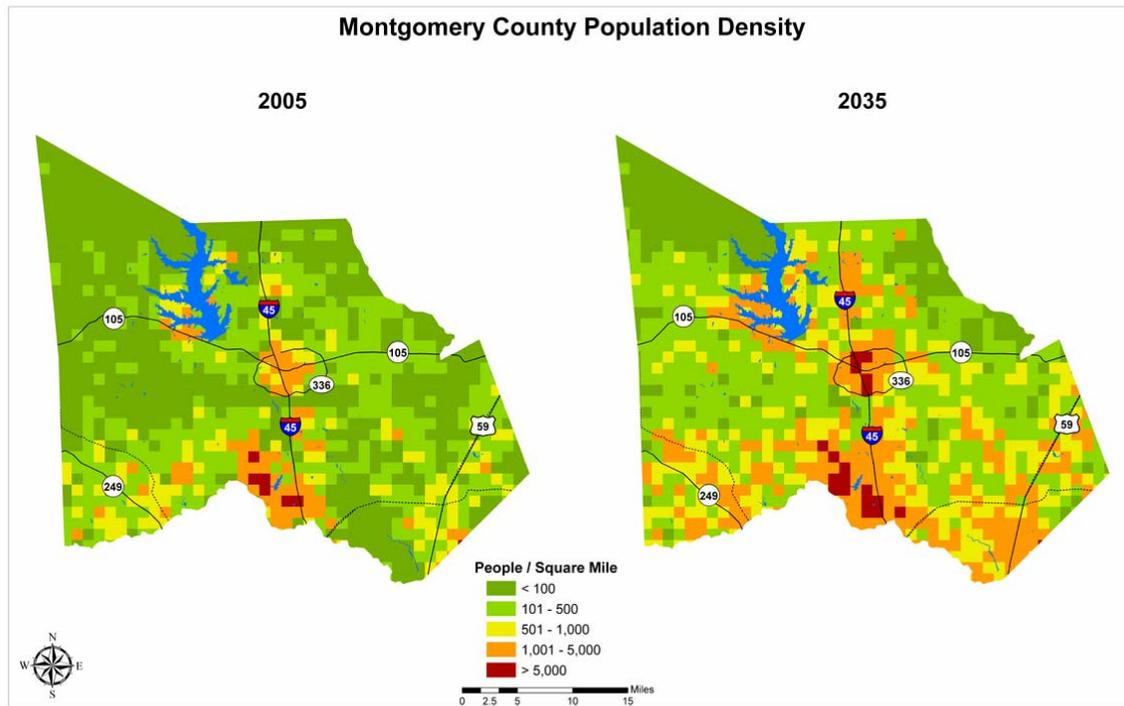
The population projections for 2035 show several areas with more than 5,000 people per square mile. Those areas will have sufficient population densities to support fixed route transit services (in the future) if the current population projections become reality. Based on the combination of those factors the expansion of intra-county public transportation services is recommended.

A proactive grants management program could be started today to apply for new grant funding that is available from the Federal Transit Administration (FTA) for Job Access Reverse Commute (JARC) and New Freedom programs. Congestion Mitigation and Air Quality Improvement (CMAQ) program funds could also be applied for through the Metropolitan Planning Organization (MPO) Call for Commuter and Transit Services Pilot Projects. The leadership in Montgomery County could start the process now to be in a position to receive more federal transit formula funds in the near future.² The following factors illustrate the reasonableness of the recommended elements of the plan.

- Better coordination among existing providers can result in a 25% -40 % increase in efficiency, based on national experience.
- The costs for the county-wide demand response service at \$21 per trip is comparable to the national average of \$24 per trip (National Transit Database).
- The recommended commuter shuttle between the Woodlands and Huntsville with interim stops at Montgomery College, Conroe and possibly others (to be determined) will provide job access for students, faculty, and the general public as well as opportunities for reverse commuting. It would also reduce the need for expanded parking at the college campuses.

² Part of the Houston Urbanized Area (UZA) extends into southern Montgomery County therefore a portion of the UZA formula funds could be allocated back to Montgomery County.

Figure ES 1: Montgomery County Population Density



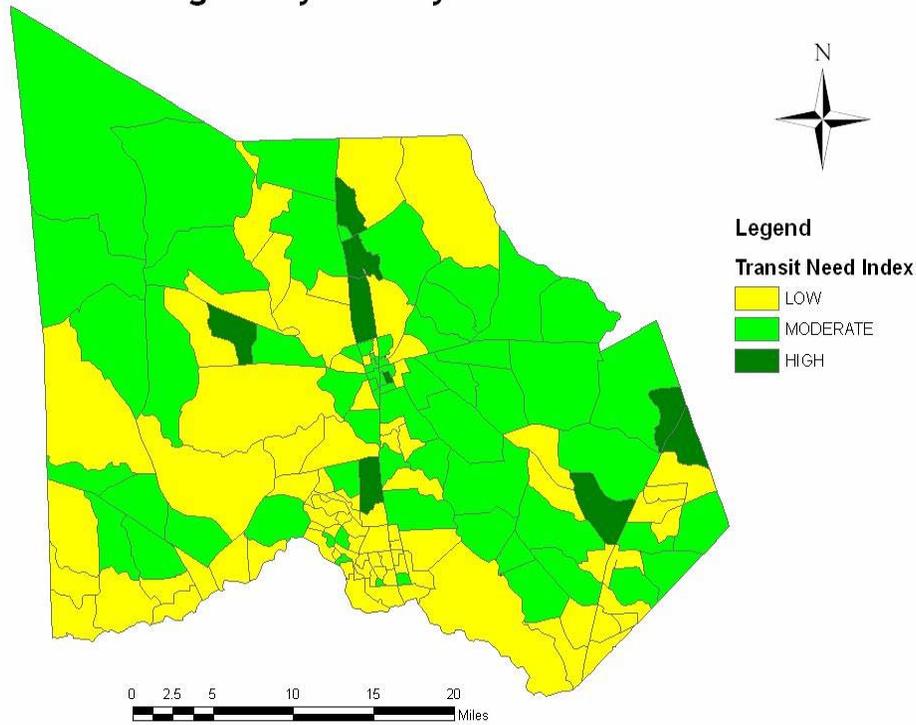
Transit Need Index

Transit planners utilize several tools in conducting an assessment of the need for transit services in an area. One of those tools is the Transit Need Index (TNI) which uses the demographic characteristics of an area and formulates scores using a mathematical model. The model was formulated based on experiences within small Texas cities in the 1990's and updated with 2000 Census data. The model results are shown in Figure 2 and indicate some localized areas of relatively higher transit need; however the majority of the Montgomery County area would be considered as having moderate transit needs according to the TNI.

As shown in Figure ES 2 higher transit needs (urban and rural) exist along the I-45 North corridor near the Conroe area, and throughout the more rural parts of the county. The broad nature of the urban and rural transit needs in Montgomery County, and the overall geographic size of the County underscore the need for expansion of public transportation services for the general public.

Figure ES 2: Transit Need Index

Montgomery County Transit Need Index



5. What about a longer range public transportation system plan?

This transit plan is based on several short term strategies to improve the current situation during a five year time frame. If the forecasted rates of growth in population and employment in Montgomery County continue there will be a need for a more comprehensive public transit system during the next five to ten years.

It is envisioned that the basic elements of this transit plan could evolve over time along clearly defined bus routes as the major transit travel patterns emerge. The intersections of those routes could eventually become connection points to future higher frequency and perhaps longer distance travel options, such as Bus Rapid Transit (BRT) or Commuter Rail.



Bus Rapid Transit (BRT) Vehicle, Las Vegas

Beyond the 10-15 year planning horizon it is feasible that higher speed passenger transport systems will be available to connect the major cities in Texas. A high speed passenger rail system is being planned now by the Texas High Speed Rail & Transportation Corporation (THSRCTC) that would connect Houston, Austin, and San Antonio by the year 2020. Eventually, a connecting link from Galveston to Dallas along the IH-45 corridor, with a stop in Montgomery County, is conceivable.



Photo courtesy of THSRCTC