

CENTRAL TEXAS STATE PLANNING REGION (23)

CENTRAL TEXAS REGIONAL TRANSIT ADVISORY GROUP BARRIERS AND CONSTRAINTS

The Regional Transit Advisory Group (RTAG) for Central Texas State Planning Region (23) has developed two primary barriers and two primary constraints related to the continuing development of coordinated transportation in the region. Under each barrier and constraint identified are the sub-barriers and sub-constraints. We have also included the RTAG Mission Statement as developed by the work group.

MISSION STATEMENT

To continue coordination of public transit services through on-going cooperation between the designated transit service provider and social service agencies to provide clients, citizens, and visitors of the Central Texas area a safe, dependable, cost-effective, and seamless transportation network to provide mobility, improved quality of life, and a stimulus for economic development.

PRIORITY ONE BARRIER

The highest priority of the two barriers identified by the RTAG is the system of barriers imposed by rules, regulations, and requirements governing the programs from agency to agency and within the operations of the regional transit service provider. The regional transit service provider is Hill Country Transit District, which operates rural service, as well as urban fixed route service and ADA complementary paratransit service. In this report, Hill Country Transit District (HCTD) and transit service provider are one and the same. Specific barriers included in this highest priority area include those listed below.

REPORTS, FORMS, AND FORMATS

Lack of consistent and compatible reports, forms, formats: Each agency has its own reports and forms related to the provision of transportation for clients. Generally, these reports and forms are not compatible with those of the transit service provider. (Most cost impact in modifying forms and formats will likely be hidden costs. Staff time and distribution of the changes will certainly be required, but the additional cost can be minimal if agencies and the transit provider can integrate changes as the changes are developed.) Although local agency representatives may be willing and ready to incorporate such changes, the changes must be approved at a much higher level. **The coordination of efforts at a high level to develop**

consistent reports related to transit trips throughout all participating agencies is needed.

REPORTING REQUIREMENTS

Reporting requirements of individual agencies vary. (Again, additional cost is likely to be minimal, and the reporting requirements can be implemented as they are modified.) A major obstacle to addressing this barrier is the matter of **different agencies having requirements at different levels – local, state, federal** - resulting in the involvement of several agencies and government entities to develop the changes.

DETAILED PROGRAM COSTS

Agencies, as a general rule, must tie transportation expenses of clients to specific programs. Currently, several agencies purchase transit fare media, such as tokens, multi-ride tickets, and monthly passes, for clients. This approach makes it relatively easy to tie transit expenses directly to a specific client and a specific program. If the transit program evolves to the point that a service agency can simply authorize transit trips for clients, the social service agencies are concerned that the transit provider and the social service agency may need to develop a method of tracking trips for the agency.

If the direction is that the transit provider simply provides the trips that are requested and authorized by the agency, and the agency does not pay for the trips, then the transit provider must receive additional funding for the additional trips. If the additional trips are performed by clients using existing fixed route transit service, no additional cost will be incurred. If the additional trips are performed door-to-door, the cost for each trip will be approximately \$17 per one-way trip per person for local trips, and approximately \$50 per one-way trip per person for trips performed within the region, but with origin and destination being in different cities of the region. **Agencies estimate that unmet trip needs can easily be as high as 50 % more than the current service trips. If so, the number of monthly local trips alone will be approximately 3,400 door-to-door trips, for an additional annual operating cost of \$693,600.**

SERVICE ELIGIBILITY AND AVAILABILITY

Many people are not eligible for services. For example, Medicaid recipients are eligible for services provided by the TxDOT Medical Transportation Program, but Medicare recipients are not. Often, the Medicare recipients require dialysis three

times a week, and cannot afford transportation for this life sustaining activity. The additional cost for providing these additional trips are included in the cost estimates provided above.

SERVICE RULES AND PARAMETERS

Individual agencies have specific rules or parameters related to the provision of rides, service requirements, and limitations (such as one type client or a specific client may not ride with another type or specific client). If these requirements cannot be modified, the cost for each passenger will easily double because shared trips can no longer be provided. It is estimated that approximately 5% of all trips (current and forecast) could be so restricted, meaning that the cost of 5% of the total trips will double in cost per one-way trip, for an annual cost of \$8,670.

VARIANCE IN SERVICE REGULATIONS

Significant variance in regulations for refusals of service, suspensions of service, or other behavioral actions among agencies and the transit provider is a problem that has significant impacts. Agencies and transit providers need to agree on specific rules of conduct that, if violated, can result in service suspensions. There is the potential for additional service costs if a client does require special service because of rule violations. The additional costs can double the cost per trip, but the overall cost may be minimal, depending on the number of clients affected.

LACK OF DETAILED BUDGET LINE ITEMS FOR TRANSPORTATION

Most agencies do not have specific transportation funds or transportation budget line items. Many agencies have very gray areas when it comes to funding transit trips. Even when agencies have funds to help clients through special programs, the cost for transit trips is often not specifically identified, and is instead part of the program costs. **In the event the transit provider assumes responsibility for providing all transit trips, even if the agencies agree to funnel their specific transit funds to the transit provider, much of the cost of the trips currently provided by the agency will not be identified. Therefore, the transit provider will assume additional trips, but will not receive all of the funds currently used for the trips.** It is estimated that many such trips can be transferred to the public transit system (provided the system has the resources and provides the coverage needed), but it will also require transferring much of the cost to the transit provider. **For example, the Bell County Health Services Director provided data that shows in a five month period, approximately 165 people required trips for prescriptions. Of this 165, only 13 used the public transit system, with 107**

people getting a ride from someone else. If these additional trips are suddenly placed upon the transit service provider, additional resources will be needed to meet the service demands.

VEHICLE USE

The use of vehicles in specific areas or for specific trips may be limited by the funding source used to procure the vehicles. For example, Hill Country Transit District is the designated service provider for Central Texas State Planning Region (23.) HCTD operates transit service in nine counties, with one rural service division and two urban divisions. **Based on funding requirements of the Federal Transit Administration, vehicles purchased for urban service cannot be used in rural service areas. This restriction can hinder efforts for more efficient service provision. Service area boundaries were highly prioritized by survey respondents, as some programs confine operations to specific geographic areas, such as the FTA's rural and urban programs.**

CUSTOMER ACCESS AND ELIGIBILITY BARRIERS

Another highly prioritized survey response was related to customer access and eligibility barriers. Especially noted in discussion was the **need for expanded public transit service in terms of service routes, service hours, and service frequency, all of which carries a hefty price tag.** Some passengers do not have any way other than public transit to access medical care and other life sustaining trips but the transit system does not provide service to their area. Some people need transit service but cannot use door-to-door service because they have no eligible disabilities and the fixed route service does not cover their area.

It is estimated that the **need for additional transit service in the Temple area** today calls for the **purchase of 3 new fixed route buses, and for the operation of two more fixed routes.** The cost for the purchase of new buses is estimated to be **\$159,000 for local match, with the difference of \$681,000 being paid through FTA.** To operate the new two routes, an annual operating cost will be **approximately \$308,000.** To extend service hours just until 8:00 PM, an additional annual operating cost is estimated at **\$267,000.**

In the **Killeen urban division, the cost for additional service is considerably higher because of the larger geographic size and population.** The number of fixed routes needs to be doubled, calling for the purchase of **10 more buses, with the local cost of \$1,459,000, with the balance of \$1,341,000 available through**

FTA. The annual operating cost for the additional Killeen Urban service is estimated at \$924,000.

In both urbanized areas, the addition of new client trips will place a larger burden on the transit provider for door-to-door service as well. In Temple, it is estimated that 3 additional STS buses will be needed at a cost of \$128,948, and will cost an additional \$308,000 annually for operating costs. In Killeen, the purchase of 6 additional STS buses will cost \$257,896 and the additional operating cost is estimated to be \$616,000.

Another key component for the transit service to be effective, as identified by the RTAG, is the need for **more frequent fixed route service**. Currently, passengers who wish to drop a child off at day care and then continue the transit trip to work must drop off the child, and then wait an hour for the next bus. The same is true for the return trip. Often, people will simply opt to not work, or in many cases, work is simply not an option because of the transit frequency. **The RTAG feels the frequency needs to double. To do so in both the Temple and Killeen urbanized areas, more fixed route buses and increased operating funds will be needed. The total need for buses is 20, at a total cost of \$5,600,000. The additional annual operating cost is estimated to be \$3,080,000.**

FINANCIAL AND DATA

The third highly prioritized survey response was financial and data, such as cost allocation and cost sharing between programs, and reporting to multiple funding agencies. This problem is exacerbated by the need of the public transit system to obtain adequate funding at the local, state, and federal level to provide the transit services needed. **The funding requirements presented above for additional routes, extended service hours, and increased frequency are not being met, meaning the transit provider cannot financially meet the service demands.** The RTAG knows that the public transit system, in terms of service hours, geographic coverage, and frequency, is a critical component of providing efficient transit service and providing a means for clients and the general public to have the freedom of mobility needed for access to medical care, education, and employment.

LIMITATIONS IMPOSED BY VEHICLE REQUIREMENTS

Finally, **limitations imposed by vehicle requirements – types of vehicles, types of fuels, equipment required** – impose barriers. In some instances, sedans may serve the trip purpose, but emissions and alternative fuel requirements, as well as equipment standards, may limit the number of vehicles that can be purchased. **The**

infrastructure and availability of certain fuels is often a problem. For example, Ultra Low Sulfur Diesel (ULSD) is considered as an acceptable alternative fuel; yet, this fuel is not available commercially at local fueling stations. In Killeen, the transit provider was forced to install its own ULSD fuel tank; this, however, is not an option for rural service. **For rural vehicles, some are powered by propane which is not cost effective when the average fuel consumption is 4 miles per gallon. Further, the propane vehicles have been extremely undependable and incur high maintenance costs because of poor design and operation. They are often out of service for repairs.**

Although sedans may work quite economically for transporting clients for out of town trips, governmental limitations prohibit use of these specific vehicles indirectly based on standards issued for service vehicles.

PRIORITY TWO BARRIER

The second highest priority of the two barriers identified by RTAG relates to the provision of consistent public transit service through an expanded public transit system that meets the needs of multiple agencies. Agencies were very consistent in reporting that many of the client trips needed could be met through the expansion of the regular fixed route service provided by Hill Country Transit District.

EXTENDED TRANSIT SERVICE

As presented earlier in this report, there is no late evening or weekend service throughout the urban areas, other than for Medical Transportation clients. Fixed route and urban paratransit service ends between 6 and 7 o'clock in the evening, limiting system use by employees whose work schedule starts or ends later. Many working people must use the weekends to either work or to attend to errands because they work during the week. There is no Sunday service, and very limited Saturday service. Several agencies provide clients transit service by buying transit system tokens or passes, which enables the clients to travel very inexpensively, provided the transit system provides access geographically and during the hours needed.

SERVICE FREQUENCY

Service access is also limited based on service frequency. Buses currently operate at one hour headways. Such a limited headway restricts people, for example, from stopping at a day care center, shopping, or attending to another errand en route to or from work, and then boarding the next bus to continue the trip.

GEOGRAPHIC COVERAGE

There is limited coverage area for fixed route service. The fixed route service needs to be expanded to cover wider geographic areas: southern portions of Copperas Cove and Killeen; western and northern portions of Temple and extended southern portions of Temple; Belton area in which no fixed route service currently exists; and service connections between these areas. **The number of day care centers and work places are growing, but the fixed routes of the transit system are not growing to provide service to these locations.** There is no requirement for day care centers and similarly related work places to be on or near existing transit service routes.

RESOURCES FOR EXPANDED SERVICE

There is a lack of resources available to meet the needs for expanded service areas and service hours, with resources needed for operating funds and vehicle procurement. More buses are needed to expand geographically and to increase frequency. More drivers and support staff are needed to provide more service. More funding is needed to expand services. Details of funding needs are presented earlier in this report.

PRIORITY ONE CONSTRAINT

The **higher priority of the two constraints** faced by the RTAG relates to the **expectations** of a public transit system by local governments, social service agencies, clients, and the general public.

LOCAL GOVERNMENTS

Local governments often express the expectation that the public transit system has virtually unlimited financial resources via grants from the state and federal governments. It is difficult to educate local governments that the public transit system may have access to some federal or state funds, but the funds are limited, and often **require significant local cash contributions to obtain the grant funds.** This same problem exists when dealing with some agencies, and certainly when dealing with clients and the general public.

There is also the expectation that each bus in service should always carry a capacity passenger load, which is an unrealistic expectation. Rather, each new route takes time to develop a strong ridership base. The public transit system can serve as a

strong economic stimulus if the system provides frequent service, over a broad geographic area, and during evening and weekend hours. The RTAG believes such service routes will build ridership over time by providing the transportation needed for people to access work, medical facilities, schools, and recreational centers. Without such a transportation base, the community can become a poor urban area instead of a vibrant economically sound community.

EXPECTATIONS OF THE STATE OF TEXAS

There is also **concern among RTAG members that the expectation exists that the development or refinement of coordinated services as directed by the state will result in the reduction of funds needed for the provision of trips.** Especially when considering the issues presented in this report regarding the need for expanded services, this is simply not correct. The public transit system cannot meet all transit needs for everyone in the community. However, many transit needs can be met. **To provide as much transit service as possible, and to meet as many trip needs as possible, funding for such expansion, both for the capital equipment needed, and for the on-going operational cost, is needed.**

UNTARGETED PEOPLE AND UNMET NEEDS

Untargeted people and their unmet transit needs are significant, and far from fully identified. For example, it is not uncommon to discover people who are using the Medicare program, but are unable to find or afford transportation to dialysis treatment, dental appointments, or medical care. This problem and the costs for meeting such service needs are presented earlier in this report.

EXPECATIONS OF THE PUBLIC

Finally, **individuals sometimes have unrealistic expectations about what a public transit system can do.** For example, the Killeen-Copperas Cove-Temple urban service area is one of the fastest growing areas of the state. **The school district is busy building and opening new schools; new medical facilities are being built; new day care centers are being built; and new shopping centers are springing up.** Teachers and parents, medical practitioners, caseworkers and business **people expect that a phone call to the transit system is all that is needed to ensure a new bus route is implemented to provide additional transit service.**

MARKETING

As with any other business or program, the public transit system will not be used if people do not know about it. **The public transit system needs to be marketed. Capital and operating funds are so limited that the transit system cannot afford to market the service,** which means many unmet needs and untargeted people are missed. A good marketing program can be **implemented and maintained year-to-year by the transit system at an estimated annual cost of \$150,000.** The more the system is advertised, the more people know about the service as a means to meet their transportation needs.

PRIORITY TWO CONSTRAINT

The **second highest priority constraint** facing this area relates to the identification statewide of how to **share resources and lower costs through group purchases.**

GROUP PURCHASES

Group purchases made available to transit service providers by the state can greatly improve the efficiency of the service in terms of administrative time and overall costs. Tires, for example, are particularly burdensome to purchase. Specifications must be detailed enough to obtain quality tires, but not so detailed as to be restrictive for potential vendors. It has become increasingly difficult to develop long-term price expectations because of the fluctuating and increasing costs of petroleum products. An easily accessible tire vendor from whom tires can be purchased in a way that meets the requirements of both state and federal agencies that fund such purchases would be greatly beneficial, especially to smaller transit service providers, and a group effort led by the state can also help lower costs. Tires are just one example of the potential cost savings and increased purchasing efficiencies for transit service providers. Other areas are bus parts; tools and support equipment; support vehicles; computers and similar administrative support equipment. **For the transit service provider, no actual cost increase is needed and, in fact, the provider may recognize cost savings from participating in a group purchase program.**

FUEL PURCHASES

Fuel costs are increasing, and there are sometimes stringent alternative fuel requirements tied to vehicle funds. Especially **outside urban centers, it is difficult to find access to alternative fuels** for transit vehicles. ULSD is not available even in urban centers in many cases unless the transit service provider is able to install its own fuel tank. Fuel costs will certainly increase, and for the transit service provider, will be similar to those seen throughout the state and by the state itself.

ELECTRONIC SCHEDULING AND REPORTING EQUIPMENT

HCTD recognizes the **need for and the benefits of a sophisticated electronic software program** and peripheral components, such as **mobile data terminals** for vehicles. However, **the cost for the purchase, installation, training, crossover, and actual implementation is prohibitive**. RTAG members have discussed the idea of a single, statewide software program, but also recognize that some transit providers already have such electronic programs, and would likely be very reluctant to change. Nonetheless, **a single, consistent program that provides the venue for consistent reporting formats throughout the state, whereby performance standards and reporting requirements are considered “apples to apples” can certainly be more beneficial and efficient than multiple programs and formats**. Whether the electronic program is the same for all transit service providers, or is purchased individually by each provider, the funding for purchasing, installing, and training is needed. RTAG **estimates the cost related to the program is approximately \$500,000 initially, and approximately \$75,000 annually thereafter to maintain and update the program**.

SUMMARY

RTAG members are in agreement that **a great deal of coordinated transit service is already being provided in the Central Texas area** by the regional provider, Hill Country Transit District. The area is somewhat unique in that HCTD is the sole public transit provider for the region, operating a 5311 rural public transit system, two separate 5307 small urban systems, and 5310 services in both the rural and urban areas; providing Title III elderly transportation services; and operating the TxDOT Medical Transportation program for the region. The members of the RTAG are comprised of social service agency leaders, management of the regional public transit system, and leaders of the Central Texas Council of Governments. The members strongly support each other and have worked together for many years, meeting and communicating transit needs and solutions for clients and the general public. The Central Texas RTAG actually evolved from an earlier group called the Central Texas Transportation Alliance, which met regularly for many years to discuss transit needs and how to meet them on a regional basis.

RTAG members from Temple were instrumental in gaining the support of the City of Temple necessary to start a public transit system that is being used far beyond the expectations of anyone. Social service agencies are well represented on the RTAG, and these community leaders worked with the transit system management to develop a

program whereby passes and tokens can be easily purchased by the agencies, then distributed to clients.

It is believed there are even greater opportunities for sharing of resources, improving the level of service, and providing more access to service through reviewing rules and regulations, and providing adequate funding to expand services.