

**Report on Identified Barriers and Constraints to Coordination
of Transportation submitted to TxDOT-PTN Division**

**Golden Crescent Regional Planning Commission for the
7-County Golden Crescent Planning Region**

September 2006

GOLDEN CRESCENT



REGIONAL TRANSIT

INTRODUCTION

This report addresses a variety of barriers and constraints to coordinated regional transportation service in the Golden Crescent Region. Some of the identified obstructions and limitations are directly related to the Texas Department of Transportation definition of barriers and constraints developed for this regional coordination effort, and some are simply perceived as limitations by local stakeholders when they were asked to voice their view on why coordination has not fully been implemented by agencies that provide transportation services.

Throughout this study process of identifying gaps and inefficiencies in service and need for transportation in the region, various barriers and constraints have arisen by stakeholders and have been recorded. Through a variety of methods these barriers and constraints have been identified by the public and those involved in the study process. Discussion to identify these hindrances to coordinated regional service took place at two public meetings in the region, Coordination Advisory Committee meetings, discussion with specific stakeholders including social services/transit providers and surveys. Most of the responses derived from community outreach were consumer-oriented and much of their focus is related to the delivery and experience of transportation services.

In addition, this report reflects input from the steering committee formed for purposes of the Golden Crescent regional coordination study. They include transit operators and social service agencies, who are more familiar with the underlying factors contributing to barriers and constraints and whose input is more directly related to organizational hindrances to coordination.

Successful coordination efforts currently in practice in the Golden Crescent region are reported as well and may become an example of a Best Practice for other regions. Potential pilot project opportunities have arisen from identifying the barriers and constraints to coordination either to correct deficiencies or to expand upon successes and will be explored in the following stage of this study.

EXISTING COORDINATION IN REGION: A BEST PRACTICE EXAMPLE

Coordination between transit agencies is not a new concept in the Golden Crescent Region. Transit coordination is part of the service delivery approach of all of the providers within Golden Crescent Region and has been extensive and vital to the existence of rural transit service.

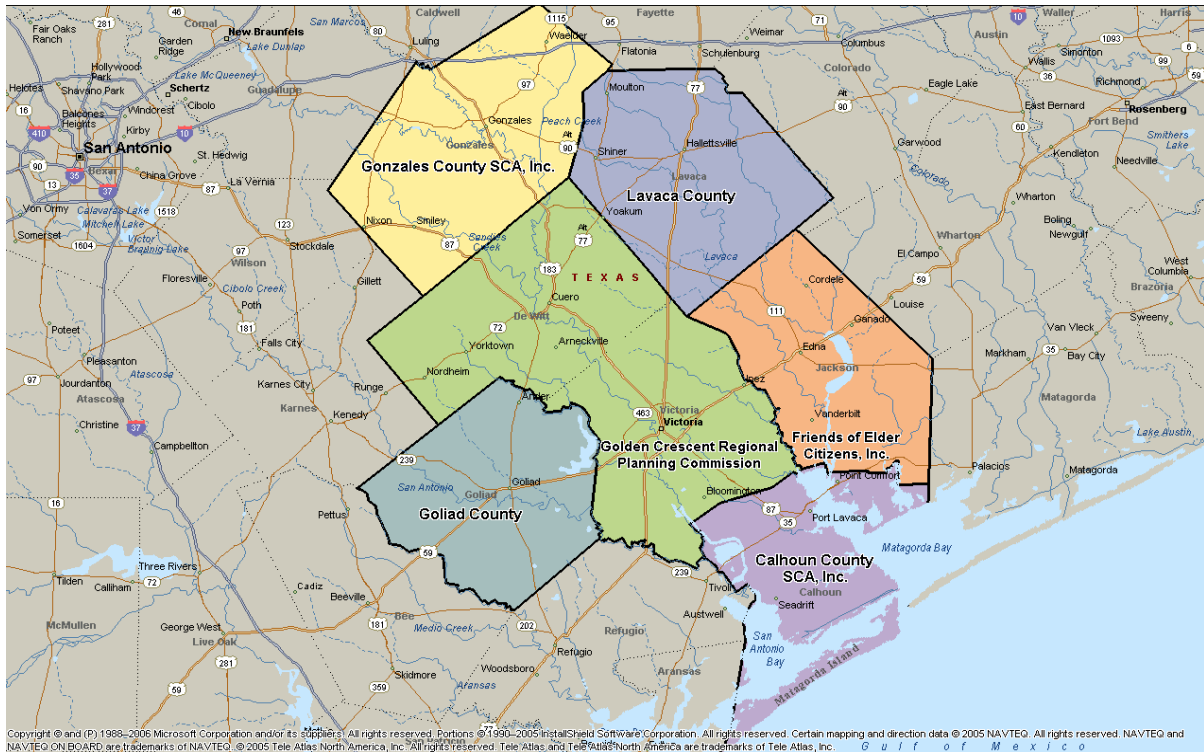
Victoria is the economic and political center of the Golden Crescent Region. GCRPC'S RTRANSIT coordinates all the rural transit service, and in recent years this provider through an inter-local agreement with the City of Victoria developed transportation services within the city of Victoria. The contractual system developed provides a balance between local autonomy and more effective regional coordination of service.

At the core of most rural public transit agencies' challenge in the United States is the issue of funding. While most large urban agencies can rely on one or more dedicated local funding source, rural systems especially need to rely on a patchwork of funding sources, along with limited local support from county and municipal government. Counties in the Golden Crescent region provide varied levels of direct assistance.

The Golden Crescent Region covers a seven county area. GCRPC as the Rural Transit District actually coordinates RTRANSIT service to eight counties. Friends of Elder Citizens, Inc. is the Subcontractor for GCRPC and coordinates public and senior transportation services. However, Matagorda County is part of the Gulf Coast planning region, and services within the county are being addressed in another regional coordination study.

Golden Crescent Region is a coordinated rural regional transit system in which several of the counties operate their service under contract with GCRPC'S RTRANSIT out of Victoria. GCRPC'S RTRANSIT directly provides services in DeWitt and Victoria Counties. GCRPC'S RTRANSIT subcontracts varied services which may include rural public transportation, medical transportation, and elderly and disabled services with the Calhoun County Senior Citizens Association, Inc. (Calhoun), Goliad County (Goliad), Lavaca County (Lavaca), Gonzales County Senior Citizens Association, Inc. (Gonzales), City of Nixon (Nixon) and Friends of Elder Citizens, Inc (Matagorda and Jackson County).. **Map 1-1** shows the service providers for the 7-county region.

MAP 1-1 GOLDEN CRESCENT COORDINATED RURAL PUBLIC SERVICE PROVIDERS



REGIONAL COORDINATION

The Medical Transportation Program is an outstanding example of successful regional coordination in the Golden Crescent region. Leadership in the coordination effort was assumed by the RTRANSIT. The newest MTP Request for Proposal issued in the fall of 2005 required RTRANSIT to resume direct responsibility for all Medicaid transportation in the Golden Crescent Region. One significant challenge involves Medicaid transportation in Matagorda County. Under the new guidelines, Matagorda County Medicaid services had to be bid from a different region, the Houston Gulf Coast region. As a result of the RFP, the coordinated transportation arrangement for Medicaid between Golden Crescent in Matagorda County was no longer feasible.

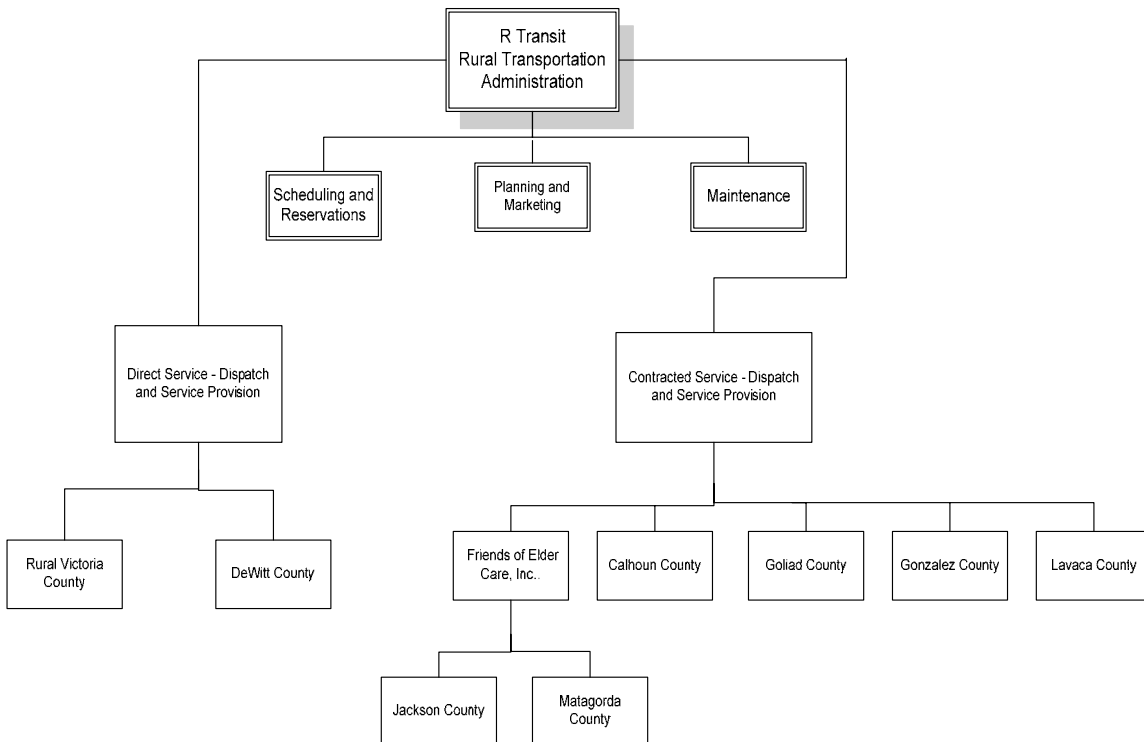
Golden Crescent regional transportation was not equipped with sufficient resources to bid on the entire Houston Gulf Coast Region. As a result, Golden Crescent Subcontracts with Friends of Elder Citizens, Inc. for Medicaid transportation in Jackson County. Friends of Elder Care of Palacios have had to go elsewhere to subcontract services for Medicaid in Matagorda County.

TXDOT awarded the contract to RTRANSIT for Region 17 – Golden Crescent. Service under the new contract commenced in June 2006, and while many of the stipulations of the new state contract have been challenging to implement RTRANSIT has successfully developed an effective coordinated regional system for Medical Transportation in the Golden Crescent region.

RTRANSIT AND COORDINATION

A coordinated model of senior, public and Medicaid Transportation exists in the Golden Crescent region. RTRANSIT began operations in November 1986. **Diagram 1 - 1** shows the coordination model of RTRANSIT. The coordination model involves providing transportation to all seven counties within the Golden Crescent region under a series of contracts with different counties in different agencies. RTRANSIT provides Administration, Reservations, Scheduling Maintenance and assurance that service standards are met by all of the providers.

DIAGRAM 1 - 1
RTRANSIT COORDINATION MODEL



BARRIERS AND CONSTRAINTS

The following are identified barriers and constraints to coordination services in the Golden Crescent Region. They are divided into categories of barriers, constraints and other concerns. The last category identifies concerns voiced by local stakeholders that do not necessarily meet the TxDOT definition of a barrier or constraint to coordination, but are hindrances to successful transit in the region.

The items listed below each category are not in order of regional importance. The top four barriers and constraints are specified at the end.

BARRIERS

Rules and regulations that guide transportation in the region affect the basic service and passenger interaction of agencies that must adhere to these guidelines. Funding and legislative intent are often tied directly to how closely an agency follows these rules.

1. Volunteer drivers at certain agencies have proven to be unreliable and it is difficult to enforce agency rules and transportation guidelines when they are not paid employees. It can be difficult and costly to find, train, and retain drivers.
2. Medicaid clients have a difficult time getting reimbursed for transit tickets and the local provider is forced to find money to buy these tickets.
3. There are insurance restrictions that make it difficult to coordinate transit services. An agency with vehicles may not be allowed to carry users of other agencies. It may be very costly to share vehicles with other agencies because of insurance requirements. Insurance rates often increase when multiple persons, including volunteers, are required to be covered by a single policy.
4. Alternative fueled vehicle requirements made by TxDOT place a hardship on agencies and make sharing vehicles even more complicated. These vehicles are not widely available, are more costly to purchase, have a poor reliability record, and the fuels themselves may not be uniformly available throughout the region. This TXDOT rule could be changed to allow areas to purchase non alternative fueled vehicles in areas with no air quality issues, instead of trying to make a mandate for everyone. These vehicles cost more money and are more expensive to operate (fuel, specialized mechanics, etc.).

CONSTRAINTS

There are a variety of constraints that have come up in discussions around the region. An obvious constraint that is very real and hinders delivery of service as well as coordination efforts is the lack of funding to purchase new vehicles and extend hours of service. More funding for transportation capital and service would not remove the need for coordinated service, but would actually improve the ability to coordinate. It is very difficult to

coordinate services when an agency is spread too thin for even their own clientele. Another major hindrance to coordination is the lack of similar technologies to report, schedule and dispatch services throughout the region.

1. Lack of additional operating dollars and funding to replace aging vehicle fleets and funding for new vehicles to meet the demand for basic services is a top concern in the region among all stakeholders.
2. Lack of service to work or other destinations based on minimal night and weekend fixed-route service availability in Victoria is a problem for placing employees in jobs and their success once hired. The need for additional services is consistent throughout the region: Early morning, late evening, weekend, and service from county to county.
3. There is little initiative, and few incentives, to pool resources (vehicles, local share match, etc.) across local areas.
4. There is a lack of information on how to access transit services by potential riders in the region or those involved with particular agencies. There is no centralized location for region-wide transportation service availability.
5. Rural public transit providers that coordinate with some social service agencies are given only the clients with long trip distances because the cost per person is so high to the social service agency. Funding becomes a very critical issue. Not much coordination with other local agencies for out of town trips.
6. Rural providers who have attempted to coordinate out of town trips with other agencies have learned they can not trust other agencies. If the other agencies' client cancelled they would not inform the other entity of this and their client was left without a ride. Communication between coordinated agencies is an issue. Failure to report cancelled trips between agencies leads to distrust and a dissolve of coordination.
7. Vehicle sharing is difficult because agencies in the area have similar peak hours.
8. Vehicle downtime is not recorded by the rural transit providers or other agencies in the region to monitor the availability of vehicles that could be used for other service.
9. Centralized rural transit scheduling and dispatching has proven to be very difficult in the region because regular users are comfortable with contacting their local provider for service, but if required to call into a 1-800 number outside their local area are much less willing to do so and usually will not. In the past, the Medicaid recipient for the region (no longer the recipient) attempted to centralize dispatching and scheduling for the rural providers and it was very unsuccessful.

10. Lack of technology to coordinate all rural providers under Victoria Rural Transit.

11. There is reluctance by many users to travel because of the need for special assistance, because of concerns for safety while traveling, or because of access limitations to transit facilities. These concerns are magnified if a second agency, transfer, or other unfamiliar circumstances are involved. Thus the comfort level of the users is a key constraint to actual usage of services, no matter how well coordinated they may be.

12. Similar schedule and dispatching software is much needed for providers in the region and would improve service delivery and coordination.

13. Counties in the region offer varied levels of local and in-kind contributions to the rural demand-response providers for each county. This can be a hindrance to coordination because the money available for transportation service and inventory varies greatly between counties within the region.

OTHER LOCAL CONCERNS

- Way too much time is spent on the State side with billing and reimbursement process for federal funds. For Small-Urban Section 5307 Programs with FTA, they find it easier to administer the program because they don't have State (TXDOT) imposed processes. For instance, when they submit a request for payment to FTA, it is done electronically and they usually receive their monies in the bank the next business day. They do not send FTA any paper work and their requests are reviewed during the Triennial Review every 3 years. However, under the Section 5311 Rural Program which is administered through the State, they have to submit a request for reimbursement usually monthly, all bills and invoices copied, and sent to Public Transportation Coordinator at the District Office. They in turn review every piece of paper and then it's submitted to the PTN Division in Austin for processing (this can take between 15-25 days) which creates a money flow problem for them. The past 2 years TXDOT had its attorney review the reimbursement process and they issued some changes. Providers could no longer submit a request unless they had paid vendors or subcontractors. The attorney's view was that TXDOT could not advance the credit of the State. On top of this, the Public Transportation Coordinator has to come out quarterly to do billing reviews. This is valuable time that could be spent coordinating other services.
- More demand than vehicle fleet. Providers themselves have to do a lot more juggling so that they can have a vehicle available to travel out of the county.

- There is an image problem regarding rural transit service in the region as a senior service only. Efforts have been made to advertise and unify the vehicles of R Transit and their subcontractors as a service for all people in need of transit in the rural areas.
- Lack of funding to expand service hours and weekends for Victoria fixed-route and rural providers.
- Riders often want more immediate rural service and are unwilling to wait for the times vehicles are available.

TOP FOUR BARRIERS AND CONSTRAINTS

1. Lack of additional operating dollars and funding to replace aging vehicle fleets and funding for new vehicles to meet the demand for basic services is a top concern in the region among all stakeholders.
2. Lack of service to work or other destinations based on minimal night and weekend fixed-route service availability in Victoria is a problem for placing employees in jobs and their success once hired. The need for additional services is consistent throughout the region: Early morning, late evening, weekend, and service from county to county.
3. There is little initiative, and few incentives, to pool resources (vehicles, local share match, etc.) across local areas.
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SUGGESTIONS TO IMPROVE COORDINATION

Information Sharing and Coordination

1. Provide a communications forum using direct meetings and through the internet.
2. Encourage providers to be proactive in reaching out to social service agencies, educational facilities, major employers and medical facilities about available resources and potential partnership opportunities. Instead of regional transit having riders come to them, take on the approach of reaching out to meet the community's needs.
3. Encourage sharing of information between businesses and transportation providers.
4. Provide transit schedules to a broader audience.

5. Begin researching and pooling resources for scheduling software or alternative software that will increase sharing of information in the region and availability of idling vehicles.
6. Establish a single point of contact in each business to address issues concerning transportation.
7. Create a region wide marketing effort for transit services and resources.
8. Continue and expand the www.goldencrescenttransit.com web site created for this study and encourage participation of a greater group of providers and social service agencies.
9. Establish an on-going advisory committee made up of local citizens to provide input to transportation providers.
10. Organize region wide schedules for all providers to coordinate out of region trips to share the responsibility and resources of these time consuming and expensive trips.
11. Establish a regional mobility manager to maximize the dissemination and flow of information as well as to keep the process moving in successive months and years.

Services

12. Establish a personnel clearinghouse for volunteer drivers all over the region. Hold a regional training that will meet the needs of all agencies. Reach out to specific groups that may have willing participants and offer an informational meeting to introduce the program.
13. Apply technology such as pagers, AVL, smart card, and other hardware/software to user needs and interagency coordination.
14. Establish a few central transit hubs in outlying areas of Victoria to focus services, shorten vehicle trips into the city, and increase transit's profile and coordination where rural vehicles can connect to Victoria fixed-route service.