

TRANSIT VISION MEMO

Introduction

The Newton County Transit Master Plan (TMP) is being carried out as a recommendation of the 2018 Newton County Comprehensive Transportation Plan and furthers the County's ongoing goal to seek and support additional transportation options and funding opportunities.

This memo documents Newton County's vision and desired long-term outcomes for transit based upon several activities carried out during the first stage of developing the Newton County Transit Master Plan. The vision connects themes from the Draft Assessment of Existing and Future Conditions, preliminary visioning input activities conducted with the public and key stakeholders, and lastly, the Transit Service Needs and Market Analysis. The synthesis of this information helped construct a guiding vision, goals, and desired long-term outcomes that are based on community preferences as well as feasibility.

Tie-in to Regional Vision

This vision factors in the regionally defined vision of world-class infrastructure, a competitive economy, and healthy, livable communities, as outlined in The Atlanta Region's Plan Policy Framework adopted in August 2015.

Insights Gleaned from Technical Analysis

Existing and Future Trends Analysis

Overview

Understanding existing characteristics and anticipated trends in County demographics, employment, land use, travel trends, and mobility conditions offers insight into potential transit needs and existing opportunities.

Summary Findings

- Of all Newton County households, 94 percent report having access to at least one vehicle in 2019 (U.S. Census, American Community Survey). However, there are areas with higher concentrations of zero-car households, such as in west-central Newton, the City of Porterdale, the Industrial Park Boulevard area, and areas south of Covington along SR 36. These portions of the county coincide with locations where higher proportions of residents experience lower average household income.
- There are concentrated areas with low vehicle access in Newton County that could benefit from additional transportation options. This need will only increase as the population of Newton ages and residents either lose the ability to drive themselves or grow more uncomfortable driving.
- The character of development land uses in Newton County indicates densities likely supportive of demand-response transit, but not fixed-route transit; even though there are some plans to strategically add a few mixed-use, denser nodes.
- Travel patterns for Newton County indicate most trips stay within the county and the City of Covington is firmly the travel center of the area. Approximately 65 percent of all trips in 2019 stayed within the county; 78 percent of these trips began or ended in the City of Covington. For home-based work trips, only 46 percent stayed within Newton County.

- The impacts of Covid-19 have localized travel within Newton County, with significant drop-offs in trips to the region's key job centers.

Transit Service Needs Assessment

Overview

The Transit Service Needs and Market Analysis, drafted in July 2021, summarizes the markets and geographic areas where there is a demonstrated need for transit services in Newton County. The analysis incorporates the following:

- Demographic and socioeconomic factors that influence the demand for public transportation
- General travel demand and trip patterns based on recent travel movement data
- Land use and development patterns, including major activity generators

Summary Findings

- In suburban and exurban areas like Newton County, the demand for transit is largely driven by transit dependent riders, although major activity and employment centers can increase demand in specific locations. Other factors that would otherwise attract riders, such as parking availability and the cost of driving, are less common in Newton County.
- Based on density alone, most places in Newton County do not have densities that would typically support scheduled fixed-route transit. Only one Census Block Group in Newton County (downtown Covington) meets the density threshold typically required for fixed-route transit.
- About one-third of the total county land area exhibits population and employment densities that would support flexible or on-demand transit service. These areas are generally located in the central and western portions of the county, in proximity to I-20, and mainly south of I-20.
- West Newton and Census Block Groups around Covington exhibit the highest need for transit services for transportation-disadvantaged populations, defined as those residents meeting socioeconomic characteristics that are typically significant determinants of home-based demand for public transportation. The transportation disadvantaged are particularly prevalent in areas south of Covington. These areas constitute nearly half of the county population (48 percent), two-thirds of the minority population (65 percent), and two-thirds of zero-car households (68 percent).
- Public transportation is most productive in areas of high trip density. There is a clear concentration of trip density in the central part of the West Newton subarea, as well as the Downtown Covington subarea and the block groups adjacent to it. Downtown Covington has the highest density of trips beginning and ending within that subarea at nearly three trips per acre.
- The highest demand for local transit service in Newton County is limited to Covington and the western part of the county, primarily along the SR 81 and I-20 corridors.
- A flexible or demand response transit service is likely the most appropriate mobility application in many areas of Newton County.
- Conyers (in Rockdale County) and the Social Circle area of Walton County have a high concentration of trips that do not stay within Newton County, indicating a potential need for transit connections to/from those locations.
- Downtown Atlanta has the highest trip interaction with Newton County of the region's major job centers. This is followed by Midtown Atlanta, Cumberland, and Perimeter Center.

Perimeter Center and Sandy Springs combined comprise a significant number of trips, on par with those to/from Downtown Atlanta. These regional commuting destinations are in line with the regional Xpress routes provided between Rockdale County and Midtown, Downtown, and Perimeter Center, indicating value in extending these routes into Newton County.

- Peer systems that were evaluated with similar population/employment size and community character primarily provide countywide demand-response (dial-a-ride) transit service, but in some cases provide vanpool programs and/or limited fixed route service.

What We Have Heard from Stakeholders and the Community

Technical Committee and Stakeholders

Overview

The Technical Committee, consisting of Newton County staff representatives, local and regional governments, and regional transportation partners, has met once to date.

Input from Technical Committee

The first Technical Committee meeting was held via webinar on May 25th. The project team provided an overview and purpose of the Transit Master Plan, updates on completed and upcoming activities, and a summary of information from the draft Existing Conditions Report. The presentation included several pause points for questions and answers, and open dialogue. The following captures key points and questions that were discussed and responded to during the meeting:

- Some Technical Committee members raised concerns about the accuracy of the data point which noted that 65 percent of all trips in 2019 stayed within the county. They stated that it does not seem accurate and does not fully reflect travel to work and shopping outside of Newton County residents to other locations in the region.
- *Response: It was explained that this was all trips, not just commuting trips. As reported in the Existing Conditions Report document, only 46 percent of home-based work trips (commuting trips) remain in Newton County, meaning the majority leave the county to get to work (pre-pandemic).*
- Congestion data, which is included in the Existing Conditions Report, should play a role in making a case for transit.
- *Response: Existing and future traffic congestion is detailed in the 2018 Comprehensive Transportation Plan and is also summarized in this document. While new transit services are unlikely to have a substantial impact on traffic congestion, it would provide a transportation alternative. Further, traffic congestion will be considered in identifying any potential transit routes in order to avoid highly congested routes where possible.*
- There is a question of whether a transit referendum would be used to determine transit inclusion in the county.
- *Response: At this point (May 2021) of the project, it is too early to answer this question. Later tasks of the master plan process will identify potential transit service scenarios and evaluate the costs and potential funding availability of those scenarios.*

Input from Stakeholder Survey

The Technical Committee members were invited to participate in a web-based stakeholder survey in addition to the public survey for additional insights on their perceptions on, and the utility of transit services in Newton County. The survey ran in tandem to the Community Vision Survey. Key input from the survey follows.

- Just over half of the stakeholders did not believe (14 percent) or were unsure of (43 percent) the level of public support for providing future transit service in Newton County. They cited several obstacles and challenges:
 - Large part of county is still rural
 - Cost to the taxpayer
 - Size and scale of transit service
- Over half (57 percent) of the stakeholders were unsure if there is political support for future transit service. Lack of familiarity to the internal politics of Newton County was the main reason for uncertainty.

Potential Transit Goals as Ranked by Stakeholders

1. Providing connections to jobs
2. Providing mobility options for those who are unable to drive and/or do not have access to a car
3. Easing traffic congestion
4. Connecting to other transit systems in the region
5. Supporting economic development and housing in Newton County downtown areas and activity centers
6. Helping reduce pollution/emissions by providing an alternative to single occupancy

Several questions were asked pertaining to potential transit services and routes or connections within and around Newton County. Key findings from these questions include:

- Stakeholder preferred transit services:
 - Commuting to work both inside and outside Newton County (86 percent)
 - Trips for groceries and other services and shopping needs (86 percent)
 - Medical trips to appointments both inside and outside Newton County (71 percent)
 - Access to job training or job services (71 percent)
 - Trips to school/education sites (71 percent)
 - Getting to parks, trails, and recreation (71 percent)
- Most important transit services to provide, in order of most to least important:
 - Providing local services within Newton County (Downtown Covington, Stanton Springs, Turner Lake Park, etc.)
 - Providing commuter services to regional employment centers and destinations (Downtown/Midtown Atlanta, Perimeter Center, Hartsfield-Jackson Airport)
 - Connecting to adjoining transit providers
- Ideal transit connections within or adjacent to Newton County
 - Downtown Covington (86 percent)
 - Oxford/Oxford College (71 percent)
 - Porterdale, Stanton Springs/Shire Pkwy area, and Piedmont Newton Hospital (57 percent)
 - Turner Lake Park, Northeast Covington, and Social Circle (43 percent)

- All stakeholders agreed the best strategy for implementing transit services would be to focus services on highest demand routes of origins-destinations.

Several questions focused on the possible outcomes and benefits of a Transit Master Plan. The key findings include:

- Outcomes of a successful Plan
 - Creating opportunities for coordination with adjoining and regional operators to establish inter-county services (71 percent)
 - Establishing a transit vision that provides transportation alternatives for Newton County residents and workforce (71 percent)
 - Determining specific transit mode(s) appropriate for Newton County (71 percent)
 - Providing a roadmap to identify transit funding and start up services (57 percent)
 - Establishing a transit vision to support economic development goals (57 percent)
- Long term benefits
 - Providing connectivity
 - Supporting long-term community needs and economic development
 - Improve traffic congestion

Stakeholder Suggested Considerations for the Plan

- Financial Feasibility
- Community input
- The needs of minority and low-income communities

Public Input

Overview

As of July 30, 2021, the public has been invited to provide input via the following channels:

- **Spring 2021 Community Visioning Survey** – The web-based survey asked about participants’ travel and demographic characteristics as well as interest in and likely use of transit should it be added to Newton County. Just over 800 people participated.
- **May 27, 2021, Public Meeting** – The meeting offered the opportunity to learn about the project and review initial findings. There were a few options to provide input. Twenty-four people attended the meeting. During the meeting, participants interacted with project staff and input activities to provide their home location, how they traveled to the event, validate existing conditions to inform the final report, and complete the Community Visioning Survey. A second public meeting is planned for mid-August.
- **Email address** – A project email address is available for community members to submit comments to the project team. To date, only one email, in opposition to transit, has been received.

Both the public meeting and the Community Visioning Survey were advertised on social media and via the County’s other outreach mechanisms. The project team also conducted a direct message campaign to Newton County cell phones to drive people to the project website.

Findings – Community Survey

- Similar to the Existing Conditions findings, **96 percent of participants reported they have access to a car.**
 - Younger community members (24 years old and younger) are under-represented.
 - Seventy-seven percent of participants have an annual household income greater than \$50,000.
- The greatest concentration of participants (45 percent) live in the Covington area (Zip code 30014).
- The greatest concentration of participants (44 percent) work or attend school in the Covington area.
- Community members have **mixed views on whether Newton County should provide transit:**
 - 49 percent said NO
 - 36 percent said YES
 - 15 percent said MAYBE
 - Respondents from west/southwest Newton County (zip code 30016) were the most in favor of the county providing transit. The Covington area (zip code 30014) was second most in favor. These are in line with the areas showing the greatest potential density/need for transit services.
- Several questions asked about participants' likelihood of using transit and for what purposes. These questions were asked only to those who said "yes" or "maybe" to Newton County providing transit, just over 400 people.

Key findings from these questions include the following items.

- Sixty-four percent said they would consider using regional commuter services if they extended to a location in Newton County.
- If transit were available, people indicated that they would most likely take transit for trips related to recreation, tourism/nightlife/dining, grocery shopping, and medical appointments, commuting outside Newton County.
- Places that would be most important to connect to transit include:
 - Downtown Covington (88 percent)
 - Piedmont Newton Hospital (75 percent)
 - Conyers (71 percent)
 - Oxford/Oxford College (60 percent)
 - Turner Lake Park (56 percent)

Common themes among those who said YES or MAYBE to transit

Service is needed for:

- Those without cars or who cannot drive
- Low-income, elderly, disabled
- Teenagers and other young people

Transit service:

- Ensures access to essential shopping/services
- Can help the environment / reduce harmful emissions
- May help address traffic congestion
- Having an alternative to driving is important

Common themes among those who said no to transit

- Lack of need for transit
- Increase in crime
- Cost of the service
- Increase in traffic (particularly onset by buses)
- Loss of rural character, influx of new residents

- When asked what the main goal for transit in Newton County should be, the following goals rose to the top:
 - Providing mobility options for those who are unable to drive and/or do not have access to a car
 - Providing connections to jobs
 - Easing traffic congestion
 - Connecting to other transit systems in the region (e.g., ATL Xpress, Social Circle, Henry County Transit)
- The top three preferences for transit services include local fixed bus service or shuttle (74 percent), direct shuttle service to Atlanta Hartsfield-Jackson International Airport (62 percent), and regional commuter rail service to regional jobs centers (60 percent).

Findings – May 27th Public Meeting

The May 27th public meeting primarily served as an educational meeting, giving people the opportunity to review analysis completed to date by the project team. The largest number of attendees live in the 30014 zip code (Covington) and 30016 (southwest Newton County). A few data points from the meeting, highlighted below, offer insight on community preferences to inform the transit vision.

Attendees indicated that **the following two factors are most important to determining transit suitability in the Newton:**

- Transit system serves those who need it most (11 votes)
- Transit system provides incentive for economic development (4 votes)

Attendees indicated **the following four factors as least important to determining transit suitability for Newton:**

- Transit system makes sense financially (7 votes)
- Transit system reaches a lot of different parts of the county (4 votes)
- Transit system runs more often along a few select routes (4 votes)
- Transit system connects to other systems in the region (4 votes)

Attendees were also asked to identify key destinations in the community not already identified through project team data. Convenience and grocery stores in Covington and other locations in and around County were identified most (10 times). Places of work were the only other destinations identified more than two times (3 locations identified).

Guiding Transit Vision

While most Newton County residents currently have access to a car, the County is growing, aging, and diversifying, and with these changes, an increasing percentage of Newton County residents will be unable to safely drive to destinations due to age, disability, income, or other factors that cause transit dependency. In keeping with regional values of world-class infrastructure, a competitive economy and healthy, livable communities, Newton County will consider implementation of transit solutions that are right sized for the community, address the greatest needs, and provide the most desired services. Transit solutions and applications will focus upon providing mobility options for those who are unable to drive or do not have access to a car and take advantage of opportunities to provide regional transit connections where it furthers Newton County's high quality of life and economic opportunities.

Transit Goals and Long-term Outcomes

Goals

- Provide mobility options for those who are unable or choose not to drive or do not have access to a car
- Provide local and regional transit connections to jobs
- Provide transit connections to essential services
- Provide opportunities for transportation alternatives to single-occupancy vehicles
- Provide transit connections between key activity centers and destinations in the county and/or outside the county
- Connect to or coordinate with other transit systems in the region (e.g., ATL Xpress, Social Circle, Henry County Transit) to provide needed connections outside Newton County

Short-term Outcomes of the TMP

- Define the transit market and needs for Newton County
- Determine the appropriate transit service scenarios for the county, based on the needs and desires of the community
- Determine operating and capital costs of potential service scenarios
- Determine availability of potential funding sources for providing different transit service scenarios
- Identify steps to initial transit service implementation, and for expansion to meet future needs

Long-term Outcomes of the TMP

- Implement transit services to help ensure all community members have access to essential services and jobs
- Provide transit services that are appropriate and meets future needs as the county grows; services that are financially feasible and comparable to similarly sized and located communities
- Monitor trip trends to areas outside Newton County, particularly for employment opportunities, and identify opportunities to connect into regional transit systems where possible in the future
- Work with adjoining counties and regional transit providers to link into the regional transit network
- Secure local, state, federal, and other funding sources needed to implement the county's desired services