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Click anywhere on the above image to view Editor-in-Chief Scott Bogren and Editor Rich Sampson share their reflections on the Georgia Transit Tour.
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Voices from the Community

In the Georgia Transit Tour edition of DigitalCT, the CTPodcast page features three important conversations. To subscribe to the CTPodcast, go to http://ctpodcast.blogspot.com/ or search “The CTPodcast” in iTunes. Click on the microphone beside each entry to listen.

Janae Futrell, Atlanta Regional Commission, Senior Principal Planner
Atlanta Regional Commission Senior Principal Planner Janae Futrell joins the CTPodcast to discuss the agency’s growing role in shaping the transportation future of the 10-county Atlanta region through innovative mobility management practices. Building from TCRP’s influential Standardizing Data for Mobility Management report, Futrell discusses how the ARC has built upon such concepts as trip discover, trip transaction and even trip triaging. The goal of the ARC’s work is route optimization that uses all modes — including volunteers and taxi-style operations.

HIPAA, Privacy and Community and Public Transportation
Here, CTAA’s Sheryl Gross-Glaser, director of the Partnership for Mobility Management, discusses the implications of the Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act (HIPAA) and other privacy laws for various types of community and public transit agencies. We reference a recently-released TCRP Legal Research Digest on the topic, and cover additional information on HIPAA in plain English. Gross-Glaser, a lawyer, urges systems to think globally about privacy as well as the reasonable standards and training that all systems should consider.

Nathan Shimanek, Driver, CyRide, Ames, Iowa
Nathan Shimanek not only won the 2014 Rookie Driver of the Year at the National Community Transportation Roadeo, he also won the highly competitive body-on-chassis vehicle division. It was truly a remarkable accomplishment for the 15-year driver, who acknowledges he didn’t practice any of the obstacles prior to last month’s competition. In this edition of the CT Podcast, Shimanek talks about the work of a CyRide driver everyday in Ames, and offers advice to future Roadeo drivers.
Linking the Workforce: Rural & Suburban Transit

By Robert Hiett

Rural and suburban transit can be found in nearly all parts of Georgia. Some parts of the state are purely rural in nature, and the local transit shuttle provides access to critical community services. Rural and suburban transit provides Georgia’s senior citizens with access to medical care, commerce centers in each community, and helps them to live in their home for longer periods of time. However, rural and suburban transit service in Georgia is used for more than just the activities that support senior citizens.

Suburban parts of the state, such as the Three Rivers Region south of Atlanta, have links to rural, suburban, and urban transit systems. Trips that assist senior citizens account for slightly less than one third of the total transit system use, and direct employment or people receiving employment training account for nearly sixty percent of the system trips. The most common trip destinations related to employment activities are retail centers, technical schools, and community colleges. The TRRC system has five participating counties (Butts, Lamar, Pike, Spalding, and Upson) with two suburban cities (Griffin and Thomaston), and a service area population of approximately 160,000 people.

Coweta County is the largest county in the Three Rivers Region, approximately 130,000 citizens, and it operates a suburban transit system. Coweta Transit started operating in 2009, and it was heavily used to support independent living for its senior citizen community. However, Coweta County’s transit system has seen its employment related trips rise from 17% of the total trip types in 2009 to 45% of the total trip types in 2014. Coweta County has a thriving set of medical, technical, and community college locations, and the transit system usage reflects this trend.

Troup County is the third largest county in the Three Rivers Region, approximately 70,000 citizens, and its two largest trip types are to support local employment and senior citizen activities. Like the other suburban cities and counties in the Three Rivers Region, Troup County has retail, medical, and educational facilities to meet the needs of its citizens. The employment based trips show the importance of the local transit system to the workforce in the area, and the senior trips demonstrate a good level of support for the county’s senior citizens.

Rural and suburban transit is a critical link to support senior citizens, and it should always support the elderly so they can continue to live in their communities. However, policy makers should also be aware that rural and suburban transit, at least in Georgia,
plays an important role in workforce development and availability.

I hope that transit can stay off the “chopping block” as the discussion continues over the future of transportation funding because there are legions of people who need this critical service to work their way to a better life.

Robert serves as the President of the Georgia Transit Association (GTA), Georgia Delegate for RPO America, and served 6 years as the Georgia Delegate for the Community Transportation Association of America. Click here to read our full profile on Hiett and the Three Rivers Regional Commission.

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Rivers Regional Commission.

to read our full profile on Hiett and the Three

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EXPO 2014 Recap

EXPO 2014 was held June 3 – 8 in St. Paul, Minn. More than 1,200 attendees participated in the week-long event. Here are some of the images and award winners from another fantastic EXPO! We’re already looking forward to EXPO 2015, May 31-June 4 in Tampa, Fla.

Urban Community Transportation System of the Year: Metro Bus, St. Cloud, Minn.

Rural Community Transportation System of the Year: Isabella County Transportation Commission, Mt. Pleasant, Mich.

Community Transportation Manager of the Year: Jeff Meilbeck, Northern Arizona Intergovernmental Public Transportation Authority, Flagstaff, Ariz.

State Agency/Association of the Year: Kentucky Public Transit Association

Dr. and Mrs. William and Budd Bell Award: Michael C. Vieira

Dr. Aaron Henry Leadership Award: Ann D. August, CCTM, Birmingham-Jackson County Transit Authority, Birmingham, Ala.

George Rucker Memorial Award: Ed Redfern, Bus Advocate

Clockwise from top left: Staff and board members of St. Cloud’s Metro Bus accepting the Urban Community Transportation System of the Year Award; the EXPO 2014 Trade Fair moments before its opening; the Twin Cities EXPO’s colorful stage banner; U.S. Sen. Amy Kloubuchar (MN) addresses EXPO attendees (via video); EXPO 2014 illuminates the message screen outside St. Paul’s RiverCenter.
EXPO 2014 Recap

2014 National Community Transportation Roadeo Award Winners

Otis Reed, Jr. Driver of the Year: Jean Dalsing, Region 8 Regional Transit Authority, Dubuque, Iowa

BOC Winner: Nathan Shimanek, Ames Transit Agency, Ames, Iowa

Minivan Winner: Jean Dalsing, Region 8 Regional Transit Authority, Dubuque, Iowa

Rookie of the Year: Nathan Shimanek, Ames Transit Agency, Ames, Iowa

Clockwise from top left: Otis Reed Jr., Driver of the Year Jean Dalsing; top 3 finishers in the Minivan Division; National Community Transportation Roadeo Committee Member Vicky Warner of RLS & Associates, Inc., and the Indiana RTAP Program leads the walk-through of the minivan division course; top 5 finishers in the Body-on-Chassis Division
The perfect compliment to Digital CT is our bi-weekly E-Newsletter, CT Fast Mail. Delivering the latest news on transit policy from the nation’s capitol, developments from across the country, research and analysis publications and information on resources and technical assistance from the Community Transportation Association and other partners, CT Fast Mail is the most direct location for the most relevant news and updates in the industry.

And it’s free to sign-up! Simply send an email to fastmail@ctaa.org and you’ll be connected with the next issue of CT Fast Mail. In the meantime, view the latest edition at www.ctaa.org.
After travelling across Georgia for a full week, it becomes apparent that the Peach State is one of interesting and observable contrasts. It’s both the largest state east of the Mississippi in terms of geography but is divided up into some of the nation’s smallest counties. The state is laden with historic, compact smaller cities while also grappling with areas of unchecked sprawl. It wisely has installed a patchwork of regional commissions to oversee planning, community services and infrastructure spanning multiple counties but multi-year, multi-jurisdiction investment campaigns seem to have a hard time passing muster with voters.

Navigating these and other paradoxes are Georgia’s community and public transportation providers, with plenty of varying identities and structures to match the state’s inherent complexities. While we couldn’t visit enough systems and providers in a week’s time to compile a full representative sample of a state as sizable as Georgia, the agencies, companies and operators we did get a chance to spend time with reflect some recurring themes that help define how mobility happens in this part of America’s Southeast.

The ways Georgia’s transit providers connect people with destinations comes in all forms, from more traditional modes like fixed-route and demand-response buses to streetcars, ferries, taxis and subways. Some span many counties and serve thousands of square miles. Others focus their service on small or large urban area.

Many face bus replacement concerns. All are included within a regional area where a regional commission works to orchestrate infrastructure and planning work to help providers of many kinds of community service – whether that’s transit routes or child care – deliver options in a more cohesive and efficient manner. Some regional commissions have direct responsibility for rural and human service transportation in their jurisdictions, while others act as the coordinating point for local networks in that region. Scott Bogren goes into depth on Georgia’s innovative use of regional commissions in his profile of the Three Rivers Regional Commission on page 45.

Last year in Minnesota, we noted the tendency of transit systems to collect the history of their organizations through news clippings and photographs in scrapbooks. In Georgia, we found a common thread of military service among the leaders and staffs at the organizations we visited, not surprising in a state where the number of active duty and military veterans is counted in the tens of thousands. The priority Georgia’s transit providers place on connecting both veterans and active duty troops with employment, training, health care and their local communities – needs not unique only to those in or connected with the military, but the state’s population as a whole – is reflective of the commitment those who make those services happen.

As paradoxes go, challenges and opportunities are present everywhere. As we spent time with the leaders and workers of Georgia’s community and public transportation industry, those opportunities and challenges are not a series of hazy objectives or insurmountable obstacles, but the realities of daily life that you’ll read have an unlimited set of innovative solutions.
Every year during our state transit tour, we take some time to stop at some non-transit attractions that provide some flavor and background to the state's identity. Georgia is – of course – no exception. Clockwise from left: the historic 1911 Waycross Union Station; the iconic Atlanta dining institution, Fat Matt's Rib Shack; the Georgia coast is under-appreciated among Atlantic Coast states, as seen here at St. Simon's Island; Savannah's collection of urban parks filled with oak trees spun with Spanish moss are the city's hallmark images; Editor-in-Chief Scott Bogren poses with a UGA Bulldog statue in Athens; Savannah's 1960s-era Amtrak station is one of the few examples of rail station architecture of that period.
The Atlanta Regional Commission: Taking a 10-County Approach to Access, Information & Mobility Management

By Scott Bogren

In the heart of downtown Atlanta, not far from the city’s soon-to-launch streetcar line and adjacent to Georgia State University, sits a brick and glass building that is home to the Atlanta Regional Commission (ARC) — our DigitalCT team’s first stop on its Georgia Transit Tour.

We’re there to meet with Cain Williamson, Manager of the ARC’s Mobility Services Division and three of his colleagues — Landon Reed, a transportation technologist; Aaron Fowler, a senior planner; and Janae Futrell, a principal program specialist. It turns out that the ARC is highly involved, through its Mobility Services Division, in rethinking and reshaping how people living in the Commission’s 10-county region access and interact with all forms of mobility. The ARC might not operate any transit vehicles, but its impact on the Atlanta region’s community and public transit future already is, and will be, considerable.

Futrell, during her presentation on the ARC’s implementation of mobility management, sums it up: “We’re all about the customers, the people living in our 10-county region and how they can access the region’s transportation assets,” she says. “That’s our niche, we’re not operators.”

The ARC: A History of Cooperation

The Atlanta Regional Commission and its predecessor agencies have coordinated the region’s transportation planning for 67 years, which in 1947 made it the nation’s first publicly funded, multi-county planning agency. What started in the counties of DeKalb and Fulton, as well as the city of Atlanta, has spread to an additional eight counties.

On the street: Unified bus stop signage is one way the ARC is re-shaping customer access to transit in Atlanta.
Funded through local, state, federal and private sources, the ARC’s Board of Directors is composed of each county commission chairperson in the 10-county region, one mayor from each county who is chosen by a caucus of county mayors, a mayor from both the north and south sides of Fulton County, the mayor of Atlanta, a member of the Atlanta City Council, 15 private citizens selected each from one of the region’s 15 multi-jurisdictional districts, and one member of the Georgia Department of Community Affairs.

With a more than $60 million annual operating budget, the ARC has divided itself into three centers: Livable Communities, Strategic Relations and Community Services. The Mobility Services Division falls under the Center for Livable Communities and focuses on transportation demand management.

“It became apparent that what we’re doing was not development, it’s service coordination” says Williamson. Indeed, as our meeting spotlights, the ARC’s Mobility Services Division staff have taken a strategic approach to their work, seeking efficient, regional solutions. It’s easy to understand why a more incremental tactic makes sense.

It’s impossible to sit down with ARC transportation staff and not discuss the 2012 Transportation Special-Purpose Local-Option Sales Tax referendum (dubbed T-SPLOST) that failed in nine of the state’s 12 regions, including Metro Atlanta. The 10-year, one-cent sales tax increase would have raised nearly $7 billion and provided the financial horsepower for a unified 10-county Atlanta region to build the type of transportation (both transit and highway) infrastructure that it sorely needs. After millions of dollars spent promoting the benefits of T-SPLOST approval, the sting of voter rejection two years ago was understandably painful.

“The vote launched a lot of soul searching around here,” recalls Williamson. Perhaps that’s what makes the three innovative projects that ARC staff shared with the DigitalCT team so noteworthy. Williamson and his colleagues have taken challenges that every city Atlanta’s size faces, and developed remarkable concepts that have the ability to transform how local residents access and ride all forms of transit.

**ATLTransit.org: Connecting the Region’s Transit Infrastructure**

Walking around downtown Atlanta, the need to link together the region’s growing roster of transit operations becomes patently clear. Just outside the ARC’s doors, in fact, Georgia State University buses roll alongside MARTA buses with Georgia Regional Transportation Authority (GRTA) vehicle operating a block away. It’s an ideal job for a transportation technologist. Enter the ARC’s Landon Reed.

“**ATLTransit.org** is a regional passenger information website using coordinated operating data,” says Reed. “It takes the schedules of a number of operators and brings them together for customers.” Led by GRTA — the overall project manager — ARC provided the expertise to stand up the trip planner.

The innovative trip-planning site puts the transit resources of four primary operators — MARTA, GRTA, Gwinnett and Cobb County — into an easy-to-use web interface that also streamlines pass and payment options as well as transfers. Reed adds that a number of what he calls secondary providers — Georgia Tech, Emory University, the Atlantic Station Shuttle, The Buc, TMA and...
Business Improvement District operations — also are being worked into the site.

“It’s all based on the open source trip-planning software called OpenTripPlanner,” says Reed, which he hopes will facilitate the site’s continued and future updating and growth.

The site is both operator neutral and user friendly, working in much the same way as popular transit trip planning smartphone apps like The Transit App, Moovit and RideScout. It’s been mobile-optimized, as well, and Reed adds that ARC is looking at making it as mobile friendly as possible.

In July the ATLTransit.org site enjoyed nearly 4,400 visits (29 percent of which were via mobile devices), half of which were dedicated to planning a trip.

### Unified Bus Stop Signage

It’s one thing to bring together the Atlanta region’s myriad transit assets together in a user-friendly trip-planning website. It’s another, however, to make sense of the available transit network at the street level, where customers actually come in physical contact with the vehicles. That’s where ARC’s Senior Planner Aaron Fowler introduces the agency’s **Unified Bus Stop Signage** project.

“We studied how riders interact with the current network,” says Fowler. “We identified local stops with overlapping service (served by more than one operator) and set out to develop a uniform bus stop design that better meets the customer’s needs.”

Once the local inventory was complete, Fowler and the ARC came to five core realizations about local bus stops — he calls them “universal realizations.”

1. Placemaking delivers confidence to passengers.

2. Specific information provides control.

3. Visuals generate transit awareness and demand.

4. Riders travel by routes, not brands or systems.

5. Use the existing infrastructure for new signage.

The result is four tiers of elegant recommended signage for Atlanta streets, each of which is readily recognizable first as a bus stop, and which then offers individual route information for all the operators that serve the stop. Further, the uniform design provides ready access to real-time bus data, for passengers with smart phone access.

“We know that eventually, passengers will access the local transit network on the streets,” says Fowler. “We want that experience to be just as simple and easy as it is on the ATLTransit.org site.”

The ARC is currently working with the transit operators, the Community Improvement Districts and the City of Atlanta to...
establish a project implementation plan and schedule for the unified bus stop signage. Regional implementation of the new signage will be a multi-year effort, with the first wave of new signage expected in late 2015.

On the Street and On the Web: Managing Communications

The last project that staff highlighted for the DigitalCT team is its most complex — and audacious — the development of a systemic approach to mobility management that is designed to combine trip triaging and route optimization with a variety of transportation service modes to ensure both cost effectiveness and efficiency using open source software and common data specs (see graphic on next page — ed).

Trip triaging is the process of achieving an ideal match between eligibility profile/accommodations needed by the user and the cost to the agency/provider.

“ARC’s planned open-source software projects reflect the human services transportation trip process from trip discovery to trip transaction (terms and concepts first clarified in the TCRP report, Standardizing Data for Mobility Managers),” says Futrell, who favors highly detailed flow charts, tables and graphics to simplify complex mobility management concepts. In fact, much of her work can be summed up by the name of the ARC’s one-click trip planner funded by the Federal Transit Administration’s Veterans Transportation and Community Living Initiative (VTCLI) and set to be initiated next month: Simply Get There (name not yet finalized — ed).
“What’s behind the scenes may be complex,” says Futrell. “But the actual passenger interface must be simple.”

One of ARC’s concepts that Futrell explains is a Travel Management Coordination Platform that uses a human services transportation brokerage engine that is, according to Futrell, the key to system-wide efficiency across various modes. The brokerage engine includes fixed-route, dedicated demand-response, carpool/vanpool, volunteers and taxi modes.

Pulling it all together is the ARC’s Atlanta Regional Mobility Network that incorporates pedestrian, bike, fixed-route and demand-response transportation modes in a detailed matrix that works its way from trips to providers, covering vital issues like coordination, fare structures, travel training, reporting and more.

“From the client or rider’s perspective, there’s too much opacity between mobility programs,” says Futrell. “We’re interested in what could make the client exchange between agencies/providers both possible and easier.”

**Tangible Coordination**

The ARC is, clearly, working on a number of notable projects that, taken as a whole, will make it easier for current and future transit passengers to access the 10-county region’s growing network of transit and mobility services.

“Everything is about providing information to the customer,” says Williamson.

As for what’s next, Williamson, Fowler, Futrell and Reed all point to a single regional fare product and policy that includes mobile/smartphone ticketing as a looming priority.

The Atlanta Regional Commission’s Mobility Services Division is undertaking a comprehensive approach to ensuring that the region’s growing list of transit operators and modes are both easily accessed and logically organized. The future of community and public transportation in the Atlanta region is in good hands. CT

The brokerage engine includes fixed-route, dedicated demand-response, carpool/vanpool, volunteers and taxi modes.
Engaging Atlanta’s History Via Streetcars

By Rich Sampson

Eight-lane highways choked with congestion. Unchecked suburban sprawl. Neighboring jurisdictions squabbling over differing views of the future. These themes are part of a narrative about the Atlanta metropolitan region that curries favor among many commentators on urbanism and infrastructure. And, to a point, they’re not unfounded. Traffic is indeed snarled in many places, smart growth objectives are not universally adhered to in the Southeast’s largest region and numerous counties, cities and towns hardly see eye-to-eye on many key issues.

But that’s not the full scope of Atlanta’s vision of itself and its future and it’s certainly not the self-portrait of the city proper. Maybe you haven’t yet heard the story of vibrant urban college campuses, a revitalized, historic neighborhood market or one of the nation’s oldest African-American communities working to restore its vitality after decades of neglect. That’s the story we witnessed firsthand as the DigitalICT staff walked along the most of the Atlanta Streetcar route through downtown and the Old Fourth Ward along with Athens Transit Director Butch McDuffie, who joined us for the first day of the Georgia Transit Tour. These lesser-known, but equally-important notions are – in part – the story of the Atlanta Streetcar.

Upending Enduring Perceptions

Walking along the streets of downtown Atlanta, it’s hard to reconcile the preconceived notions that many – especially outsiders – have about the city with its current reality. Well-established neighborhood pocket parks – the kind you’d have no trouble believing

Stations and streetcar tracks – including the Woodruff Park stop in downtown Atlanta – are fully installed, awaiting testing
exist in places in the Twin Cities or Boston – abound every few blocks, like the tidy Woodruff Park nestled into what could only be described as the core of the downtown business district. Nearby Broad Street – with its sidewalks lined with mature, leafy trees providing welcome shade to trendy sidewalk cafes and hookah lounges – could easily be mistaken for a scene in Portland, especially as students heading to classes at Georgia State University emerge for the day. This is when the nearby streetcar rails installed on the adjacent Auburn Ave., and Peachtree Street begin to make sense: this is the kind of setting where streetcars can thrive.

Transportation in all its forms is a perplexing challenge in the Atlanta region, which is fitting for an area whose history is so tied to moving people and goods. The city was initially nothing more than a junction point for five different railroads, a location still borne out by the Five Points district downtown. That rail nexus is also why the then-fledgling settlement was such a key objective for U.S. General William Tecumseh Sherman, when he infamously burned Atlanta as part of his March to the Sea in 1864 as the Confederacy drew to a close. As the city was rebuilt and once again flourished over the subsequent century and a half, rail travel gave way to the region’s continued transportation import in the form of Atlanta-Jackson Hartsfield International Airport, which has grown to become the busiest such facility in the world.

Atlanta’s public transportation legacy has likewise endured periods of growth and retreat, much of it tied to the establishment of the Metropolitan Atlanta Rapid Transit Authority (MARTA) in 1971. We considered this history in depth in this article as the region prepared to vote on multi-jurisdiction, long-term investment stream for transportation projects known as Transportation Special Local Option Sales Tax, or T-SPLOST in July 2012. That measure was ultimately defeated by voters, a setback that would seemingly grind to a halt any efforts to significantly improve mobility options in Atlanta and its surrounding communities. And yet, thanks to the combined efforts of local elected officials, business leaders and community representatives that began two years prior to the T-SPLOST vote, a flicker of hope remained in the form of plans for Atlanta’s first streetcar route since 1949 (our profiles of the Atlanta Region Commission and Henry County Transit in this issue of DigitalCT also provide important context for the future of mobility in the Atlanta metropolitan region—ed).

As far back as 2003, representatives of Georgia Tech and Georgia State universities, the Georgia World Congress Center, the Buckhead Community Improvement District, the Buckhead Coalition, Underground Atlanta, Central Atlanta Progress, the Woodruff Arts Center and MARTA came together to explore ways new streetcar routes might augment MARTA’s existing regional heavy-rail rapid transit and bus network specifi-
cally within the city of Atlanta. That group ultimately formed Atlanta Streetcar, Inc., a nonprofit entity tasked with making streetcar service in Atlanta a reality (we also looked at the early stages of the Streetcar’s construction in the 31st issue of RAIL Magazine in the fall of 2012 — ed).

**Selecting the Right Corridor**

As Atlanta Streetcar, Inc., was advancing plans to return streetcars to the city, it focused on determining corridors that would produce the greatest value to Atlanta, which didn’t necessarily mean that it would only focus on the highest level of transit-oriented development. Instead, the organization – and its constituencies – sought a broader tool to increase connectivity with the MARTA network and prioritize high-capacity transit access in neighborhoods and commercial districts that had been bypassed by development elsewhere.

From 2006 through 2009, much of that focus was within the so-called **Peachtree Corridor**, a north-south stretch spreading north from the downtown core through the Midtown district and the Brookwood neighborhood to the Buckhead commercial zone. Specific alignments for the 14-mile route were sketched out, along with detailed funding estimates. The corridor has strong commercial, retail, entertainment and residential nodes and would likely generate strong – if not skyrocketing – transit-oriented development. But while the Peachtree Corridor seemed like a natural fit for a streetcar line, it also benefits from MARTA’s north-south heavy-rail line already connecting many of the same destinations, making a new streetcar service redundant.

Instead, city leaders – especially those representing neighborhoods in Atlanta’s Eastside – asked Atlanta Streetcar, Inc., to explore a east-west running route, linking the down-

The streetcar will launch in 2014.
town core through the Sweet Auburn Historic District to the Old Fourth Ward. Both neighborhoods are historic African-American neighborhoods, with the Old Fourth Ward the location of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.'s boyhood home and the Ebenezer Baptist Church, where he first preached.

Although the southern edge of the area is served by the King Memorial and Georgia State stations on MARTA's east-west line, its residential and commercial activity zones are several blocks removed from the route. Moreover, the construction of the “downtown connector” stretch of Interstates 75 and 85 through the heart of the Sweet Auburn district in the 1950s imposed both a physical and perceptual barrier between downtown and the Old Fourth Ward, one that generated heated opposition along racial lines. Since then, community and neighborhood leaders in the Sweet Auburn and the Old Fourth Ward have sought means to reconnect the area with the heart of the city.

In 2010, Atlanta Streetcar, Inc., – with the support of city leaders and MARTA – shifted its focus from the Peachtree Corridor to a new loop route through downtown and then heading east through Sweet Auburn and the Old Fourth Ward. That year, the project received $47 million investment through the second round of the U.S. Department of Transportation’s Transportation Investment Generating Economic Recovery (TIGER), while local funds would cover the remain-

ing $43 million of the $90 million effort. Construction began in 2012 and service will begin sometime this fall following extensive training and certification of the streetcar route, its Siemens S70 vehicles and streetcar operators, mechanics and dispatchers. The 2.7-mile will serve 12 stations and is expected to carry more than 2,600 riders each weekday.

“It’s truly a multi-purpose project,” said Sharon Garvin, Communications Director for the Atlanta Streetcar, during our visit to the system’s vehicle storage and maintenance facility, smartly tucked under an overpass of Interstates 75 & 85. “The Streetcar will serve as both a downtown circulator as well as a catalyst for activity and mobility in some of this city’s oldest neighborhoods. There’s a lot of interest in bringing equality to both sides of the line.”

“The Streetcar is just another tool in the regional toolbox,” adds Carl Jackson, Manager of Streetcar Services for the city of Atlanta, who also oversaw the development of Seattle’s South Lake Union Streetcar. “The success of a streetcar line is based on how it is integrated into the fabric of the community, and I like what I’ve seen here.”

A Spark for Improved Connectivity

Inasmuch as the defeat of the T-SPLOST measure two years ago was a sobering reality check for the Atlanta region’s ability to support substantial infrastructure projects, the launch of the Atlanta Streetcar may serve as a glimmer of hope for future mobility improvements. According to Garvin, the Streetcar is an opportunity for the city of Atlanta to demonstrate to the larger region that lasting transit achievements – however limited – are possible in the area.

“The recognition that the Streetcar is now
becoming a reality will pay huge dividends for how this city and this region view their ability to accomplish priorities,” predicts Garvin, who – like Jackson – has extensive background in the passenger rail industry, having served on the communications team for Southern California’s Metrolink commuter rail network for many years. “There’s already a sense of anticipation that the Streetcar can build momentum for other initiatives, like the Atlanta BeltLine.”

Indeed, the arrival of the Streetcar through the Old Fourth Ward may act as both a concrete and figurative marker towards the development rail transit on the BeltLine, a collection of short, previously unconnected freight rail spurs that is currently under transformation into a trail and park network that encircles Atlanta. Passage of the T-SPLOST would have provided investment for a hybrid light-rail/streetcar operation throughout the BeltLine, although alignments for such a network are still being preserved throughout the trail corridors. Just a few blocks east of Jackson Street – where the Streetcar loops back towards downtown Atlanta – is the Eastside stretch of the BeltLine corridor, where retail, restaurant, residential and commercial developments are already emerging to leverage the revitalized BeltLine trail system. Additional east/west-running Streetcar lines could ultimately link the BeltLine’s East and West corridors, with North and South connections following after.
In the meantime, the project’s staff are working with elected officials and community leaders to prepare for the launch of service this fall. That process, according to Carl Jackson, is dependent on continual engagement with those who live and work in the neighborhoods and districts where the Streetcar will travel. That includes everything from regular communication on Streetcar testing details and service parameters to the city’s hiring of a Streetcar Liaison tasked with conveying concerns and questions from the community to project officials. Jackson explains this mantra stemming from the first day he arrived in Atlanta several months ago.

“You have to stop on the corner, have a sandwich, smell the area and see what you’ve got,” says Jackson, a third generation railroader who appreciates how rail infrastructure can establish tone and an identity for a given community like few other public assets. “A streetcar is a very personal, community-oriented mode of transport and it’s our job to make sure it meets the community’s expectations.”

“And we’re looking forward to continually adapting the service once it gets rolling,” adds Garvin. “This won’t be a static, bureaucratic operation once we get started. Everything – from service hours to fares and community events – will be responsive to what the community wants its streetcar to be. It’s incredibly exciting.”

High Stakes

Beyond the 2,600 daily passengers expected to board the Atlanta Streetcar’s first line, there’s much more riding on the most significant and anticipated transit project in the Atlanta region in more than 30 years. Its success could function as the springboard for a multitude of new bus and rail transit options in the area while also reframing how their neighborhoods and business districts view themselves as livable, sustainable communities. In order for that success to materialize, the Atlanta Streetcar must first do the little things right, namely providing reliable, responsive and efficient transit service on a daily basis.

“No matter what happens afterwards, this project’s success depends on what it means to the community,” says Jackson. “We’re ready to be depended on.” 

Auburn Ave. (above right) looking west towards downtown Atlanta is primed for a renaissance fueled by the Streetcar, while the route could be the spark for a larger citywide network (below).
RouteMatch: Tour Reveals Customer-Driven Approach

By Scott Bogren

The area around the streetcar and the Atlanta Regional Commission, the first stops for the DigitalCT team on its Georgia Transit Tour, is known locally as downtown. The final stop on Day One is several miles north in Midtown Atlanta — a more upscale shopping and high-rise district that is home to RouteMatch, the well-known transit software and technology firm.

In each state transit tour, we endeavor to provide a diverse snapshot of community and public transit in our selected state — spotlighting a variety of transit systems, state agencies and even vendors and manufacturers. With the Georgia Transit Tour launching in Atlanta, we knew a visit to RouteMatch was in order.

Since its founding in 2000, RouteMatch has grown in both staff and clients. RouteMatch now occupies the entire 33rd floor of its Midtown Atlanta office tower. Daisy Wall, RouteMatch’s Vice President, Marketing, took the DigitalCT team on a walking tour, explaining the various departments and their organizational roles.

From Routing and Scheduling to Apps and Smartphones

With 160 employees and 600 clients worldwide (including eight statewide contracts), RouteMatch has come a long way in 14 years. The company has expanded to include offices in Denver, Toronto and Brisbane. The core of its business is demand-response and fixed-route computer-assisted routing and scheduling on one platform, with additional emphasis on automatic vehicle location systems, business analytics, rider communication tools and, increasingly, mobile interfaces. The integration of coordination and mobility management is a particular focus.

“Our product is continuously updated because we’re building from the same original code,” explains Wall. She notes that this has allowed the company to grow organically, as well as quickly make updates and add functionality.
The rate of change in the technology industry is well-known and provides a challenge to both technology developers and users. Today, according to Wall and others we spoke with at RouteMatch, the buzzwords are Cloud deployments, apps and smartphones.

“Technology changes so fast,” says Wall at the tour’s outset. “We provide weekly internal training for our employees to try to keep up with it.” She added that some of the new innovations the company is working on include electronic fare payment and transit asset management.

In 2013, RouteMatch won an American Business Stevie Award for its front-line customer service team in the computer hardware, services and software division. The company know how vital frontline support is, because it understands its customers and the industry.

“The transit industry, and most of our customers, are strapped for cash,” says Wall. “We understand that, so we need to find ways to focus on efficiencies and more affordable ways to access our technologies, like through a subscriptions model.”

Newer versions of RouteMatch’s software are now shipping with tablets (the company says more than 7,000 are deployed in the field) to simplify data input into the system and help community and public transportation systems better manage their fleets. These packages are kits designed for simple installation, hopefully, according to Wall, taking no longer than 15 minutes.

33 Floors Up

The RouteMatch offices offer what can only be described as commanding views of Atlanta, in all directions. Functionally, the space meets one’s expectations of a technology firm — office walls have write-erase boards in many areas, a well-stocked break room offers employees a chance to decompress, a couple of foosball tables highlight an interior hallway. Perhaps most unique is the art adorning various walls throughout the floor. Wall says RouteMatch CEO Bahman Irvani collects the art and has it placed strategically throughout the company’s headquarters.

RouteMatch clusters core business functions together to improve teamwork and work flow; so areas like documentation, product development, customer support, educational services, advanced consulting, marketing and sales — each with its own modus operandi — are strategically located. Each area has its own environment, specifically designed to enhance productivity.

The development area of the 33rd floor, for example, is quieter and has higher walls on its nested cubicles than others — all the better to both code and think.

Adam Cornett, RouteMatch’s director of information connectivity and technology steps away from his quiet, isolated cubicle to discuss his focus on creating mobile applications and technology to deal with such key community and public transit issues as no-shows and trip confirmation.

“Let’s face it, everybody has a smartphone now,” says Cornett. “So we need to make everything we do mobile friendly. Agencies focus engagement, so it’s imperative we provide different ways for riders to secure, access or cancel their trips.”

One thing Wall emphasizes throughout the tour — and that Cornett underscores — is a core mission of steering the company’s products away from being too complex and expensive while always pursuing flexibility and configurability. These are phrases the DigitalCT team often hears echoed by transit showstoks.
system managers and it’s fascinating to delve into them from the perspective of the technology developers, as opposed to the end users.

The customer service side of the RouteMatch floor is buzzing with both individuals and groups hovered around telephones walking customers through problems and looking for solutions. Conversations are conducted throughout this part of the building. A hierarchy of customer service responses is clearly at play here and teamwork encouraged. Interestingly, Monday morning and Fridays are the two busiest timeframes in customer service.

Wall discusses the variety of customer service issues that the department handles, all the way up to what she calls a, “showstopper” —a problem that might keep a transit system from operating.

“We all race around here to solve a showstopper immediately,” says Wall. “It’s taken very seriously.”

Since the DigitalCT team is about to embark on a trip across Georgia, Wall introduces us to a senior sales director with RouteMatch who also happens to have Georgia in his sales territory. The company has 69 active clients in Georgia and the director already knows seemingly all the stops and people we’re scheduled to see in the coming days. It’s clear that service after the sale is important here.

“One of the best things we do is not just providing training after an agency buys the software,” says the sales director, “we make the training individualized by using that system’s data so they’re learning in a more targeted environment — their own.”

Down the next hallway is what RouteMatch calls Advanced Consulting. This team works more intensely with customers, providing not only technical assistance on the technology, but transit operations and
business process consulting.

“Once an agency buys our software,” says David Chin, Advanced Consulting Group manager, “they want to see increased productivity – and so do we.”

The Advanced Consulting Group does a deep dive with a specific customer, ensuring they get the absolute most out of the software.

“We like to do more than just teach a customer how to use the software,” says Wall. “We strive to help them understand the data they’re seeing and how to improve performance and make adjustments.”

A Clear Focus

Throughout the 33rd floor of this Midtown Atlanta office tower, the main focus is on the customer. In addition to the art on its walls, RouteMatch offers such words as “Nice” and “Service” as a non-too-subtle reminder to all of its employees.

Wall knows this focus is both strategic and vital to the company’s growth and future.

“It’s a learning experience. We learn about our software from how the customers use it,” says Wall. “Changes and innovations come from the customer directly and we monitor market trends within transit as well as outside to find creative approaches to build into new versions. We’re fortunate to have such passionate people here who love what they do, and customers whom we feel are like family."

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The city of Rome, Georgia sprawls at the foothills of the Appalachian Mountains, where the Etowah and Oostanaula Rivers wed to birth the Coosa River. Located on former Creek Native American, and decades later, Confederate territory, in what is now Floyd County, Rome has a diverse population and history. A metal statue of baby brothers Romulus and Remus, mythical founders of Ancient Rome, nursing at their adoptive mother, a wolf, stands in front of Rome’s city hall, a gift from Italian dictator Benito Mussolini.

In the northwest corner of Georgia, Rome was given its name because of its rolling hills and rushing rivers which reminded its founders of the Italian countryside.

Today, one can see the fascinating and beautiful sights of Georgia’s Rome by taking the city’s public buses around the historical and modern buildings of its urban center and its Appalachian backdrop of gentle mountains, green forests and calm rivers.

Georgia Power once provided bus service for the city, but handed over control to the city authority in 1961, along with $300,000 to help get the new Rome Transit Department (RTD) started. Now RTD offers its passengers two kinds of buses: Main Line for fixed-route and Tripper for peak hour connections to the Main Line, as well as non-emergency paratransit for people with disabilities and the elderly.

Fares come as low as 60 cents, since students and seniors get reduced rates. Children under five ride for free.
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New York City, San Francisco and the Bay Area. Washington, D.C. All these large metropolitan regions are well-known for their substantial transit networks where people are accustomed to using transit on a regular, if not daily basis. And according to the statistical analysis website, FiveThirtyEight, Athens-Clarke County, Ga., falls right in line after those massive metropolises in annual per capita transit usage, with each resident of this college town averaging 99.6 trips on Athens Transit or University of Georgia (UGA) Campus Transit each year. That places the area ahead of well-established transit cities like Boston and Chicago and also similar campus communities like Champaign, Ill., and State College, Pa.

That level of small urban vitality was evident as the DigitalCT staff roamed the compact streets of downtown on the morning of our second day of the Georgia Transit Tour. After our breakfast stop at the local breakfast institution – the Mayflower Restaurant on Broad Street – no fewer than ten buses operated by Athens Transit and UGA Campus Transit passed us by – even though it was then still the middle of summer.

Of course, the reason why so many residents, students, faculty and visitors take advantage of Athens’ transit options is simple: great transit takes them where they need to go. The tandem of Athens Transit – serving both the city of Athens and surrounding Clarke County – and UGA Campus Transit work in concert to move more than 46,000 daily passengers during the fall and spring semesters with a mix of fixed-route and demand-response services that have become an essential element of daily life in the Southeast’s quintessential college town.
Transit in Athens

Big Transit On Campus

Neither the University of Georgia nor strong public transit are newcomers to Athens. Founded in 1785, Georgia’s flagship public university is the oldest state-supported college in the nation. One of the state’s first railroads linked Athens with Augusta in 1841, primarily to bring students to UGA and ultimately reached Atlanta by 1845. At that time, Athens was one of the most bustling communities in the state, after coastal cities like Savannah and Brunswick. A network of horsecar lines served the growing campus-oriented city beginning in 1885, which were then electrified by 1893 and converted to buses in the 1930s. Due to the then-compact size of the UGA campus and a reliance on personal automobiles following World War II, public transportation ended in Athens in the early 1950s.

Enrollment at colleges and universities across the nation surged in the late 1940s and early ‘50s through the G.I. Bill, UGA was no exception, as the university entered a sustained era of growth. By the mid-1960s, students and faculty alike sought easier ways to get between the campus’ condensed academic core and new buildings and facilities constructed on the periphery of the campus, along with off-campus housing, shopping and entertainment destinations. In 1966, UGA acquired five surplus buses from the United States Military and launched its first Campus Transit route, running north-south through the heart of the campus. The Initial 5-cent fares were collected in cigar boxes on the buses’ dashboards.

Less than a decade after its launch, Campus Transit was moving more than 10,000 daily riders on a three-route network, with a student transportation fee replacing on-board fare payment in 1972. The strong profile established by UGA’s transit network led student leaders to join with community activists to push for the restoration of public transportation service in the larger Athens community. The support of elected officials from both the city of Athens and Clarke County – along with the UGA’s Student Government Association’s approval of the student transportation fee to support public transit throughout the county – led to the creation of Athens Transit in 1976.

Instead of viewing the two networks as redundant, local leaders and everyday riders alike viewed them as complimentary – one focused primarily on moving students, facility and staff around campus and the other geared towards connections between the UGA campus, Athens and Clarke County. That cooperative mentality allowed for operating synergies between bus routes during semesters and continuing transit access for the permanent community when things are less hectic during the winter and summer breaks.

“UGA Campus Transit and Athens Transit are very good partners operationally,” says Butch McDuffie, Athens Transit Director –

Vital Stats

Organizations: Athens Transit, University of Georgia Campus Transit
Managers: Butch McDuffie, Ron Hamlin
Founded: 1976, 1966
Annual Ridership: 1.8 million, 11 million
Number of Vehicles: 25, 46
Websites: athenstransit.com, www.transit.uga.edu/

In Their Own Words

Athens Transit Director Butch McDuffie speaks about transit’s prominent role in this campus-oriented community.
who came to the system after stops at transit systems in Colorado Springs, Colo., and Knoxville, Tenn., and 15 years of active duty in the U.S. Army and nine in the National Guard, including deployments during the Persian Gulf War and the war in Iraq. “We try to not duplicate too much of our services, but there are some overlaps.”

The Campus Crush

Approximately 50 percent of the landmass of Athens-Clarke County — geographically, the second smallest county in the nation — is owned by some sort of government entity, with the bulk of that property under UGA control. Accordingly, the Athens-Clarke County Unified Government — which merged in 1991 to reduce jurisdictional complexities — has an incentive to ensure access to public institutions, facilities and destinations. The combined city-county population is more than 115,000, including 34,000 during the UGA fall and spring semesters, producing a degree of density and vibrancy not uncommon in campus-oriented communities.

“We benefit from the density UGA creates here,” says McDuffie. “Our entire community feeds off the campus activity and people are always on the move.”

McDuffie’s counterpart at Campus Transit, Ron Hamlin, aims to channel that sense of perpetual motion to a campus community who might not be familiar with the level of mobility options the two systems offer.

“Many students – even the ones from the Atlanta area – have never set foot on a bus in their life, so orientation is important,” says Hamlin, who joined Campus Transit in 1990 after starting his transit career as a student bus driver while studying forestry at the University of Massachusetts campus in Amherst in the 1960s and then at transit providers in Australia. “During student orientation, parents come over right away, wondering do they really need to spend the money to park a car on campus. Students eventually figure it out.”

Campus Transit’s 10 routes on class days during the spring and fall semesters operate as frequently as every five minutes, while
Transit in Athens

Athens Transit’s 19 routes run on 20, 30 or 60 minute headways. Athens Transit also operates The Lift, curb-to-curb demand response paratransit throughout Clarke County. Demand for trips on the two systems rockets on home game days for UGA Bulldogs football games in the fall, when tens of thousands of red-and-black clad spectators descend on Athens, virtually doubling the city’s population. Campus Transit operates a service with a significant number of part-time student bus drivers who are capped at 20 work hours per week. All student drivers receive 125 hours of training before carrying passengers and the entire driver roster is continually undergoing training.

“By necessity, we’re always training,” says Hamlin, who notes that providing transit for an on-campus environment requires continual adaptation, as new buildings and facilities are built and university leadership changes, not to mention a rider base that essentially turns over every four years. “Universities are always adopting new technologies, new policies and we always have new students, so we are continually adapting and changing ourselves.”

Automatic Mobility Connections

Midway down a sloping grade from the UGA campus and Athens’ downtown activity zone towards the North Oconee River – within a stone’s throw from Weaver D’s Delicious Fine Food, whose slogan Automatic For the People was popularized by former

CTAA’s Small Urban Network is working to improve federal transit legislation and policy for smaller cities. If you represent a transit operation in a small-urban community, please contact Scott Bogren at bogren@ctaa.org and be sure to get on our SUN mailing list. Through the end of 2014, CTAA is offering a specially-discounted membership rate for new small-urban members.
UGA college band R.E.M. on their 1991 album of the same name – is Athens Transit’s sleek mobility nexus, the Athens Multi-Modal Transportation Center. On the day of our visit, the center was serving as a polling place for a special local election. It’s that sort of community gathering place that the facility has offered since 2006 opening.

When McDuffie left on his second deployment under the Operation Iraqi Freedom campaign in October 2005, the center was only just emerging from blueprints supported by investment from a Special Purpose Local Option Sales Tax (SPLOST) approved by Athens-Clarke County voters in 2000. Upon his return the following year, the station was nearly complete and opened that year. All Athens Transit routes serve the facility on a pulse-point schedule, along with UGA Campus Transit and four Megabus trips daily between Charlotte and Atlanta. In 2007, the center was awarded the 2007 Innovative Design in Engineering and Architecture Award from the American Institute of Steel Construction for its brick and steel truss de-

sign by Niles Bolton Associates. Its 17 angled bus bays demonstrate the important identity community and public transportation options carries in Athens.

“It’s a transformational project that has revitalized the area, including several thousand units of off-campus student housing nearby,” says McDuffie. “There’s tons of service going back and forth.”

The brownfield site between Hickory and Foundry streets – the former location of the
Hanna Batrite Company, which manufactured baseball bats – was specifically chosen not only for its ability to spur redevelopment of the North Oconee riverfront, but also for the little-used freight rail line that runs through the property. It was that same rail line that first connected UGA students with Athens and Augusta in the 1840s. Although firm timelines and funding sources have yet to materialize, leaders and planners in both Athens and Atlanta envision frequent passenger rail service between the two regions. The facility also pairs well with a collection of unique bus shelters throughout the city commemorating the city’s college rock music legacy, which spurred not only R.E.M., but the B-52s, Widespread Panic, the Indigo Girls and of Montreal. The system’s Funky Little Shack stop on the outskirts of town pays homage to the B-52s signature hit, “Love Shack.”

“Transit in Athens can’t be like anywhere else in the world because there’s nowhere else like Athens, Georgia,” McDuffie explains succinctly.

Maintaining Perspective

Moving millions of riders annually – more than 12 million annually on both UGA Campus Transit and Athens Transit – can seem like a daunting proposition. And, surely, orchestrating the movements of tens of thousands of daily riders, students and faculty on two distinct, yet interconnected transit systems is no small feat. Its one that’s also resoundingly recognized by state and local leaders in crucial to the vitality of Athens-Clarke County and the UGA campus. But, for McDuffie, those challenges and opportunities are quite manageable compared to the realities of forward deployment overseas.

“My staff say I’m tough now, but I’m nothing like I used to be,” says McDuffie, who as a Chief Warrant Officer in Iraq, oversaw movements of supplies, equipment and vehicles through incredibly hostile territory. “There’s challenges and opportunities no matter where you go. It’s all about keeping the proper perspective.”

Both UGA Campus Transit and Athens Transit serve the Bulldogs’ Sanford Stadium on-campus, often moving tens of thousands of fans on game days.
Henry County Transit: Great Challenges, Greater Opportunities

By Scott Bogren

After a day and a half visiting transit systems in cities that count ridership in the millions, the second part of day two of the Georgia Transit Tour takes the DigitalCT team to Henry County Transit (HCT) — a rural transit system that suddenly finds itself operating inside a large-urban area.

In a pristine brick headquarters building with a sleek metal roof located on an access road paralleling Interstate 75, Henry County Transit Director Tye Salters — who is six weeks into the job — and Accounts Administrator Debbie Crabtree, who began with the agency 24 years ago as a driver, welcomed the DigitalCT team to an agency facing extraordinary challenges — and opportunities.

Both quickly describe what Henry County has been through in the past 20 years as nothing short of a whirlwind. Transit, they admit, has just been along for the ride.

Crabtree, who has spent a good portion of her working life in Henry County says of the transit challenge before the system: “We’re trying to figure out what to do next.” Salters, who recently took the agency’s helm after beginning his transit career in New Haven, Conn.,, sees potential, everywhere.

Growth. Exponential Growth

In 1990, the total population of Henry County — whose county seat of McDonough is 30 miles southeast of Atlanta — was 58,000. Today, the population stands at 210,000. Honestly, it’s hard to put that kind of rapid population growth into context, but let’s try.

In the past decade, Henry was the fastest growing county in the nation for three years running. During this period, the county...
was opening two-to-three new schools every year. In 1990 there were no WalMarts in the county; now there are three, with plans for another. In 1990 there were no dialysis centers in Henry County, today there are seven. The lone senior center that the system originally served has swelled to four throughout the service area. From 2000 to 2010 alone, population density in the county went from 370 to 649 people per square mile.

Interstate 75, which snakes through the county from northwest to southeast, providing a main line into metropolitan Atlanta and Hartsfield-Jackson Atlanta International Airport to the north and Macon in the center of Georgia, is a major reason for the unprecedented growth. All along the interstate, sprouting like mushrooms after a summer storm, are warehouses and industrial complexes taking advantage of the county’s inexpensive land and quick access, via I-75, to the rest of the state and country. It reads like a who’s who of American retail: Home Depot, Toys R Us, Pep Boys, Sports Authority and dozens more.

“Somewhere along the way, we became the warehouse capital of the South,” says Henry County’s Assistant County Manager, Cheri Hobson-Matthews, who joined the meeting at Henry County Transit’s facility. “To be economically competitive, we need to address congestion.”

Not surprisingly, traffic has become a real problem; one that threatens the county’s continued business development.

Crabtree sums it up: “Fridays are not pleasant here in Henry County if you’re in a car.”

Making matters worse, Henry County Transit finds itself bound up in a bureaucratic misinterpretation that threatens to severely limit how it uses its Federal Transit Administration formula funds.

Is Zero a Number?

In MAP-21, CTAA and a number of transit advocates around the country fought for flexibility in the way urban transit operators can use their Section 5307 formula funds. The issue centered around whether or not transit systems serving areas with populations greater than 200,000 could use any of their formula funds for operating expenses — prior to MAP-21’s passage in July of 2012, they could not.

In the end, the new law added a measure of flexibility for agencies operating in MSAs with more than 200,000 population (the 2010 Census added all of Henry County to the Atlanta MSA) and with 100 or fewer buses in fixed-route service. One might think that Henry County Transit, with its 27 buses and population base greater than 200,000, is perfectly suited to take advantage of this flexibility. You’d be wrong if you did.

Henry County Transit provides all of its service in a demand-response mode. Again, one might think that the system, therefore,
operates zero vehicles in fixed-route service and is still perfectly suited to take advantage of the flexibility. Wrong again. Counter to Congressional intent, FTA interpreted MAP-21 to be only offering operating funding flexibility to fixed-route systems. And therein lies a severe challenge facing Henry County Transit. Not only does the agency and its leadership have to tackle service area growth issues unlike virtually anywhere else in the country, but it has to do so – right now – with no federal operating assistance.

In discussions with Congressional staff members about reauthorizing MAP-21, the operating flexibility trap in which HCT finds itself was routinely called a technical correction, something that would be fixed in the next bill. That, however, looks like it may take some time.

“We’re trying to figure out what to do next,” says Crabtree.

What Transit in Henry County Looks Like Today

From three buses in 1990 to 27 today (including one 40-foot coach), Henry County Transit has attempted to keep up with the service area’s stupendous growth. In many ways, the types of service that the system was initially designed to serve — taking local senior citizens to congregate meals at senior centers, providing life-sustaining dialysis transportation — it continues to provide, just a lot more of it.

Henry County Transit operates Monday through Friday, from 6:00 a.m., to 6:00 p.m. Fares are $4 per trip for anyone under the age of 60, $2 for those older. Trips into neighboring Clayton County carry a fare of $5. As a demand-response operation, passengers call a central phone number that is answered in the Henry County Transit facility in McDonough. Next day reservations must be made before 2:30 p.m., on the previous day with same day requests filled on an as-available basis. Due to high demand, HCT strongly recommends scheduling trips in advance.

Henry County Transit also provides human service transportation through the Georgia Department of Human Services (DHS). The human services agency schedules the rides for the clients with the HCT. The fares for DHS clients are billed directly to DHS at an agreed-upon rate.

Thus far in Fiscal Year 2014, Henry County Transit has transported 34,000 seniors, 60,000 non seniors and 13,000 passengers with disabilities, covering half a million miles in the process (these figures include both public transit and DHS-funded trips). Medical and employment trips are the predominant destinations, with such locations as the Eagles Landing Medical Park, Piedmont Henry Hospital and the local WalMarts identified specifically by staff as key trip generators.

Hartsfield-Jackson Atlanta International Airport, located south of Atlanta, is annually one of the world’s busiest airports and is Delta Airlines’ busiest hub. Not surprisingly, the airport complex is an employer for many Henry County residents, and thus a transportation destination not just for flyers, but workers alike.

A tour of the year-and-a-half-old Henry County’s 21 drivers enjoy some unique accommodations in the relatively new headquarters facility.
Henry County Transit service, the Georgia Regional Transportation Authority runs its Xpress Commuter Bus service out of two park-and-ride lots in the county — in McDonough and further to the south and west in Hampton. These services provide rush-hour service into both Downtown and Midtown Atlanta, and are increasingly popular with Henry County commuters. HCT does provide some trips connecting people with these lots. GRTA also facilitates vanpools through the Georgia Commute Options programs out of Henry County.

The very existence of these commuter bus routes and vanpools speaks directly to the emerging role of transit in Henry County. Even in its demand-response mode, Henry County Transit cannot keep up with demand.

“We can’t manage demand for our service alone,” says Crabtree. “We’re turning away trip requests.”

What Transit in Henry County Will Look Like in the Future

The one certainty about transit service in Henry County in the future is that it will look vastly different when compared to today’s operation. Assistant County Manager Hobson-Matthews understands the challenge.

“The main issue we’re looking at, the one we hear about most often from local residents, is quality of life — that’s the real issue,” says Hobson-Matthews. “Transit is a critical component to what we’re doing here in Henry County, but we have to do it right.”

One concern that inevitably arises when it comes to any discussions of Henry County’s transit future is, of all things, the Metropolitan Atlanta Regional Transportation Authority (MARTA). County residents understand that the traffic that’s come along with the recent population explosion is debilitating. But according to Crabtree and Salters, they’re equally fearful of MARTA.

“People understand we need to do something, but they’re clear they don’t want MARTA,” says Crabtree.

This is not to imply that HCT or any local officials share this worry. In fact, Salters and Crabtree had just returned from a meeting in Atlanta with ARC staff prior to speaking with the DigitalCT team.

“We know we need to establish some fixed routes,” says Salters.

Perhaps it’s the potential construction and operating costs of building a MARTA-like system and the tax increases it might necessitate that make Henry County wary, perhaps it’s the fact that many of the new Henry County residents moved away from Atlanta to avoid just such issues, or perhaps people don’t fully understand the congestion mitigation and economic development benefits that more intensive community and public transportation services — regardless the service

Henry County’s proximity to Atlanta is a major factor in its tremendous growth — and the key to its future.

County Transit facility reveals a well-planned layout with ample room for growth and an accent on providing unique accommodations to the system’s 21 drivers. In addition to the driver’s break area, the system offers drivers individual desk areas where they can charge phones, read and relax. And if any driver is looking for reading material, HCT has a fully stocked lending library on-site with titles to suit all tastes.

Both Salters, who began his career in transit as a driver with the Greater New Haven Transit District in Connecticut, and Crabtree, who drove at HCT, understand the importance of taking care of transit operators.

“These drivers are the face of Henry County Transit to our customers,” says Salters.

In addition to Henry County Transit’s
type or mode they assume — might bring.

Hobson-Matthews, clearly, sees the potential: “Transit has been this little island here in Henry County, we need it to be a far more central issue, for it to be more involved.”

The county recently released a request for qualifications for a comprehensive transportation plan and feasibility study as a first step in its future transit journey. Local leaders have also identified some additional Community Development Block Grant investment (access to which is one of the benefits of Henry County’s growth) to further the planning process.

“We’ve got to explain to residents that our transit plan isn’t MARTA,” says Hobson-Matthews, “and that we’ll consider anything.”

The Danger of Jumping to Conclusions

It is difficult to fully understand the challenges confronting any transit agency of any size and in any community without paying the system — and the community it serves — a visit. Former Federal Transit Administrator Jenna Dorn once said, “when you’ve seen one transit system, you’ve seen one transit system.” Never has that observation been more apt.

When the DigitalCT team scheduled its visit to McDonough and Henry County Transit, we envisioned profiling a traditional demand-response rural transit operation. We couldn’t have been further mistaken.

Today, Henry County Transit is aptly described by Hobson-Matthews as an island, albeit a successful one. Approaching a quarter century of service, HCT performs admirably, meeting the needs of seniors, people with disabilities and other residents of the county within a traditional demand-response service mode. The challenge is realizing transit’s potential in Henry County. It’s an extraordinary challenge — and an even greater opportunity.

The Competitive Edge: Making Community and Public Transit the Best Alternative for Medical Transportation

Today there is never-before-seen complexity in the non-emergency medical transportation field. Limited funding combined with growing patient loads has states seeking intermediaries that can control costs through competition. Community and public transportation providers must become efficient, safe, cost-effective and accountable to maintain these important medical transportation services. The Community Transportation Association, in response to requests from its members, is introducing a new initiative this fall — the Competitive Edge — which will give community and public transit providers the tools, resources and benefits they need to make them central players in this new medical transportation environment. Here’s what the Competitive Edge encompasses:

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   Access to the Transit Industry’s Best Resources and Training
   You don’t need to have all the answers, you need to have access to them when you need them. Here’s how the Competitive Edge helps:
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   - Online Library and Resource Holdings: The most timely resources, news and research, all housed on CTAA’s medical transportation website
   - CTAA staff: Our professional staff are always available to offer analysis and insight
   - Important training and certification programs such as the Certified Safety and Security Manager, PASS Driver Certification, and the soon-to-be released Medi-PASS Driver Certification.

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   As part of the Competitive Edge initiative, the Association has developed a cohesive set of benefits to ensure your operation is efficient and cost-effective:
   - The Insurance Store: Through an exclusive agreement with Newtek, members can access the best coverage at the lowest price.
   - Energy Program: CTAA members pay less for fuel and energy with our FleetCards program and other energy management initiatives

Please go to www.ctaa.org/competitiveedge to learn how you can bring the Competitive Edge to your state. As always, CTAA training staff are available to help tailor this new program to your precise needs. Please call Charles Dickson at 202.247.8356 or email dickson@ctaa.org for all the details on this unique opportunity!
Columbus is Georgia’s second largest city, with its population now greater than 300,000 stretching beyond the state border into the metropolitan area it shares with Phenix City, Ala. Accordingly, Columbus needs an extensive public transportation system to serve its numerous residents. Providing that service is METRA.

METRA was established in 1978 when the area’s private transit provider, Howard Bus Lines, went out of business. As the successor to Columbus Transportation Company, Howard Bus Lines had carried passengers to-and-from Columbus and Phenix, as well as intermediate destinations.

As a department of the Columbus government, METRA is now responsible for community and public transit in the city. With nine bus routes, the system operates from 4:30 a.m. to 8:30 p.m., Mondays through Saturdays. All of METRA’s fixed-route buses are wheelchair-accessible and Dial-a-Ride curb-to-curb paratransit service is also available to people with disabilities.

METRA’s fleet of 16 fixed-route buses and six demand-response buses serves an area of 147 square miles. The system provided 1.1 million unlinked rides in 2012, about 21,000 rides a week over 1.1 million revenue miles.

In 2011, the United States Department of Transportation awarded METRA $1.7 million to purchase four new hybrid buses. The buses replaced diesel buses cutting down both fuel costs and pollution in the region.

“Columbus believes in moving forward in terms of being environmentally friendly and transit is one piece of that puzzle. We’re so pleased to have the federal government come in and assist us with this effort,” Saundra Hunter, Director of METRA told a local media outlet when the system took delivery of the buses.

METRA’s hybrid project was one of the 46 projects throughout the nation selected by the government to receive federal funds. It is part of two government programs, the Clean Fuels Grant Program and the Transit Investment in Greenhouse Gas and Energy Reduction (TIGGER) Program.

Also in 2011, METRA, Muscogee County Mental Health court, and the Columbus Georgia office of Homeland Security applied together for further federal funding to make...
the METRA buses safer, and expand other programs. The $2.5 million dollars they hoped to receive have been matched by the city of Columbus.

Fast forward to 2013, METRA proposed evening bus service. Currently, buses only run from 4:30 a.m. to 8:30 p.m., weekdays and Saturdays. The planned Night Owl third shift would run late into the night, past 11:00 p.m.

This would help residents of Columbus who work night jobs get to-and-from work, increasing the amount of people willing and able to work at night. The employment, along with the bus fares, would boost the local economy. But so far, by 2014, METRA bus service still ends at 8:30 p.m.

The city of Macon lies the Ocmulgee River, originally made of mounds built into the grassy hills by the Creek Native Americans that lived in what is now Bibb County in middle Georgia. Once settled by the Europeans, the city grew as it became a hub of the southern cash crop cotton, carried by stagecoach, steamboat and finally rail from the city to be sold all over the United States and the world. In 1895, the New York Times dubbed Macon the Central City, as it had grown into the vital point for textile and railroads in the state of Georgia.

At first, transportation in Macon was controlled by the Georgia Power Company. Then, after 1949, the privately-owned Bibb Transit Company ran the buses that replaced the streetcars, removed in 1938, until it was purchased by the Macon County government in 1973. The purchase made way for the Macon Transit Authority (MTA) that serves the city and surrounding area today.

In 2014, MTA Buses ferry passengers throughout the city on 13 routes. At least one of these buses is now zero-emissions, too, upholding the section of the MTA's Mis-

Macon's Terminal Station, built in 1916, is set to restore its role as a local, intermodal transportation hub.

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MISSION STATEMENT to “produce a stable and productive environment that fosters well-being and growth.”

In its Mission Statement, MTA also promises to provide “high-quality, dependable and affordable service to all segments of our community.” This commitment includes people with disabilities, whom the MTA serves with non-emergency paratransit that is not limited to doctors’ appointments and takes passengers who cannot use the fixed-route buses to and from most of the destinations necessary for independent living. The paratransit fare is $2.50.

The Macon County Transit Authority is proud of its buses and paratransit operations. Soon to be added to that list is the historic Terminal Station of Macon, the central point of the central city, which MTA is in negotiations with Macon County to acquire.

Built brick-by-sandstone-brick and finally completed in 1916, the Terminal Station is older than most of the city’s residents. It survived two world wars, the Great Depression, segregation and witnessed the triumphs of the Civil Rights Movement, as well as the beginnings of music, athletic and political careers of Macon’s notable residents.

Mothballed in 1975, it was purchased by Georgia Power Company in 1982, which converted it to office space. In 2002, the city of Macon bought it, returning it to its original purpose as a train station, as well as adding other modes of transportation and keeping the retail space.

Now, in 2014, the 98-year old landmark of central Georgia is due for another renovation, after the partial renewal in 2010, and under new management.

The Macon-Bibb County commissioners have tentatively voted to give the station to the Macon Transit Authority and await a second vote in the future. The MTA already manages the building and houses its offices inside it, so the transfer of ownership is a natural decision.

The MTA is eligible for a $1 million federal grant, which it plans to use to finish the Terminal Station’s revitalization. The previous 2010 renovations cost $5 million.

“With the federal funds we think we can seek, we think that we can make a big improvement on it,” Andy Stroud, Marketing/Facilities Director of the MTA told a local media outlet. “There are some areas that are blighted, that we think that we can renovate and put to good use.”

Fixing the holes in the ceilings, stained carpets, peeling paint and cracked foundation, and filling 35,000 extra square feet of space on the 13-acre property are among the MTA’s plan for the historic station.

Currently one of the tenants in the building, the MTA hopes to rent out the empty space once it owns the landmark, boosting the economy of the region. With a marble-floored lobby and fountains in the yard, Terminal Station is already a popular spot for events such as weddings and fundraisers.

First up to start as soon as the MTA gains ownership and the requisite federal funds, is the conversion of the station’s Colored Waiting Room into restaurants and office space. That change would turn the uncomfortable reminder of the station’s—and our nation’s—discriminatory past into a new, friendly and integrated environment, as a testament to progress made.
Of course, the transition of ownership has not been without some concerns about the magnitude of the project.

“It was brought to my attention that some of the commissioners did not know that there were areas of the building that needed to be improved.” Stroud said. “We wanted to show them some of the blighted areas and show them what we could do to help build them up and make them viable areas again.”

However, none of the commissioners attended the tour, according to Janice Ross of the commissioner’s office.

In addition, one of the commissioners was absent for the 8-0 vote that conditionally hands ownership of the Terminal Station to the MTA. And of those eight that agreed, some expressed reservations.

Commissioner Elaine Lucas said she reluctantly voted in favor. Her reluctance stemmed from the fact that she wanted the Colored Waiting Room and the Colored Entrance to remain intact, as an authentic teaching-tool about segregation for future generations. Still, she recognized that the station deserves to be revitalized and that the MTA has better access to federal funding to do that.

The historic Terminal Station of Macon is the oldest surviving train station in the state of Georgia; the center point of the state itself, and was a center of transit for the region in its heyday.

Though it has fallen into disrepair and disuse, the station is a landmark, beloved and frequented by city residents. And soon, the Macon Transit Authority hopes to fully restore it to its former greatness. **CT**
Three Rivers Regional Commission: Georgia’s Original Coordinated Rural Transit Operation

By Scott Bogren

Leaving behind the burgeoning Atlanta metropolitan exurbs, the Georgia Transit Tour’s second day concludes in Griffin with a visit to the Three Rivers Regional Commission (TRRC) and its Government Services Director, Robert Hiett.

With a charming and largely intact downtown area, Griffin (population 23,000) is the county seat of Spalding County, one of 10 counties in west-central Georgia that constitute the Three Rivers Region. The TRRC calls home a three-story store-front along Griffin’s main drag (Hill Street) — a building that, similar to the agency that currently occupies it, can be called multi-purpose.

“This building has been a radio station, a morgue and several other incarnations,” says Hiett with a wry smile.

Hiett, who speaks softly, politely and with a comfortable southern accent that belies both the import and conviction of the thoughts he’s communicating, occupies a large ground-level office strewn with the orderly stacks of paper and other indications of what’s been a busy day. Beside his desk is a cart full of Georgia Transit Association files and paperwork. Behind him, on a table, sits a television that’s not quite old enough to be an antique, but that has dials and an antenna all the same.

“I keep that here so people will ask me about it,” says Hiett, smiling just enough so you think he might be pulling your leg, when asked about the TV. “It never hurts when people underestimate you.”

Running a 10-county coordinated transit system that provided more than 300,000 total trips last year and that won 2008 and 2013 National Association of Development Organization Innovation Awards, and with a resume that includes current President of the Georgia Transit As-
sociation (GTA), nine years as GTA Legislative Chair and six years as Georgia’s Delegate to the CTAA State and Tribal Council, there’s little fear of that.

“Here at Three Rivers, we look at transit holistically and coordinate where it makes us efficient,” says Hiett. “This efficiency creates more trips, which creates more good outcomes.” What TRRC doesn’t do is operate any vehicles directly. Contractors — currently Quality Transportation — drive and take care of the vehicles, while TRRC does the rest, guaranteeing quality service by maintaining rigorous service standards.

The Advent of Regional Commissions

Georgia’s Regional Commissions — the state is divided into 12 — were born in the Georgia Planning Act of 1989. Originally known as Area Planning and Development Commissions, a 2009 State House Act changed the name to Regional Commissions. The 12 Regional Commissions are funded by per capita dues from member counties, as well as various federal and state grants and special projects.

At TRRC, the county dues have been $1 per capita for longer than Hiett’s 13 years at the transit helm. The total population for the 10-county region is roughly 500,000, and the agency enjoys a roughly $4 million overall budget.

Each regional commission is unique. In addition to its transit system, TRRC focuses on comprehensive planning, land use, transportation planning, economic development, historic preservation, revolving loan funds, business retention and development, affordable housing, global economics, tourism, defense conversion, telecommunications and technology, geographic information systems, disaster mitigation planning and community development.

Membership with the TRRC is automatic for governments within the 10-county region (the counties of Carroll, Heard, Coweta, Troup, Meriwether, Spalding, Upson, Lamar, Pike and Butts), while an appointed Council is responsible for establishing the Commission’s policy and direction. Council membership for the TRRC is comprised of not less than two – nor more than five – representatives from each member county served, including at least one elected or appointed municipal government official from each member county and at least one elected or appointed county government official from each member county. The TRRC’s by-laws also authorize it to include non-public council members.

“Our organizational goal is right there in our mission,” says Hiett, “to make the region a better place to work and live.”

A Coordinated Approach that Works

The Three Rivers Regional Commission was initially launched in 1995, and two years later it became the first regional commission in Georgia to coordinate rural public transit — specifically, Federal Transit Administration Section 5311 funds with those from the Georgia Department of Human Services (DHS). Subsequently,
many regional commissions around the state have adopted a similar approach.

TRRC’s basic concept of coordination is to merge together general public transit services with DHS-funded individual trips, thus allowing DHS to base its transportation expenditure on a client-by-client basis. By providing transit service to DHS — which includes Department of Aging, Division of Children and Family Services, Temporary Assistance to Needy Families and Department of Behavioral Health and Developmental Disabilities — and the Department of Labor’s Vocational Rehabilitation clients, agencies like TRRC can significantly reduce duplication, increase efficiency and for thrive regional rural transit operations (click here for coverage of the Coastal Regional Commission). To further cost-effectiveness, most regional commissions then contract out the actual transit operations to local private operators.

Hiett hands the DigitalCT team a colorful flow chart from among the assorted papers at his desk that explains Georgia’s rural transit coordination process under the header, Trip Bundling Saves Money (see image on next page – ed). Simply put, Georgia DOT 5311 dollars flow to a contractor known as a Third Party Operator (TPO) while DHS investment, which is tied to individual clients subject to specific eligibility criteria, moves to a transit contractor that purchases trips, at a fully allocated cost or rate, with the TPO. The TPO then performs the trip, typically through a private operator or contractor.

As part of the ongoing process, the Georgia Development Council is charged with regularly analyzing the regional coordination program, seeking to validate both the savings and offer recommendations.

“We’ve come out looking good in the reports,” says Hiett. “And we’ve learned some ways to be more efficient. That includes shortening distances per trip, right-sizing our fleet, streamlining fuel purchasing, and working with our local governments on insurance, maintenance, and storage solutions.”

In some parts of the U.S., typically, coordinated rural transit service primarily entails two programs: FTA formula programs (for example, Sections 5310 and 5311) along with Medicaid non-emergency transportation funds. Georgia, on the other hand, has developed a regionally based system that bypasses Medicaid altogether.

“The capitated rate that the state’s set up for Medicaid NEMT, along with potential liquidated damages that come from the program, make it tough to bring those dollars effectively into our coordinated approach,” says Hiett. It’s a mantra we’ll hear at several other stops on our tour.

**Now Serving: 10 Counties**

Three Rivers Regional Commission’s coordinated transit approach has developed along two distinct tracks. From its inception in 1997 until 2009, TRRC coordinated both DOT and DHS funding into what it called the Three Rivers Transit System in Spalding, Butts, Pike, Lamar and Upson Counties. Until then, in the other five counties in its region, TRRC provided only DHS trips.

Hiett attributes the development of TRRC’s coordinated approach to a realistic assessment of today’s transit funding environment.

“When you looking at a flat funding environment, you don’t have the resources to just keep adding services to meet demand,” he says. “You have to make the absolute most of the assets you have.”

Beginning in 2009 and continuing today, TRRC administers rural public transit service in Coweta and Meriwether Counties, while Heard and Troup Counties operate their own public transit. Carroll County, at the far north-west corner of the TRRC region, currently has no public transit service.

“It’s hard to make it work when there’s no public transit as part of a county coordinated system,” says Hiett of Carroll County.
Trip Bundling Saves Money

GDOT
Rural Transit Program

GDOT Contractor/TPO

Purchase trip at fully allocated cost (FAC)

DHS Transit Contractor

DHS Human Services Transit Program

Bundling buys down local government costs.
Contracting with a private transportation provider has been part and parcel of TRRC’s approach since the system’s launch.

“The first thing you’ve got to recognize,” says Hiett, “is that Georgia transit is heavily involved in third-party contracting.”

For TRRC and Hiett, that means Quality Transportation, which has been the local private contractor since 2009. The system uses 70 drivers and 23 total vehicles — the majority of which are 14-passenger shuttle-type buses that offer both increased fuel efficiency and that do not require drivers to possess Commercial Drivers Licenses. Hiett readily acknowledges it is difficult to keep CDL drivers from jumping to other employment opportunities and, pragmatically, he doesn’t want to train drivers for other industries.

Across the TRRC rural transit programs, employment destinations make up half the trips — with some variance from county-to-county — followed by senior-oriented trips, medical care and social/recreation purposes. The system’s vehicles average 514 trips per month, with each covering roughly 3,400 miles during the same timeframe.

Vehicle replacement — as is the case with many community and public transit operations — is what Hiett dubs his Achilles heal.

“It’s a big problem because it just takes too long,” he says of the vehicle replacement process. “It takes a year-and-a-half to get a new vehicle through the DOT. I’m fairly confident that eventually we’ll get it, it’s just slow.”

Another challenge is the lack of local competition in the private transportation contractor arena.

“When I started 15 years ago, I could trip over transportation operators that were potential contractors with us,” recalls Hiett. “Now, I’m scraping the bottom of the barrel.”

Having enough private operators in a region to breed competition, and thus lower prices, is a key component in the Regional Commission coordinated transit program.

A Preview of Coming Attractions

In planning the Georgia Transit Tour, making Griffin and the Three Rivers Regional Commission an early destination was more a matter of logistics than logic. That said, it seems wise, in retrospect, to have visited and learned all about the state’s first fully coordinated, regional commission-run rural transit operation early in the tour.

Hiett and TRRC clearly broke ground with their ever-evolving approach and with subsequent tour stops scheduled for both the Coastal Regional Commission in Darien, Ga., as well as a private transportation provider — MIDS — that serves both the Southern Georgia and Southwest Georgia Regional Commissions, it’s useful to visit where the concept originated. It’s a rural transit strategy that’s fairly unique to Georgia.

“What we’re doing is all about efficiency,” says Hiett.

In the many states the DigitalCT team has visited over the years in our transit tours, this sojourn to Griffin, Georgia might be the first time we’ve paid a visit to a transit operator without ever even seeing a bus. To Hiett, that’s exactly the point.

“This is a multi-purpose agency where we all wear a lot of hats,” says Hiett. “We don’t need to directly operate the vehicles to ensure they’re being used in the most cost-effective, efficient way.”

CT
The famed squares of Savannah, each shaded by a magnificent canopy of Spanish Moss-filled oaks, provide an urban patina unlike anywhere else in the world. Each square was uniquely designed — beginning with the first four in 1733 — to be the center of a surrounding eight-block ward in one of the nation’s first exercises in urban planning.

Though not quite as old, transit has a historic relevance in Savannah, with horse-drawn streetcars first plying the city’s streets in 1869. Today, however, the clear focus of leaders at Savannah’s Chatham Area Transit (CAT) is decidedly on both the city’s and the agency’s future. From its newly renovated operations and maintenance facility to the equally new downtown transit center to the recent launch of Georgia’s first bike-share program, CAT is finding new ways to serve its historic home town.

The old-growth trees, abundant city squares and unique local architecture immediately make entry into Savannah an unmistakable experience. We arrived for Day 3 of the Georgia Transit Tour eager to learn how transit fits into this singular landscape. Through the oppressive late July heat of Coastal Georgia, the DigitalCT team made its way to CAT’s tidy and impressive operations and maintenance facility, on the outskirts of downtown Savannah in a largely residential area, to meet with the system’s leadership team before venturing out to see the system in action.

In a bright conference room in the renovated operations and maintenance facility, CAT Director Dr. Chadwick Reese quickly spells out the agency’s charge: “What we’re trying to do here,” he says, pausing purposefully, “is to pivot our operations to attract choice riders while maintaining excellent service to what I call our captive riders, many of whom are second and third generation riders.”

As the engaging conversation transpires, it becomes clear that CAT’s already-underway transition, in fact, covers all facets of its operations.

This pivot, as Reese is no doubt aware, is no simple maneuver. Before being named CAT Executive Director in 2011, Reese led transit systems in Jacksonville, Fla., Gainesville, Fla., and Gwinnett County, Ga. He understands the challenges that lie ahead.

“In transit, quality is defined by the customers,” says Reese. “And quality is how we’ll attract riders across the city — our biggest challenge is changing us.” It becomes apparent that change is the one constant in Savannah’s transit history.

By Scott Bogren

The Pivot: CAT Brings Modern Transit to Historic Savannah

Georgia Transit Tour 2014

Savannah is one of the nation’s most unique and recognizable cities.
A Transit History of Transition

A look through transit history in Savannah reveals that the current transition—or pivot—that Dr. Reese is leading the agency through is, in reality, another in a series of such maneuvers. The origins of public transportation in Savannah date to 1869, with horse-drawn service from the city’s Savannah River riverfront. The Savannah, Skidaway and Seaboard Railway, with its 12-passenger cars and horses wearing bells to alert traffic, introduced transit to the city and gave way in 1890 to the Savannah Street Railway, a fully electric operation that allowed the city to quickly spread its roots.

As was the case in many communities, the dawn of the 20th century saw the local Savannah Electric Company consolidate lighting, power and transit service under one local utility. The company even built a local amusement park to not only purchase additional electricity and lighting, but as a destination for riders on its streetcars.

Streetcar service flourished in the city through the 1930s, to be replaced by buses right after World War II when the Savannah Electric and Power Company sold out to the Savannah Transit Company. The last streetcar from the city’s initial system ran in August 1946, and such service would not be seen in the city again for more than 60 years. In 1961, the city of Savannah formed the Savannah Transit Authority, which operated city buses in much the same routes they had been for decades, all the way into the 1980s, when economics forced major changes to local transit operations.

By 1986, the Savannah Transit Authority was caught in the spiral of rising capital needs along with diminishing federal and state support. A series of fare increases and service cuts did little to stem the tide. It was clear a major overhaul—or pivot—was in order. The system needed a reliable source of local investment, and state legislation allowing the creation of transit authorities in conjunction with transit service districts tapping local property taxes proved timely. Chatham County Commissioners adopted a local ordinance creating the district in late 1986, thus transforming the Savannah Transit Authority.

In early 1987 the Chatham Area Transit Authority (CAT) was born, led by a 12-member board of directors. Within months, system leaders added five new routes and cut fares, as well as reinstating both night and weekend service. New vehicles were purchased and a private management company was selected to run CAT—an arrangement that lasted until April, 2013 when the CAT board voted to end its then-partnership with Veolia.

Completing the circle and furthering transit’s re-emergency, streetcars returned to Savannah in 2009 with the birth of the city’s River Street Streetcar line—a one-mile, six-stop line paralleling the Savannah River. Operated by CAT as part of a cooperative arrangement with the city, the River Street Streetcar emerged as both a transit mode and tourism operation. Ferry service to Hutchinson Island (home to Savannah’s Convention Center) as well as a local downtown circulator bus system—both also operated by CAT and known collectively as the dot—are now also part of this agreement.
CAT operates county-wide — not just in the city of Savannah — serving a population of 270,000.

For a system its size, CAT offers — both directly and in partnership — as wide a variety of mobility options as one is likely to find anywhere in the nation. Few cities can boast of fixed-route bus, paratransit, bikeshare, ferry, streetcar and downtown circulator services.

“Our employees are not only covered by FTA rules and regulations,” says Reese, “they’re covered by maritime law and the Coast Guard.”

In partnership with Savannah Mobility Management, Inc., CAT operates the Savannah Belles Ferry, the River Street Streetcar and the Express Shuttle — each of which are fare-free and designed to move visitors and tourists alike through the history city.

The ferry operates along 20-to-30-minute headways and connects two points along River Street with Hutchinson Island’s Savannah International Trade and Convention Center. A project to improve the island’s ferry terminal will soon begin, funded through CAT.

The River Street Streetcar, using authentic 1930s-era Melbourne-style cars, operates Thursday through Sunday, noon to 9:00 p.m., and has become an icon of Savannah’s tourism program as it covers its one-mile circuit along River Street’s cobblestones.

The Express Shuttle circulator system serves 12 separate stops in Savannah’s historic district with 20-minute headways with connections to the streetcar, ferry and CAT fixed-route bus routes. The circulator’s easily recognizable white body-on-chassis vehicles with the dot emblazoned on their sides operate 7:00 a.m., to 9:00 p.m. on Monday through Saturday and 11:00 a.m., to 9:00 p.m., on Sundays.

“Our partnership with the dot is so important in part because it supports CAT’s strategic plan of being a true mobility manager,” says Reese. “These services help us move and connect people while promoting the economic development of our community.”

Earlier this year, CAT launched CATBike, the state of Georgia’s first bike-share program. Thus far, the program offers two bike station locations — Ellis Square and the downtown intermodal transit center. CATBike even has solar powered bike docks. Annual membership costs $60.

“We’re looking to grow the bike share program,” says CAT Chief Development Officer Ramond Robinson. “We think it’s a great first-mile/last-mile solution for many of our passengers, particularly the large student population (estimated at greater than 20,000). It’s mobility management making good business sense.”

To help reduce reliance on CAT’s paratransit service, Teleride, the agency recently
completed an unusual partnership with the local Yellow Taxi Company to assist with the procurement of wheelchair accessible taxi cabs. CAT paid for half the cost of these new taxis through an FTA New Freedom Grant.

“Prior to this program there were no accessible taxis in Savannah,” says Robinson. “So it was definitely needed and is a benefit to the city.”

**Putting the Finances Together**

Like many of its counterparts, CAT finds itself today in a precarious financial position, though few agencies have seen such a rapidly changing landscape. In addition to its federal formula funding under Section 5307, CAT enjoys receipts from a local downtown hotel bed tax; and local voters just approved an additional 15 percent in local property tax dollars for the system to begin purchasing new rolling stock. The age of the CAT bus fleet presents a stern challenge to the system. Reese estimates that half of the current bus fleet could be replaced immediately as the overall fleet averages more than 8 years in service.

“We're looking at $23 million in unfunded rolling stock needs,” says Reese. “The age of the fleet increases our operating costs.”

Further exacerbating CAT’s financial struggle is the need to reduce a sizable debt that the agency incurred in the past decade.

Of course, the transition from more than 25 years of the system being operated under partnership with a private operator — the last three years of which with Veolia — remains a primary focus for Reese and his leadership team.

“Managing cash flow and anticipating when collected property tax revenues will accrue is tricky, especially without reserves,” says CAT Chief Financial Officer Terri Harrison.

For Reese, this is more than just another pivot for the organization, it’s a real sea-change that revolved around accountability.

“Since the transition, we’re much more accountable, we can’t hide behind an outside company,” says Reese. “It’s all about who you’re accountable to, who you answer to. I only care about the customer’s expectations.”

He notes that all of CAT’s leadership team is getting away from what he calls, “duct-tape management, treating the symptoms and not the real issue.”

CAT’s Robinson, says: “we’re looking at our challenges like a mobility manager. How do we help local businesses and keep our focus on local economic development? We’re now spending a lot more time locally.”

Two recent projects will undoubtedly serve to burnish CAT’s image locally.
Building CAT’s Image

CAT’s Operations and Maintenance Facility, originally built in 1961, just finished undergoing a significant ($6.1 million) rehabilitation. After sitting down with DigitalCT staff in the conference room, CAT’s Chief Operating Officer, Curtis Koleber, provided a quick tour.

Right from the entrance, the new facility speaks directly to Dr. Reese’s aim to engage customers and project a professional image. Monitors display system information in kiosk-style videos for anyone in the building’s clean and modern waiting area. Just off the waiting area, the operations hub spotlights the technology being used to track, schedule and dispatch the variety of services. CAT’s employees can monitor all aspects of the operations from this part of the facility.

Back across the waiting area and alongside a hallway that features management offices, the new facility houses a state-of-the-art training room that will, ideally, be used by many local community groups. The training room features a number of write/erase walls and can be configured in multiple ways to adapt to the specific needs of a group or class.

“This training room is a far cry from what we used to use,” says Reese, taking a seat in the front row as the tour progresses.

Toward the back of the operations and maintenance facility, above the nicely appointed driver break room, CAT built a fitness center for drivers and staff with cardio machines as well as free weights and ample room for group fitness sessions. It’s an impressive set up that serves a very specific purpose.

“We’re developing a real wellness program for our drivers,” says Koleber. “We’ve made a conscious decision to try to improve our driver’s health — it helps them renew their DOT cards and lowers our health insurance rates.”

The fact that the fitness center stands above the original building’s colored employees’ entrance stands testament to the significant changes at CAT in the past 50 years. A fact that is further emphasized by the recent completion — after 20 long years of strife and toil — of the Joe Murray Rivers, Jr. Intermodal Transit Center.
To get to the intermodal center, the DigitalCT team leaves the residential neighborhood that is home to the system’s operations and maintenance facility and heads back into town, toward the city center and the Savannah River. Even in July, there is an abundance of students — most from the nearby Savannah College of Art and Design (known locally as SCAD), which even operates some of its own buses.

Completed last October at a price tag of $15 million, the Rivers Center offers Savannah residents direct connections between CAT, circulator and Greyhound bus services, as well as one of the two CATBike bike share locations. Originally conceived in 1993, the intermodal center endured two decades of local political fighting to go from concept to reality.

“We had no money, no location and 61 lawsuits,” recalls Reese, smiling now that the center is complete. “The uncertainty of where the intermodal center would be built took the focus, for a long while, away from the project itself.”

“We knew that we had to settle the lawsuits and then focus on the plan to build rather than the site itself,” says Reese. “We worked more at the committee level, pulled together and pieced together a complex financing package.”

One of the key supporters of the Rivers Center was then-Savannah Mayor Otis Johnson, who left office in 2012 after two terms. Reese and his management team acknowledge the former mayors dogged determination to get the project done, no matter the hurdles.

“It was all he would ever want to talk with us about,” says Reese.

Reaction at the Intermodal’s opening was — according to all CAT senior management — broad relief. And former Mayor Johnson was there for the grand opening last October.

“Getting it done raised our credibility locally,” says Reese. “It was crucial that we got it done, and done right. It removed a black eye from the agency.”
And what they got done is an attractive, functional space, replete with joint ticketing, 14 covered bus bays (four of which are designated for Greyhound), free Wi-Fi and 24/7 open-door availability — definitely enough transportation modes to accentuate the intermodality in its title. In the late afternoon as DigitalCT staff were visiting the site with CAT’s Ramond Robinson, the vibrant churn of passengers and buses, regularly coming and going, with some riders waiting in the facility’s tidy waiting area while others drifted out to the bus bays, was plainly evident. It was precisely how an intermodal transportation center should look and feel.

In the CAT office space attached to the Rivers Center is a unique and fitting tribute to the man for whom the facility is named. Joe Murray Rivers, Jr., was a CAT Board Member, Chatham County Commissioner and interim CAT Executive Director — as well as a powerful transit advocate. To honor his commitment, CAT chose a unique remembrance: Joe Murray Rivers Jr.’s shoes, bronzed.

“Rather than a painting or a simple plaque, we thought we’d honor the miles Mr. Rivers walked on behalf of CAT and this beautiful intermodal facility,” says Robinson.

Moving Forward

The pivot that Dr. Chad Reese and his leadership team speak of is, in reality, nothing new to community and public transportation. It’s an acknowledgement that even in an historic city like Savannah — with its several hundred year-old canopy of oak trees and two dozen historic downtown squares — transit operations must change and evolve right alongside the communities they serve in order to remain relevant, efficient and cost-effective. In Savannah, embracing that change and adapting to it is termed a pivot, and it’s well underway.

Recent services like free downtown circulators, streetcars and bike-share programs are being introduced, technology is dramatically impacting operations and 21st century facilities have been built to bring it all together. CAT is at the forefront of it all, listening to its customers, building community support and putting service on the streets.

“We’re really like any other local business,” says Reese. “We’ve got to build our brand while being as efficient as possible.”

Savannah is one of the few urban areas of its size with a full-fledged bike sharing network — Georgia’s first such system.
RideShareNation

Bike/Ped
Carpool
Car Share
Vanpool
RideShareFinance
Ride Share
Telework
Transit
The Coastal Region’s Team Effort – Crossing Borders, Improving Lives

By Rich Sampson

The smooth red clay of King’s Swamp Road that led the DigitalCT team to the offices of the Coastal Regional Commission (CRC) outside Darien is unmistakably Georgia. The surrounding inlets, marsh plains and coastal waterways – among the most breathtaking vistas the state has to offer – are likewise distinctive to the state’s shore-line that stretches from the South Carolina to the Florida borders. In the same fashion, the work done by the CRC and its 10-county regional, coordinated mobility network could be found only in Georgia.

Equally unique among our travels visiting community and public transit providers in states like Georgia over the years was the group that joined us for the beginning of Day Four and our discussion at the CRC offices, located in a massive, rehabilitated former juvenile detention facility, a first such location for the DigitalCT staff. Usually, two or three representatives from the system, agency or organization in a given community visit with us. When we walked into the large community meeting room at the CRC, we were greeted by a group of a dozen – not only leaders and staff of our host agency, but also representatives of the Georgia Departments of Transportation (GDOT) and Human Services (DHS) and Transitions, Inc., the CRC’s contracted, private transportation provider. It was a demonstration of the priority Georgia’s coastal region places on coordinated mobility.

It Takes A Team

When covering a region that stretches 5,500 square miles across 10 counties, there’s more than a few dirt and clay roads like the one we drove over near Darien. It’s an area that includes three metropolitan statistical areas – Savannah, Hinesville and Brunswick – and many more rural stretches where population densities are scant but mobility needs are great. Due to the small geographical sizes of most of Georgia’s coun-
Coastal Regional Coaches

Vital Stats

Organization: Coastal Regional Coaches
Manager: Don Masiasak
Founded: 2011
Annual Ridership: 182,500
Number of Vehicles: 85
Website: coastalregionalcoaches.com

In Their Own Words

In this short video, staff from the Coastal Regional Commission, the Georgia Department of Transportation, Georgia Department of Human Services and Transitions, Inc., say a quick hello as the operators of the 10-county Coastal Regional Coaches network.

Innovating for Efficiency

Tasked with the daunting challenge of making more than 500 trips per day a reality, the CRC prioritizes partnerships. That means regular consultation and input from the system’s two state-level funding programs, GDOT and DHS. Those agencies representatives, GDOT’s Troy Green and DHS’s Bonnie Martin – both of whom attended our discussion – are in regular contact with CRC staff ensuring that such a sweeping, multi-county effort is not only able to keep abreast of the state’s regulations and policies but also that both sources of investment are well-coordinated to ensure the highest levels of service are provided.

“The selling point from DHS’ perspective from the very beginning has been the quality of the system,” explains Martin, who’s oversight of the system is as in-depth as participating in vehicle maintenance inspections.

“It’s about the trip happening in the most cost-effective way,” adds Green, who notes that when Coastal Regional Coaches began operations, the vast majority of trips – 88 percent – were classified as human service travel. Today, 39 percent of Coastal Regional Coaches service is considered general rural public transportation. “Bonnie and I have a friendly, informal competition, but really it’s about getting the best service for the greatest number of people.”

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Coastal Regional Coaches providing general public transportation across a 10-county region while also serving as responsible stewards of public investment, CRC staff have identified numerous administrative and operational tools to deliver service as efficiently and responsively as possible. Some of these are structural, such as a revised fare policy that sets trips that travel within a single county or cross into an adjacent county set at an affordable $3, while longer distances require an additional $10 for each subsequent country crossed. That work also includes the continuing development of a Regional Vanpool Program, specifically tailored to the needs of regular work commuters. This program will allow the CRC to direct the focus of Coastal Regional Coaches service to equally-important, but less routine trips to medical appointments, senior centers and social outings.

Beyond the procedural elements the CRC utilizes to achieve efficient service are the operational advantages offered by working with a single contracted transportation provider in Transitions, Inc. Headquartered in Savannah, Transitions, Inc., employs the drivers, dispatchers and mechanics that make Coastal Regional Coaches service an everyday reality. CRC’s scheduling staff field calls from individuals or agencies requesting the trips – requests for next-day service must be received by noon – then put together a manifest for each driver that is sent to Transitions, Inc.

The company’s 27 drivers are stationed in communities across the 10-county area in order to respond to local trips in their counties. While major maintenance and overall of the vehicle fleet – owned by the CRC and comprised largely of body-on-chassis vehicles with a few minivans – is conducted by Transitions at their Savannah facility, it also conducts roving maintenance orders at smaller auto repair shops in smaller communities in order to reduce deadhead trips and return vehicles to service as quickly as possible. In some cases, Transitions assigns hard-to-serve trips to other local transportation providers, such as taxi companies. Both entities utilize RouteMatch software to dispatch trips and orchestrate maintenance schedules, a key cog in an operation designed for efficiency – an inherent incentive for a for-profit business like Transitions.

“We consider ourselves a community ownership model,” says Transitions, Inc., Chief Executive Officer Justin Ricon. “We hire, do the training and we’ve created a transparent program. At a time when too many vendors are going out of business, we have an approach to billing and operational costs. That’s the cost of doing business.”

The CRC’s 10-county area spans from South Carolina to Florida.
Coastal Regional Coaches

Transitions’ Operations Manager Jimmy Green notes that the model is predicated on a group of drivers well-versed in the needs of the region.

“It’s key to have people that know the area, dispatchers and drivers,” says Green. “We work as a team – there’s no big I’s and little You’s.”

A Portfolio of Possibilities

Although the tripartite partnership to establish reliable, efficient and responsive mobility options in the coastal region is just a few years old, the team is already highlighting a number of opportunities to further broaden the scope of the system and enhance its efficacy. The CRC is currently identifying grant funding to support dedicating two vehicles exclusively to dialysis trips. Coastal Regional Coaches currently transports more than 60 dialysis patients to appointments throughout the 10-county region each week. CRC staff believes the heightened level of care and precision needed to properly transport a dialysis patient would be best provided by permanently dedicating vehicles and drivers to those patients, freeing up the rest of fleet to serve other crucial medical trips. The urgency of dialysis trips is forefront among all the system’s players, including Transitions.

“We know that for people on dialysis trips, their life is in jeopardy if we don’t show up,” says Ricon. “All our service – however vital – is about providing a certain quality of life, whatever that means to that passenger.”

Martin of the DHS agrees, saying, “the drivers of this system have a real sense of urgency about their jobs.”

Some of those other medical appointments the CRC would like to serve better are those for military veterans and their families in the region. More than 128,600 veterans live in the region – many in the vicinity of Fort Stewart in Liberty County – and four VA clinics are located throughout the area. In 2012, the CRC was awarded funding through the Federal Transit Administration’s Veterans Transportation and Community Living Initiative (VTCLI) to upgrade their existing One-Call center to include a One-Click website component to allow veterans and their families – along with anyone else – to schedule and cancel trips online. Although the CRC is still waiting for the funds to be disbursed by the FTA, the agency is ready to roll-out the system quickly.

“Once the VTCLI funding comes, we have a system to move it right into our program,” says Masiasak.

The organization’s transportation department is also working with their counterparts in its economic development arm to identify opportunities for Coastal Regional Coaches to help shape employment and training trends in the region. This includes outreach to major area employers like Gulfstream and the U.S. Army to determine their employees’ mobility needs and identify responsive solutions, including the agency’s Regional Vanpool Program, along other partners, such as local sheltered workshops, economic development agencies and area colleges such as Georgia Southern University in Statesboro, College of Coastal Georgia in Brunswick and Savannah Technical College.
“We’re integrated into the transportation planning process in the region and it helps to guide our service,” says David Dantzler, Mobility Manager for the CRC. “A fresh set of eyes will bring a fresh set of results.”

Some of those results have the CRC exploring new connectivity with mobility options extending beyond the region, such as Amtrak’s three daily roundtrips out of Savannah, intercity bus routes at Chatham Area Transit’s Joe Murray Rivers, Jr. Intermodal Transit Center in downtown Savannah and Savannah/Hilton Head International Airport. Nonetheless, whether the connections are intra-region or international, its leadership notes that policies and regulations installed at the federal level can be frustrating barriers to innovation at the local level.

“Farebox revenue absolutely should be considered a source of local match funding,” says Masiasak, who also notes the severe limitations in investment on capital for vehicles and equipment. “We want to be recognized as a coordinated region transportation system, but sometimes it’s beyond your control.”

An Openness to Succeed

The Coastal Regional Commission has succeeded in implementing in under five years what many communities strive for decades to accomplish: a fully coordinated, multi-county rural transportation network open to anyone who needs a ride. The strong partnership forged between the Commission, state-level agencies and Transitions, Inc., is the underlying foundation upon which that success rests, but their joint focus on innovation and cooperation is what made it ultimately possible.

“The key is innovation, the openness to look at different ways of doing things,” says James Brown, Director of Technology for Transitions, Inc. “Everyone is open to innovation here, it’s how we succeed. We’re open to doing things differently, always… constantly… are there better ways to optimize operations, technology, customer service? Then we’ll do it.”
Liberty Transit: More Than A Name

By Rich Sampson

The descriptive namesake of Georgia’s Liberty County is an identity that was not earned lightly. Three of the signatories of the Declaration of Independence – Button Gwinnett, Lyman Hall and Georgia Walton – all resided in the county seat of Hinesville. Nearby Fort Stewart is the largest military installation east of the Mississippi River and hosts the U.S. Army’s Third Infantry Division. As both Hinesville and Fort Stewart have grown rapidly over the past three decades as the Army post’s mission has become permanent, the area is integrating a new aspect to its identity of liberty: the freedom of mobility.

The DigitalCT team made its way from Darien to Hinesville to conclude Day Four of the Georgia Transit Tour. The city’s wood-and-marble framed city hall – which opened in 2011 – occupies a full block in the heart of the growing city’s downtown and was the site for our visit.

Expanding mobility opportunities in Hinesville, Fort Stewart and Liberty County is made possible by the recently-inaugurated Liberty Transit. Launched in late 2010, the system operates both fixed-route and demand-response service to the growing area. In a community where notions like mission and duty have particular resonance, local leaders have embraced improving transit options as part of the core of their civic responsibility.

Responding to a Growing Community

As recently as 1970, a little more than 4,000 permanent residents lived in Hinesville. Although Fort Stewart was initially constructed in 1941 as a World War II anti-aircraft artillery training center, it saw several rounds of deactivation and reactivation during the Korea and Vietnam wars – including hosting the Army’s 1st Armored Division during the Cuban Missile Crisis, which drew a visit from President Kennedy to inspect the troops. The facility did not become a permanent installation until the mid 1970s, when it became home and headquarters to the 24th Infantry Division. The post was ultimately transferred to the Third Infantry Division on April 25, 1996.
The permanent military presence at Fort Stewart beginning in the 1970s spurred a fundamental reshaping of life in Hinesville and Liberty County. It shifted from a quaint, small-town county seat into a thriving base-oriented community. Over the subsequent decades, the population skyrocketed from 4,115 in 1970 to more than 30,000 by the year 2000 – with another 11,000 troops stationed on the base – requiring new schools, government offices and – eventually – a way to get around town without a car.

During the new millennium’s first decade, elected officials with both the city of Hinesville and Liberty County began collecting requests for transportation options to get around the town and on and off the base without needing a vehicle. That need is magnified in communities near military installations, where troops, personnel and their families are reassigned often, and may not able to bring along multiple personal vehicles, if any. Those same leaders sensed a moment of opportunity in the mid-2000s, when the city of Hinesville began planning for its first public transportation options. That groundwork became fortuitous, as the combination of annual federal capital investment became available after 2000 – when the Hinesville-Fort Stewart Metropolitan Statistical Area crossed the 50,000 population plateau – and one-time-only capital funds through the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act in 2008 meant the area would have access to sufficient resources to launch a public transit system.

In 2010, the city contracted with Veolia Transportation to operate the new service, which had acquired seven new buses to operate over a three-route network, with buses deviating from their routes to serve curb-to-curb passengers within ¾ of a mile of each line. Veolia hired Theodis Jackson, an operations manager with 30 years of transit experience who previously worked with paratransit operations at the Massachusetts Bay Transportation Authority and New Jersey Transit. Jackson relished the opportunity to guide a new transit system from its inception.

“I wanted to see what a start-up looked like from the beginning,” says Jackson of the new service, which debuted on Oct. 4, 2010. “I’ve never seen people so excited about getting transit, it was very energizing.”

“We’d been hearing there’s been a need for it, because there is such growth here and we’ve been trying to meet that need,” said Charles Frasier, Hinesville Mayor Pro Tem, who represents the city's first district on the City Council, upon the system’s opening. “Because there are so many people – not just the military but civilians – who can’t get to point A to point B without transportation. Fantastic ride, we truly enjoyed it. It’s a state-of-the-art bus with all the amenities.”

**Finding A Rhythm**

Just a few years into its role as a small urban transit provider, Liberty Transit is engaged in both settling into the daily rou-
Liberty Transit

Theodis Jackson comes to Liberty Transit after overseeing paratransit systems in Boston, Mass., and New Jersey.

“Liberty Transit is a direct connection of Hinesville and Fort Stewart. The system provides more than 25,000 annual trips, operating Monday thru Friday from 5:50 a.m. to 7:25 p.m. Fares are set at a reasonable $1 each way, with half-price fares for seniors and people with disabilities.

Unlike many transit providers that operate in communities with military installations, Liberty Transit is authorized to serve the post at Fort Stewart directly. The system has designed its schedules to accommodate the time required for base guards to board buses and inspect riders’ identification cards. Only authorized personnel may travel on Liberty Transit buses past the front gates. Although Fort Stewart’s leadership has allowed the system’s buses to enter the facility since the service started, Jackson explains as the post’s commandants change, new communications and outreach is necessary to maintain the relationship.

“It’s a different way of doing things when working with a military installation,” says Jackson. “They ultimately understand the importance of this connection, but proper procedures and approval are very important.”

In addition to the administrative protocols necessary for interaction with Fort Stewart, the system also is considering new potential destinations in Liberty County beyond Hinesville. Jackson works with the Liberty County Planning Commission to determine unmet mobility needs. In 2013, the system extended limited service during peak periods along its 6 and 7 routes to serve commercial, retail and employment locations on the southwest side of Hinesville, in addition to expanding limited service on its Route 8 to connect with neighboring Flemington.

Jackson sees opportunities for additional service in Flemington as well as the community of Allenhurst to the south, along with potential regional connections to Savannah and Chatham Area Transit (click here for more information on Chatham Area Transit). Although Liberty County is within the 10-county service area of Coastal Regional Coaches’ rural demand-response operation, that system’s bylaws prohibit it from serving trips between urban areas (for more information on Coastal Regional Coaches, click here).

“‘We’re operating under a 15-year plan to identify neighborhoods and communities where we can provide better service,’” says Jackson. “Our ultimate goal is to reach more areas in Liberty County with the same level of service we provide in Hinesville.”

Just The Beginning

Over a career that’s spanned more than three decades in community and public transportation, Theodis Jackson has seen it all, yet remains captivated by doing the daily work of getting people in and around the communities where they work and live.

“There’s never a dull moment, but it’s incredibly rewarding work,” says Jackson.

After spending time in large metropolitan regions like Boston and New Jersey’s urban communities, helming a transit operation still very much in its formative days is a new kind of challenge for Jackson. But his job is easier with the strong support of Mayor Thomas, the Hinesville City Council and Liberty County, and its summed up by the system’s simple, but reflective motto: freedom to move. CT
Anyone who’s ever ridden along on a trip with a community transportation provider is sure to have heard the term *family* used to describe the service. Frequent riders will speak of “my driver,” who knows that they come out of the side door on Thursdays because its garbage day or to be careful that the dog doesn’t come barging out if the back gate is open – things only family members or close friends would know. That social element is part and parcel to the community transportation experience, where the ultimate value of a trip isn’t just going somewhere, but going somewhere with someone else.

Since 1987 – incidentally the same year as the Community Transportation Association’s founding – the owners of MIDS, Inc., a family-owned transportation company have provided mobility options throughout South Georgia. As a private, for-profit transportation company, MIDS blends the familial focus of community transportation with the efficiencies and accountability required of a small business as the contracted provider for human service and public transportation across 11 counties in Georgia’s Southern and Southwestern regions, along with a host of other mobility services in another 11 counties.

That sense of family was present from the moment the *DigitalCT* walked through the door at MIDS’ offices in Valdosta. There, Director of Public Relations Josh Hobdy and Operations Manager Danny Saturday welcomed us not only with handshakes but also coffee and donuts – a family breakfast, an ideal way to conclude the Georgia Transit Tour.

In 1987, Cooley and Debbie Hobdy came across a notice for a contract to take clients in South Georgia to mental health care and appointments in and around Valdosta. Already owning a small fleet of multi-passenger vans, they were awarded the contract and
began their careers as a local transportation provider – a mom and pop operation in the truest sense of the phrase. Building on their initial foray into moving people to specialized destinations and programs, the couple worked to grow their business, taking on new contracts for other medical appointments, including transporting people with disabilities and non-emergency stretcher trips, as well as special events such as weddings, business events and reunions.

By 1992, the company known as MIDS (Medical Industry Delivery Systems) was formed, according to Josh Hobdy, Director of Public Relations for his parent’s company – although he adds the M once was intended to represent it’s medical focus. Recognizing the firm’s growing role in providing medical transportation in the region, the Southern Georgia Regional Commission awarded MIDS a contract under its pilot program to operate human service transportation in several counties. At the time, three other contract operators provided service under the program, but MIDS gradually incorporated contracts to become the sole contracted provider over a multi-county region. Ultimately, rural public transit service was added through the model first adopted by the Three Rivers Regional Council to form a coordinated mobility network (click here for more).

“We’ve been doing coordination for many years at the local level” says Danny Saturday, MIDS Operations Manager. “At MIDS, coordination is not just a term to talk about at meetings. We have been providing coordinated transportation services for many years.”

Managing the various transportation contracts is Saturday’s main mission at MIDS. While the combination of human services and public transportation supported by the Georgia Department of Human Services and the Georgia Department of Transportation, respectively, accounts for the bulk of the company’s non-chartered business, it also operates non-emergency medical transportation for Georgia Department of Community Health and various Workers Compensation insurers, as well as service for clients of the Georgia Vocational Rehabilitation Agency. MIDS receives non-emergency medical trips via Georgia’s statewide broker, Logisticare. Although each program has different eligibility requirements and levels of payment for each trip, MIDS’ business model demands shared trips to reduce costs.

“In order for this model to work, we need to keep the programs in balance,” says Saturday. “There’s so many unmet needs in this region, but the funding is not there to serve everyone in their own vehicle. It requires a lot of trust.”

The Value of Experience

Many of Georgia’s regional commissions hire private transportation companies to provide the service in their areas. The Southern and Southwestern regional commissions – which employ MIDS, among other provid-
MIDS Inc

ers — are no exception. Yet it is a challenge to identify stable, reliable companies to contract with, especially when long reimbursement timelines due to state-level bureaucracy means contract providers often have to front the cost of operating the service until reimbursements are received through the regional commissions. Over its more than 25 years of operation, MIDS has cultivated the institutional stability and experience needed to withstand drawn-out repayment schedules.

That MIDS quality of service manifests itself in the volume of service the company provides on a daily basis. MIDS provide service from Brantley and Charlton counties in Southeast Georgia west to Dothan, Ala., and from as far north as Irwin County south to the Florida/Georgia state line. That amounts to an operation of more than 2 million miles and 122,000 hours of service annually. Such a sweeping effort requires the work of 97 employees and a fleet of 77 vehicles, a mix of body-on-chassis vehicles and 15-passenger vans. Some 55 vehicles are owned by individual counties for rural public transit and assigned to MIDS for operation and maintenance, while the company owns another 22 vehicles to supplement the fleet and serve its charter business. In addition to the company’s main administrative and maintenance facility in Valdosta, MIDS also stations drivers and staff out of a satellite location in Bainbridge.

Managing an operation stretching hundreds of miles and spanning several counties requires a dedication to both training and technology. All MIDS drivers are trained through the Community Transportation Association’s Passenger Service and Safety (PASS) program, ensuring a baseline for professionalism and customer service across the company, along with thorough defensive driving training, background checks and drug testing. Many drivers are current or former bus drivers, augmenting their mid-day downtime during the school year and all-day during breaks. Meanwhile, MIDS uses RouteMatch to schedule and dispatch trips as part of Georgia’s statewide contract to provide the software, as well as tracking the location and maintenance status of the vehicle fleet. MIDS receives requests for human service and non-emergency medical trips directly from agencies, while individual riders seeking public transit service call local numbers in their own county that are transferred to MIDS.

“RouteMatch has given us the ability to know where our assets are at any given time,” says Saturday.

**Equally Invested in Outcomes**

There’s often a stigma attached to private companies providing mobility options geared towards specific and very human-related needs, like trips to health care, employment training or vocational rehab. Some observers will claim only public entities can truly focus on these needs, devoid of the profit motive that supposedly limited for-profit providers. That notion is disproven every day via the work of companies like MIDS, who take their role in providing critical, quality-of-life care very seriously.

“People assume that only government can do this kind of work,” says Hobdy, noting the dozens of dialysis trips MIDS provides every day. “We know that we’re helping to save lives and that motivates us to run a successful, efficient business so we can continue serving folks in South Georgia for another quarter century.” CT
Thronateeska was the old name of Albany, Georgia, given to the lush landscape, green with grass, trees and vines, by the Creek Native Americans because of the flint found in its river. The Flint River is the reason businessman and judge Nelson Tift called the city he founded Albany; like the capitol of New York, both cities rested at the heads of rivers.

Albany has other nicknames, too, like the Good Life City and the Artesian City, for the wells that result from the Flint River, populated with steamboats carrying cotton. Albany also gifted its name to a city in Texas, just as the lower Georgia city inherited the name from Albany, New York.

The Albany Transit System (ATS) serves Albany’s population of just less than 100,000 in its service area of just 17 square miles. ATS buses and paratransit for people with disabilities, carry passengers all over the historic city in Dougherty County. All buses and paratransit vehicles accommodate both bicycles and wheelchairs.

The Albany Transit System operates eight fixed-route buses and four demand-response buses and serves more than 650,000 passengers annually.

In early 2013, ATS officials proposed four changes to the Albany bus routes that would eliminate infrequently used and unneeded stops in the transit system, in order to save money as well as make bus trips quicker and more efficient. But before implementing these changes, ATS surveyed residents of the service area to determine if they approved of shrinking the routes.

The population generally seemed in favor of the changes, especially the changes to the Brown Route that takes passengers to the Albany Technical College. Respondents noted that the shortened, more direct route made riding the bus simpler and easier.

Another change approved of by the majority of Albany public transit passengers was the 25-cent fare increase, and subsequent 5-cent fare increases each year, beginning in 2014, due to rising fuel costs.

“We’re not getting a lot of opposition to the increase,” Transit Director David Hamilton told the Albany Herald, “People who ride the city buses seem to understand that we have to account for the increase in fuel costs... It’s something we need to do, but we wanted to do it incrementally to minimize the impact on the community. We haven’t had a fare increase since 2008, and everyone knows how much fuel costs have risen in that time.”

Some of the additional revenue generated by the fare increase will be used to purchase five new fixed-rate buses and six paratransit buses next year.
Where’s Transit Notes?

Many long-time readers of Community Transportation Magazine — in both its print and digital formats — might recognize that this is the first edition of the publication in more than a decade to not include a Transit Notes section. This is no oversight. CTAA now provides both daily and bi-monthly collections of national transit news and notes in its twitter feed and FastMail e-newsletter, respectively. In other words, you don’t have to wait for the next edition of DigitalCT to get the community and public transportation news coverage you’ve come to expect from us. Just follow @CTMag1 on twitter or subscribe for free to FastMail right on the CTAA website homepage at www.ctaa.org.
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