Northeast Georgia Rural and Human Services Transportation Plan

Prepared for:

Northeast Georgia Regional Commission

Prepared by:

In association with
Clarification & Mediation, Inc.
1.0 Executive Summary

This regional Rural and Human Services Transportation plan has been prepared for the Northeast Georgia Region Commission (NEGRC), under contract with the Georgia Department of Transportation (GDOT). The NEGRC RHST Plan reviewed existing transit systems and plans, regional demographics, NEGRC 2035 Regional Plan and other local and regional plans, held one Technical Committee meeting, and two Public Visioning Sessions. From this information, together with national literature reviews and GDOT, GDC, DHS and DCH RHST planning efforts, a vision for RHST in Northeast Georgia has emerged:

Work towards an improved coordinated RHST System that provides regional coverage and is convenient, safe, efficient, and reliable. The RHST system will address the needs of the transit-dependent and choice populations; respond to changing demographics, development and employment trends; and adapt to meet the region’s needs.

Based on this vision, the NEGRC RHST Plan was developed. The NEGRC RHST Plan Key Areas are noted below:

Key NEGRC RHST Study Findings, the regional transit and human service transportation needs (outside of Athens) include:

- Demographic analysis presents a clear need for additional transit service across all rural ridership groups, including:
  - Seniors - Increase to 18% of region’s population by 2035
  - Low-income households – regional average is 18% of population
  - Disabled persons – 18% of the region’s population
  - Persons without vehicles – about 7% of the regional population
- Technical and higher education institutions and students need additional transportation options.
- Development is occurring primarily in places that transit does not currently serve.
- Students and Universities/Colleges outside of Athens have few transportation choices.
- Regional key activity centers are poorly served by transit.
- The region’s employers, particularly outside of Athens, are poorly served by transit.
- Regional coverage does not exist, as only limited areas in the region are served by public transit.
- Coordination of rural and human service transportation exists in limited areas.
- There is more demand than ability to meet the demand across all RHST ridership populations.
- There is a need for 24/7 service in some regional areas.
NEGRc RHST Visioning Sessions and Technical Group Meetings confirmed these findings and expressed clear support for a regional transit focus that provided technical resources and assistance to the local systems while starting to address RHST issues as noted in the Short-term Action plan; see below.

NEGRc RHST Short-term Action Plan - to address these areas and improve RHST service and coordination, within the NEGRc area. The following recommended short-term action steps are summarized below. A more detailed discussion of recommended actions is presented later in this document.

**Short-term NEGRc RHST Activities (September 2012 to June 2014)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>RHST Regional Action Item</th>
<th>Responsibility</th>
<th>Targeted Completion Date</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Appoint NEGRc staff to form and assist RHST Committee (at least 25% time)</td>
<td>NEGRc</td>
<td>September 2012 (Complete)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Establish a regional RHST Committee including providers, users, GDOT, DHS &amp; DCH to foster coordination and efficient RHST operations</td>
<td>NEGRc</td>
<td>October 2012 (Complete)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Determine feasibility to fund and employ RHST Mobility Manager in 2013</td>
<td>NEGRc</td>
<td>June 2013 (Complete)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Promote RHST to Policymakers</td>
<td>RHST Committee</td>
<td>December 2012 to December 2013</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Investigate Additional Coordination Efforts by and between GDOT, DHS, DCH and others</td>
<td>NEGRc</td>
<td>December 2012 to December 2013</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marketing and Public Awareness to:</td>
<td>RHST Committee</td>
<td>Ongoing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Employers</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Educational Facilities</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Activity Centers</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Establish RHST Regional Forum (meet quarterly or more often as determined)</td>
<td>NEGRc</td>
<td>August 2013 through February 2014</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Seek and leverage new with existing Funding</td>
<td>NEGRc</td>
<td>2013-2014</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Determine feasibility and/or motivation to establish additional rural public transit within the Region</td>
<td>NEGRc</td>
<td>June 2014</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dialogue with other Regions</td>
<td>NEGRc</td>
<td>2013 (Ongoing)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Better Leverage Existing RHST Funding</td>
<td>NEGRc</td>
<td>June 2014</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Create Updated NEGRc Short-term RHST Plan</td>
<td>NEGRc</td>
<td>June 2014</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Longer-term goals are discussed in this document. They are intended to follow on from the initiatives listed above and will require more substantial investment. These goals should be set, however, as the region grows and develops.
2.0 Introduction

The Northeast Georgia Region (NEGR) Rural and Human Services Transportation Plan (RHST plan) outlines the Rural and Human Services Transit (RHST) vision through identifying specific elements of a strategic plan and documenting the public engagement activities involved in the process.

To accomplish these goals, this Plan provides an assessment of the existing available transit services throughout the region and identifies the RHST providers and other available transit service. The Plan also provides an assessment of the region’s unmet transit needs. This is accomplished through reviewing the Georgia Department of Transportation (GDOT) and Northeast Georgia Regional Commission (NEGRC) Regional Plans and identifying existing and anticipated transit activity centers, including:

- Major employment centers,
- Retail centers
- Medical facilities
- Senior centers
- Social services
- Educational facilities.

Furthermore, the Action Plan developed herein builds upon recommendations provided in both GDOT and NEGRC reports as well as other local and county plans developed within the region.

A review of existing and forecasted demographics was undertaken to thoroughly understand the key transit-dependent population. These demographic trends were matched against the GDOT and NEGRC regional plans as well as compared to the major activity centers in the region.

As part of developing the Action Plan, a public engagement process was developed which incorporated key stakeholders and RHST representatives. The process included a series of stakeholder meetings and visioning sessions at various locations throughout the region. These sessions were used to receive input on existing transit service needs as well as ensure that the Action Plan developed is based on sound assumptions and foundational elements. These sessions also solicited ideas for short-term and long-term RHST solutions for the region and sought feedback on the need for further transit as the region grows and develops.

With the information obtained from regional planning documents, demographic analysis and public engagement, a Gap Analysis was used to develop strategies to address the unmet transit needs within the region.
The strategies identified were prioritized based upon the needs of the community, input from stakeholders and the results of visioning and public engagement meetings. Factors influencing prioritization included demand, efficiency, operations and available funding. The strategies were put into short-term and long-term goals as part of the Action Plan.

This Plan is intended to be a living document which should be updated and modified as future issues and opportunities arise which may impact the planning process.
3.0 NEGRC Study Area

The Northeast Georgia Region is one of the 12 Regional commissions throughout the state. It is located immediately to the east of the Atlanta Metropolitan Area. Its location within the State of Georgia is shown in Figure 1. The region consists of the following 12 counties:

- Barrow County
- Clarke County
- Elbert County
- Greene County
- Jackson County
- Jasper County
- Madison County
- Morgan County
- Newton County
- Oconee County
- Oglethorpe County
- Walton County

Source: Georgia RHST Plan 2.0, GDOT, 2011

The region’s largest city is Athens (Clarke County). With a population of just under 150,000 people, Athens contains approximately 25% of the region’s population and is the economic and cultural center of Northeast Georgia. The western part of the region that is adjacent to the Atlanta Metropolitan area has a moderate population density which exhibits suburban land use characteristics. The remainder of the region is primarily rural with other population centers being significantly smaller. Other communities within the region include:

- Covington
- Elberton
- Greensboro
- Jefferson
- Madison
- Monroe
- Watkinsville
- Winder

The region is served by two interstate highways; I-20 running east-west and I-85 running northeast by southwest, as well as SR316, a major east-west state highway connecting the region to the Atlanta...
metropolitan area; along with a well-defined network of state and other highways which connect the major population and employment centers. The region’s transportation system is depicted in Figure 2.

Figure 2: Northeast Georgia Transportation System

Source: Northeast Georgia Regional Assessment, NEGRC, 2011
4.0 Document Review

In compiling this Plan, several regional planning documents were reviewed to develop the foundational elements for the RHST Action Plan and to ensure a consistency with regional and state plans. The key documents that were reviewed are:

- Northeast Georgia Regional Agenda – NE Georgia Plan 2035, NEGRC 2012
- Georgia Rural and Human Services Transportation Plan 2.0, GDOT 2011
- Northeast Georgia Regional Assessment – NE Georgia Plan 2035, NEGRC 2011

Other county and local transportation plans within the region were also reviewed. These include:

- Transit Development Plan for Greene County, NEGRC, 2008
- Jackson County Transit Development Plan, NEGRC, 2010
- Transit Development Plan for Oglethorpe County, NEGRC, 2009
- Transit Development Plan for the City of Social Circle, NEGRC, 2007
- Transit Development Plan for Walton County, NEGRC, 2007
- Atlanta Regional Commission (ARC) 2030 Regional Transportation Plan, ARC, 2007
- Madison Athens-Clarke Oconee Regional Transportation Study (MACORTS) Year 2035 Transportation Plan Update, Athens-Clarke County Planning Department, 2009
- Public Transportation study for the MACORTS Region, MACORTS, 2009
- One Athens Plan, Partners for a Prosperous Athens, 2006

These planning documents were used to verify existing and forecasted demographic information, existing transit service and infrastructure, planned transportation improvements. A review of the documents also revealed the current and future transit needs and deficiencies within the region, providing a further basis for the development of the RHST Action Plan.
5.0 Demographic Analysis

In order to develop a successful Action Plan for RHST in Northeast Georgia, a comprehensive understanding of the region’s demographic makeup is required. This analysis forms a foundation for determining future transit needs in Northeast Georgia.

The region’s current population is approximately 580,000 people. The population has grown by approximately 33% in the period from 2000-2010, a similar growth rate from 1990-2000. A county-by-county breakdown of the 2010 population is shown below in Table 1.

Table 1: 2010 Population - Northeast Georgia Region

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>County</th>
<th>2010 Population</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Barrow</td>
<td>69,367</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clarke</td>
<td>116,714</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elbert</td>
<td>20,166</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Greene</td>
<td>15,994</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jackson</td>
<td>60,485</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jasper</td>
<td>13,900</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Madison</td>
<td>28,120</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Morgan</td>
<td>17,868</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Newton</td>
<td>99,958</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oconee</td>
<td>32,808</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oglethorpe</td>
<td>14,899</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Walton</td>
<td>83,768</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>TOTAL</strong></td>
<td><strong>574,047</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Northeast Georgia Regional Assessment, NEGRC, 2011

By 2035, the region’s population is anticipated to reach in excess of 1.1 million people, an increase of approximately 250% from 1990. Future growth is expected to place a greater burden on the existing transportation infrastructure, including the region’s current transit service. The historical and projected population growth within Northeast Georgia is shown below in Table 2.
Table 2: Historical and Projected Population - Northeast Georgia Region

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>1990</th>
<th>2000</th>
<th>2010</th>
<th>2020</th>
<th>2035</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Historical and Projected Population</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Historic and Projected Population Growth Rates</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1990-2000</td>
<td>438,300</td>
<td>585,627</td>
<td>767,691</td>
<td>1,143,941</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>33.5%</td>
<td>33.6%</td>
<td>31.1%</td>
<td>49.0%</td>
<td>249.0%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Northeast Georgia Regional Assessment 2035, NRGRC, 2011 – based on US Census projections calculated by the Carl Vinson Institute of Government Applied Demography Program, UGA.

5.1 Rural and Human Services Transportation Key Demographics

The following sections outline some of the region’s key demographic trends and issues, as they relate to reliance on Rural and Human Services Transit. As the population grows according to the projections above, the current demographic trends are anticipated to prevail or increase, creating the strong potential for additional RHST service across the region.

5.2 Senior Population

Currently, persons over the age of 65 represent approximately 12% of the Northeast Georgia Region’s total population. By 2035, this group is anticipated to reach 18% and will be the largest sector of population as the current “Baby Boomers” age and people live longer, healthier lives. An illustration of the future demographic trends by age group is shown below in Table 3.
5.3 Low-income Households and Employment Statistics

Over one half of the region’s counties had poverty rates in 2010 which exceeded the national average of 14%. In addition, the poverty rate for children under 18 years exceeds the national average of 21% in the same seven counties. Clarke County has the highest poverty rate in the region with over 36% of the general population and 34% of children under 18 years of age living below the poverty line. In contrast, Oconee County has just over 8% of the general population and 10% of children under the age of 18 living in poverty, the lowest rate in the region. A breakdown of poverty rates by county is shown below in Table 4.

A significant proportion of the senior population does not or cannot drive themselves to access medical care, senior centers or basic services and thus relies on human services transit availability. As this population sector continues to grow, the need for reliable transit for seniors will increase.
Table 4: Low Income Populations by County - Northeast Georgia Region

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>County</th>
<th>Poverty Population</th>
<th>Children Under 18 Years of Age</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>#</td>
<td>%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Barrow</td>
<td>8,724</td>
<td>12.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clarke</td>
<td>38,764</td>
<td>36.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elbert</td>
<td>4,180</td>
<td>20.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Greene</td>
<td>3,079</td>
<td>19.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jackson</td>
<td>8,971</td>
<td>14.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jasper</td>
<td>2,134</td>
<td>15.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Madison</td>
<td>5,103</td>
<td>18.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Morgan</td>
<td>2,863</td>
<td>15.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Newton</td>
<td>12,565</td>
<td>12.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oconee</td>
<td>2,780</td>
<td>8.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oglethorpe</td>
<td>2,238</td>
<td>15.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Walton</td>
<td>10,784</td>
<td>12.5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Northeast Georgia Regional Assessment, NEGRC, 2012

Low-income households may lack safe, reliable transportation and therefore have difficulty accessing general services such as shopping, medical care and jobs. Without the mobility to access well-paying jobs, it is likely that a majority of this population sector will be unable to overcome poverty. The recent One Athens study also revealed that many of the people who live below the poverty line are employed but do not have skilled, well-paying jobs and are known as the “working poor.”

5.4 Disability Population

Persons with disabilities often rely on transportation to access health care or education. Additionally, many people with disabilities who are able to work are unable to drive and need transportation to maintain employment and live independently. The US Census estimates that disabled people represent approximately 18% of the region’s population.

A future projection of the disability population is not available, but a significant proportion of those with a disability are seniors; therefore it is anticipated that this population will grow given the projected aging over the next 30 years.
5.5 Transit Dependency

2000 US Census Data illustrates that the Northeast Georgia Region contains 11,300 households (about 7%), without a motor vehicle. While this number has decreased from the previous 1990 estimate, the transit-dependent population relies on transportation for health care, work, school, shopping and other services.

The transit-dependent population is typically a summary of the population groups who are described above, though also may consist of people who simply do not wish to own an automobile. The remainder of this Plan will typically refer to the transit-dependent population.

5.6 Choice Riders

Within the Region, there are also key demographics relating to those riders who, if given a choice, would choose to ride rural transit. These RHST trips may include:

- Employment
- Activity Centers
- Education Centers
- Medical Facilities
- Future Development Areas

The following sections describe each of these areas in terms of the potential impact on the need for additional transit connectivity.

5.7 Employment and Workflow

The employment and workflow information is important as it shows the employment travel patterns within the region, thus indicating the need for potential transit service.

The unemployment rate in Northeast Georgia is currently at 9.5 percent, higher than the statewide rate of 8.9 percent. While these figures are an effective comparison for other regions and states, they do not fully represent the economic picture within the region.

Input from stakeholders and discussions with major employers in the region reveals that lack of transportation for education and work-force training is a key obstacle in hiring for jobs. Furthermore, the recently-completed One Athens Study determined that a significant number of employers are paying low wages. This trend is known as “underemployment” and represents its own challenges for mobility and economic development.
Also illustrating the employment picture within the region is a workflow analysis. This analysis was performed based on the 2000\textsuperscript{1} US Census Journey to Work Data and provides an insight into origins and destinations for workers in the region. Figure 3 below shows a geographic representation of commuting patterns in the Northeast Georgia Region.

\begin{figure}[h]
\centering
\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{figure3.png}
\caption{Workflows Into and Out of the Northeast Georgia Region}
\end{figure}

Source: 2000 US Census journey to work data.

As shown in the above figure, the majority of commuters travel within the region to and from their jobs. A significant proportion of the population, however, travels out of the region to work, particularly to Metropolitan Atlanta and Northern Georgia, suggesting that the western portion of Northeast Georgia has strong commuting ties with the Atlanta Region. This trend illustrates a potential need for transit to serve these commuters, however it also suggests the potential need to provide greater intra-regional transit to serve commuters which remain within Northeast Georgia.

\footnote{Note: 2010 Census data have been released, but they are not as extensive and do not include journey to work information.}
6.0 Activity Centers

One of the major difficulties for the Northeast Georgia Region in terms of transit needs is geography. With the exception of Athens, Northeast Georgia is a large geographic area with predominantly low-density widespread population centers. Getting people from remote areas to activity centers is currently a challenge, particularly for those who rely on transit.

Key activity centers within the Northeast Georgia Region include major employers, medical facilities, educational facilities and retail districts. This section of the Plan describes these activity centers in the region by type and discusses and known future development.

6.1 Employers

Northeast Georgia’s economy is relatively diversified with a mixture of several industrial sectors including service, manufacturing and public service. The breakdown as shown below in Figure 4 shows that over half of the current jobs in the region are in the service industry.

Figure 4: Breakdown of Jobs by Industry Type in Northeast Georgia

Source: Northeast Georgia Regional Plan 2035, NEGRC, 2011

The 10 major industrial sectors and employer types currently in the region are shown below in Table 5
Table 5: Ten Largest Industrial Sectors within Northeast Georgia

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Top 10 Industrial Sectors within Northeast Georgia</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Education Services</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Manufacturing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Retail Trade</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Health Care and Social Assistance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Accommodation and Food Services</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Public Administration</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Construction</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Wholesale Trade</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. Administration, Support, Waste Management, Remediation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. Professional, Scientific and Technical Services</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: NEGRC, Labor Market Statistics, Quarterly Census of Employment and Wages Program

The 5 largest employers within the region are:

- Athens Regional Medical Center, Clarke County
- Pilgrims Pride Corporation, Clarke County
- St. Mary’s Health Care System, Clarke County
- University of Georgia – Main Campus, Clarke County
- Wal-Mart, Regionwide

Other major employers within the region include a Pilgrim’s Pride plant, HiLo distribution center and Motor Tech facility in Elbert County. There are also the BBB distribution center, Carters and TD Automotive production facility in Jackson County.

Notable additions to the region’s labor market include Caterpillar Inc. which is building a new manufacturing plant in the Athens area. The facility is scheduled to open in 2013 and up to 1,400 jobs are anticipated by 2020\(^2\). In addition, Baxter International plans to build a large healthcare manufacturing plant near Social Circle. The facility is anticipated to create 1,500 jobs once open in 2018.\(^3\) Finally, a replacement project is underway for St. Mary’s Hospital in Greene County which will generate additional employment. The impact of these new large employers is anticipated to maintain the region’s diverse mix of industry and will create more skilled jobs for the local area.

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6.2 Medical Facilities

Over a dozen medical facilities are located throughout the region. Facilities range from large regional hospitals and medical centers to smaller health care clinics. Major medical facilities within the region are shown below:

- St. Mary’s Health Care System, Clarke County
- Athens Regional Medical Center, Clarke County
- Walton Regional Medical Center, Walton County
- Northridge Medical Center, Jackson County
- Medical College of Georgia Clinic, Oconee County
- Minnie G. Boswell Memorial Hospital, Greene County
- Morgan Memorial Hospital, Morgan County
- Morgan County Healthcare Clinic, Morgan County
- Newton Medical Center, Newton County
- Jackson County Health Care Clinic, Jackson County
- Oglethorpe Health Care Clinic, Oglethorpe County
- Rensselaer Care Center, Jasper County
- Oglethorpe Health Care Clinic, Oglethorpe County
- Madison County Georgia Health Services, Madison County

6.3 Educational Facilities

Several large educational facilities are located within the Northeast Georgia Region. The largest institution, the University of Georgia, employs 10,000 people alone and has a student population of approximately 35,000 people. Several other technical and community colleges as well as satellite campuses for other institutions are located throughout the region. The key facilities are listed below:

- University of Georgia in Athens
- Athens Technical College
- Piedmont College
- Oxford College of Emory University
- Lanier Technical College, Barrow and Jackson County Branches
- Troy University
- Georgia Perimeter College – Newton Campus
- DeKalb Technical College
- Gainesville State College’s Oconee Campus

6.4 Areas of Development

In the Northeast Georgia Regional Plan 2035, a significant focus was placed on analyzing development patterns within the region. The review included an inventory of existing development, demographic and geographic analysis and stakeholder input relative to existing and desired development patterns.

The result of this analysis showed areas of development with consideration of the region’s important natural and cultural resources. Graphically, a map showing Areas of Special Attention was developed. This map shows possible conflict between future development and the natural and cultural resources within the region. In addition, opportunities for redevelopment and infill are shown. The development areas provide a geographic understanding of where potential transit opportunities exist. The Areas of Special Attention Map is shown below in Figure 5.
As shown in the above graphic, the majority of potential development and redevelopment is anticipated to be in the western portion of the region adjacent to the Atlanta Metropolitan Area. Other significant areas of development lie along the I-85 and I-20 corridors.

Also shown on the above map are areas of high unemployment. These areas are generally distant from the major transportation corridors and areas of development. The correlation between areas of high employment and areas of development suggest that a lack of transportation options may contribute to region’s unemployment and poverty levels.
7.0 Existing Transit Services
Moving from the identification of the region’s RHST demographics and choice ridership areas, we then looked at the various RHST services within the NEGR. Currently, within the Northeast Georgia region, there is a mixture of transit services and providers. Public transit is provided in Athens-Clarke County and five rural areas. Human Services Transit (DHS, Senior and Medicaid) is provided throughout the region. Figure 6 illustrates the Region’s RHST service structure as of June 30, 2012. DCH and DHS are in transition with their various HST changes noted starting on Page 17.

Figure 6: Existing Transit Structure in Northeast Georgia
Region 5: Northeast Georgia

Source: Georgia RHST Plan 2.0, GDOT 2011

7.1 Public Urban and Rural Transit
Urban public transit is provided by Athens Transit for Athens-Clarke County. It is a fixed-route service with 15 routes throughout the community. In addition, a demand-response service is provided for those with disabilities and is available within one mile of a fixed route. Support for this service is provided by FTA Section 5307 Urban Public Transportation Funding and is
administered by GDOT. GDOT reports that Athens Transit has an operating budget of approximately $5.2 Million.

Rural public transit is provided in Elbert, Greene, Jackson and Morgan counties and the City of Social Circle in Walton County. In general, these services provide transit to all residents who request it. Typically, the service is by request and charges users a fee. There is no fixed route, but users must typically provide 24 hours in advance of their required trip time. The vehicles are usually handicap accessible. Support for these services is largely provided by FTA Section 5311 Rural Public Transportation Funding and is administered by GDOT. The amount of funding varies by each system.

7.2 Human Services Transit

Human Services Transit is provided throughout the Northeast Georgia Region in the form of DHS and Medicaid services. Each is provided on a county-by-county basis and receives a variety of state and federal funds. DHS and Medicaid transportation funds are administered by the Georgia DHS and DCH, respectively.

Presently, DHS transportation is provided by two operators within the region; Advantage Behavioral Health Systems (ABHS) and the GRN Community Service Board (GRN CSB). As shown in the figure above, GRN CSB provides services to Newton County (as well as Gwinnett and Rockdale Counties outside of the region). ABHS provides DHS transportation to the remainder of the region. The NEGRC’s Area Agency on Aging typically administers Division of Aging trips and utilizes a third-party provider for transit. Trips are usually limited to transporting users to and from the respective County Senior Center. These trips are supported by an operating budget of approximately $2.6 Million.

On July 1, 2012, DHS will change its HST providers as follows:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>DHS Contract Operator</th>
<th>Operation Area</th>
<th>Provider</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Elbert Count</td>
<td>Elbert County</td>
<td>Elbert County</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Greene County</td>
<td>Greene County</td>
<td>ABHS</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Newton County</td>
<td>Newton County</td>
<td>Senior Center</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NEGRC</td>
<td>The region’s other 9 counties</td>
<td>T&amp;T Transportation</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Medicaid transportation is provided through several private providers throughout the region. The major providers are shown below in Table 6.
Table 6: Northeast Georgia Medicaid Transportation Providers

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Broker</th>
<th>Provider</th>
<th>Area Served</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Southeast Trans</td>
<td>Velstar Medical Transportation</td>
<td>Clarke, Greene, Jasper, Jackson, Morgan, Oconee, Oglethorpe</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Master Care</td>
<td>Madison, Elbert</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Georgia Medical Care</td>
<td>Barrow, Newton, Walton</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

To coordinate through the three providers for reservations and scheduling, DCH utilizes Southeastrans and Logisticare as its brokers. These trips are generally not coordinated with or combined with other DCH trips or those provided by DHS. Funding amounts for Medicaid trips within the region are presently unknown.

Again, similar to DHS, DCH changed its regions and broker on May 1, 2012. Now, Southeast Trans continues to serve Jackson, Barrow and Walton counties in its brokerage regional area (North Region). Logisticare now handles the Medicaid NET for the rest of the NEGR. They are both currently using the same previous operators. However, it is likely that the providers may change as Logisticare learns the NET operational requirements within the new counties that were moved from the DCH North Region to the DCH East region.

Table 7: Northeast Georgia Medicaid Transportation Providers

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Broker</th>
<th>Area Served</th>
<th>DCH Region</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Southeast Trans</td>
<td>Barrow, Jackson, Morgan, and Walton</td>
<td>North</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Logisticare</td>
<td>Clarke, , Elbert, Greene, Jasper, Madison, Oconee, Oglethorpe and Newton</td>
<td>East &amp; Central</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

7.3 Other Transit

Within the region, there is also a transit system for one of its largest employers and key educational facilities, the University of Georgia (UGA). UGA Transit provides fixed-route and paratransit services to the university community. The service is free and funded through a student transportation fee. Through paying the transportation fee, students are also permitted to ride Athens Transit buses in an agreement between UGA and the Athens-Clarke County government.

Georgia rideshare is a GDOT sponsored program which provides a system where commuters can find carpool and vanpool services to provide a safe and convenient way of commuting to and from jobs. The State of Georgia also operates park and ride lots where commuters will gather to ride carpools, vanpools or other forms of transit. In Northeast Georgia, there are park and ride lots in Barrow and Newton Counties.
8.0 Overview of Findings/Foundational Elements

In review of the GDOT RHST Plan, the Northeast Georgia Regional Plan 2035 and other documents, there are several conclusions to be made about the region’s demographic and economic situation for the transit-dependent population. There are also conclusions to be drawn about the current Rural and Human Services Transit infrastructure in the region.

- The region has adequate transportation infrastructure with good road connectivity between population and employment centers.
- The senior citizen population within the region is increasing and will continue to increase in the future as the “baby boomer” generation ages, placing a greater burden on existing transit service. Senior Transit is available region wide, but will need to continue accommodating this population and must plan for the increased demand.
- Other transit-dependent populations such as poor and disabled residents are likely to remain steady or increase, placing an increased demand on transit service. This population should be recognized as a target group when identifying transit needs and planning improvements.
- Unemployment is higher than the state average, but does not illustrate the issue of “underemployment.” Only two counties within the region have positive trip inflow, suggesting the need for more skilled jobs. Lack of transportation for work-force training is an obstacle in hiring for skilled jobs.
- There is limited rural public transit within the region. Four of the 12 counties and the City of Social Circle have rural transit service. There is also a lack of connectivity as there is no coordination between counties or with the urban transit system in Athens.
- DHS and Medicaid transportation is available region-wide, though transportation funding is fragmented; this leads to lack of coordination and duplication of service in some areas.
- There is opportunity and the likelihood for significant development in parts of the region, yet the highest areas of unemployment exist outside of these areas, suggesting the need for greater transit connectivity.
- There are several areas where large employment centers are being created, such as the Caterpillar and Baxter facilities. Future transit and development planning should recognize these locations as many businesses will develop and locate in proximity to these sites.

The issues identified above served as the foundational elements in the public engagement process. Their intent was to serve as a starting point for discussion and to ensure all issues have been identified. The public engagement process, as described in the next section, was a key part of developing the plan and facilitated the vision for transit in the Northeast Georgia Region.
9.0 Public Engagement Activities

Public engagement was a major part of this planning process and helped to identify existing transit needs and deficiencies. It was also a crucial step in developing the vision for transit in the region. This section describes the steps taken in the public engagement process as well as the outcomes and input received from the meetings. Full documentation of these meetings is located in the appendix.

9.1 Stakeholder and Community Engagement Plan

The project team developed a plan for stakeholder and community engagement activities to provide a systematic approach to meeting and communicating with stakeholders as well as to maximize feedback and input into overall vision.

The objective was to present the RHST planning process to stakeholders and solicit input on whether the right foundational elements were being considered as the planning process moved forward. The RHST plan must address the transit needs of Northeast Georgia emphasizing the mobility needs of the transit-dependent, providing access to skilled job and creating a more coordinated and efficient service.

The engagement plan was designed to include the following facilitated meetings:

- Technical Stakeholders Focus Group with NEGRC and other Technical staff
- Visioning Sessions with Key Regional Stakeholders
- Report-Back Session to NEGRC Board

In addition, a brief questionnaire was distributed to stakeholders unable to attend any of the above meetings.

9.2 Technical Stakeholder Focus Group

The technical stakeholder focus group meeting was intended to set the foundation for the visioning meetings and included a core group of NEGRC and other key transit stakeholders. The meeting was held at Northeast Georgia Regional Commission offices on May 17th, 2012.

The intent of this focus group meeting was to ensure that foundational elements that have been were correct and agreeable to the core group. The meeting was also used to seek input into where further analysis may be needed and what important issues need to be addressed by the RHST Plan prior to the visioning sessions.

The meeting also focused on the leveraging and coordinating of resources and assets. Because of the complexity of funding streams and the various agencies that administer them, the region’s
transit is a fragmented system which in some cases leads to inefficiencies and duplication of service.

The final item of discussion in the focus group meeting was to determine how best to engage the community during the visioning sessions and on the RHST Plan. It was determined that assuring a broad cross-section of participants was key to understanding all unmet need and soliciting input on solutions.

Some of the key outcomes of this meeting were as follows:

- The foundation elements were generally correct. The lack of connectivity between transit systems must be addressed. The poor and underemployed must be recognized as any analysis of transit dependent riders. The disabled population should also be recognized as transit-dependent as they do not necessarily qualify for Medicaid or Medicare transit service.
- The small positive inflow of workers into the region may be a result of lack of transportation to the small businesses throughout the region.
- The transit system needs to be more affordable and more flexible. It should also be better marketed, as many people are not aware that any current service exists.
- Assistance and training on a regional level would be useful for owners and operators of transit service to fully understand rules, regulations and best practices relative to leveraging and coordinating resources and assets.
- It is important to stress that the RHST plan is not about cutting service, but maximizing resources and creating a more efficient service that operates efficiently and in a cost-effective manner.

Based on the input received at this meeting, the planning approach was refined in advance of the visioning sessions.

### 9.3 Visioning Sessions

Following the technical stake focus group meetings, two visioning sessions were held to engage additional members of the transit community and other interested parties. These sessions were held on June 12th and 14th, 2012 in Madison and Comer, GA, respectively.

The information sought at these visioning sessions was based on the following questions which had also been asked of and agreed upon by the technical stakeholder focus group:

- Is the project team looking at the right foundational elements for the RHST plan?
- Is the information presented in these sessions accurate?
- What existing transportation services issues are important to address?
- Are there any ideas for solutions?
- What is your vision for RHST service?
What should be done immediately to address current needs?
What should be done to encourage transit use?
How can services be better coordinated?
What are some ideas for long-term funding?

The visioning groups were in general agreement that the foundation elements of the plan and the information presented in this plan was accurate. Attendees felt that several transit service issues should be addressed as part of the plan. Some of the key issues included:

- There is a need for rural public transit within the region, though it is not necessarily a region wide issue. There are some areas needing more public transportation solutions than others. Due to the changing demographics and development patterns within the region, the demand is fluid.
- The region could benefit from a higher level of coordination relative to transit service; however coordination efforts should consider impacts on the transit providers from an operational and service delivery aspect. Stakeholders voiced concern of coordination relying on too broad of a “regionalizing” of service. They noted that regional approaches in the past have often benefited the large population centers while neglecting more remote parts of the region.
- Any planned transit coordination should be mindful of the senior transportation funded by DHS. Senior Transportation provides a personalized service which will be affected by cuts in DHS funding. Any centralized and coordinated service which seeks better trip efficiencies may reduce the personalized service that senior centers can provide.
- A plan should address current needs while accounting for the ability to expend transit service in the future based on demand. The plan must also identify the target demographic for transit ridership and successfully meet the needs of this group.
- One of the biggest issues identified with current transit service is the lack of awareness within the community. Transit needs to be better marketed in the region along with any proposed coordination improvements.
- Transit needs to be given higher priority with local elected officials. Current service potential is not being maximized.

Several ideas for transit solutions and visions for RHST service were voiced at the visioning sessions. These included:

- Service needs to be marketed effectively and the public needs to be better educated on the advantages of transit. Outreach efforts need to alleviate people’s apprehensions and stereotypes of public transportation and those who typically use transit. All riders need to feel they are using a safe, comfortable and convenient service.
- Existing coordination between transit providers needs to be supported and encouraged. The region should also partner with major employers to seek innovative ideas for encouraging transit use as well as funding initiatives.
• An effective transit service should exist irrespective of county and political boundaries and provide intra-regional trips.
• NEGRC should establish a RHST committee which meets at a suitable frequency to put ideas for transit solutions into action.

There were several other transportation-related suggestions made during the meetings which, while very useful, are beyond the scope of this document. A full set of meeting minutes is available in the appendix.

9.4 Questionnaire
For stakeholders unable to attend the visioning sessions, a questionnaire was prepared and distributed. The questionnaire responses were generally in line with the input received at the visioning sessions and support the foundational elements that were developed. As with the visioning sessions, several other useful transportation-related suggestions were made through the questionnaire responses. A full set of the responses is available in the appendix.
10.0 Gap Analysis

Based on the information provided in GDOT, NEGRC and other planning documents as well as the extensive public engagement process, it is apparent that there is a need for improvement to the Rural and Human Services Transit system in Northeast Georgia. This section of the Plan aims to address the needs while understanding the challenges of funding and political support.

During the public engagement process, it was clear that the region is seeking a transit solution that is tailored to them and not a mandated set of rules that inhibit flexibility on operation of transit service. It was also clear that a wide-ranging overhaul was neither necessary nor desired for the entire region. It was determined that coordination, efficiency, and prioritization should be the key steps for improving RHST in the region. Each of these strategies is discussed below along with an action plan to guide the process from planning to realization.

10.1 Coordination and Efficiency

Coordination of RHST can be achieved through an array of strategies. It was clear in the visioning sessions that a “one size fits all” solution to coordination of service was not desirable to the region.

The “Coordination Continuum” illustrates the extent of potential coordination efforts and can range from exchange of information to coordinating the purchase of services and equipment. Figure 7 shows a graphical representation of the continuum.
The range of coordination efforts can range from an exchange of information among agencies to coordinating purchase of services. Regional approaches to coordinated service delivery have proved successful in other Georgia regions. The level of coordination can be tailored to the existing structure of service or used to expand service to address unmet demand.

Coordinated service delivery focuses on three themes:

- Administration/Oversight
- Operations/Service Delivery
- Funding

Coordination of administration and oversight can provide opportunities for service bundling, inter-agency coordination, a regional approach to transit and coordinated reporting systems and requirements. These coordination efforts can lead to improved efficiencies, particularly important given the probability of further funding constraints.

Coordination of operations and service delivery can lead to improved transit service quality. Such efforts may include the coordination of purchasing, maintaining and insuring vehicle fleets; scheduling and information technology services for operators and users; and, improved utilization of vehicle fleets.

Coordination of funding activities can provide the most efficient use of limited monetary resources. These activities may include bundling of funds; payment of service; wise and efficient use of public funding; and, leveraging of funds to attract federal dollars.

The visioning sessions indicated that administration and oversight coordination is desirable to eliminate service duplication and inefficiencies and provide a more coordinated, streamlined approach to regional transit. Any coordination efforts, however, must be mindful of not cutting essential service for the transit dependent, particularly seniors. The stakeholders were also concerned that a regional approach may favor the larger cities and neglect the more remote parts of the region. The stakeholders were receptive to coordination of funding to ensure that the limited resources available are used as efficiently as possible.

10.2 The Coastal Georgia Example

An example of a successful coordination of funding efforts is in the Coastal Georgia Region. The Coastal Georgia Regional Commission serves as the recipient for the FTA Rural and Human Services Transit (5310 and 5311) funds. This eliminates the inefficiencies of dealing with several administrative organizations and provides a single point of contact for all regional providers. The coordination effort began in four of the region’s counties and now all ten counties participate in the system.
Coordination efforts in the Coastal Georgia Region have resulted in a more efficient, less fragmented transit system. Currently, four service providers, under contract to the CRC, provide DHS and public transit trips in the region. The services are regional in nature rather than county-based, providing for better coordination of service and for leveraging of funding and resources.

Coastal Georgia hopes to build in its success through establishing a regional call center and dispatch system to promote ease of use by riders and efficient operation for transit providers.

10.3 The Northeast Georgia Vision

Based on the document review, stakeholder input and technical analysis, a vision for RHST in Northeast Georgia has emerged. The NEGRC RHST Vision Statement is:

Work towards an improved coordinated RHST System that provides regional coverage and is convenient, safe, efficient, and reliable. The RHST system will address the needs of the transit-dependent and choice populations; respond to changing demographics, development and employment trends; and adapt to meet the region’s needs.

This Vision will then be realized through a Short and Long Term action plan that follows in Section 11.
11.0 NEGRC Action Plan
This section presents the action plan for RHST in Northeast Georgia, based on the vision which has emerged through stakeholder input and the meetings described previously. This plan provides the region with tangible goals and objectives for improving transit service while addressing the economic and development needs of the region. Recognizing the availability to implement actions to improve transit service, the plan is comprised of short-term and long-term goals.

11.1 NEGRC Short-term Action Steps
Short-term goals can be achieved through immediate and tangible initiative and do not require significant investment for implementation. As these goals are met, they can serve to build momentum for further investment in long-term solutions and will demonstrate the region’s commitment to improving public transit. A summary of the short-term goals, responsibilities and target dates is shown below in Table 8.
Table 8: Summary of Recommended NEGRC RHST Short-term Action Items

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>RHST Regional Action Item</th>
<th>Responsibility</th>
<th>Targeted Completion Date</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Appoint NEGRC staff to form and assist RHST Committee (at least 25% time)</td>
<td>NEGRC</td>
<td>September 2012 (Complete)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Establish a regional RHST Committee including providers, users, GDOT, DHS &amp; DCH to foster coordination and efficient RHST operations</td>
<td>NEGRC</td>
<td>October 2012 (Complete)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Determine feasibility to fund and employ RHST Mobility Manager in 2013</td>
<td>NEGRC</td>
<td>June 2013 (Complete)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Promote RHST to Policymakers</td>
<td>RHST Committee</td>
<td>December 2012 to December 2013</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Investigate Additional Coordination Efforts by and between GDOT, DHS, DCH and others</td>
<td>NEGRC</td>
<td>December 2012 to December 2013</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marketing and Public Awareness to:</td>
<td>RHST Committee</td>
<td>Ongoing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Employers</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Educational Facilities</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Activity Centers</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Establish RHST Regional Forum (meet quarterly or more often as determined)</td>
<td>NEGRC</td>
<td>August 2013 through February 2014</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Seek and leverage new with existing Funding</td>
<td>NEGRC</td>
<td>2013-2014</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Determine feasibility and/or motivation to establish additional rural public transit within the Region</td>
<td>NEGRC</td>
<td>June 2014</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dialogue with other Regions</td>
<td>NEGRC</td>
<td>2013 (Ongoing)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Better Leverage Existing RHST Funding</td>
<td>NEGRC</td>
<td>June 2014</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Create Updated NEGRC Short-term RHST Plan</td>
<td>NEGRC</td>
<td>June 2014</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

A more detailed description of each of the short-term regional goals is:

- The NEGRC should assign a staff person or multiple staff members to focus part-time (25% time) on regional RHST. This includes working with the RHST committee, GDOT, DHS, DCH and the region’s employers, educational and medical facilities and activity centers, as well as its county members, to improve RHST service within the region, and finally, to accomplish the short-term goals. (Should the Regional RHST Mobility Manager position be pursued, the duties assigned to this staff person would be fulfilled by the NEGRC MM.)

- The NEGRC should organize a RHST committee to ensure that this action plan and other transit initiatives are tangible and can achieve desired results. The RHST committee should
be charged with assigning individuals the task of getting plans implemented within a reasonable schedule and budget. This will provide a sense of accountability to the public and show a willingness to put plans into action.

- The NEGRC should consider utilizing Federal Transit Administration and GDOT funding to employ an RHST Mobility Manager (MM) who will work with the RHST Committee to ensure that the steps noted herein are taken. The MM can also be a resource to the region’s RHST systems regarding operations, funding, advocacy, and marketing. The hiring of a regional MM has also been recommended and encouraged on a state level by GDOT.

- The RHST Committee members should also promote regional transit to policymakers and elected officials and ensure that it is considered during key decision making. Officials should be educated and involved in the plan to improve mobility within the region and fully understand the consequences of their decisions as they relate to increased mobility and the transit-dependent population.

- Existing available services should be effectively marketed, acknowledging that literacy, English language skills and lack of internet access are among the challenges that must be overcome when communicating to the public. In addition, a public awareness effort should be made to educate and alleviate people’s apprehensions about public transit.

- Provide a regional forum for RHST and urban transit systems and operators to discuss issues relative to transit service. Specific issues could include:
  - Rules and regulations based on funding source
  - Best practices for effective operation
  - Maximizing resources
  - Fleet maintenance

- Consider developing a fuel cooperative for transit operators as a way to keep fuel costs down.

- Establish dialogue with other regions to exchange information on coordination efforts and discuss the leveraging of resources and assets for additional funding sources.

- Investigate coordination efforts for administration and oversight of transit services and look for ways to improve efficiencies without risk to the transit-dependent population. Senior centers have specifically requested that any coordination efforts do not put their operations at risk.

- Begin to establish ways to leverage additional funding for more long-term improvements.

11.2 NEGRC Long-term Action Steps

Long-term goals, while requiring more substantial investment, will need to be set and achieved to address unmet transit demand as the region grows and develops. The economic and demographic analysis performed for this study indicates that future demand for transit service is anticipated to increase. Furthermore, increased mobility and access to skilled jobs is crucial to the region’s prosperity.
The long-term goals are as follows:

- Coordinate transit opportunities with major employers and major planned developments. Provide incentives for these employers and developers who will promote and assist with the funding of transit service. Such incentives may include tax benefits for employers and employees, and regional promotion of businesses and developments. Further, in exchange for having a transit option, the employer may be willing to subsidize the transit costs either directly to the employee or to the transit system.

- Develop a coordinated approach to administering federal funds and distributing them to the transit providers. Such an approach will allow a more flexible service to meet the region’s needs.

- Consider a coordinated approach to DHS and rural public transit. This will eliminate inefficiencies and possible duplication of service. A coordinated approach should eliminate any logistical difficulties and operate seamlessly for users. Transit only works successfully when it is safe, affordable and convenient for the public.

- Develop a transit system which is coordinated across county lines and provides a seamless transition to the urban public transit system in Athens.

- Planning efforts should continue to identify the target demographic for transit dependency and meet that group’s needs. Planned improvements should account for future expansion based on future need.

- Invest in providing transportation to higher education centers to ensure skilled workforce training.

- Consider a regional call center and dispatch service to provide a more coordinated system that is user friendly. Riders are more likely to use a service if they have one common clearinghouse of information rather than having to make several inquiries to different entities.
12.0 Appendix

- Technical Stakeholders Focus Group Meeting Minutes
- June 12, 2012 Visioning Focus Group Meeting Minutes
- June 14, 2012 Visioning Focus Group Meeting Minutes
- Questionnaire Summary Report