

Athens Transit System Transit Development Plan Update

Executive Summary

As Adopted By The Mayor And Commission
November 3, 2009

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

STUDY OVERVIEW

This Transit Development Plan (TDP) Update for Athens Transit System provides a comprehensive review of the system's operations and the demographics and attitudes of its users. The purpose of this update is to analyze system strengths, validate and/or recommend changes to the 2006-2010 TDP and present additional opportunities for improvement in the next five years. The plan synthesizes data and public and stakeholder input on all facets of Athens Transit System services to provide a sound approach to short, medium and long term improvements based on operating efficiencies and public interest. This TDP Update was adopted by the Mayor and Commission on November 3, 2009.

Specific route/schedule/service area coverage recommendations presented in this TDP Update include an assessment and validation of the recommendations contained in the 2006-2010 TDP. Some of the route/schedule/service area recommendations from the 2006-2010 TPD have been carried forward into the Update. This is a result of demographic and socioeconomic changes that have occurred in the study area as well as changes in land use, work based trip needs and other trip needs (e.g., shopping, healthcare, recreational) that were identified.

This Update also presents other opportunities for improvement as it relates to consistency, policy, communications and marketing. Recommendations are presented as an initial guide for moving forward in the planning process and with current initiatives underway. In concert with the recommendations, the creation of a Technical Advisory Committee (TAC) is recommended. This TAC would become the technical compliment to the Athens Transit Citizens Advisory Committee. The TAC would quantify, qualify and prioritize recommendations including those presented in this Update.

THE ATHENS-CLARKE COUNTY COMMUNITY

Athens-Clarke County is located approximately 70 miles northeast of Atlanta. Athens-Clarke County is situated between Madison County and Oconee County, and is considered to be the activity center for the area (an activity center is an area within a region, neighborhood or intersection of several neighborhoods that serves as a formal or informal gathering place).

Being outside of the metropolitan Atlanta region and the associated Atlanta Regional Commission (ARC) metropolitan planning organization (MPO), Athens-Clarke County is a member of the Madison Athens-Clarke Oconee Regional Transportation Study (MACORTS) MPO. Athens-Clarke County is a fairly urban county, and is one of six unified governments in Georgia. The only separate municipalities within the county are Bogart and Winterville.

Athens-Clarke County is a young community with the median age of 26. The 2000 US Census estimates the population of Athens-Clarke County for 2006 to be approximately 112,787. According to the Madison Athens-Clarke Oconee Regional Transportation Study 2030 Long Range Transportation Plan, the population projection for the year 2010 for Athens-Clarke County is 114,955. In the year 2030, the population is expected to grow to over 141,000.

Since 1980, Athens-Clarke County has enjoyed a growth rate of 54.3 percent. Increasing growth rates in the neighboring counties of Madison and Oconee will have an impact on the transportation system of Athens-Clarke County. Oconee County is expected to grow 3.3 percent per year over the next 20 years, while Madison County is expected to grow approximately 1.7 percent per year.

While these growth rates appear modest, regional growth is important primarily because of the impact that it has on employment and travel patterns. Athens-Clarke County is a regional employment center with the University of Georgia (UGA), Athens Regional Medical Center, and the Athens-Clarke County Board of Education providing significant employment opportunities for the region. Additionally, a strong manufacturing base in Athens-Clarke County attracts workers from neighboring jurisdictions. Seven of the largest employers in the Madison Athens-Clarke Oconee region are located in Athens-Clarke County.



Both Madison County and Oconee County have plans to expand infrastructure and increase development density. Oconee County, in particular, has infrastructure in the northern portion of the county that makes the area attractive for large-scale commercial, industrial, and residential development. Increases in population and development in these adjoining counties may shift travel patterns as more and more residents find employment in their home county as opposed to commuting to Athens-Clarke County.

As populations grow, even slightly, more people bring more automobiles. According to the Georgia Department of Revenue, in the year 2000, there were approximately 48,280 registered vehicles in Athens-Clarke County. According to the 2000 US Census, very few residents of Athens-Clarke County use public transportation to get to work—only 2.4 percent. Over 75 percent of workers drive alone. If growth rates in the Madison Athens-Clarke Oconee region remain constant over the next 20 years, there may be over 420,000 passenger vehicles in the area by 2030.

UGA, with a population of approximately 34,000+ students, faculty and staff is located in Athens-Clarke County, adjacent to downtown Athens. UGA accounts for the lower median age of residents in Athens-Clarke County. UGA runs its own transit system, but also negotiates an annual contract with Athens Transit System to provide service for University faculty, staff, and students. The fare for the negotiated Athens Transit System Service is paid through the student activity fee that all students are required to pay. Athens Transit System has been able to capture a significant share of trips made by students who live off-campus.

PUBLIC PARTICIPATION

This plan relies on an extensive public participation program designed to solicit input from members of the general public, current users of the system, community leaders, key policy decision-makers and other transportation stakeholders in Athens-Clarke County. This program included an on-board customer survey, individual stakeholder interviews, public drop-in sessions, and public meetings to solicit feedback from users and non-users alike.

All of this input was used to complement operating data collected and guide the planning process throughout the study. The public involvement program determined that:

- 57% of respondents cited infrequent service as a concern
- 70% of respondents stated that their employer offers no incentive for using transit
- 78% of transit users use transit to get to work or school
- 74% of respondents said that a stop was located less than ½ mile from their residence
- 56% of respondents prefer to walk less than ½ mile to a stop
- 70% of non-users stated that they didn't use transit because a personal vehicle is more convenient, the infrequency of bus service, or lack of service in their area.

A number of key themes emerged through the public participation process related to frequency, reliability, route coverage and transit amenities. Comments were in response to the question, “What do you think is the most important transit improvement that needs to be made by Athens Transit System?”

Frequency

- More frequent
- Run 24 hours a day, 7 days a week
- Stops more than once an hour
- More frequent on major routes
- Later routes
- 30-minute routes
- Run earlier on Saturday
- More night and weekend hours

Reliability

- The buses need to be on time and leave on time
- Be consistently on schedule
- Unpredictable during peak hours

Route Coverage

- Offer broader areas
- Serve more rural areas
- Serve Ultimate Drive midday
- More routes–Whitehall Road–Barnett Shoals
- Bus line down Epps Bridge to Walmart
- Need more routes off Atlanta Highway
- Serve more east side neighborhoods

Transit Amenities

- Nicer bus stops
- Better web site and maps/schedules of routes
- More shelters
- Lighting at shelters and all stops
- Rain shields
- Need kiosk with current bus locations



- More art bus stops
- Trash cans at all stops
- Art like on Broad Street
- Need better sidewalks and safer crosswalks

Additional issues that emerged from the three public meetings were:

- Need a comprehensive transportation plan
- Access to transit should be a requirement for development
- Circular routes are not beneficial
- Vision too pragmatic
- Broader coverage; extend out further
- Maps are hard to understand
- There are neighborhood pockets and edges that are underserved
- Need to promote modal choice
- Need service to all public schools
- Quality of pedestrian environment varies
- Need more publicity

SERVICE ANALYSIS

A thorough review of a transit system's existing conditions serves as the foundation for eventual operating recommendations in a Transit Development Plan Update. This study details the current operations of Athens Transit System, financial and operating data, and staffing and organizational structure. The study team also reviewed demographics throughout the Madison County, Athens-Clarke County, Oconee County region; the current route network's geographic coverage; proximity to major trip origins and destinations; and relationship to overall transit needs in the community.

Athens Transit System operates a “hub and spoke” transit service that provides over 1.5 million unlinked passenger trips per year. The Service Characteristics Summary Report for the 2008 Report Year shows 1,671,265 unlinked passenger trips for Fiscal Year (FY) 2008. Daily ridership is approximately 9,000 trips a day. Based upon current industry standards, this is a very high ridership number given that service is provided with 22 buses in maximum service. Athens Transit System maintains a fleet of 28 buses and 5 vans.

Athens Transit System is a department of the Athens-Clarke County Unified Government and has approximately 80 employees. The Director manages the day-to-day operations. There are four Administrative Division personnel that report to the Director. This staff consists of the Superintendent of Operations, Transit Planner, Maintenance Administrator and Administrative Assistant. An eight-member Citizens Transit Advisory Committee provides review and oversight of the system.

The Operations staff provides over 60,000 hours of transit service annually on three transit modes. The Maintenance staff, comprised of 12 people, is responsible for the daily maintenance, repair, and servicing of their transit and support vehicles in operation in excess of 750,000 miles per year.

SERVICE ENHANCEMENT

The strong productivity of many routes and of the Athens Transit System as a whole provides a solid foundation for route recommendations aimed at future transit development in Athens-Clarke County. By reducing bus route duplication or clearly unproductive services, enhancing frequencies, and increasing service on the most productive routes, Athens Transit System will benefit from the cost-effectiveness of a more streamlined system. Modest enhancements to Athens Transit System's most productive services, as well as improved service to important employment and commercial destinations, will lead to greater system-wide success in the coming years.

Based on the route analysis, field investigations, discussions with Athens Transit System staff and stakeholders, and extensive public outreach, the Transit Development Plan Update recommends the following service enhancements:

1. Provide 30-minute headways on the following routes:
 - Route 5 Beechwood/Baxter
 - Route 6 West Broad/Atlanta Highway
 - Route 7 Prince Avenue
 - Route 9 Macon Highway/Five Points
 - Route 20 Georgia Square Mall
 - Route 25 Lexington Road/Gaines School
 - Route 26 College Station Barnett Shoals
2. Conduct an analysis of all schedules for achievability relative to ridership and potential delay factors.
3. Evaluate and establish, where practical, bus priority treatments in Athens-Clarke County's most congested corridors.

4. Add Saturday service on Route 9 Macon Highway/Five Points, Route 7 Prince Avenue, and on Route 26 College Station/Barnett Shoals.
5. Extend service on all evening routes until 12:00 am on weekdays and 11:00 pm on Saturday.
6. Begin Saturday morning service at 7:00 am.
7. Provide 60-minute frequency for late evening and Saturday routes.
8. Consolidate Route 6 West Broad/Atlanta Highway with Route 6A West Broad/Brooklyn.
9. Revise Route 8 Barber/Garnett Ridge. This very long route has marginal performance with 0.85 average riders per mile and 15.51 average riders per hour.
10. Extend Route 24 Athens Technical College, farther out to serve major employers in the industrial northeast area of Athens, including Merial Limited, and Conwed Plastics.
11. Discontinue service provided by Route 30 West Athens Circulator and Route 31 North Athens Circulator. If this is not a viable option, utilize the financial resources to improve the effectiveness and efficiency of these two routes.
12. For more efficient service, remove large loop operations and provide more direct two-way routings with shorter travel times on:
 - Route 5 Beechwood/Baxter
 - Route 7 Prince Avenue
 - Route 8 Barber/Garnett Ridge
 - Route 25 Lexington Road/Gaines School
 - Route 26 College Station Barnett Shoals
13. Expand the Athens Transit Citizens Advisory Committee to include business and civic leaders.
14. Raise downtown parking fees by adding \$1.00 to \$2.00 surcharge that is dedicated to transit operations.

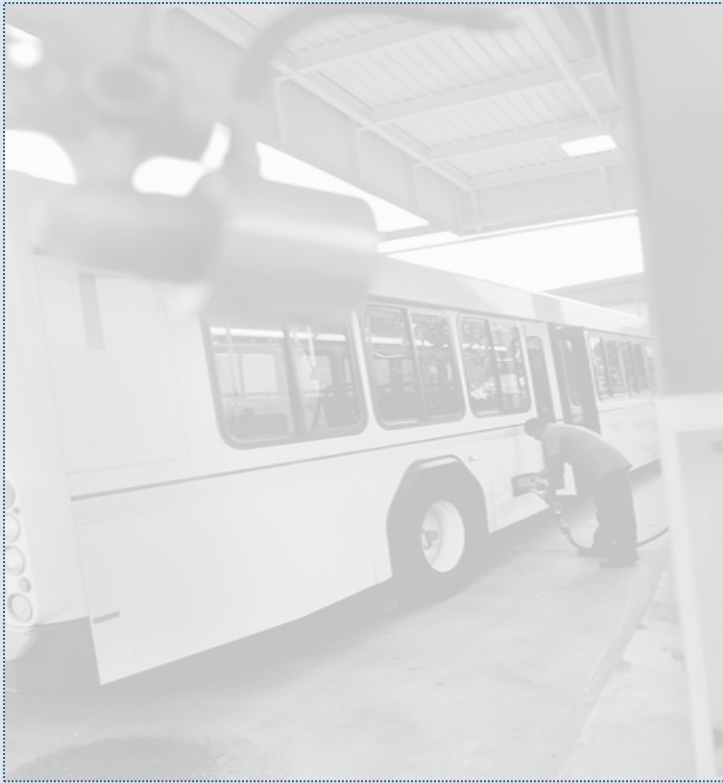
15. Continue to monitor planning and development practices in Athens-Clarke County to ensure transit supportive best practices and the true integration of land use and transportation planning.
16. Enhance marketing efforts in the following ways:
 - Develop new route and schedule maps that are user friendly. Include bus stop locations
 - Develop new and updated system map
 - Ensure that all buses have the necessary route and schedule maps on board
 - Provide route information at all shelter stops
 - Aggressively market Athens Transit System services in a consistent and visible way
17. Continue and enhance coordination between Athens Transit System and the UGA Transit System.
18. Investigate the feasibility of providing a Central Business District lunchtime circulator van with 15–minute headways.
19. Continue to explore more ways to expand and implement “Green Transit” beyond the current initiatives.

SUMMARY

The Transit Development Plan Update is designed to consider a five-year planning horizon. However, because of funding constraints, the Plan may be implemented as funding becomes available. The Transit Development Plan Update delivers the following focal conclusions:

1. Athens Transit System provides good service to those in the community that are transit dependent and to students at UGA.
2. Frequency of service is a major concern of Athens Transit System users and non-users. Enhancements to current routes can improve efficiency and customer convenience.

3. Athens Transit System must increasingly address the needs of shift workers and those who work non-traditional work hours.
4. Parking and development policies encourage automobile use over transit and should be addressed.
5. Athens Transit System would benefit significantly from public-private partnerships.
6. Further expansion of service should be considered only after issues of frequency, route efficiency, hours of service have been addressed.



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