

Southwest Georgia Regional Commission

The [Southwest Georgia Regional Commission](#) is a regional planning organization based in Camilla, Georgia, looking to increase ridership on its transit system and to empower older adults and people with disabilities to be more independent.

Project Goal:

The Rural Transportation Plan for Southwest Georgia will focus on development of a strategy to provide increased public transit services to aging and disabled populations in Southwest Georgia. This plan will inventory current ridership and, working with strategic partners, will develop a strategy for intentionally increased ridership. This plan will be enveloped into the Southwest Georgia Regional Transportation Plan, with strategies assessed annually. This plan will focus on data collection to find gaps in transportation, plus solutions, including increased access to ADA-compliant vehicles, marketing of services and future funding sources for rider sponsorships.

Population Served:

- All 14 counties in the service region, with a population of 354,000.
- People 60 years of age and older, plus those any age with mental or physical disabilities with limited access to transportation resources.
- 16% of the region's population are people with disabilities, and 24% are aged 60 or older.
- Low income: Each county is at or below the Federal Poverty Level.

Transportation Barriers:

- A rural region; most land is agriculture and timber within 5,916 square miles.
- Transportation costs and inability to drive.
- The area was named as the first "Age Friendly" region in America.
- A Public Transit Development Plan was begun in 2019, with its strategies paused in response to the pandemic. A strategic Regional Transportation Development Plan created in 2022 does not specifically address strategies to meet one of its strategic goals: Ensure system capacity meets the transportation needs of the region's growing senior population. This grant will be the catalysis to use those plans, as well as other regional plans that outline specific needs to provide for the targeted population demographics.

Community Needs:

- Southwest Georgia Regional Transit operates 76 vehicles in 13 counties to provide rural public and human services transportation. However, disabled individuals and older adults forgo dental visits, eye exams and even haircuts or personal grooming services when attempting to secure transportation.
- The target population needs increased ability to use transportation services, plus the increased self-reliance and social acceptability that freedom of travel brings.

Community Engagement Efforts:

The planning process included four Planning Committee meetings, 44 one-on-one conversations (upped from a goal of 30) and 161 survey responses with highly representative demographics. Community meetings were piggybacked on other community events, like the silver steppers line dancing club. Fruitful conversations came from having a booth at a regional housing conference,

which brought together many regional stakeholders and provided an interesting dynamic to discuss issues that extend beyond, yet touch on, housing concerns such as transportation.

Multi-sector Collaborative Partnerships:

The 24-member Planning Committee included leaders with local health systems, schools, aging services organizations, housing task force, non-emergency medical transportation provider, the mayor and a city councilwoman, a county commissioner, a hairdresser, a dentist and three transit riders. Nine committee members are also members of the target populations.

Funding and Sustainability:

- The Southwest Georgia Regional Transit system operates a 5311-funded demand response transit system servicing all 14 counties.
- The Regional Transit system also contracts with the Georgia Department of Human Services to provide rides through their 5310 program. Partners include local recreation authorities, senior organizations, transit providers, AARP, Project Search, food pantries, extension offices and schools.
- Funds to carry out the implementation phase of this project are written into the region-wide Georgia Department of Transportation Planning grant.

Outcomes:

The engagement effort revealed transportation barriers that had not been exposed previously. Cost is an issue for over 90% of respondents. Over the previous three months, those who did not have access to personal or borrowed transportation have missed one or more medical appointments, and 75% missed social and/or religious activities. Of respondents, 36% could not drive, and 21% were unable to drive due to age-related issues. Accessing transit for work is an issue for many, and participants wanted vouchers for work or school.

The process yielded five goals that align with strategies found in the Regional Transportation Development Plan, and the methods to help achieve those goals will be enveloped into the plan. The goals include: increase awareness of services, increase participation in community/ quality of life, discover and aid other providers, increase transit funding and envelop aging and disability transportation planning in local plans.

The effort also connected regional agencies that had never coordinated resources before. Workgroups to carry out the goals pair the commission with local partners such as governments, nonprofits, schools, faith-based organizations and industry.

Learnings:

- The biggest takeaway was the target population's lack of awareness of the transportation services offered.
- One-on-one organic conversations were the best source of gathering data with riders and their caregivers, agencies, elected officials and the general public.
- Planning Committee meetings may work best when conducted virtually.
- In discussions with community members, having transportation users and/or their caregivers present is key for buy-in.
- Create a single survey rather than tailoring different versions to specific populations.
- Survey fatigue is real in the post-covid world and dampened responses.
- Envelop aging and disability transportation in all local plans.