



CHAPTER I

Introduction

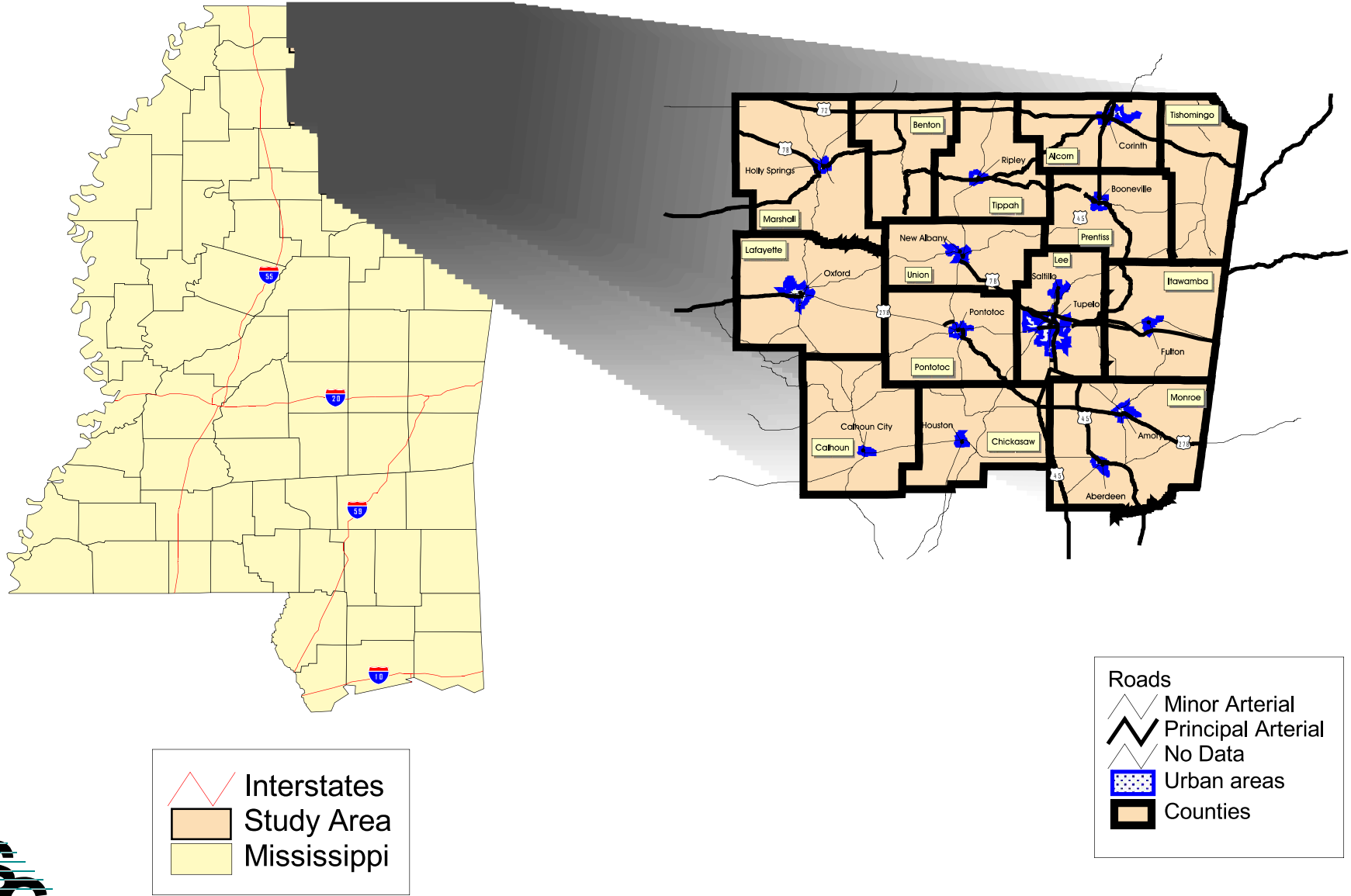
The Community Transportation Association of America (CTAA), Three Rivers Planning and Development District, and the Mississippi Department of Transportation contracted with LSC Transportation Consultants, Inc. to complete a Technical Assistance project. The plan specifically focuses on developing a coordinated public transportation system for northeast Mississippi and Three Rivers Planning area. This coordinated plan is built upon the Statewide United We Ride Coordinated Human Service Transportation Plan. The northeast Mississippi area, shown in Figure I-1, includes a 14-county area:



- Alcorn
- Benton
- Calhoun
- Chickasaw
- Itawamba
- Lafayette
- Lee
- Marshall
- Monroe
- Pontotoc
- Prentiss
- Tippah
- Tishomingo
- Union

The plan examines transit needs, alternatives, and programs for the communities within the area, and the potential for coordinated transportation services to meet the needs of local residents.

Figure I-1
Northeast Mississippi Study Area



PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

This project is comprised of two main elements. The first element is a focus on the types of services which should be provided in the major populated places of Tupelo and Oxford. These areas have the highest propensity for transit usage and highest proportion of need. The second focus of this study has been to include those regional and rural connections to access services. There are two distinct service areas in the region—urban areas and rural areas.

A new requirement of SAFETEA-LU—the current federal transportation funding bill—is that projects for the Federal Transit Administration Section 5310 program, the Job Access and Reverse Commute Program (JARC), and the New Freedom program must be derived from a local Human Services-Transit Services Coordinated Transportation Plan. This new requirement is consistent with other efforts at the federal level to coordinate transportation services, such as the United We Ride program and the President’s Executive Order on transportation coordination.

The State of Mississippi is well aware of the coordination issues facing both residents and providers. There is a history and realization of the importance of coordination in Mississippi as evident by the following:



- Participation in CTAA’s Coordination Institute, 2006.
- Statewide United We Ride meeting, 2006.
- Presentation before Legislative BORPSAT (bunch of the right people sitting around the table).
- Participation in Statewide Coordination Coalition.
- Statewide Coordination Summit, October 2007.

The Mississippi State Team which participated in the 2006 Institute for Transportation Coordination developed the Vision Statement:

Vision Statement

A network of inclusive, seamless, coordinated transportation systems that are accessible, reliable, and promote independence through a continuous strategic planning process.

Introduction

This strong support and background led the State of Mississippi to cooperate very closely with CTAA to complete this important study. The study area presents some real challenges as it is comprised of a variety of needs—medium-sized urban areas, a major university campus, and extremely rural areas, all with limited transit services other than human services transportation. There are large gaps in service for specific population groups. For example, one of the local nonprofit providers recently experienced financial difficulties and was forced to close its doors in the Tupelo area. The gaps and loss of a provider exemplify some of the difficulties the region is experiencing. With the competing interests of a large student population, the elderly, the disabled, commuters/employees, and the general public, the challenge was to identify realistic service options based upon the established vision for services from community residents and stakeholders.

It appears there is significant local willingness to look at increasing and starting new transit services in the area, evident by the feasibility study in the Oxford area. The intent of this project is to provide an analysis of those areas which could sustain future transit services, estimate costs to provide services which meet a realistic portion of the needs, and act as a precursor to future studies and implementation.

This project thus identifies the existing transportation providers, the needs of the various population segments, and develops a coordinated transportation system which efficiently and effectively meets local transportation needs.

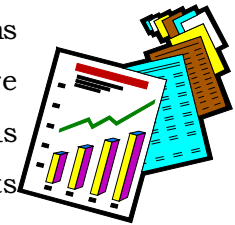
The main purpose of this study was to analyze and prepare recommended strategies for the development of a coordinated public transportation system for local residents. This technical assistance project describes the existing conditions in the region related to transportation services, discusses service and other alternatives for meeting public transportation needs into the future, identifies a recommended set of alternatives, and presents an implementation plan for the next five years.

The inception of this study was the result of a technical assistance grant from CTAA, as well as a planning grant from the Mississippi Department of Transpor-

tation (MDOT). This plan can be used by Three Rivers Planning and Development District and local providers to develop a coordinated general public transportation system within the region which meets MDOT requirements for Federal Transit Administration grant funds for the purchase of capital equipment and operating funds.

REPORT CONTENTS

This Final Report presents a summary of the existing conditions related to transportation services and how those services are delivered. The report includes a description of the region as well as a review of existing transportation resources available to residents in the area.



Chapter II presents the existing community/economic conditions and a transportation system overview for the greater 14-county area. Chapter III presents an overview of the existing transportation services in the area. Chapter IV provides a quantitative assessment of service demands and gap analysis. Chapter V provides a review of coordination and service strategies which may be looked at during the course of this plan.

Chapter VI presents an assessment of key stakeholder interviews. Chapter VII presents coordination alternatives for the existing providers in the area. Chapter VIII presents service alternatives examined as part of this effort. These alternatives range from vanpools to regional intercity routes. Chapter IX identifies suitable financial and institutional alternatives for coordinated services. Chapter X provides the recommended service plan, while Chapter XI provides an overview of the implementation plan.

STUDY APPROACH

As in many areas across the United States, residents are taking a closer look at transportation services and are seeking to find the most effective means of providing those services. The greater 14-county area is extensively large with pockets of populations scattered throughout the area and a number of small communities.

Introduction

The two main communities of Tupelo and Oxford represent regional transit destinations for many residents. While the more rural areas have minimal services, they continue to represent destinations in their own respect. Some of the smaller communities have limited medical services available, some shopping, and additional human services which require travel to these larger urban areas. A key element in the plan was to clearly evaluate the unmet transportation needs of local residents and provide an analysis of the current gaps, both geographic and in terms of service provision.

This planning effort focuses on the feasibility of providing a more coordinated general public transportation system to meet the community's needs. One important step toward providing an integrated community-wide transportation system is involving key players such as the local decision-makers and leaders, agencies which either have a need for increased transportation services or currently provide services, local residents, local school representatives, and other agencies/organizations such as MDOT. Individuals from each key stakeholder department or agency provided input for this planning process.

Project Team

Two initial “kick-off meetings” were held in Pontotoc at the Three Rivers Planning and Development District offices. One meeting was held in the morning and another in the afternoon/evening on August 30, 2007. The meetings were attended by key stakeholders in the area—MDOT, current residents within the area that have transportation concerns for the community, local providers, and community decision-makers. These stakeholder groups met to discuss the project goals, priorities, and a time line for completion of the final study. The group also discussed the local steering committee members who would be critical in completing the study for the area. The local Steering Committee was then formed through a variety of key decision-makers and community leaders. The first Steering Committee meeting was held on October 31, 2007 in Tupelo. Additional meetings were held throughout the fall and winter of 2007 and early 2008.



There are existing resources in the area provided by both general public transportation providers and human services agencies which provide transportation services for their clients. The existing resources represent a significant investment and provide some of the resources necessary to implement a general public coordinated transportation system. Coordination and consolidation of services typically allow local entities to provide additional and enhanced service to the community using existing resources. A key issue in this project was to identify those existing resources that are available and any additional resources that may be needed to provide transportation service. One difficulty was getting information from the local health and human service offices in each of the counties.

Stakeholders

The group of local stakeholders identified by the project team includes numerous public and private providers, as well as key stakeholders in the communities. These groups represent not only those who provide transportation services, but also those that may have specific transportation needs. As part of the process to identify local transportation issues, these stakeholders were provided the opportunity to provide input for the study.

Steering Committee

A project Steering Committee was formed in October 2007. This group provided key decision making during this process. The group was formed through cooperation with the Department of Transportation, Three Rivers Planning and Development District, and LSC. Members were either nominated, volunteered, or were selected to join. The group was made up of various local decision-makers such as Town/City Council members, Mayors, Board of County Supervisors, and other various key individuals. A list of those involved through this process is provided in Appendix A. The group was introduced to the project, roles and responsibilities were established, and the initial background information presented at the first meetings. Additionally, during the January meeting, this group was presented with service alternatives. A final meeting to present the final plan was held in May 2008.

SUMMARY OF THE ISSUES

During the August “kick-off meetings,” the LSC team briefed the stakeholders on the study process to be undertaken over the course of the study. The key stakeholders involved with transportation services were identified. Major issues and concerns regarding public transportation were discussed and are summarized as follows:

- There is significant need for service for elderly, disabled, and low-income workers.
- There is a major need to access to medical facilities (e.g., dialysis).
- Groceries and pharmacy access is needed.
- There is an overabundant number of people without cars.
- There is an issue with providing insurance for volunteer drivers.
- There are areas which are very rural with low concentrations of population.
- Families are not always available to provide rides so there is an increasing reliance on friends.
- The history with service in Tupelo and the support may be an issue.
- There is an issue with providing non-emergency medical (other than Medicaid) transportation.
- Local Medicaid providers are needed.
- There needs to be coordination with other needs and services.
- The lack of funding is a concern.
- Currently there may not be enough capacity—especially in Lee and Prentiss Counties and, therefore, additional demand is not being met.
- Clients are very dispersed and, therefore, there may be a perception of low ridership.
- Find more efficient ways to use transportation resources.
- Medicaid funding should be used to help coordinated services.
- There is an issue with grouping appointments because of medical scheduling.
- There is difficulty in getting volunteers to assist or drive.
- The issue of provider “turf issues” or service boundaries is an issue.
- The concern for affordable service.
- There needs to be accountability for service provided.
- Rising costs of insurance.
- There is a driving-under-influence issue; possibly services could help this.
- There is an issue accessing the VA services.
- Need broad participation by all communities.
- Private providers area available; however, they are costly.
- Businesses should be approached for financial support.
- There is a need for accessible and safe/reliable vehicles. Maintenance for older vehicles is costly.

VISION FOR PLAN

In developing any transit system, it is necessary to recognize the goals and objectives for transportation in the community as this determines the direction to be taken in developing recommendations. The goals provide the specific direction for the development of appropriate strategies and implementation.

The LSC team, with input from the Stakeholders Group and Steering Committee, developed goals and objectives to guide the future transit operations and the expansion of the transit services within the 14-county area of northeastern Mississippi. Many transit issues were identified during the August 2007 kick-off meeting, discussions with other key stakeholders in the region, and meetings with the Steering Committee in October. The LSC team used these issues to develop goals and several specific objectives for the goals. The goals were used to develop and evaluate the transit service alternatives, projects, and programs for the future.

Transit Vision

The vision for transit service in greater northeast Mississippi consists of a general mission statement, a set of five action goals, and objectives for each goal. The mission statement, goals, and objectives typically form a hierarchical structure with the mission statement being the most general. Goals support the achievement of the mission, and objectives support the goals.

Mission Statement

The mission statement establishes the overall direction of an area and its residents and identifies the most generalized set of actions to be achieved in the area. The Mission Statement for coordinated transit service in the 14-county area is as follows:

Mission Statement

The mission of the greater northeast Mississippi Coordinated Transit System is to provide quality, safe, dependable, and courteous transit service to those residents who are transit-dependent for mobility and access for medical, job access, shopping, and social activities.

Goals and Objectives

For planning purposes, a goal is defined as a purpose or need that should be attained in order to address a transportation issue. An objective is a specific method or activity that is designed to achieve an identified goal. Based on meetings with the Stakeholders Committee, Steering Committee, and other key stakeholders, the LSC team formulated the goals and objectives for a coordinated transportation system serving the 14-county area and the cities of Tupelo and Oxford.

Goal #1: Maintain the existing ridership base while attracting and coordinating new rides

Objective 1.a: Provide increased services in the cities of Tupelo and Oxford as well as the surrounding rural areas.

Objective 1.b: Improve and expand transit service to the following locations—major employment centers, human services agencies, medical centers, high schools, colleges, educational institutions, shopping centers, and nursing homes.

Objective 1.c: Begin new transit services to include in-town routes and regional connectors to the major communities in the region. Services will be concentrated for the elderly, disabled, and low-income individuals and those areas with the greatest transit need.

Objective 1.d: Maintain the existing level of ridership by continuing to serve the elderly, disabled, those who cannot drive, and those who cannot afford a vehicle.

Objective 1.e: Develop a performance-based system to ensure the system is operating efficiently and effectively. Performance measures should include cost per passenger-trip, cost per hour of service, passengers per revenue-hour/mile, and others.

Goal #2: Provide for the economic sustainability of the transit system

Objective 2.a: Develop a cost allocation system to determine the proportionate share of local funding to be contributed by each local government or agency involved in a coordinated system.

Objective 2.b: Establish a capital and vehicle replacement fund, and allocate local contributions on an annual basis to this savings account. The account should be sufficient to provide the local match funds required to obtain federal grants for the replacement of vehicles and new capital facilities.

Objective 2.c: Determine an equitable fare payment system. Fares should be uniform from agency to agency.

Objective 2.d: Pursue Federal Transit Administration (FTA) Sections 5309, 5311, 5310, JARC, and New Freedom funding, as well as state funding for the transit service operations.

Objective 2.e: Seek out and apply for grants which may be available for capital or operating support.

Objective 2.f: Develop a six-year financial plan, and update this plan on an annual basis.

Goal #3: Provide high-quality customer-oriented service

Objective 3.a: Fixed routes should be no longer than 60 minutes in travel time from the beginning of the route to the last stop on the outbound direction of the route.

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Objective 3.b: The fixed and regional routes should operate on time 95 percent of the time and should arrive no later than five minutes past the scheduled arrival time at each stop along the route.

Objective 3.c: Demand-response service should operate within 15 minutes (plus or minus) of the scheduled arrival time.

Objective 3.d: The fixed and regional routes should operate on the most direct routes between stops and the final destination.

Objective 3.e: Paratransit service should be provided within three-quarters of a mile from any fixed routes.

Objective 3.f: The transit service should operate a minimum of two days per week in areas with the greatest transit needs, with the eventual growth in transit service on the weekends.

Objective 3.g: Annual training should be provided for all agencies, and sharing of expertise among agencies is critical.

Goal #4: Provide efficient, effective, and safe services

Objective 4.a: Fixed routes should operate at an average productivity of five passengers per service-hour (after service has been established for at least one year). This will be reviewed on an annual basis to determine productivity.

Objective 4.b: Regional routes should maintain a minimum productivity of five passengers per service-hour. Those routes which do not meet the minimum standard should be reviewed annually for service changes.

Objective 4.c: Services should be provided to 90 percent of the population in the areas with the greatest transit needs.

Objective 4.d: An identified “lead agency” should work to coordinate the transit service with the other area transportation providers in order to meet regional

transportation needs. This lead agency should process grant applications for the entire 14-county area and work as the mobility coordination office for the region.

Goal #5: Promote existing services available and new services

Objective 5.a: Continue to use every opportunity to promote the existing transit service including, but not limited to, the following ideas:

- Display the telephone number for rides prominently on all fleet vehicles.
- Form a Regional Transit Coordination Council with all coordinated agencies having representation on this Council.
- Develop a resource guide for all agencies to reference.
- Continue providing information on local agency website.
- Post flyers with the telephone number and hours of operation at various locations within the service area.
- Place regular public service announcements with the newspaper, radio, and television.
- Offer reduced fares to attract ridership during slower times of the day, week, or year.
- Run periodic special promotions, such as summer passes for children or holiday season fares for shoppers.
- Operate special event service to promote the transit service and aid in the reduction of congestion during community events.
- Develop a branding for all coordinated vehicles.
- Develop a marketing plan for new services in Oxford and other areas as planned.

Objective 5.b: Develop a public education program on the benefits of transit services and the need to maintain and improve the overall transportation system in the region.

Objective 5.c: Develop a statement of purpose and need that identifies the benefits of transit service in the communities.

Objective 5.d: Educate local decision-makers on the need and benefits of supporting transit services in the communities and rural areas of the region.