

## **CHAPTER 18: TRANSIT COORDINATION**

### **Hidalgo County MPO Active Supporter of the Public Transportation**

The Hidalgo County MPO is an active supporter of public transportation and believes that a balanced transportation system, one that allows alternatives to the automobile, will serve multiple functions. Public transportation helps ensure the access to work, school, medical, shopping, social, and recreational opportunities for populations with special needs, which may include, but is not limited to youth, the elderly, and people with low incomes. Transit can generate cost savings in major capital improvements by reducing the need to build new roadways, widen existing ones and building additional parking capacity. Public transportation can reduce congestion, since a few buses can transport the equivalent of 100 vehicles (assuming one passenger per vehicle). Since the enactment of SAFETEA-LU the coordination among transit providers, Health and Human Services and other stakeholders have become necessary.

Below the Hidalgo MPO intends to provide a report of the Lower Rio Grande Valley (LRGV) public transportation services and the regional coordination efforts that have and will continue to take place. The Hidalgo County MPO strongly supports the regional coordination efforts and envisions, along with its partners, the smooth transportation of citizens throughout the three county area.

### **Introduction & Background**

In 2007, the enactment of House Bill 3588 in the 78<sup>th</sup> Texas Legislature substantially altered the way human service transportation is administered. The Texas Department of Transportation (TxDOT) was given the added responsibility for direct funding, management, and oversight of selected client services delivered under the Texas Health and Human Services Commission (HHSC), and the Texas Workforce Commission (TWC) programs. The intent of HB 3588 is “1. To eliminate waste in the provision of public transportation; 2. To generate efficiencies that will permit increased levels of service; and 3. To further the state’s efforts to reduce air pollution” (HB 3588, Article 13, Chapter 461, Section 461.001)

In 2005, the TxDOT Draft Strategic Plan called for the development of regional public transportation coordination plans. Former Texas Commissioner Hope Andrade then led the efforts to implement a strategy to develop regional public transportation plans.

Broadly, the project examined ways to more effectively “manage mobility” for the region. A major area of emphasis for this study was the coordination of services at the local level. The project included an evaluation of coordinated transit and human service transportation on a regional scale throughout the LRGV. Through this planning process there will be a consideration of the use of New Freedom federal funds, Job Access Reverse Commute (JARC) funds, as well as Federal Transit Administration (FTA) Section 5310 funding.

### **LRGV Fulfillment of the Federal Mandate**

The Lower Rio Grande Valley Development Council (LRGVDC) was declared the lead agency, which will provide administrative support for the overall process. The plan includes outreach to non-profit, private and public providers as well as public in the three county area (Cameron County, Hidalgo County, and Willacy County). Surveys were taken; the data was analyzed to determine the needs of the population, the needs being met and the gaps in service. This plan makes public transportation available to move throughout the region safely, reliably, efficiently, and affordably. Developed to determine strategies to fill the gaps and making a seamless network of public and private facilities and services that are easy to comprehend, responsive, to individual travel needs and easy to access. The Transit Advisory Panel (TAP) includes the key stakeholder agencies and groups; they provide direction and oversight through the planning process. Currently the TAP is working with the LRGVDC to put the plan into action by fulfilling this federal mandate that ensures that projects receive these funds, minimizes service duplication, thereby enhancing public transportation across the region.

### **Demographics and Land Uses**

The Lower Rio Grande Valley (LRGV) is a geographically and culturally unique and diverse area of Texas. It is a three county area-Cameron, Hidalgo, and Willacy and it has three larger cities: City of McAllen at the west end of the region, Harlingen in the middle and Brownsville in the east, with many more cities within the surrounding area. The three counties have over 1.5 million residents with many visitors from Mexico and many winter Texans (part time residents from October to March). Physically, the area has a long urbanized corridor along US Highway 83, which links the three largest cities-McAllen, Brownsville, and Harlingen with the urbanized portion of Hidalgo County. The vast

majority of the population resides in this corridor. Travel patterns indicate the need for public transportation throughout the US Highway 83 corridor and South Padre Island.

### **Transit Services**

As mentioned above the three county area is a geographically and culturally unique diverse area of Texas. There are a variety of transit needs based on this diversity: specifically from the colonias scattered throughout the service area, needs in the towns, from across the border, winter Texans, and tourists. Coupled with this, there are a wide range of human service needs that are currently only partially coordinated.

The myriad of public transit and intercity operators throughout the three county area complicates service coordination. Public transit in the three county area is provided by three small urban transit systems- City of Brownsville- *Brownsville Urban System (BUS)*, City of McAllen-*McAllen Express Transit (MET)*, and LRGVDC-*Rio Metro*. There are two rural systems in the region-Town of South Padre Island-*The Wave* and LRGVDC-*Rio Transit*. In addition, there is a private for profit operator-*Valley Transit* that operates intercity service as well as a transit type service between the City of Harlingen and City of McAllen and City of McAllen and Reynosa, Mexico.

The description of the transportation providers in the three county area follows.

### **Lower Rio Grande Valley Development Council**

The Texas Department of Transportation (TxDot) designated LRGVDC as an urban and rural transit district. LRGVDC operating as ***Rio Metro*** is the designated recipient of Federal Transit Administration (FTA) Section 5307 transit funds for the McAllen-Pharr, Edinburg urbanized area. TxDot allocates Section 5307 funds to LRGVDC from the Governor's Apportionment for the Harlingen-San Benito urbanized area. LRGVDC operating as ***Rio Transit*** receives FTA Section 5310 and Section 5311 funds and state transportation funds from TxDot in support of elderly, disable, and rural transportation services.

***Rio Metro*** operates within the Hidalgo urbanized area (excluding McAllen) and serves the rural areas of the region. Rio Metro operates between the hours of 8:00 am and 5:00 pm, Monday through Friday and provides demand response and fixed route services. Two of the seven routes operate daily, while five routes operate two or three days per week on

alternating days. LRGVDC-*Rio Metro* charges a \$2.50 per trip with half fare discounts available for senior citizens and individuals with disabilities.

***Rio Transit*** provides 5,200 hours of service annually and carries 5,000 passenger trips within the rural area of Hidalgo County and Cameron County. Service is provided between 7:00 a.m. and 5:00 p.m. Monday through Friday and provides demand response and fixed route services. LRGVDC uses an eight zone fare structure ranging from \$3.00 (within one zone) to \$10.00 per trip. In addition, to the above mentioned transit services, LRGVDC provides vehicles to Willacy County and the cities of Rio Hondo and Hidalgo, to operate a transit system within their respective city and or county areas.

#### ***City of McAllen-McAllen Express Transit (MET)***

*MET*, now in its eight year of operation, is operated by the City of McAllen and is a subcontractor of LRGVDC. *MET* receives funding from a variety of sources, including the FTA Section 5307 and Section 5309 grants, state grants, farebox, and local revenues such as city general revenue funds. *MET* operates seven fixed routes throughout the City of McAllen and ADA Paratransit service Monday through Saturday, between 6:00 am and 7:00 pm. Regular fare is \$1.00 and half fare for the elderly, individuals with disabilities, Medicare recipients, and students. In addition, *MET* has other service amenities such as an automated trip reservation system, automated vehicle routing, computer assisted dispatching, and automatic vehicle locators.

#### ***City of Brownsville-Brownsville Urban System (BUS)***

BUS has been providing public transportation for the City of Brownsville since 1978. BUS receives FTA Section 5310 and Section 5307 funds and state transportation funds from TxDot in support of elderly and disabled services. In addition, the city contributes the local share.

*BUS* provides two types of service: Fixed route and ADA Paratransit Service. The ADA Paratransit service (curb to curb) is available for individuals with a disability that **prevents** them from using the regular fixed route. Services are provided in wheelchair accessible vehicles and the majority of bus stops are ADA accessible.

The *fixed route service* serves 14 routes in Brownsville, operating from Monday through Saturday from approximately 5:50 am to 8:26 p.m. Fixed route fare is \$1.00, and discount rates are available for students, elderly, and disabled passenger as they board or via purchase of daily, weekly, or monthly passes.

Also, LRGVDC-*Rio Transit* operates Route 31 for *BUS*, which is JARC funded and *BUS* serves as the grantee

The *ADA Paratransit service* (curb to curb) is available for individuals with a disability that **prevents** them from using the regular fixed route. ADA Paratransit Services operates during the same hours and days as the fixed route service; however, eligibility determination is required prior to using service and trip reservations need to be made at least one day in advance. The fare for one-way trip is \$1.50, no discounts are available, however, there is the convenience to purchase tickets and avoid having to have the exact fare or needing change.

Partnership exists among LRGVDC-*Rio Transit*, *The Wave*, and *BUS*. Transfers are accepted from *Rio Transit* by *BUS* and vice versa, which gives the opportunity for citizens of Port Isabel, South Padre Island and surrounding rural areas to have access to the City of Brownsville transportation services.

#### **Town of South Padre Island- *The Wave***

The Wave is designated a rural transit provider and uses Rural Public Transportation (Section 5311) Grant Program with the goal of enhancing the access of people in non-urbanized areas to health care, shopping, education, employment, public services, and recreation.

The WAVE operates fixed routes and flexible routes services. The Wave route starts South on Padre Blvd, west over the causeway into Port Isabel (Lighthouse, Library, Las Palmas Plaza, and Museum), and back over the causeway to the island. The WAVE connects to passengers to LRGVDC-*Rio Transit* in Port Isabel, TX at Las Palmas Plaza. This service allows persons to connect seamlessly between South Padre Island to Brownsville and vice versa. The WAVE provides free service seven (7) days a week from 7:00 a.m. to 7:00 p.m. (regular hours) and 7:00 a.m. to 11:00 p.m. (summer hours).

#### ***Valley Transit Company (VTC)***

Valley Transit is a full-service bus company serving South Central Texas and Northern Mexico with intercity, charter, tour and transit operations and Package Express service. VTC provides the following service modes: fixed-route, intercity service and charter services. VTC is a for profit company, thus 100% of their operating funds are generated from fares and customer payments. VTC sells transportation services to Greyhound Bus

for fixed route, subscription service, and demand-response amounting to over 2,000,000 vehicle miles operated.

VTC operates fixed route service on Business 83 (local service) and Expressway 83 (express service) serving all towns from Brownsville to Mission, Texas. From McAllen to Edinburg on US 281 is served by a fixed route. From Harlingen to Raymondville to US 77, VTC operates a fixed route service.

### ***LeFleur Transportation***

As the dedicated Medical Transportation Program (MTP) provider, Le Fleur Transportation provides non-emergency medical transportation services for the LRGV area. Le Fleur Transportation seeks to provide eligible customers with non-emergency transportation services for medical and dental appointments. The Medical Transportation Program (MTP) Specialists are available to take requests by telephone on weekdays from 8:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m. CST. MTP requires at least two work days' advance notice for most requests, but will attempt to accommodate urgent ones. Most of the clients are transported free of charge due to their eligibility for the Medical Transportation Program through Medicaid. Recipients should call in their request as far in advance as possible. Medical Transportation Program offices are closed during federal holidays.

LeFleur Transportation also provides private pay transportation to clients not covered by the Medicaid Medical Transportation Program. As for the private pay clients, the rate depends on the type of trip and the distance to be traveled. There are private pay discounts available and are given based on volume and frequency of trips.

The service area covers Corpus Christi, South to the Rio Grande Valley and Laredo. LeFleur Transportation operates seven days a week 24 hours a day.