South Texas Coordinated Transit Plan

Final Plan

May 2022

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Section 1:
Introduction

The South Texas Development Council (STDC) requested a service-oriented update to the 2017 Five Year – Coordinated Public Transit-Health and Human Service Transportation Plan. STDC and the regional stakeholders in South Texas recognize that an update was needed that focuses on strategies that help eliminate gaps in services.

Planning efforts are directed toward effectively and efficiently increasing service to meet the needs of all riders with an emphasis on:

- Elderly persons
- Persons with disabilities
- Low income residents
- Zero car households
- Youths
- Veterans
- Non-English speaking residents (Title VI)

Potential services can include traditional fixed route, fixed schedule, flex route and paratransit services, while also including coordination strategies, such as mobility management, designed to improve service for customers.

This coordinated plan is the latest phase of the coordination process. Unlike previous years, this effort emphasizes strategies and operational options and focuses less on the process. The goal of this effort is to encourage the implementation of activities that foster improved public and human service transportation.

The plan has been developed over the past eight months, with input from many interested stakeholders through an open planning process with multiple interviews and opportunities for comment.

Section 1 discusses background to the study, requirements and purpose of the process. Subsequent sections as required are as follows:

- **Section 2 –** Transportation Resources in the Region – A review of existing services.

- **Section 3 –** Comprehensive Assessment of Unmet Transportation Needs – Reviews demographics, travel patterns and comments received from stakeholders and the public. It also emphasizes transit dependent populations (elderly, persons with disabilities, low income, and zero-car households), veterans, and Title VI populations including those with a language barrier. This also includes the gap analysis.

- **Section 4 –** Planning for Comprehensive Services – Describes how human service and healthcare programs work with transit.

- **Section 5 –** Integrated Planning Process – Details the review of other planning processes in the study area.

- **Section 6 –** Vision, Mission and Goals

- **Section 7 –** Sustainability Planning – Ensuring service can continue into the future.

- **Section 8 –** Organizational, Operational and Financial Strategies for the Future – Puts all of the recommendations and strategies in one section.

- **Section 9 –** Performance Measures – Includes measures for the plan as well as for the operation.

Purpose of the Coordinated Plan

The coordinated transportation planning requirements for the Section 5310 program administered by FTA and initiated in 2006, continue. The purpose of the Section 5310 program is to enhance mobility for seniors and persons with disabilities by providing funds for programs to serve the special needs of transit-dependent populations beyond traditional public transportation services and Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) complementary paratransit services.

The STDC 5 Year Comprehensive Coordinated Plan is designed to meet the coordinated transportation planning requirements. The plan incorporates the four required elements (listed here) as well as additional requirements from TxDOT:

1) An assessment of available services that identifies current transportation providers (public, private and nonprofit).

2) An assessment of transportation needs for individuals with disabilities and seniors. This assessment can be based on the experiences and perceptions of the planning partners or on more sophisticated data collection efforts, and gaps in service.

3) Strategies, activities, and/or projects to address the identified gaps between current services and needs, and opportunities to achieve efficiencies in service delivery.

4) Priorities for implementation based on resources (from multiple program sources), time and feasibility for implementing specific strategies and/or activities identified.

The purpose of this planning process was twofold. The first was to continue moving forward with implementation of existing coordinated efforts. The coordinated approach to mobility and transportation choices calls for local planning and local decision making based on sound planning activities. The second purpose was to meet the requirements of the Federal Transit Administration (FTA) rules regarding development of a coordinated transportation plan for any locale to receive funds from the FTA, a very important resource for funding.

State Coordination Requirements

The Texas Department of Transportation (TxDOT) administers the Section 5310, 5311, 5311(f) and Rideshare Programs for the state of Texas. TxDOT's Public Transportation Division (PTN) manages these funding programs that are affected by the coordinated planning process.

Key Coordination Premise

> *Excellent public transportation is the best way to address and coordinate the majority of transit dependent and human service client transportation needs.*

Experience and research across the country in both urban and rural areas tells us that scheduled public transit is the best way to provide coordinated transit service as most transit dependent and human service clients can ride fixed-route/scheduled service or the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) paratransit. The best way to support the needs of human service agency clients, veterans, the transit dependent and Title VI populations as well as other priority groups of potential riders, is through excellent public transportation rather than expensive one-on-one specialized service (with exceptions).

When public transit systems are able to meet the majority of needs through the existing fixed-route/scheduled public transit network, then human service agency resources can be freed up to focus on the specialized needs of their most difficult to serve clients – true coordination.

Unique Needs in the South Texas Area

South Texas is a unique area with unique mobility needs. Its proximity to the Mexican border along with the prevalence of low-income rural areas and communities with high transportation needs make it an area that requires extra care and attention to the core principals of the coordinated planning effort. Efforts to support or improve public transportation are supported by the regional stakeholders, human service agencies, and public transit systems as an essential element of coordinated transportation. Continuing with the need to build rural public transit, large portions of the service area are in need of more effective, scheduled transportation options.

> *Any coordination effort should start with building the public transit network and maximizing the use of higher productivity services such as on demand, fixed route services and fixed schedule services (in rural areas).*

Section 2:
Inventory of Transportation Resources

Introduction

This section of the Five Year Plan summarizes regionally coordinated transportation plans which document existing transportation services and resources in the region. The review of existing services will be used in combination with the completed demographic and land use analysis and the current public and stakeholder input to identify the unmet needs and gaps in service, and to then begin developing potential strategies to improve mobility in the region.

The inventory of transportation resources uses information from previous coordinated transportation plans for the region, while reviewing input from committee members and other stakeholders and covers the geographic region shown in Figure 2-1.

Public Transportation Providers

The following public transportation systems currently provide services in the STDC region:

- El Metro – City of Laredo/Laredo Transit Management Inc.
- El Aguila Rural Transit System – Webb County Community Action Agency
- Valley Metro – Lower Rio Grande Valley Development Council
- Rural Economic Assistance League, Inc. (REAL Inc.)

El Metro – City of Laredo / Laredo Transit Management Inc.

Laredo Transit Management Inc. (El Metro) operates the public transit system for the City of Laredo. El Metro's mission is to promote and provide high quality, cost-effective public transportation services that address the needs and demands of the citizens of Laredo, Texas. A department within the city of Laredo government, El Metro is both an urban transit district (UTD) under Texas Transportation Code (TTC) Chapter 458, as well as a municipal transit department with a local sales tax dedicated to transit. El Metro is governed by the nine-member Laredo Mass Transit Board, which is comprised of the members of the City Council.

Figure 2-1: South Texas Development Council Service Area
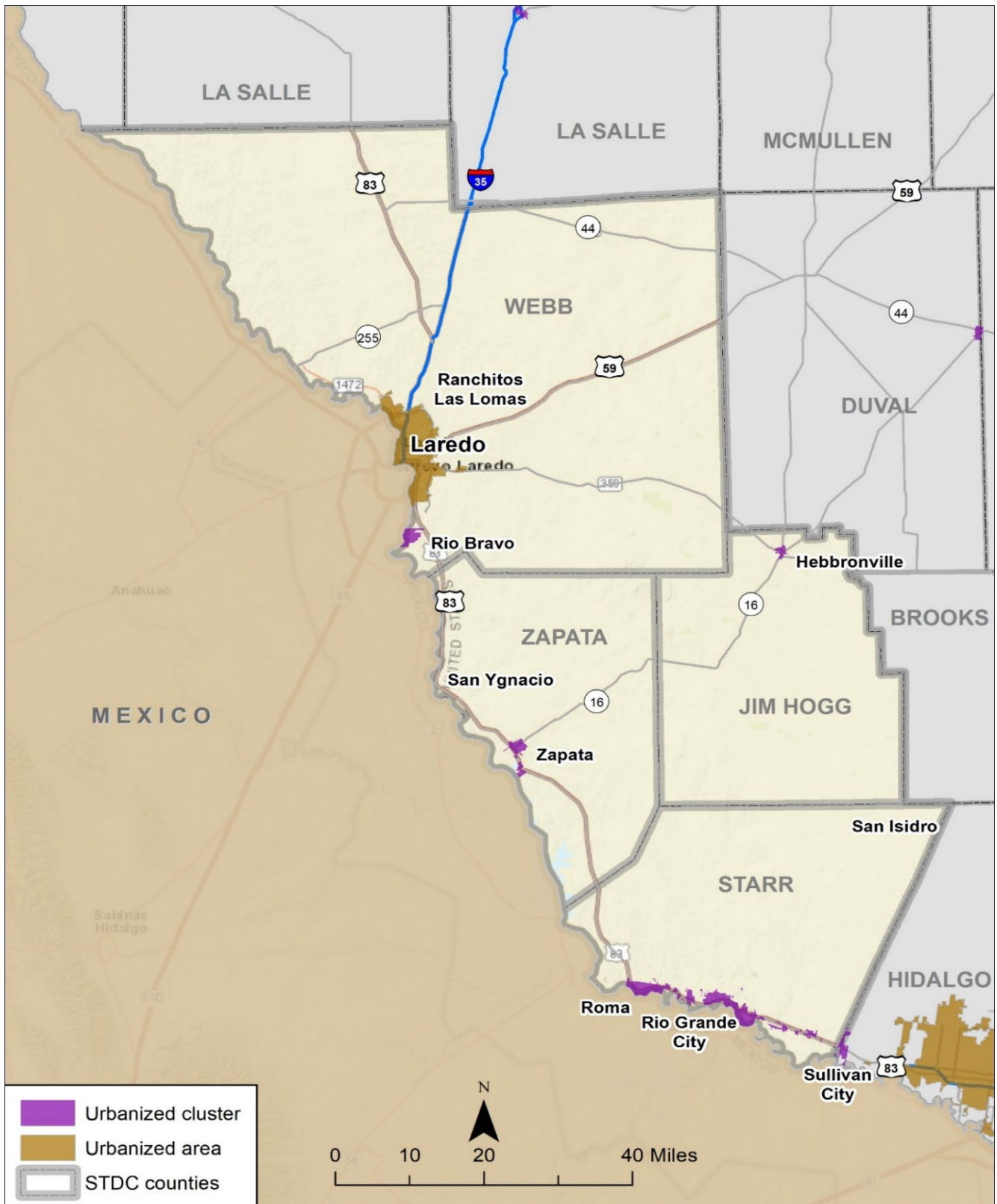
The city currently contracts with First Transit to manage the daily operations of El Metro, which includes 23 fixed routes and El Lift Paratransit Service, and covers much of Laredo. El Metro employs about 180 individuals and has an in-house driver training program.

The fixed route system map is shown in Figure 2-2. Fixed routes operate Monday through Saturday between the hours of 6:00 a.m. and 10:30 p.m. Some routes also operate Sundays between 7:00 a.m. and 8:40 p.m.

Fixed route fares are $2.00 for regular fare riders, $1.50 for students with valid school ID, $1.00 for seniors and individuals with disabilities with El Metro ID during peak hours, $0.75 for children ages 5 to 11 or seniors and individuals with disabilities with El Metro ID during off-peak hours, and free for children under 5 traveling with an adult, Peak hours are Monday through Friday, 6:00 a.m. to 9:00 a.m. and 3:00 p.m. to 6:00 p.m.; outside of these hours, seniors and people with disabilities pay the regular fare. Transfers between routes are $0.75. Ticket passes are available for students throughout the academic year.

El Lift is the paratransit service required under the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) to complement fixed routes provided by public entities such as the city. As such, El Lift provides shared, origin-to-destination public transportation to people with disabilities who are unable to use El Metro fixed route buses because of their disability. El Lift operates seven days a week, 6:00 a.m. to 10:20 p.m. and Sunday from 7:00 a.m. to 8:40 p.m. In order to use this service, individuals must apply for eligibility certification, with recertification required every two years. El Lift rides may be scheduled by calling one to seven days in advance, between 8:00 a.m. and 5:00 p.m. (seven days a week). Fares are $1.75 for trips within 7 miles, $2.00 for trips 7-14 miles, and $2.25 for trips 14 miles and over, with no charge for personal care attendants.

The El Metro fleet is made up of 47 fixed route buses, 21 demand response "El Lift" vans, and one trolley. All vehicles are wheelchair accessible, and larger buses are equipped with bicycle racks that allow cyclists to bring their bikes along when they travel. El Lift offers travel training to help individuals with disabilities learn to ride the accessible fixed route bus service.

In FY 2019, El Metro provided more than 2.5 million passenger trips. El Metro is now being managed by Hendrickson Transportation Group effective February 1, 2022.

Figure 2-2: El Metro Transit System
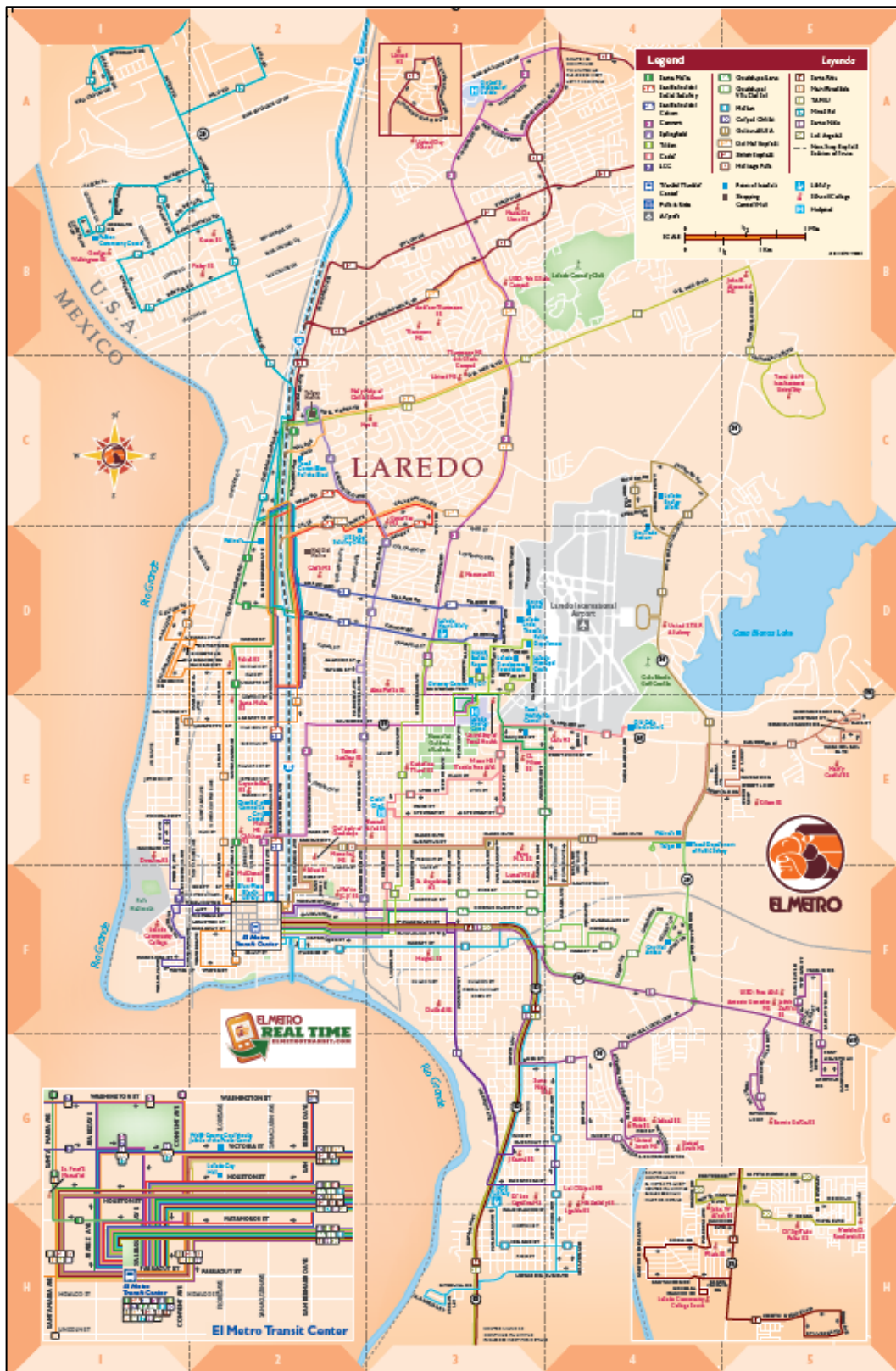
Source: El Metro Transit, Last accessed October 2021

The El Metro Transit Center, the main transfer point in the fixed route transit system, is located at 1301 Farragut in downtown Laredo. The El Metro Transit Center is also served by El Aguila (Webb County Community Action Agency) and Greyhound, both described later in this document. El Metro's administrative and customer service offices are located at the Transit Center. The Transit Center includes a five-level, 412-space parking garage, providing service for visitors to downtown Laredo with both a park and ride facility as well as the ability to park and shop. Parking fees provide a source of revenue for the transit system.

El Metro's FY 2019 budget totaled about $16.4 million. The system is funded by local sales tax, the FTA Section 5307 urban formula grant program, passenger fares, TxDOT state operating grant funds, and local revenues including advertising, vending, donations, and reimbursements. Capital projects such as the purchase of new buses are also supported by FTA grants with local match funding.

Additionally, El Metro is the designated recipient of FTA Section 5310 transit funds for the Laredo urbanized area. In this role, El Metro puts out an annual call for projects, to enhance mobility for seniors and individuals with disabilities, from local governments and private non-profit organizations. The human service transportation services supported by the Section 5310 program are described later in this section. Table 2-1 depicts El Metro's pre pandemic operating statistics.

El Metro management indicated a need for additional transfer locations outside of the downtown area. El Metro is assessing new transfer locations that will be used for timed connections between various El Metro fixed routes. Management indicated that the transfer locations can be used to connect with El Aguila and other transportation services to reduce duplication of services. El Metro has been able to update their fleet with some of the expanded funding during the pandemic but will have five to ten vehicles that will be coming to the end of their useful life over the next five years. The El Metro asset management plan depicts their detailed vehicles replacement strategy.

Table 2-1: General Operating Statistics El Metro for FY 2016 – FY 2019

Demand Response Service	FY 2016	FY 2017	FY 2018	FY 2019
Unlinked One-Way Passenger Trips	3,055,470	3,037,511	2,793,146	2,562,636
Revenue Miles	1,964,645	1,961570	1,953,562	1,961,354
Revenue Hours	174,606	175,455	173,090	172,947
Total Operating Expenses	$14,574,740	$14,555,394	$15,357,074	16,011,82
Operating Expense per Revenue Hour	$83.47	$82.96	$88.72	$92.58
Trips per Revenue Hours	17.5	17.3	16.1	14.8

El Aguila Rural Transit System

The Webb County Community Action Agency (WCCAA) is a rural transit district authorized by TTC Chapter 458. Through its El Aguila Rural Transit System, WCCAA provides transportation services in the rural areas of Webb County. El Aguila operates fixed route bus service connecting Laredo with Bruni, Mirando City, Oilton, and Aguilares in the eastern part of the county, and Rio Bravo and El Cenizo in the southern areas of the county. The El Aguila Rural Transit System also operates demand response service throughout rural Webb County.

The Bruni, Oilton, Mirando, Pueblo Nuevo and Los Altos route operates one roundtrip each Monday, Wednesday, and Friday, departing Bruni at 8:00 a.m. and arriving in Laredo at 9:45 a.m. This route then departs Laredo at 1:30 p.m. and arrives in Bruni at 2:45 p.m. The Rio Bravo and El Cenizo route operates 8 roundtrips per day, between Monday and Saturday and four roundtrips per day on Sundays, connecting these two communities with Laredo. The first Monday through Saturday trip departs Laredo at 5:45 a.m. and the last trip returns to Laredo at 8:00 p.m. On Sundays, the first trip departs Laredo at 7:30 a.m. and the last trip returns to Laredo at 6:45 p.m. El Aguila stops at the El Metro Transit Center in Laredo, which allows for connections with El Metro as well as Greyhound.

Fares for these routes are $1.50 for the general public, $0.75 for seniors and individuals with disabilities with ID, $0.50 for college students with ID, and free for children ages 4 and under. An "intercity" fare of $0.25 is charged for service between communities (referred to as intra-city or inner-city service in other regions) such as transfers from El Metro, Greyhound or Valley Transit Company. Tickets can be purchased at El Aguila's office at Jarvis Plaza, at 4801 Daughtery Street in downtown Laredo, as well as at grocery vendors in Rio Bravo and El Cenizo.

El Aguila provides general public demand response service Monday through Friday between 7:00 a.m. and 5:00 p.m. This service operates on a curb-to-curb basis from passengers' homes to medical facilities and personal appointments. The fare for this service is $1.00 each way.

El Aguila provides ADA paratransit service within ¾ mile on both sides of its fixed routes. The fare for this service is $0.75 each way.

El Aguila operates a fleet of 20 vehicles. The buses operated in fixed route service seat between 25 and 33 passengers.

In FY 2019, El Aguila Rural Transit provided 68,557 one-way passenger trips with the total operating funds expended of $858,351. Funding sources include FTA Sections 5310 and 5311, State Section 5311, passenger fares, and local contributions.

In 2015, WCCAA conducted a community needs assessment. Based on a community survey tally, transportation was the highest need identified, ranking above assistance in gaining employment, family support, education, and health insurance.

Table 2-2 summarizes these data.

Table 2-2: General Operating Statistics El Aguila Transit for FY 2016 – FY 2019

Demand Response Service	FY 2016	FY 2017	FY 2018	FY 2019
Unlinked One-Way Passenger Trips	80,502	70,581	70,086	68,557
Revenue Miles	227,889	209,456	218,470	223,425
Revenue Hours	14,174	14,071	14,826	14,837
Total Operating Expenses	$785,541	$853,871	$820,281	$858,351
Operating Expense per Revenue Hour	$55.42	$60.68	$55.33	$57.85
Trips per Revenue Hours	5.7	5.0	4.7	4.6

Valley Metro – Lower Rio Grande Valley Development Council

The Lower Rio Grande Valley Development Council (LRGVDC), based in McAllen, provides urban and rural public transportation in the Lower Rio Grande Valley as well as Starr and Zapata Counties through its transit department, Valley Metro.

Valley Metro only recently assumed responsibility for rural transit services in Starr and Zapata Counties, following the de-establishment of the former Community Action Council of South Texas in June 2015. Valley Metro currently operates demand response services in both of these counties, and flex route services in Starr County.

The Starr County service operates Monday through Friday from 7:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m., and serves the communities of Alto Bonito, La Grulla, Garciasville, La Casita, Rio Grande City, Midway, La Rosita, Garceno, Escobares, Roma, Los Saenz, and Fronton. Demand response service is also provided from Starr County to destinations in the Lower Rio Grande Valley.

The Zapata County service operates Monday through Friday from 7:30 a.m. to 5:00 p.m. and serves the communities of San Ygnacio, Ramireno, Zapata, Siesta Shores, Lopeno and Falcon. Demand response service is provided from Zapata County to Laredo, Roma, Rio Grande, Weslaco and Harlingen.

Each of these services requires a 24-hour advance reservation. Fares for demand response service range from $3.00 to $105.00. Fares for flex route service are $1.00 for adults (regular fare), $0.50 for students, seniors ages 60 or older, individuals with disabilities, Medicare cardholders and veterans. Transfers from one bus to another are free. Children under 7 ride free, as do students from the University of Texas Rio Grande Valley. Transfers to other Valley Metro routes are also free. Figure 2-3 depicts Valley Metro's system map and Table 2-3 shows their operating statistics.

Figure 2-3: Valley Metro Transit System
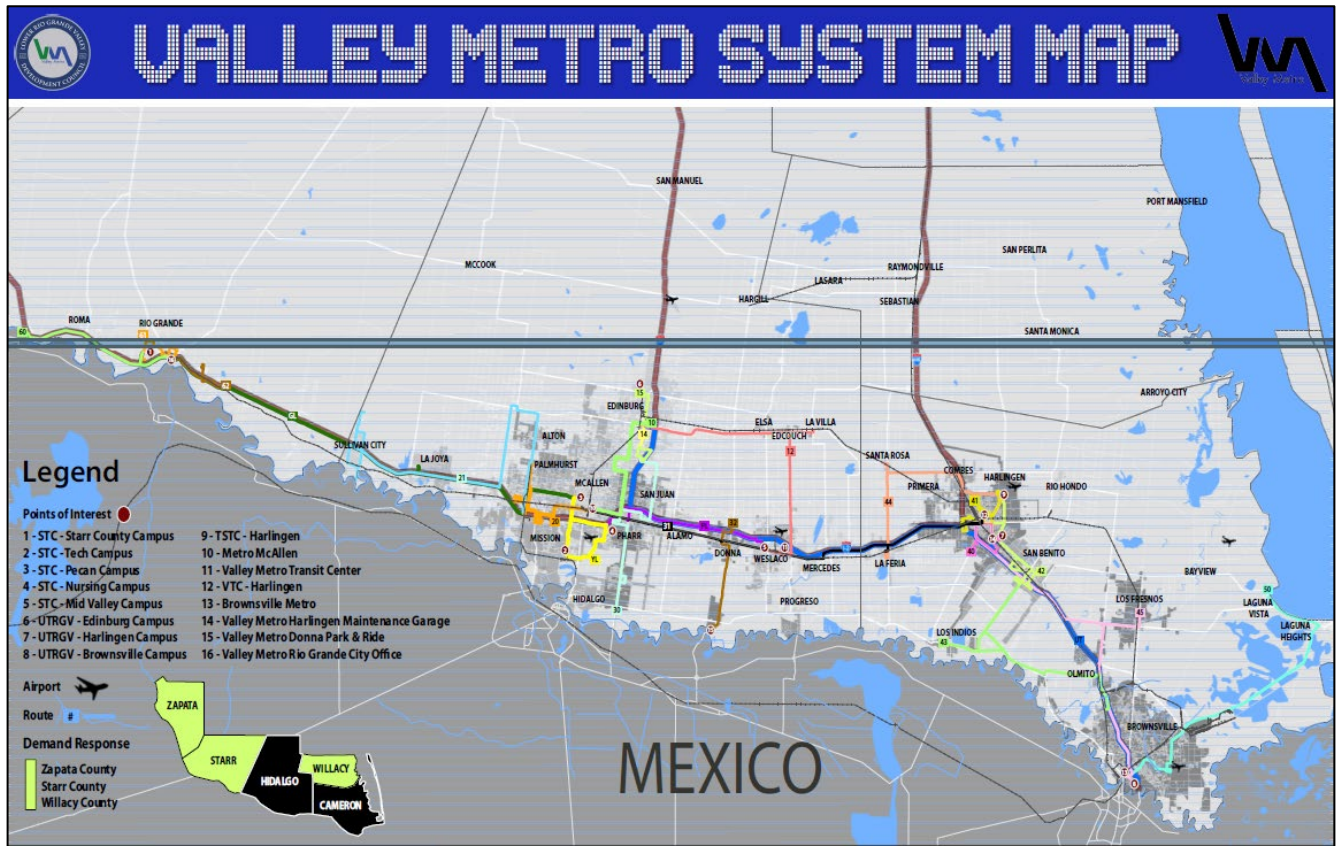
Table 2-3: General Operating Statistics Valley Metro Transit for FY 2020

Demand Response Service	FY 2016	FY 2017	FY 2018	FY 2019
Unlinked One-Way Passenger Trips	525,282	619,753	709,226	819,209
Revenue Miles	2,122,299	2,077,381	2,195,682	2,581,988
Revenue Hours	91,221	96,532	101,291	116,115
Total Operating Expenses	$6,145,799	$6,621,581	$6,948,345	$8,495,422
Operating Expense per Revenue Hour	$66.98	$68.43	$68.41	$73.08
Trips per Revenue Hours	5.8	6.4	7.0	7.1

Rural Economic Assistance League, Inc.

Rural Economic Assistance League, Inc. (REAL Inc.) is a non-profit organization with a mission to provide safe, caring and quality community-centered services for seniors, persons with disabilities and the general public by assisting them and their families in maintaining an independent and fulfilling life. REAL Inc.'s programs include adult day care, home health care, housing, and transportation. REAL Inc. is a rural transit district (RTD) authorized under TTC Chapter 458. REAL Transit serves rural San Patricio County and all of Aransas, Bee, Brooks, Duval, Jim Hogg, Jim Wells, Live Oak, and Refugio counties. REAL Transit operates demand response service for the general public throughout the service area as well as contract human service transportation in some areas. Figure 2-4 shows the REAL service area.

REAL Inc. only recently assumed responsibility for rural transit services in Jim Hogg County, following the de-establishment of the former Community Action Council of South Texas in June 2015. REAL Inc. operates a fleet of 81 vehicles.

In FY 2019, REAL Inc. provided a total of 287,897 one-way passenger trips with a budget of $3,087,294. Funding sources include FTA Sections 5310 and 5311, State Section 5311, passenger fares, and local contributions. Table 2-4 shows the pre-pandemic REAL operating statistics.

As a rural transit district, REAL operates the demand response service, REAL Transit, from Monday through Friday from 8:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m. and serves trip origins in a nine-county region in the Coastal Bend area of South Texas, including Jim Hogg County which is in the STDC service area. REAL also provides services to major urban areas such as Corpus Christi and San Antonio on a daily basis with some of these trips originating in Jim Hogg County. REAL coordinates rural public transportation with adjacent transit districts and the urbanized provider for increased regional access and connectivity.

Figure 2-4: REAL Demand Response Map
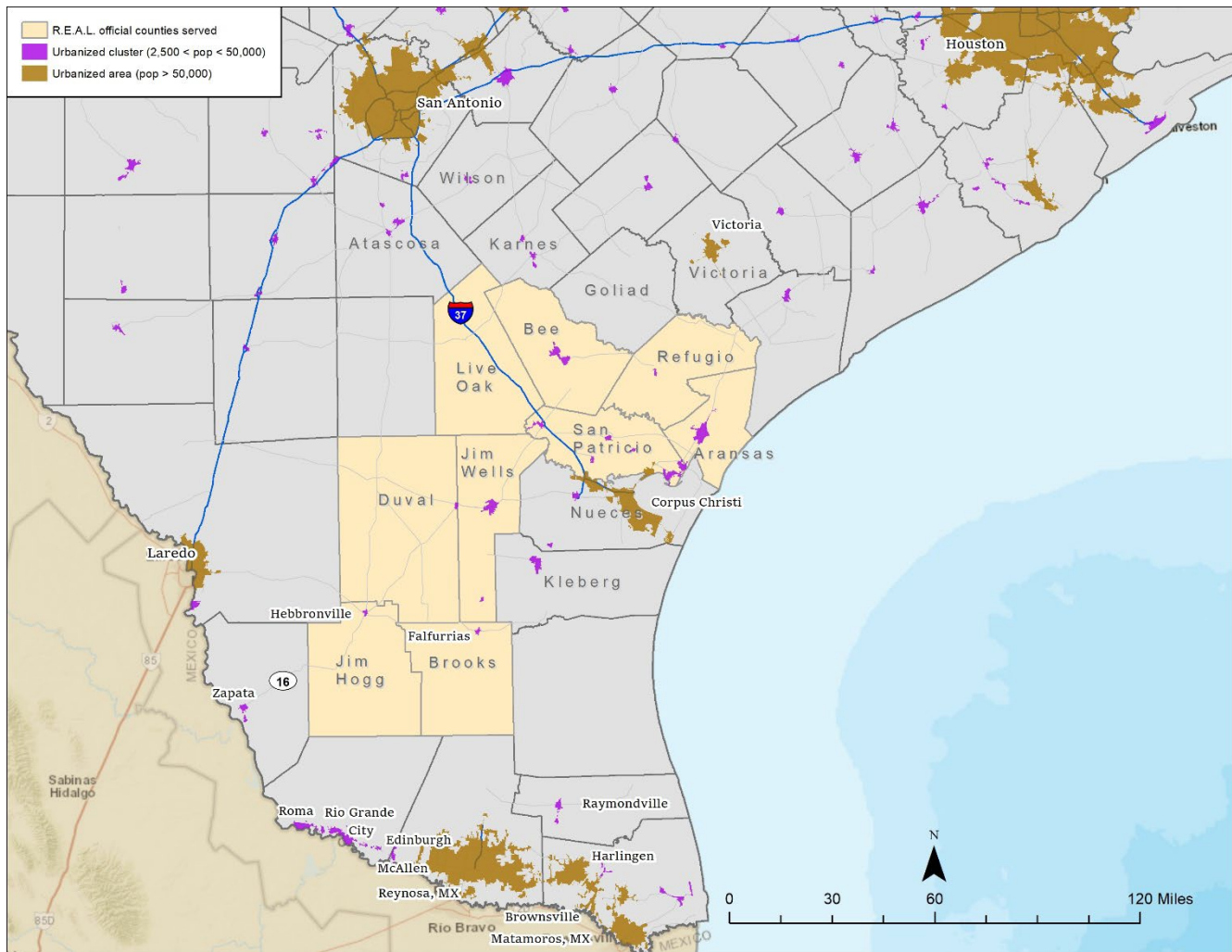
Table 2-4: General Operating Statistics REAL Transit for FY 2016 – FY 2020

Demand Response Service	FY 2016	FY 2017	FY 2018	FY 2019
Unlinked One-Way Passenger Trips	295,429	271,244	271,842	287,897
Revenue Miles	573,362	872,244	1,010,169	1,124,653
Revenue Hours	54,167	40,879	57,224	60,049
Total Operating Expenses	$1,928,157	$2,653,548	$2,456,150	$2,733,599
Operating Expense per Revenue Hour	$35.60	$64.91	$42.92	$45.52
Trips per Revenue Hours	5.5	6.6	4.8	4.8

Specialized and Human Service Transportation Providers

Various types of organizations provide transportation services that can be considered under the "human service" umbrella – public agencies, private non-profit organizations, and even private for-profit companies provide "lifeline" services targeted to seniors, people with disabilities, low-income individuals, and other vulnerable populations. Transportation is often provided in the context of other services and programs. For this inventory, human service and medical transportation services have been grouped into the following subcategories:

- **Medicaid non-emergency medical transportation (NEMT),** exclusively serving medical needs.

- **Section 5310 program subrecipients** are human service transportation providers specializing in transportation services for individuals with disabilities or over the age of 65.

- **Non-FTA recipients** are other providers that may serve medical appointments in addition to other trip purposes.

Medicaid Non-Emergency Medical Transportation

This includes the various brokers for Medicaid NEMT service. These brokers contract with public and private agencies, as well as taxi cabs to provide medical transportation. There are five brokers currently serving the STDC region. Each broker serves one of five healthcare companies: Access2Care serves Cigna-HealthSpring, MTM, Inc. serves Molina Healthcare, One Call serves Driscoll Plan, SafeRide serves Superior HealthPlan, while Modivcare (formerly LogistiCare) serves United Healthcare. They are listed in Table 2-5 broken out by the service area.

Table 2-5: NEMT Brokers by Service Area

Service Area	Access2Care	Modivcare	MTM	One Call	SafeRide
Jim Hogg County	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Starr County	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Webb County	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Zapata County	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓

Source: Managed Care Service Area Map, last accessed November 2021
https://www.hhs.texas.gov/sites/default/files/documents/services/health/medicaid-chip/programs/managed-care-service-areas-map.pdf
Texas Health and Human Services, Health Plan Contact Information, last accessed November 2021
https://www.hhs.texas.gov/services/health/medicaid-chip/programs-services/medical-transportation-program/health-plan-contact-information

Client-Focused Services

The South Texas Region has a variety of human service or client focused transportation providers most of which focus on transportation services for people over the age of 65 and people with disabilities. Veteran transportation services are also included in this review.

Section 5310 Program Recipients

Below is a description of active 5310 programs in South Texas. With the onset of the global pandemic many of these services were halted. Several 5310 programs focus on getting senior citizens and people with disabilities to congregate meal centers. With the threat of COVID particularly for the at-risk communities that the 5310 program serves, many meal sites were temporarily closed and the vehicles were used to deliver meals as opposed to people. This section reflects the pre-COVID services with hopes that the residents of South Texas that rely on these services will be able to enjoy their community centers in the near future.

Jim Hogg County

Jim Hogg County is a Section 5310 subrecipient and operates transportation services through its Transportation Program, Social Services Program and Veterans Service Office. Social service transportation for low income and older adult residents is provided for local and out of town medical appointments. Jim Hogg County's Veterans Service office operates a van to transport veterans to medical services.

Webb County

The Webb County Community Action Agency, in addition to operating El Aguila (described in the Public Transportation section of this report), provides senior transportation as part of the Elderly Nutrition Program. They are a 5310 recipient. Webb County Indigent Care Assistance provides emergency financial assistance for transportation to people with disabilities and families who cannot work and have no other means of support. Webb County also provides transportation for veterans. The Veterans Affairs Office recently revived its Veterans Transportation Program, providing transportation to dialysis, the VA Medical Clinic and other medical transportation needs with limited county funding.

Zapata County

Zapata County provides transportation for seniors, people with disabilities, families who are indigent, and veterans under at least three different programs. The Elderly Transportation Program of the Zapata County Nutrition Program provides transportation to eligible participants (ages 60 or older) to other areas to obtain medical services and other needs. In addition, transportation is provided to congregate

meals. Nutrition Centers in Zapata, San Ygnacio and Falcon provide daily noontime lunches from Monday through Friday to eligible participants.

Zapata County's website indicates that the Indigent Program provides financial assistance for transportation to individuals with disabilities and families who cannot work and have no other means of support. This assistance is temporary until the individuals qualify for other resources.

Zapata County Veteran Services program participates in the Disabled American Veterans Volunteer Transportation Network, transporting veterans with disabilities to medical services. Van service is operated by volunteer drivers. The van services the Laredo Outpatient clinic on Mondays and Thursdays, departing the Zapata County Courthouse at 8:00 a.m., stopping in San Ygnacio at 8:30, and arriving in Laredo at 10:00 a.m. On Wednesdays, the van serves the Harlingen Outpatient Clinic and the Harlingen Health Care Center, departing from the Zapata County Courthouse at 7:00 a.m., stopping in Falcon at 7:30, and arriving in Harlingen at 10:00 a.m.

Based on data available in TxDOT reports on Section 5310 subrecipients, Zapata County operates three vehicles. Zapata County rural public transportation services were provided by the former Community Action Council of South Texas Valley Metro. Since this organization was de-established, Valley Metro operates rural demand response public transportation services in Zapata County, described in the Public Transportation section of this document.

Non-FTA Subrecipients

There are several passenger transportation services that are not funded by FTA grant programs but provide transportation to communities in South Texas. Some of these agencies provide non-emergency medical transportation, food delivery and trips to congregate meal sites. These services include:

- Texas Medicaid Non-Emergency Medical Transportation (NEMT) Program
- Border Area Nutrition Council (B.A.N.C.)
- Ruthe B. Cowl Rehabilitation Center
- Webb County (was 5310 in 2017 plan, but not in 2020 Texas Transit Statistical Report)
- Webb County Community Action Agency - Elderly Nutrition Program
- Webb County Indigent Care Assistance
- Webb County Veterans Affairs Office

Other Private For-Profit Transportation Service Providers

Intercity Bus Services

Intercity bus services are provided by several carriers in the South Texas region that primarily serve, Laredo, Brownsville, McAllen and San Antonio. These carriers include Greyhound Lines, Tornado Bus, Omnibus Express, Valley Transit Company, and Valley Metro. These services are discussed in detail below. A summary table of each active service with routes and schedules is provided in Table 2-6.

Table 2-6: Summary of Intercity Bus Routes in the South Texas Region

	Table / Route Name	Schedule	Route	RTs / week (eff. 2/20)	RTs / week (eff. 2/21)	Texas Places Served (Feb 2020)
Greyhound	484	9389/9589 9403/0831 9407/7259 9057/0895 9027/9041 0897/9047 9377 (South) 9414/0898 9428/9026 9320/9336 9356/9568 0894/9386 0836 (North)	Dallas – Austin – San Antonio – Laredo – Nuevo Laredo (MX) - Monterrey (MX) (13 southbound, 11 northbound)	77	28	Dallas, Waxahachie, Waco, Austin, San Marcos, San Antonio, Laredo North, Laredo
	486	9407/9341 7265/9095 9389/9428 9080/9328 9042/7336	Houston – San Antonio – Laredo	35	14	Houston SE, Houston, Katy, Schulenburg Weimar, San Antonio, Laredo
Tornado / El Expreso*	n/a	n/a	Monterrey – Laredo	n/a	28	Laredo
	n/a	n/a	Nuevo Laredo – Dallas	n/a	36	Laredo, San Antonio, Austin
	n/a	n/a	Nuevo Laredo - Laredo	n/a	56	Laredo
	n/a	n/a	Laredo - Dallas	n/a	65	Laredo, San Antonio, Austin
	n/a	n/a	Laredo – San Antonio	n/a	72	Laredo, San Antonio
	n/a	n/a	Laredo - Houston	n/a	14	Laredo, Houston

	Table / Route Name	Schedule	Route	RTs / week (eff. 2/20)	RTs / week (eff. 2/21)	Texas Places Served (Feb 2020)
Omnibus Express	n/a	n/a	Laredo – Houston	n/a	56	Laredo, George West, El Campo, Rosenberg, Hillcroft, Houston
	n/a	n/a	Monterrey, MX – Laredo – Houston	n/a	21	Laredo, George West, Victoria, El Campo, Rosenberg, Hillcroft, Houston
	n/a	n/a	Monterrey, MX – Laredo – San Antonio	n/a	21	Laredo, San Antonio
	n/a	n/a	Monterrey, MX – Dallas	n/a	21	Laredo, San Antonio, San Marcos, Austin, Dallas,
	n/a	n/a	Roma – Houston	n/a	7 (eff. 2021)	Roma, Rio Grande City, Falfurrias, Robstown, El Campo, Houston)

Greyhound Lines Incorporated

Greyhound Lines currently operates 19 routes (tables) in Texas. As the largest carrier in Texas, with its headquarters based in Dallas, Greyhound operates to most corners of the state including El Paso, Amarillo, Brownsville, and the Texas Triangle (Dallas, San Antonio, Houston). The Greyhound network in Texas connects with routes and cities in four adjacent states. Two routes in South Texas are operated by Valley Transit Company (VTC), a subsidiary of Greyhound Lines.

Table 484, Dallas – Austin – San Antonio – Laredo – Monterrey, Mexico

This table has four roundtrips per day, with one schedule in each direction and very limited stops served. Pre-COVID, this was one of the busiest Greyhound tables by far, with eleven roundtrips per day. There were thirteen southbound schedules and eleven northbound schedules. This is one of three Greyhound tables with stops in Mexico, including Nuevo Laredo and Monterrey.

Table 486, Houston – San Antonio – Laredo

This table has two roundtrips per day, with one schedule offering direct "express service," and the other serving Katy and Schulenburg Weimar. Pre-COVID, there were five roundtrips per day with one schedule leaving from southeast Houston, and three arriving there. There are three to four stops in Texas served.

Table 487, Monterrey – Nuevo Laredo

Most recently this table had one southbound trip and two northbound trips operating between Monterrey, MX (Mexico) and Nuevo Laredo, MX which is adjacent to Laredo. However, there have been no active trip schedules since February 2021.

Figure 2-5: Greyhound System Map in Texas

Omnibus Express

Omnibus Express has been operating since 2008, when it began under the name Autobuses Ejectivos. It connects millions of people each year through different services including intercity bus travel, charter buses, and school groups. Omnibus provides service in Mexico and eight states, including Texas, Louisiana, Mississippi, Alabama, Georgia, Florida, South Carolina, and North Carolina. Florida has the most frequent number of stops in the United States, followed by Texas. Omnibus serves five border regions in Texas, including El Paso/Juarez, Laredo/Nueva Laredo, Roma, McAllen, and Brownsville/Matamoros. From Brownsville and the southern border communities, Omnibus provides service to the Texas Triangle and extends east from Dallas and Houston stopping in states on the way to North Carolina and Florida. Service in Mexico is extensive, covering more than twenty Mexican states. As of January 2021, some routes have been suspended, however there is still active service from Monterrey, MX to San Antonio/Houston/Dallas; and from Matamoros, MX to Houston. Figure 2-6 presents a map of the Omnibus Express routes in Texas. Four Omnibus routes received Section 5311(f) funds in 2021: Roma – Houston, Brownsville – Houston, McAllen – Houston, Brownsville – San Antonio.

Figure 2-6: Omnibus Express System Map in Texas

Tornado Bus / El Expreso

Founded in Dallas, Tornado Bus has been operating since 1993, providing service across Mexico and the United States via El Paso, Laredo/Nuevo Laredo, McAllen/Reynosa, Matamoros/Brownsville. From the border communities, passengers can connect to the Texas Triangle and head north to Midwest states, or head east. Tornado Bus serves more than fifty locations in thirteen states including Louisiana, Arkansas, Missouri, Oklahoma, Illinois, Iowa, Wisconsin, Florida and Minnesota. Tornado owns the El Expreso brand (launched in Houston in 1989), which share the same website and app, and is featured on some of its buses (sometimes displaying both brands) and terminals. Tornado Bus and El Expreso partner with multiple Mexican carriers like Grupo Estrella Blanca, Autobuses de Oriente and others to provide service within Mexico. The corridor with the highest frequency of trips is between Laredo and Dallas with about 49 roundtrips per week (7 per day), and two less roundtrips per day between Nuevo Laredo and Dallas. This trip frequency surpasses Greyhound's Table 484 between Monterrey/Laredo and Dallas which as of January 2021 had four roundtrips per day. Figure 2-7 presents a route map of the Tornado Bus and El Expreso routes in Texas.

Figure 2-7: Tornado Bus / El Expreso System Map in Texas

Charter Bus Companies

The following charter bus operators have an address in the South Texas region:

- Cougar Bus Lines Ltd – serves Laredo and South Texas with charter service for any trip purpose including Casino tours and school shuttle buses. Contact: info@cougarbuslines.com (956) 726-9978
- Tornado Tours, Inc. – is a charter and tour bus company serving all of South Texas from Eagle Pass to Brownsville. Contact: http://www.956tours.com/ (956) 220-7536.
- US Coachways – is a nationwide charter bus rental company that serves all of Texas including the South Texas region. Contact: https://www.uscoachways.com/ (855) 473-5969

Taxi Companies

Fourteen taxi companies were identified in Laredo serving the city limits and outlying areas of the city in Webb County. Some taxi services go into Mexico as well. Below is the name, hours of operation and contact information for each Laredo Taxi company:

- A-1 Taxi – 24 hour taxi service in Laredo and nearby areas. (956) 723-9177
- ABC Taxi Laredo – 24 hour taxi service in the Laredo Texas area and Nuevo Laredo Mexico. (956) 237-5323
- AC Taxi Service - evening taxi service in Laredo from 10 p.m. to 7 a.m. (956) 334-9623
- Escalera Taxi Service – 24 hour service in Laredo/ Nueva Laredo (956) 568-8520
- Laredo Yellow Cab – 24 hour service in Laredo and outlying areas. (956) 723-8285
- Morocco Taxi – 24 hour service in Laredo and Nueva Laredo. (956) 949-4969
- Nora Taxi – 24 hour service in Laredo and outlying areas. (956) 645-5890
- Red Fox Taxi – 25 hour taxi service in the City of Laredo. (956) 724-6669
- Sabinas Taxi – 6 a.m. to 11 p.m. service in Laredo and outlying areas. (956) 635-1192
- Tops Taxi – 24 hour car service in Laredo. (956) 722-1011

Transportation Network Companies

In the past few years, several transportation network companies (TNCs) have emerged that offer on-demand ride-hailing services used for various purposes such as first mile/last mile service, student transportation, medical trips, intercity travel, carpooling, moving, and delivery services in the U.S. However, not all of them are as popular as Uber and Lyft and their services are limited to metropolitan cities such as San Antonio. This section covers four TNCs that are currently operating in the Alamo region namely Uber and Lyft.

Uber and Lyft provide on-demand, ride-hailing transportation services in certain areas of the Alamo region. Service is available 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, though the supply of vehicles is limited and

varies by time of day. Customers are required to set up an account with Uber or Lyft and link a debit/credit card to their account. No cash is exchanged between drivers and passengers, and two or more passengers can split payments.

To reserve a trip, customers are required to use a smartphone to request a vehicle, indicating their pickup location and destination. The TNCs guarantee a vehicle will arrive at a passenger's location within minutes. Passengers are sent the vehicle type, color, and license plate number of the vehicle coming to pick them up. Upon arrival at the requested origin, drivers wait two minutes for passengers.

Lyft covers the STDC region however Uber services east and south of Zapata are limited. Uber and Lyft service zones in the STDC region are provided in Figures 2-8 and 2-9 respectively.

Figure 2-8: Uber Service Area
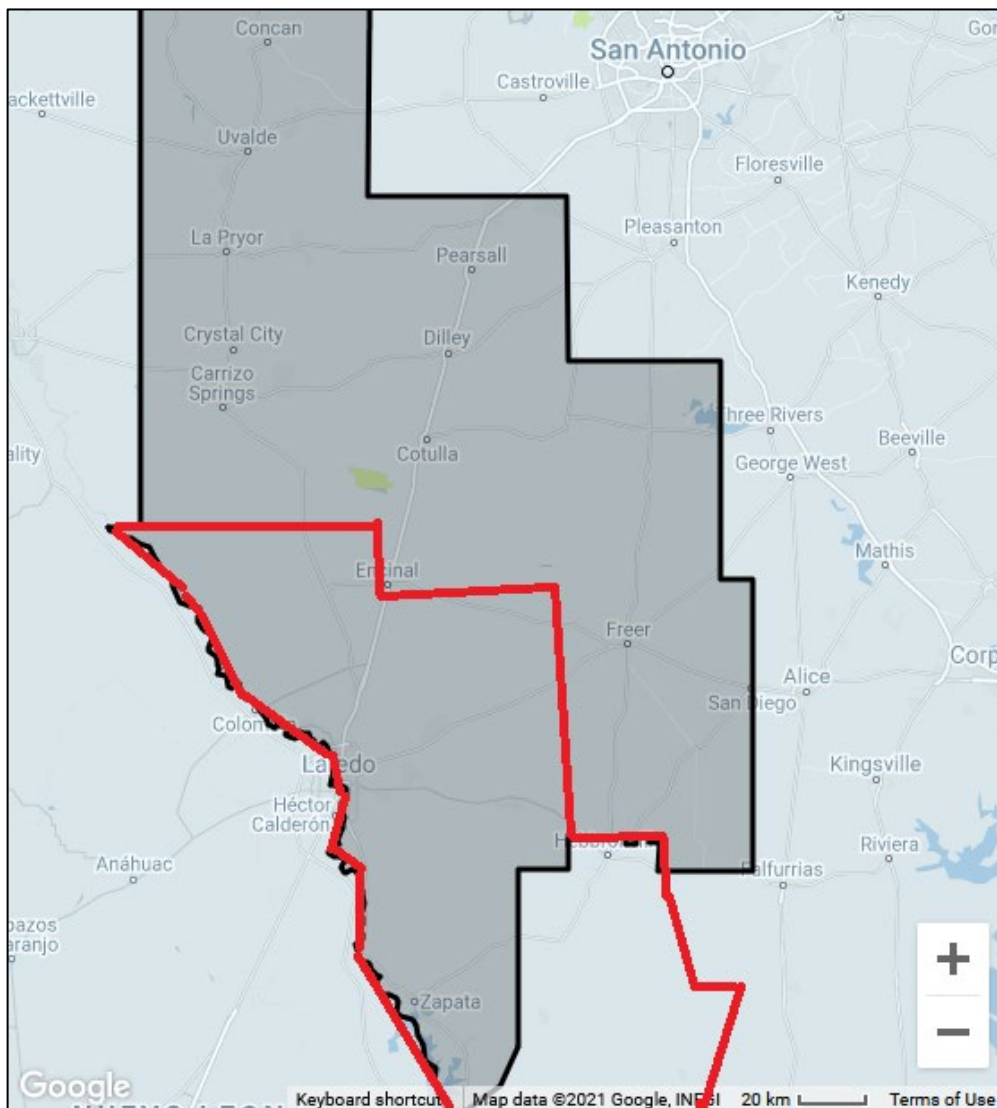
Source: Laredo Uber webpage "Use Uber in cities around the world," last accessed November 2021
https://www.uber.com/global/en/cities/laredo/

Figure 2-9: Lyft Service Area
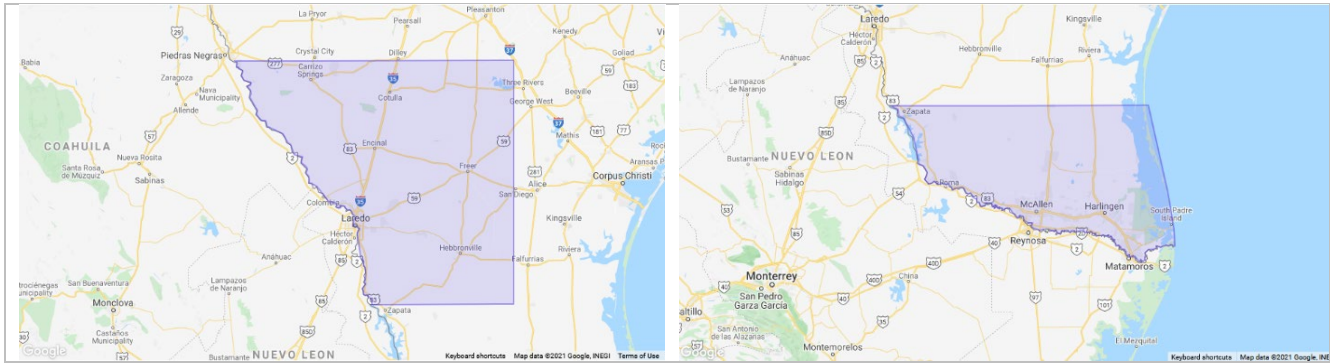
Source: Laredo and Rio Grande Valley Lyft webpage, last accessed November 2021 https://www.lyft.com/driver/cities/laredo-tx and https://www.lyft.com/driver/cities/rio-grande-valley-tx

Section 3:
Comprehensive Assessment of Unmet Transportation Needs

Introduction

This section analyzes demographic and land use data to help assess the need for mobility options in the South Texas service area. It is the first step in the three-part process of determining needs and most important, unmet needs. The transit needs assessment will include:

1. A Review of Demographics, Land Uses, and Travel Patterns – it identifies where potential transit users live and where people are going.

2. Inventory of Transportation Services in the study area – it documents the current level of service and where it operates.

3. Identification of Unmet Needs (Gap Analysis) – it compares the areas of need to the level of service provided, to assess how the needs are met and where unmet needs may exist.

In this section, historical, current and projected population trends are captured in the following sections along with a description of transit-dependent populations that include socio-economic demographic groups that typically show a propensity to use transit services. This section provides a Title VI demographic analysis that examines low-income, minority and limited English proficiency populations. Major trip generators in the area are also reviewed. Community and regional travel patterns are also examined in this section. Data sources include the 2010 Census and the American Community Survey (ACS) 2015-2019 5-year estimates.

This demographic analysis along with the review of existing services in Chapter 2 will provide a broad transportation needs assessment required for developing service and coordination alternatives and strategies.

Population Profile

The following section provides a general population profile for the South Texas Region, identifies and evaluates underserved population subgroups, and reviews the demographic characteristics pertinent to a Title VI analysis.

Historical and Recent Population Trends

As of the 2019 Five Year ACS Census, total population in the South Texas Region was 357,139 (Table 3-2). This represents a more gradual change from 2010; growth during the last decade had been on slow progression with some decrease compared to nearly twenty one percent increase from 2000 to 2010 (Table 3-1). Webb County has the highest population of 273,526 in the region while Jim Hogg has the lowest (5,231). Like many rural counties in the country Jim Hogg has seen the population plateau while counties with larger urban areas like Webb County and Laredo have seen significant growth. The historical population and recent population trends are depicted in Tables 3-1 and 3-2 respectively.

Table 3-1: Historical Populations for South Texas Study Area

	Webb	Zapata	Jim Hogg	Starr	STDC Reg. Total	State of Texas
2000	193,117	12,182	5,281	53,597	264,117	20,851,820
2010	240,346	13,609	5,211	59,989	319,155	25,145,561
% Change	24.45%	11.7%	- 1.3%	11.9%	20.83%	20.6%

Source: U.S. Decennial Census and ACS 2019 5 Year Estimates, Table B01003

Table 3-2: Recent Population Trends for South Texas Study Area

	Webb	Zapata	Jim Hogg	Starr	STDC Reg. Total	State of Texas
2015	263,251	14,308	5,239	62,648	345,446	26,538,614
2016	266,006	14,335	5,218	63,008	348,567	26,956,435
2017	269,624	14,415	5,262	63,420	352,721	27,419,612
2018	272,053	14,369	5,282	63,894	355,598	27,885,195
2019	273,526	14,304	5,231	64,078	357,139	28,260,856
% Change 15-16	1.05%	0.18%	- 0.4%	0.57%	0.9%	1.6%
% Change 16-17	1.4%	0.55%	0.84%	0.65%	1.19%	1.7%
% Change 17-18	0.9%	- 0.3%	0.38%	0.74%	0.8%	1.7%
% Change 18-19	0.5%	- 0.45%	- 0.96%	0.28%	0.43%	1.3%
% Change 15-19	3.9%	- 0.02%	- 0.15%	2.28%	3.38%	6.5%

Major population centers in each county are as follows:

- Webb County:
  - Laredo (County Seat) – 255,205 Population
- Zapata County:
  - Zapata (County Seat) – 13,295 Population
- Jim Hogg County:
  - Hebbronville (County Seat) – 4,101 Population
- Starr County:
  - Rio Grand City (County Seat) – 15,317 Population

The population centers are illustrated in Figure 3-1.

Visitor Populations

For regions and communities along the U.S./Mexico border people moving across the border has extensive impacts on the economy. This includes public transit ridership. In Laredo, for example, many Mexican residents come across the border every day on work visas or to shop and conduct personal business and many of these people use public transit services like El Metro to reach their destinations. Starting in 2020 due to the COVID-19 global pandemic the US government closed the U.S./Mexico border to all non-essential business. As a result, significantly fewer people are coming into Laredo and using public transit services. The decline in ridership will be examined in detail in Section 2 of this plan.

In 2019 the Laredo border crossing saw 15,180,724 individuals coming from Mexico via bus, personal automobile or the pedestrian bridge. In 2020 that number was 7,672,730, a 50 percent decline.[1] If the assumption is a 2 percent mode split for those border crossing trips (it's likely higher for this population) once they enter the United States it means that transit systems serving the Laredo area would see an annual decline of 150,160 one-way trips just due to the border crossing alone.

Future Population Projections

Projections developed by the Texas Demographics Center shown in Table 3-3, estimate that the South Texas Region's population will increase by about 8 percent over the next thirty years (to 388,258 in 2050) as opposed to the high population growth rate of the state (about 90%).

Table 3-3: Future Population Projections for South Texas Study Area

Time Period	Webb County	Zapata County	Jim Hogg County	Starr County	STDC Regional Total	State of Texas
2020	276,183	14,409	5,077	64,731	360,390	29,677,668
2030	298,373	14,257	4,760	66,246	383,636	34,894,452
2040	308,783	13,690	4,372	65,324	392,169	40,686,496
2050	308,632	12,821	3,941	62,864	388,258	47,342,105
% Change 2020-2030	8.03%	-1.05%	-6.24%	2.34%	6.45%	17.58%
% Change 2030-2040	3.48%	-3.98%	-8.15%	-1.39%	2.22%	16.6%
% Change 2040-2050	-0.05%	-6.35%	-9.86%	-3.77%	-0.997%	16.36%
% Change 2020-2050	11.7%	-11.02%	-22.38%	-2.88%	7.73%	89.77%

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[1] Source: Bureau of Transportation Statistics – Border Crossing/Entry Data

Population Density

Population density is often an effective indicator of the types of public transit services that are most feasible within a study area. While exceptions always exist, an area with a density of 2,000 persons per square mile will generally be able to sustain frequent, daily fixed-route transit service. Conversely, an area with a population density below this threshold but above 1,000 persons per square mile may be better suited for flex route or microtransit services.

Figure 3-2 portrays the South Texas Region's population density at the census block group level. This map presents a detailed version of the population centers shown in Figure 3-1. Starr and Webb have a couple of block groups with density greater than 2000 persons per square mile while census block groups with density greater than 1000 persons per square mile are located in Zapata and Jim Hogg; Zapata in Zapata; Hebbronville in Jim Hogg.

Transit Dependent Populations

Public transportation needs are defined in part by identifying the relative size and location of those segments within the general population that are most likely to use transit services. These transit dependent populations include individuals who may not have access to a personal vehicle or are unable to drive themselves due to age or income status. Determining the location of these populations assists in the evaluation of current transit services and the extent to which the services meet community needs.

The Transit Dependence Index (TDI) is an aggregate measure displaying relative concentrations of transit dependent populations. The TDI aggregates census data of people and households per block group that represents specific socioeconomic characteristics from the 2019 American Community Survey's Five-Year Estimates. Five factors make up the TDI calculation:

1. Autoless Households
2. Senior Population (ages 65 and older)
3. Youth Populations (ages 10 to 17)
4. Below Poverty Populations
5. Individuals with Disabilities

For each factor, individual census block groups were classified according to the prevalence of vulnerable populations relative to the study area average. The factors were then put into the TDI equation to determine the relative transit dependence of each block group. Table 3-4 and Figure 3-3 explain what each TDI score means:

Figure 3-1: South Texas Region-Population Centers

Figure 3-2: Population Density
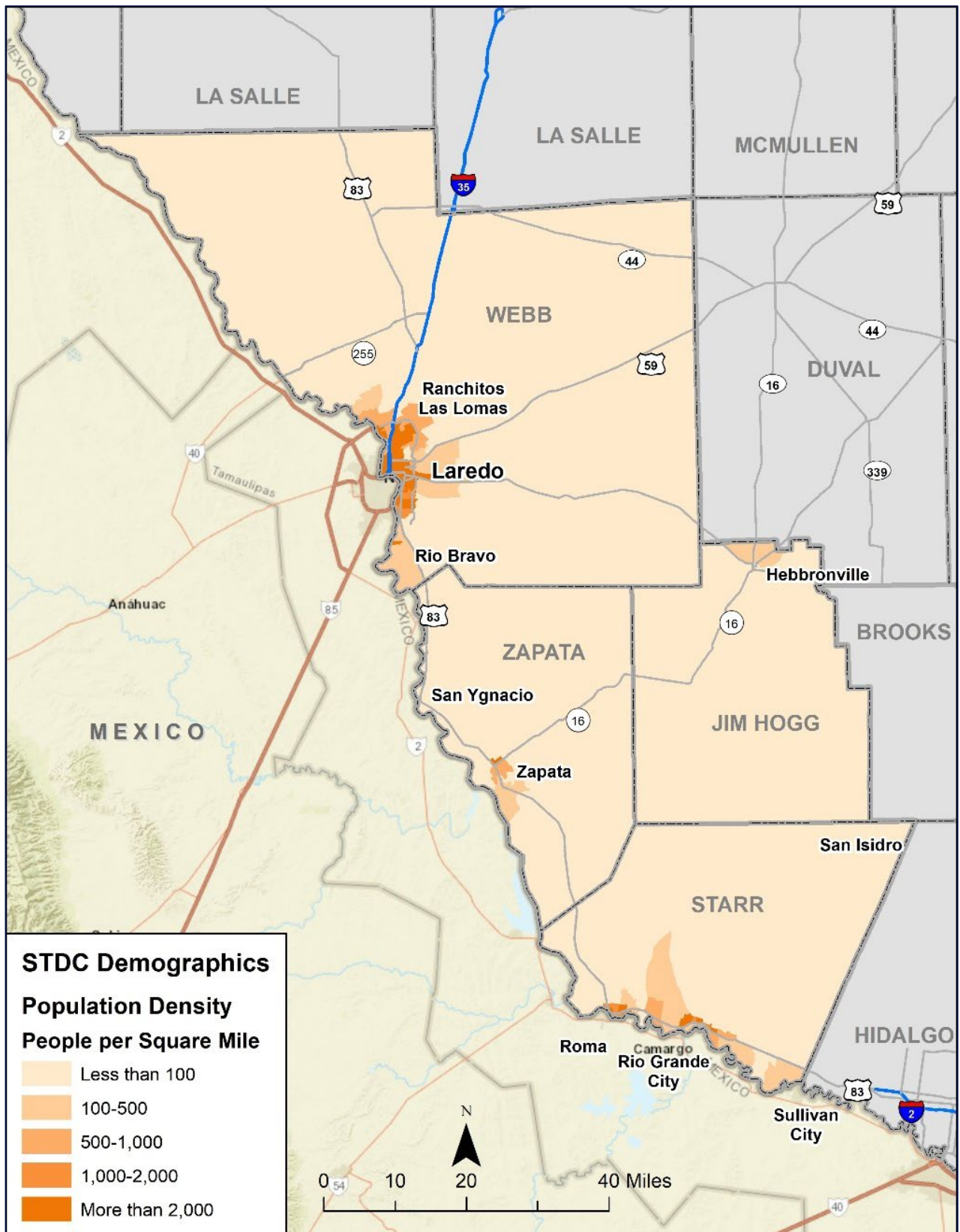
Table 3-4: TDI Score Definitions

TDI Score (Needs)	Meaning
Very Low	Less than and equal to the service area's average
Low	Above the average and up to 1.33 times the average
Moderate	Above 1.33 times the average and up to 1.67 times the average
High	Above 1.67 times the average and up to two times the average
Very High	Above two times the average

Figure 3-3: Transit Dependent Populations Classification System
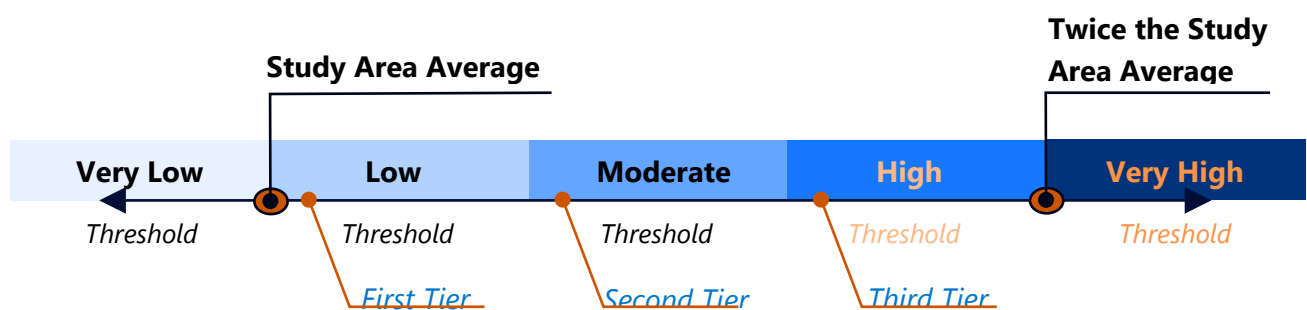
As illustrated in Figure 3-3, the relative classification system utilizes averages in ranking populations. For example, areas with less than the average transit dependent population fall into the "very low" classification, where areas that are more than twice the average will be classified as "Very High." The classifications "Low, Moderate, and High" all fall between the average and twice the average; these classifications are divided into thirds.

Figure 3-4 displays the TDI rankings for the South Texas Region. Areas with a "Very High Need" or "High Need" are located in Laredo and parts of Roma. Areas with a "Moderate Need" are located in Rio Grande City.

The Transit Dependence Index Percent (TDIP) provides a complementary analysis to the TDI measure. It is nearly identical to the TDI measure except for the exclusion of population density. The TDIP for each block group in the study area is calculated based on autoless households, elderly populations, youth populations, individuals with disabilities, and below poverty populations. It is the percentage of population that is transit dependent in each census block group. The advantage of TDIP is that it helps in identifying transit needs in areas with smaller populations such as rural areas. For example, certain areas of the study area may have fewer people overall but the percentage of people in that area that belong to one or more of the transit dependency cohorts might be very high.

Figure 3-5 shows transit need based on the percentage. According to the TDIP, there are a few small block groups that have the highest percentage of transit dependent population (greater than 90%) located in Laredo, Roma, and Rio Grande City. There is also a large census block group in Hebbronville that has a moderate percentage of transit dependent population.

Figure 3-4: Transit Dependence Index
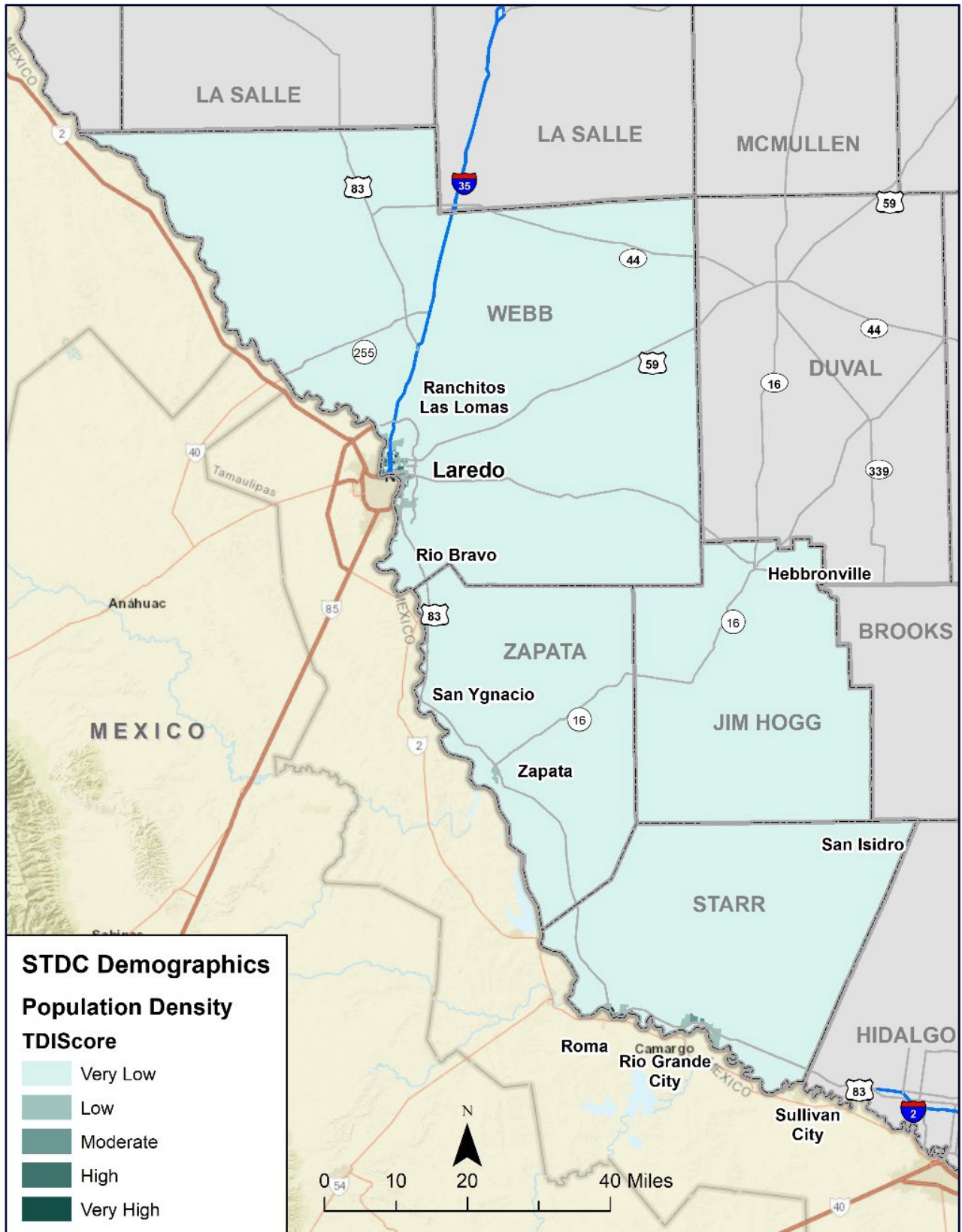
Figure 3-5: Transit Dependence Index Percentage
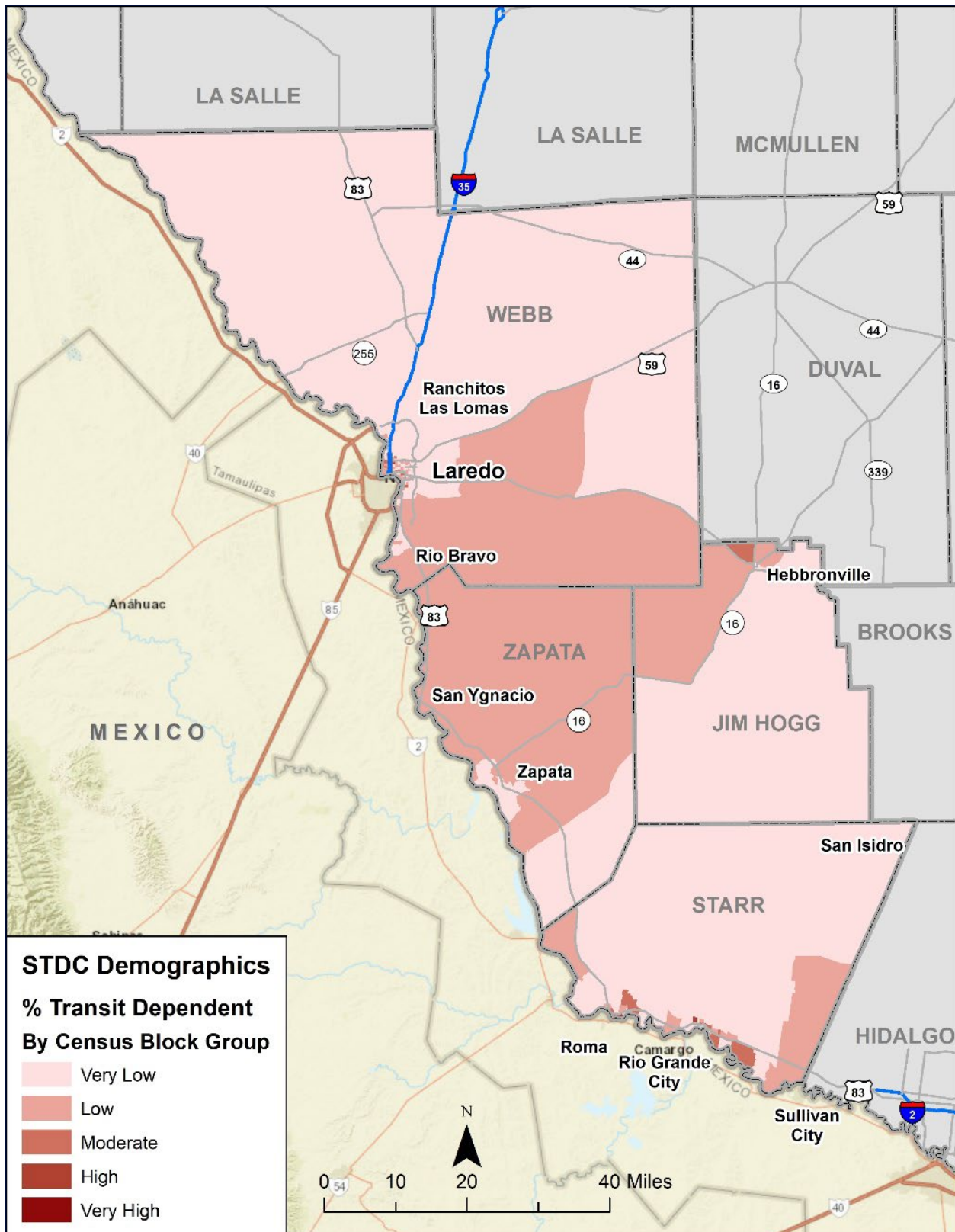
Autoless Households

Households without at least one personal vehicle are more likely to depend on the mobility offered by public transit than those households with access to a car. Although autoless households are reflected in both the TDI and TDIP measures, displaying this segment of the population separately is important since most land uses in the study area are at distances too far for non-motorized travel. Figure 3-6 displays the relative number of autoless households. The areas of "Very High" needs are located in Laredo, Rio Bravo, most of Zapata County, Roma, and Rio Grande City. Areas of "High" need include the greater Rio Bravo area, the northwestern portion of Jim Hogg County, and areas along the southern and eastern border of Starr County.

Senior Adult Population

A second socioeconomic group analyzed by the TDI and TDIP indices is the older adult population. Individuals 65 years and older may scale back their use of personal vehicles as they age, leading to greater reliance on public transportation compared to those in other age brackets. Figure 3-7 displays the relative concentration of seniors in the study area. Zapata and a large block group in Zapata County have a higher concentration of senior population as compared to other counties in the South Texas Region. Areas in Laredo, Roma and Rio Grande City also have a higher concentration of older adults.

Youth Population

Youths and teenagers, ages 10 to 17 years, who cannot drive or are just beginning to drive but do not have an automobile available, appreciate the continued mobility from public transportation. Areas with a "Very High" or "High" classification of youth include areas of Laredo and Rio Grande City.

Individuals with Disabilities

Individuals with disabilities may be unable to operate a personal vehicle and consequently more likely to rely on public transportation. As shown in Figure 3-9, block groups in Laredo, Zapata and northwest Zapata County, Roma and Rio Grande City.

Title VI Demographic Analysis

As part of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, Title VI prohibits discrimination based on race, color, or national origin in programs and activities receiving federal subsidies. This includes agencies providing federally funded public transportation. The following section examines the minority and below poverty populations within South Texas Region. It then summarizes the prevalence of residents with Limited-English Proficiency (LEP).

Figure 3-6: Distribution of Autoless Households in the Study Area
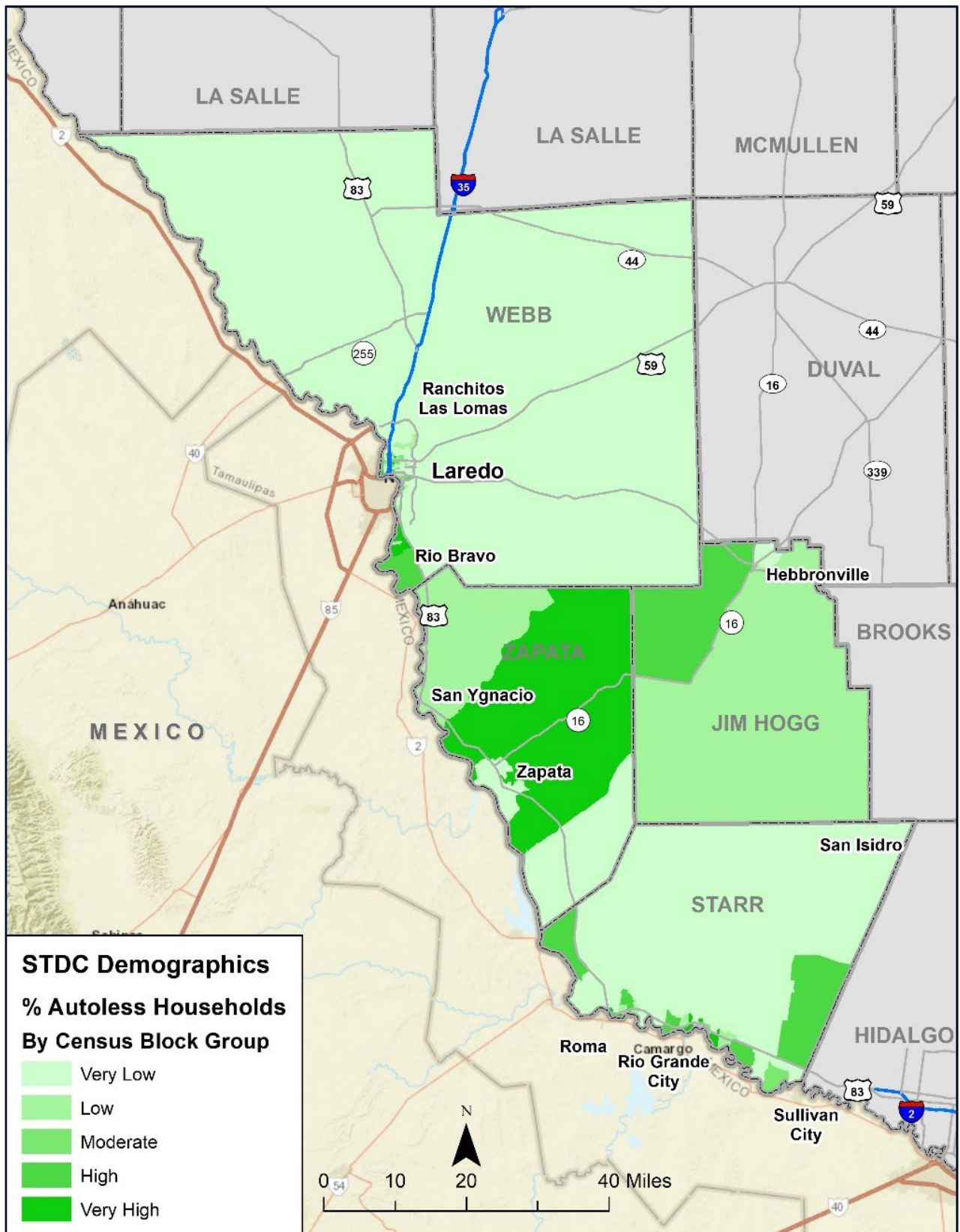
Figure 3-7: Distribution of Senior Adults in the Study Area
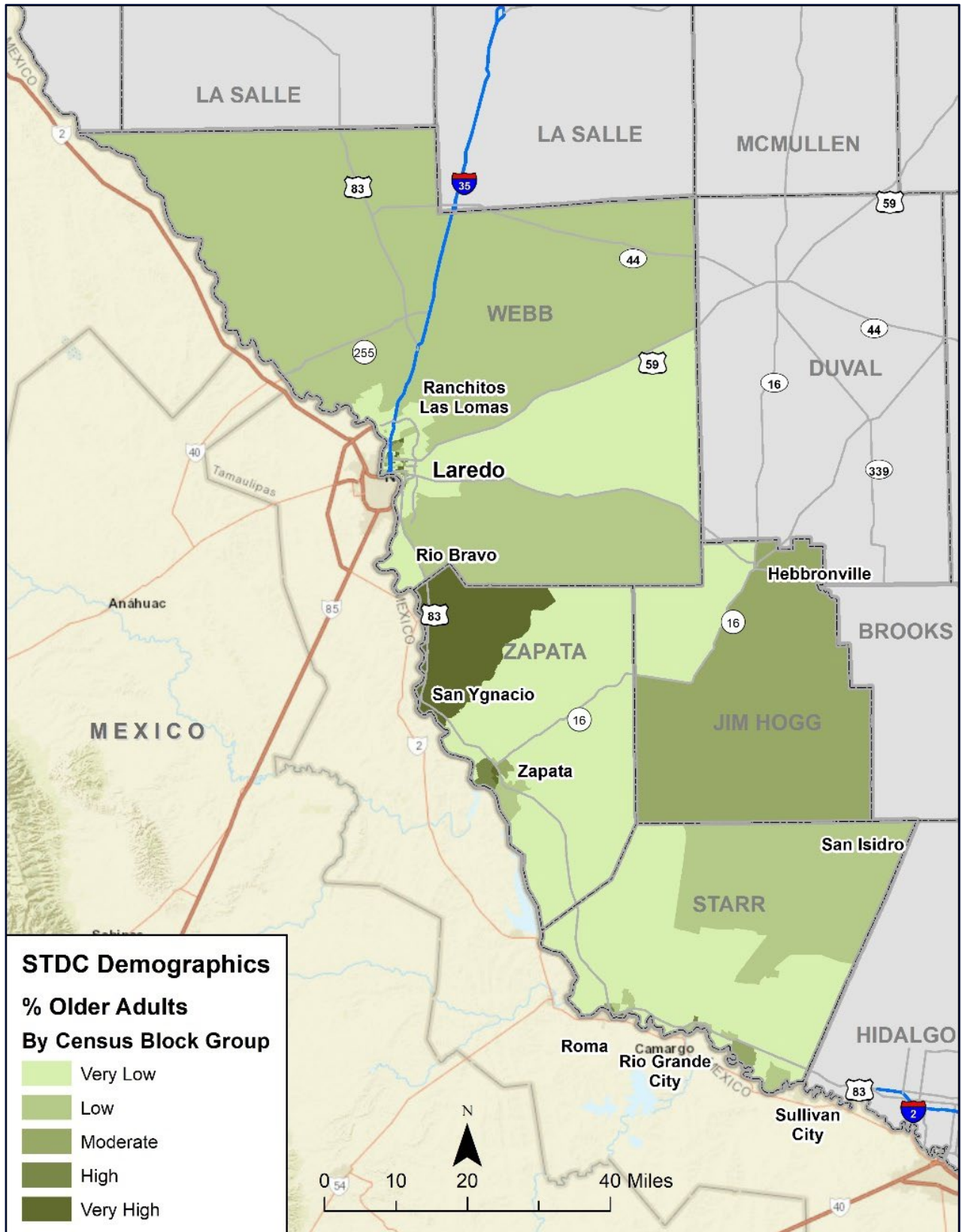
Figure 3-8: Distribution of Youths in the Study Area
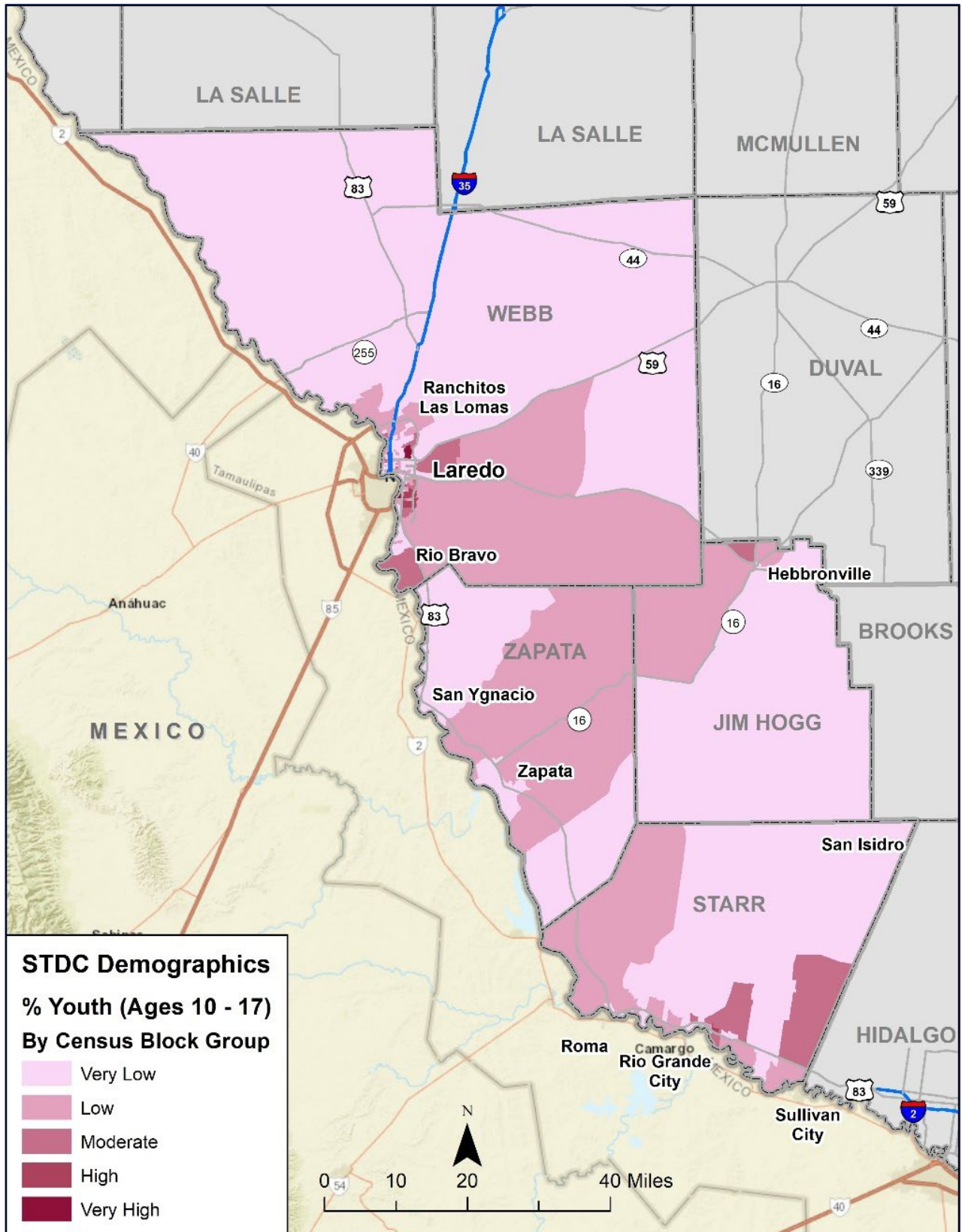
Figure 3-9: Distribution of Individuals with Disabilities in the Study Area
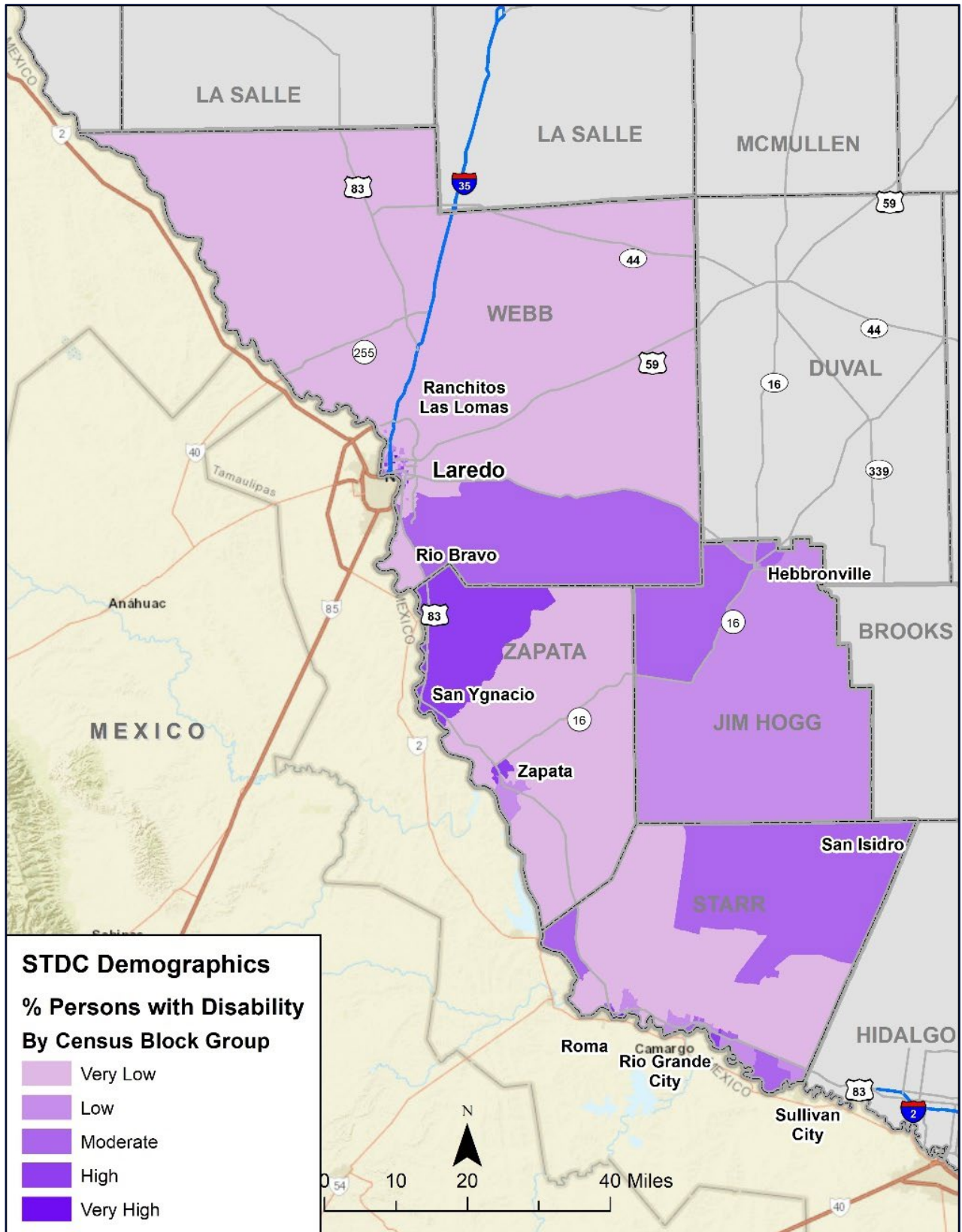
Minority Population

It is important to ensure that areas with an above average percentage of racial and/or ethnic minorities are not disproportionately impacted by any proposed alterations to existing public transportation services. The vast majority of the South Texas Region is composed of racial/ethnic minorities. Figure 3-10 depicts the percentage of minority persons above or below study area average of 97.2 percent per block group in the study area. This includes areas of Laredo, large portions of Zapata County, most of Jim Hogg County, and all of Starr County.

Low-Income Population

The second socioeconomic group included in the Title VI analysis represents those individuals who earn less than the federal poverty level. These individuals face financial hardships that may make the ownership and maintenance of a personal vehicle difficult. In such cases, they may be more likely to depend on public transportation. Figure 3-11 depicts block groups with low income individuals that are above or below the study area average of 32.1 percent. Much of the major places within the study area contain above average low income individuals such as Laredo, Zapata, Roma, and Rio Grande City. Other areas include Hebbronville, regions south of highway 59 in Webb County, most of Zapata County and the southeast portion of Starr County.

Limited-English Proficiency

In addition to providing public transportation for a diversity of socioeconomic groups, it is also important to serve and disseminate information to those of different linguistic backgrounds. Limited English Proficiency (LEP) population is a count of people who do not speak English as their primary language and their ability to speak English is less than "very well." Title VI's Safe Harbor Provision stipulates that recipients of federal funding must provide written translations of all "vital documents" for each language group with an LEP population that makes up 5 percent or 1,000 persons (whichever is less) of the total population of the service area.

As shown in Table 3-5, population residing inside STDC service area are a smaller group that speak only English (8.65%). Spanish is the most prevalent language in the entire region. The number of Spanish speaking LEP persons (133,642) within the STDC service region meets the Safe Harbor threshold which makes it mandatory for STDC to serve the Spanish speaking LEP populace in the service area and additionally provide all vital documents be translated and available in the Spanish language. A majority of the Spanish speaking LEP population in the whole region resides in Starr County.

Figure 3-10: Minority Individuals in the Study Area

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KFH Group Inc.
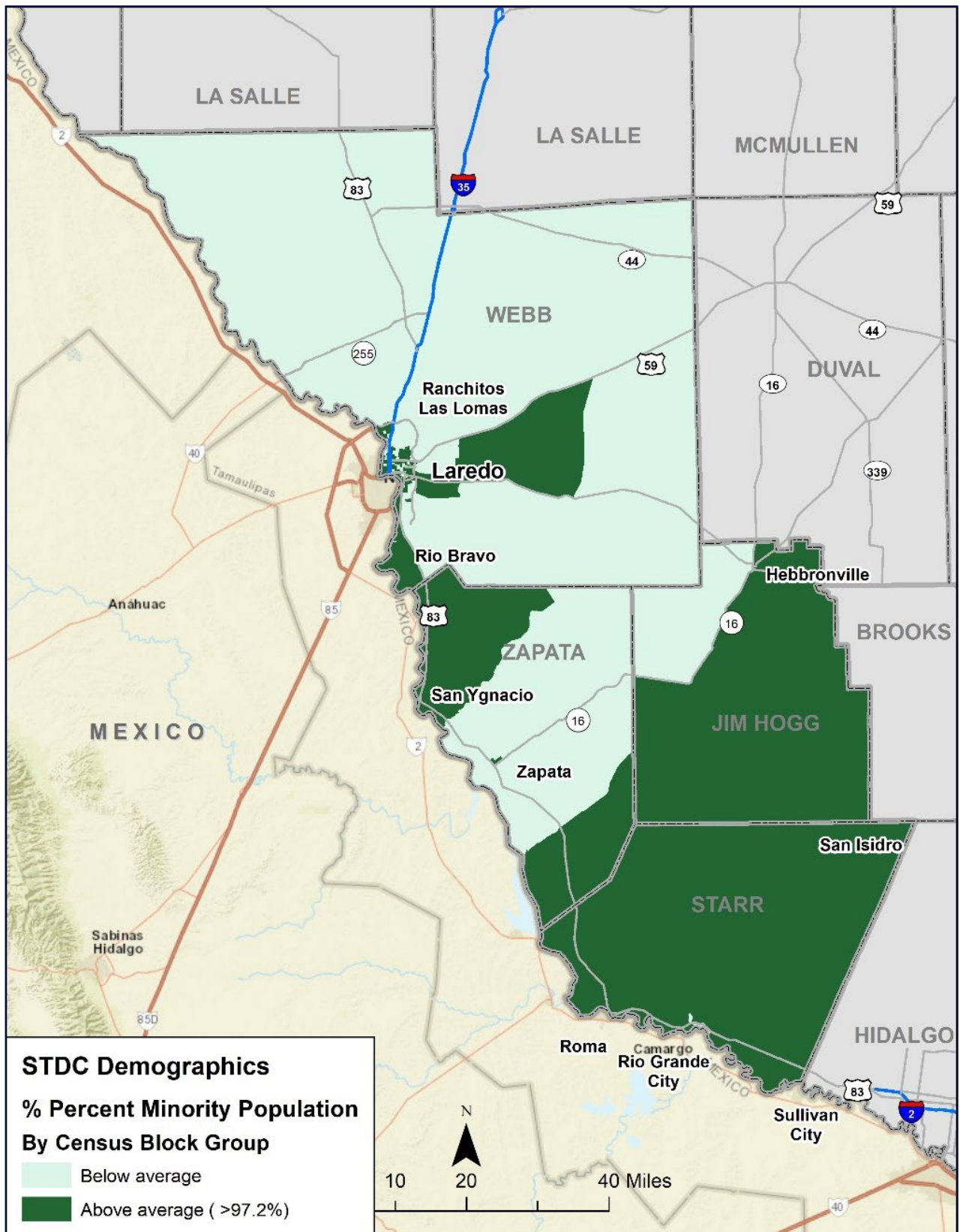
Figure 3-11: Individuals Below Poverty in the Study Area
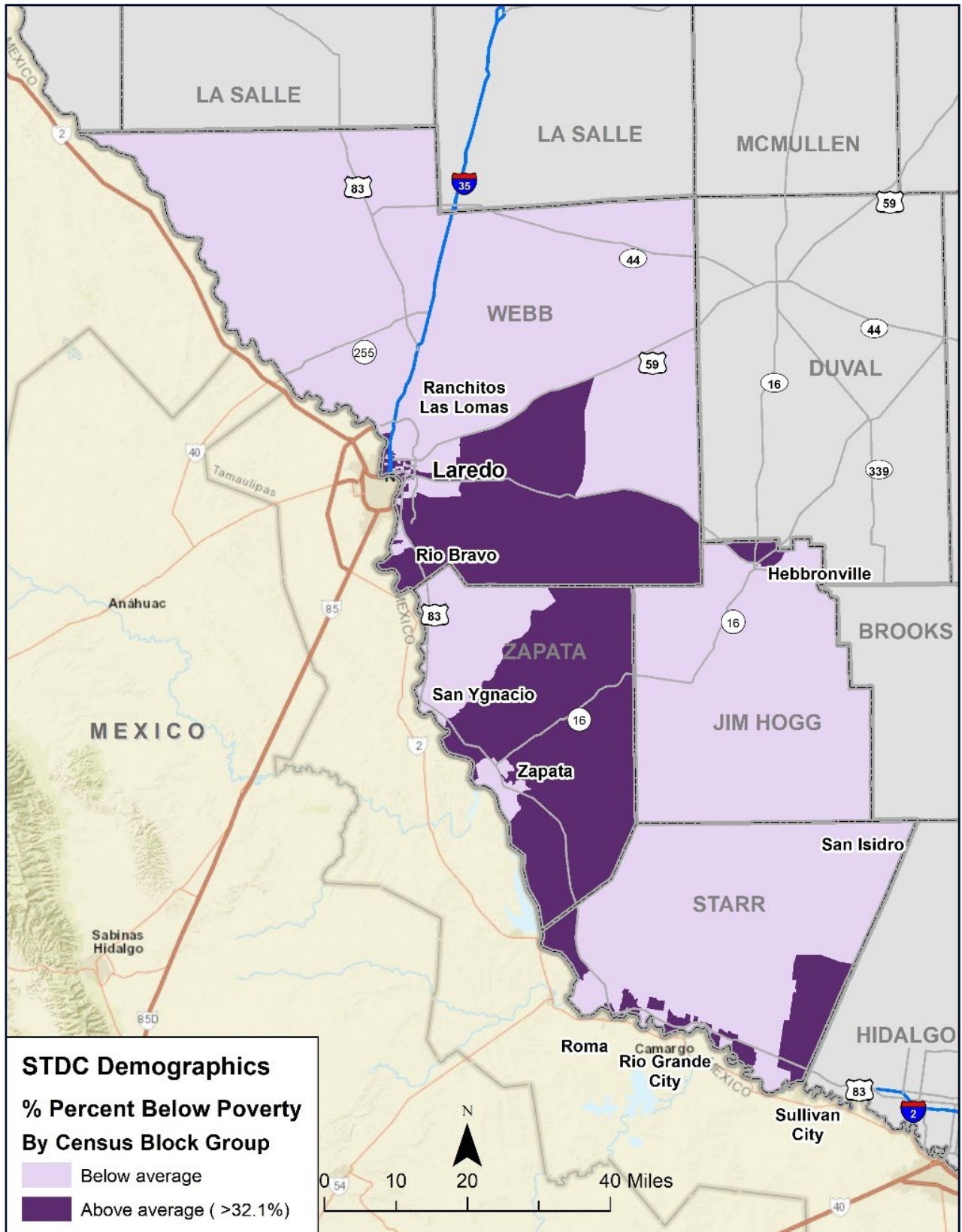
Table 3-5: Limited English Proficiency for STDC Service Area

	Webb County, Texas		Zapata County, Texas		Jim Hogg County, Texas		Starr County, Texas		Service Area Total	
Total population 5 years and over	236,875		12,747		4,927		56,360		310,909	
English Only	21,998	9.29%	1,389	10.9%	1,293	26.24%	2,206	3.9%	26,886	8.65%
LEP Population:	**# Estimated**	**% LEP of County Pop.**	**# Estimated**	**% LEP of County Pop.**	**# Estimated**	**% LEP of County Pop.**	**# Estimated**	**% LEP of County Pop.**	**# Estimated**	**% LEP of Total Service Area Pop.**
Spanish or Spanish Creole	**97,709**	**41.25%**	**6,066**	**47.6%**	920	18.67%	**28,947**	**51.36%**	**133,642**	**42.98%**
French (incl. Patois, Cajun)	0	0.0%	0	0.0%	24	0.5%	0	0.0%	24	0.0%
Italian	7	0.0%	0	0.0%	0	0.0%	0	0.0%	7	0.0%
German	0	0.0%	0	0.0%	0	0.0%	0	0.0%	62	0.1%
Other West Germanic Languages	0	0.0%	0	0.0%	0	0.0%	0	0.0%	0	0.0%
Greek	0	0.0%	0	0.0%	0	0.0%	0	0.0%	0	0.0%
Russian	26	0.0%	0	0.0%	0	0.0%	0	0.0%	26	0.0%
Polish	1	0.0%	0	0.0%	0	0.0%	0	0.0%	1	0.0%
Other Slavic languages	0	0.0%	0	0.0%	0	0.0%	0	0.0%	0	0.0%
Persian	0	0.0%	0	0.0%	0	0.0%	3	0.0%	3	0.0%
Hindi	43	0.0%	0	0.0%	0	0.0%	0	0.0%	43	0.0%
Other Indic Languages	58	0.0%	0	0.0%	0	0.0%	0	0.0%	58	0.0%
Other Indo-European languages	0	0.0%	0	0.0%	0	0.0%	0	0.0%	0	0.0%

	Webb County, Texas		Zapata County, Texas		Jim Hogg County, Texas		Starr County, Texas		Service Area Total	
Chinese	15	0.0%	0	0.0%	0	0.0%	0	0.0%	15	0.0%
Japanese	58	0.0%	0	0.0%	0	0.0%	0	0.0%	58	0.0%
Korean	55	0.0%	0	0.0%	0	0.0%	8	0.0%	55	0.0%
Mon-Khmer, Cambodian	0	0.0%	0	0.0%	0	0.0%	0	0.0%	0	0.0%
Vietnamese	47	0.0%	0	0.0%	0	0.0%	0	0.0%	47	0.0%
Other Asian Languages	91	0.0%	0	0.0%	0	0.0%	0	0.0%	91	0.0%
Tagalog	56	0.0%	0	0.0%	0	0.0%	22	0.0%	78	0.0%
Other Pacific Island Languages	0	0.0%	0	0.0%	0	0.0%	0	0.0%	0	0.0%
Hungarian	0	0.0%	0	0.0%	0	0.0%	0	0.0%	0	0.0%
Arabic	0	0.0%	0	0.0%	0	0.0%	0	0.0%	0	0.0%
Hebrew	0		0	0.0%	0	0.0%	0	0.0%	0	0.0%
African languages	0	0.0%	0	0.0%	0	0.0%	0	0.0%	0	0.0%
Other and Unspecified Languages	0	0.0%	0	0.0%	0	0.0%	4	0.0%	4	0.0%

Source: American Community Survey, Five-Year Estimates (2011-2015), Table B16001.

Land Use Profile

Major Trip Generators

Identifying land uses and major trip generators in the South Texas Region complemented the above demographic analysis by indicating where transit services may be most needed. Trip generators attract transit demand and include common origins and destinations, like multi-unit housing, major employers, medical facilities, educational facilities, non-profit and governmental agencies, and shopping centers.

Laredo is one of the major cities in South Texas, located just outside the study area. It has a concentration of a variety of trip generators and therefore is a major trip destination for the entire South Texas Region. Zapata, Hebbronville, and Rio Grande City also contain most of the major trip generator categories such as regional hospitals, major employers, higher educational facilities, big box grocery stores, human service agencies and multi-unit housing apartments. A comprehensive list of all major trip generators by category within the South Texas Region by place and county is provided in Appendix A while a summarized version of trip generator categories by place is illustrated in Figure 3-12. Key observations derived from the land use analysis by trip generator categories are as follows:

- **Medical:** Mission Regional Medical Center, Rio Grande Regional Hospital, and Cornerstone Regional Hospital are located in Hidalgo, which is just outside the study area. Rural Health at Starr County Memorial in Starr County, and Laredo Regional Medical Center in Webb County are the major regional hospitals within the study area as well as the major employers.

- **Shopping:** The only big box stores within the South Texas Region are grocery stores that include Walmart (often the largest trip generator), H-E-B, Border Town Food, and Lowes Food Market. Laredo is a prime shopping location in the study area with Walmart Supercenter, Target, and The Outlet Shoppes at Laredo (the only major retail shopping destination within the South Texas Region).

- **Education:** Zapata High School in Zapata County, Early College High School, Jose A. Valdez High School, Premier High School – Laredo, United South High School, and Lyndon B. Johnson High School in Webb County, Hebbronville High School in Jim Hogg County, and Grulla High School, Rio Grande City High School, Early College High School, Roma High School and San Isidro High School in Starr County. Texas A&M International University, Laredo College South Campus, and Laredo College in Webb County, and South Texas College in Starr County are the major regional colleges in the study area.

- **Human Service:** There are many human service agencies in the South Texas Region that include libraries, community centers, senior centers, homeless shelters, food pantries, civic buildings, correction facilities, nursing and assisted living facilities, and mental health and rehabilitation centers. Most of these agencies are located in the cities of each county.

- **Major Employers:** According to STDC data, major employers that are located in a single building or campus include regional hospitals/medical centers, assisted living and rehabilitation facilities and nursing homes, higher education facilities, detention centers and big box grocery stores in each county as identified above. A few additional major employers include banks, transportation facilities, business consulting firms and manufacturing industries, and suppliers and consultants in the energy and construction sector. A detailed list is provided in Appendix A.

- **Multi-family Housing:** Residential land uses are considered one of the important local trip generators. Multi-family housing communities with five or more units including affordable housing units are identified as major trip generators. Hillsboro in Hills County has a number of multi-unit housing apartments followed by Mexia in Limestone County. A few apartment buildings are also identified in Marlin, Fairfield, Whitney and Groesbeck. No multi-family housing was found in Bosque County.

- **Colonias:** In South Texas there are several neighborhoods that can be classified as colonias. Colonias are substandard housing developments, often found along the Texas-Mexico border, where residents lack basic services such as drinking water, sewage treatment, and paved roads. Many colonia residents lack access to personal automobiles and have low incomes. As a result, many residents of colonias have a need for affordable mobility options to access employment and basic goods and services. Figure 3-13 shows the location of colonias in the region. As shown, there are several colonias in the unincorporated areas near the major towns and cities in the region. In Starr County there are many colonias along the border.

Figure 3-12: Major Trip Generators in the Study ARea
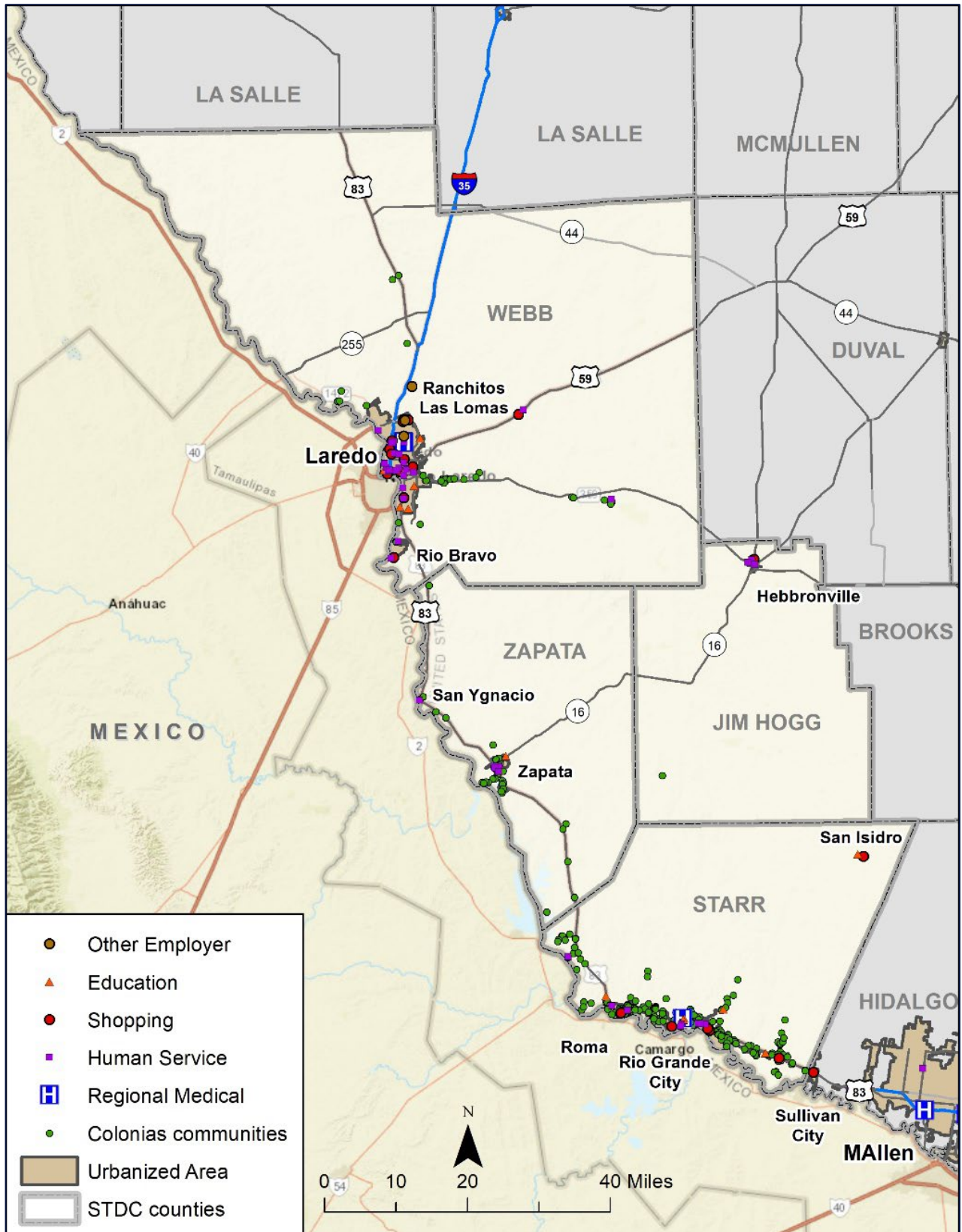
Figure 3-13: South Texas Region Colonias
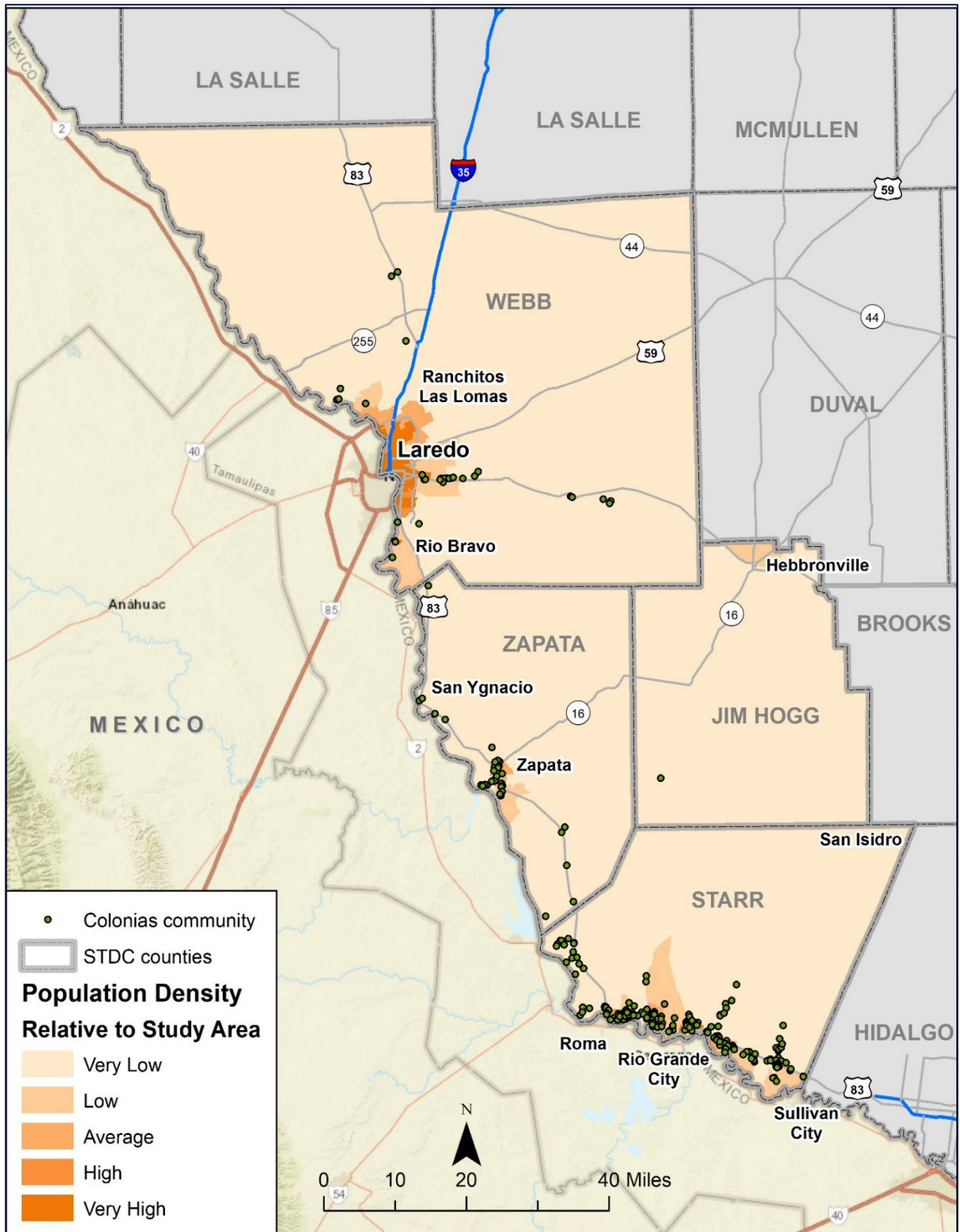
Employment Travel Patterns

In addition to considering the locations of major employers, it is also important to account for the commuting patterns of residents working inside and outside of the counties in the South Texas Region. According to 2019 ACS five-year estimates, the majority of South Texas residents work in the county in which they live. Starr and Jim Hoog County have the most out-of-county commuters. Also, a majority of South Texas Region residents (above 70 to 80%) drive alone to work, similar to the state average of 80.5 percent. Journey to work patterns are provided in Table 3-6.

Another source of data that provides an understanding of employee travel patterns is the Census Bureau's Longitudinal Employer-Household Dynamics (LEHD) dataset. As of 2018, the top six employment destinations for primary jobs[2] for residents in each county in the South Texas Region are provided in Table 3-7. Webb, Starr and Zapata counties are the top common employment destinations in addition to the county of residence. Webb County is also a major employment destination for residents of Zapata and Jim Hogg counties. Hidalgo County in the lower Rio Grande Valley is a popular employment destination for residents of Starr County.

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[2]According to US Census LEHD OnTheMap application, a primary job is the highest paying job for an individual worker for the year.

Table 3-6: Journey to Work Patterns for South Texas Region

	State of Texas		Webb County		Zapata County		Jim Hogg County		Starr County	
	Number	**Percent**	**Number**	**Percent**	**Number**	**Percent**	**Number**	**Percent**	**Number**	**Percent**
Total 16 years or older	13,115,511		108,124		4,910		1,863		21,143	
Location of Employment										
Worked in state of residence	12,986,844	99.0%	107,279	99.2%	4,910	100%	1.863	100%	20,764	98.2%
Worked In county of residence	10,077,404	77.6%	103,309	96.3%	4,173	85%	1,333	71.6%	16,315	78.6%
Worked outside county of residence	2,909,440	22.4%	3,970	3.7%	737	15.0%	530	28.4%	4,449	21.4%
Worked outside state of residence	128,667	1.0%	845	0.8%	0	0.0%	0	0.0%	379	1.8%
Means of Transportation to Work										
Car, truck, or van - drove alone	10,560,476	80.5%	88,263	81.6%	3,333	67.9%	1,343	72.1%	14,875	70.1%
Car, truck, or van - carpooled	1,308,229	10.0%	12,255	11.3%	1,186	24.2%	423	22.7%	3,747	17.7%
Public transportation (excluding taxicab)	181,273	1.4%	1,274	1.2%	0	0.0%	15	0.8%	58	0.3%
Walked	200,955	1.5%	1,675	**1.6%**	180	3.7%	22	1.2%	854	4.0%
Taxicab, motorcycle, bicycle, or other means	203,366	1.6%	1,614	1.5%	7	0.1%	28	1.5%	97	0.5%
Worked from home	661,212	5.0%	3,043	**2.8%**	204	4.2%	32	1.7%	1,512	7.2%

Source: ACS, Five-Year Estimates (2015 - 2019), Table B08130

Table 3-7: Top 6 Places of Work for the Residents of each County in South Texas Region

Webb County	
Location	**Percent**
Webb County, TX	82.1%
Bexar County, TX	2.6%
Hidalgo County, TX	2.1%
Zapata County, TX	1.3%
Cameron County, TX	1.0%
Nueces County, TX	1.0%
Others	9.8%

Zapata County	
Location	**Percent**
Zapata County, TX	51.9%
Webb County, TX	18.8%
Starr County, TX	5.6%
Hidalgo County, TX	4.4%
Bexar County, TX	1.9%
Maverick County, TX	1.6%
Others	15.1%

Jim Hogg County	
Location	**Percent**
Jim Hogg County, TX	44.9%
Webb County, TX	17.2%
Hidalgo County, TX	5.6%
Jim Wells County, TX	4.2%
Nueces County, TX	3.9%
Cameron County, TX	3.5%
Others	20.7%

Starr County	
Location	**Percent**
Starr County, TX	71.9%
Hidalgo County, TX	16.1%
Cameron County, TX	2.8%
Zapata County, TX	1.2%
Webb County, TX	0.9%
Nueces County, TX	0.8%
Others	6.3%

Source: Census Bureau, OnTheMap Application and LEHD Origin-Destination Employment Statistics, 2018.

Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats

The South Texas passenger transportation planning region consists of four public transit systems serving the same area, with little in the way of human service agency-operated transportation. The region is rural in nature, is located outside of Laredo and is complicated by a significant transit dependent population. This is coupled with the complexities of visitors from Mexico also needing transportation services.

The focus at this time is on making some basic changes to the services available: **improving connections** in the service area, developing a **marketing strategy** for rural services, and introducing a **new, more productive, and attractive service**.

This section summarizes the current strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats across the region. There are significant challenges facing the region, but it has the capability to affect the changes needed to grow and become relevant to a wider range of residents.

Strengths

The South Texas Region has high demand for transit services and professional transit operators that serve the community. Its strengths include:

- **Historically high demand for service** – The region is full of people that rely on passenger transportation services to get to their destinations particularly in the Laredo area. They are also in close proximity to Mexico with visitors needing transportation services. These reasons make public transit a popular mode.

- **Professional management** – Management is knowledgeable and skilled in transportation issues. They have the ability to adapt and change.

- **Tenured, veteran vehicle operators** – Experienced vehicle operators go a long way toward ensuring a safe, quality service.

Weaknesses

Like many planning areas, South Texas has to deal with long distance trip needs, lack of local funding and the difficult job of marketing services to rural communities.

- **Marketing in rural areas** – It is difficult for new services to be productive if residents do not know about the service. This includes outreach to communities that are served or are getting new service as well as branding and image. Cut-away vehicles are often indistinguishable from other institutional transportation services making it hard to tell if the vehicle is a "senior bus" or a public transit vehicle.

- **There is a lack of local funding** – Rural transit depends on matching funds. The counties and cities are not supporting the service. This is especially difficult in the very low-income counties in Texas. This is compounded when trying to serve high need rural areas like colonias.

- **Regional Connectivity** – There is limited service to Laredo from Zapata and Jim Hogg counties. Starr County service is oriented to the Lower Rio Grande Valley and has some connections to the McAllen area. Much of this service is limited in days of the week and time of day.

- **Service design** – Service design is not only about where the service goes. *When* the service operates is just as important. In order for services to be attractive to commuters, the vehicle has to arrive at a destination before 8:00 a.m. and depart well after 5:00 p.m. If shoppers would like to use the service a midday run is necessary so they don't have to spend more than eight hours at the destination.

Opportunities

There are a number of opportunities for transit providers and human service agencies to initiate at low or no cost that will have a significant positive impact on service. This review will show that with the exception of Limestone County, current service is not generating the potential ridership in the region. There are activities that can be undertaken to improve ridership.

- **Urban/rural coordination** – Many service providers in the region have an excellent working relationship. El Aguila and El Metro should continue their success in working to provide connections that are beneficial to residents by reducing the number of transfers required for passengers.

- **Branding** – Rural transit needs to distinguish itself from senior centers and prisons by branding that gives recognition of their service to the community. Grassroots branding can make a difference. It must look and sound professional.

- **Sponsorships** – It is possible to generate private sector funding through sponsorships. Walmart, HEB, and United have all contributed to/funded transportation in a significant way.

- **Continue coordination in rural areas** – Transit providers should seek out new opportunities in human services and health care services. Human service focused transportation, sometimes funded through the FTA Section 5310 grant program, can do a good job filling in the gaps of public transit with specialized services.

Threats

The biggest threat is that services will lack funding to support rural services in the region. El Aguila, REAL and Valley Metro are already stretched thin just maintaining the current services they provide and will need local support to expand services.

- **Local funding** – The lack of local funding severely limits growth. This is particularly difficult when trying to expand service to high need rural areas such as colonias.

- **Image in the community** – Similar to a number of other systems, rural transit services in the region are often seen as the senior bus. There is a need for supporters of transit in each community. Rural transit needs to build a brand and become visible in each community and subsequently build support.

Stakeholder Engagement and Public Outreach Efforts

As part of this coordinated planning effort, a variety of public, community, and stakeholder outreach activities were held to ascertain the overall attitudes toward passenger transportation, mobility needs, and potential strategies to meet those needs in South Texas. Due to the current pandemic, a variety of web-based interactions and interviews using COVID protocols outlined by the Center for Disease Control were also used. The major activities held included:

- Regional Stakeholder Interviews
- Human Service Provider Interviews
- Public Transit Provider Interviews

This section details the findings of each outreach effort including agencies interviewed, needs identified, and potential strategies discussed.

Regional Stakeholder Interviews

As part of this outreach effort regional stakeholders were interviewed. Regional stakeholders consist primarily of governmental planning and regulatory agencies with a vested interest in passenger transportation in South Texas. Eleven people were interviewed directly by the project team which included members of:

- Texas Department of Transportation
- South Texas Development Council
- Community Development Department
- Economic Development Department
- Laredo Metropolitan Planning Organization
- Lower Rio Grande Valley Development Council

Participants gave a variety of information pertinent to this planning effort. On the following pages, input received is organized by theme. Several participants gave similar input, and some topics and themes are consolidated.

Service Area and Locations

- Most of the regional trip needs in Zapata County are for service to Laredo. Valley Metro currently provides service to Laredo from Zapata County even though the city is outside the Valley Metro Service area. This stretches Valley Metro services in the county thin for local trip availability.

- There are needs for medical and veterans travel from the South Texas Region to some of the large and specialized medical facilities in Corpus Christi.

- Webb County rural transportation services have expanded considerably since the last plan with more areas around Laredo being served. El Aguila is operating more fixed route services and has expanded pilot projects to serve colonias in the region.

- Most regional passenger transportation needs in Starr County and Rio Grande City are to the Lower Rio Grande Valley and McAllen area.

- Veterans have the need to travel outside of the region, particularly to Temple and Fort Worth.

Service Parameters

- Using rural transportation services in the region to access employment can be difficult as some service availability is not conducive to work hours.

- Many interviewees noted that weekend service for shopping or service industry jobs was desired.

Infrastructure

- Sidewalk and pedestrian facilities in Laredo are lacking. This prevents El Metro from expanding services in certain areas.

- El Metro is planning new transfer facilities on the periphery of the service area to improve connections with El Aguila.

Funding

- There is a need for local support of transportation services. Most rural services are funded through federal and state sources.

- There is a need for additional services supported by the FTA Section 5310 grant program for older adults and persons with disabilities. Section 5310 services are a good way to fill in the gaps of the public transit network, however there has been limited success getting awarded these grants in the past in South Texas.

- There has been limited success implementing sponsorship strategies, as suggested in the last coordination plan.

Coordination

- El Metro and El Aguila need to continue and expand on coordination success to improve connections, reduce duplication and reduce transfers, while understanding that sometimes these goals are mutually exclusive.

- There has been limited success coordinating with the VA to get veterans to Laredo and Corpus Christi.

- There are vehicles in the region, often vans owned by human service agencies, that are underutilized or in disrepair. There may be potential for counties or transportation agencies to help maintain these vehicles and/or use them to help expand services.

Service Type

- App based dial-a-ride service may be a viable solution for El Metro to expand service to areas of Laredo not suitable for fixed routes and large heavy duty transit vehicles.

- It is much easier for rural residents to schedule medical transportation services than it is to use rural transit to access employment. There are additional resources for medical trips. There is not enough regional emphasis on commuter and employment transportation.

Human Service Provider Interviews

As part of this process, the KFH Group engaged human service representatives that help clients with transportation issues. Some of these agencies provide specialized transportation and some help clients secure transportation services. These agencies have a unique perspective on the transportation needs of those most vulnerable in the community and those most likely to need transportation services the most. Eight individuals were interviewed including representatives of:

- Area Agency on Aging
- Community Services Department
- Gateway Community Health Center
- Rio Grande City Nutrition Center
- Workforce Solutions for South Texas
- Las Flores Adult Day Care
- United Way

The discussion of needs and strategies is summarized by topic. The conversations regarding needs and strategies were centered on continuing to improve services in the region for those that need it most, in particular low-income residents and seniors.

Service Area

- There is need for increased non-Medicaid medical transportation services into Laredo, McAllen and Corpus Christi.

- Valley Metro service in Starr County has been tremendously helpful to human service clients and commuters.

- Rural residents in colonias are still under served. These communities are in dire need of transportation services. The residents in Zapata County do not understand how to use the services.

Trip Purpose

- Medical trips are easier to access than other trips in the region due to Medicaid transportation options and other scheduled services to medical facilities. Rural transportation for shopping and employment can be more difficult to schedule.

- There is a need for expanded veteran transportation options for shopping, employment, etc., and to go to VA facilities in Laredo and Corpus Christi.

- Students in Jim Hogg County and Zapata County need transportation services to access educational opportunities in Laredo. There are also student transportation needs to the Texas A&M Campus in Kingsville.

Marketing

- Many residents in Jim Hogg and Webb counties are unaware of transportation services available to them. Even if residents are aware of El Agulia or REAL, they perceive the services as "the special bus." Expanding community outreach efforts will help people become aware of public transit as well as help improve ridership.

- Some younger residents think of the rural services in the region as a system for older adults.

- Upgrading rural service vehicles to differentiate them from other plain white institutional buses would help the agencies stand out.

Coordination

- A regional fare would greatly help lower income residents, particularly in rural areas, to allow them to use services without paying multiple fares.

- Interviewees notes that a one-call-one-click service for regional transportation services would be helpful for human service organizations trying to help their clients navigate regional trip planning.

- Public transit agencies and healthcare providers should attempt to coordinate services to help better serve residents trying to access medical appointments. It was noted that occasionally appointments are missed because the rural demand response schedules are already full when a trip request is made.

COVID 19

- Many nutrition centers in the area have a van for transporting residents. During the pandemic the congregate meal centers closed and started using vehicles for meal delivery. This led to social isolation of many residents.

- The pandemic presented significant problems to many human service clients making it difficult to get safely to shopping and medical appointments. Many human service clients were skipping medical appointments because they did not feel comfortable using transportation services or being in a doctor's office.

Public Transit Provider Interviews

The project team conducted interviews of the public transit agencies in the region: El Metro, El Aguila, REAL and Valley Metro. This section summarizes the findings of those meetings.

El Metro Interview

The El Metro interview included the Planning Manager and Operations Analyst for the system. The interview lasted one hour and covered three major topics:

- **Covid 19**: The pandemic hit El Metro particularly hard with ridership being well below 50 percent of the previous year. While ridership suffered nationwide due to the pandemic, border crossing restrictions coupled with normal declines in ridership significantly impacted El Metro. El Metro has used the increase in COVID related funding to secure vehicles and ensure their fleet is up to date.

- **Facilities**: El Metro has been studying and planning for new transfer locations at the edges of their current fixed route system. The new transfer locations will be ideal connection points for other

service providers in the region, particularly El Aguila. It will also help reduce duplication of service to downtown Laredo and save El Aguila the burden of taking their vehicles to the city center.

- **Service Types**: El Metro is limited on what areas of Laredo they can serve due to the roadway and pedestrian infrastructure in the city. Many streets are not able to handle the large heavy duty transit vehicles operated by the system, and they do not have the sidewalk infrastructure to support fixed route. A zone based, app hailing or dial-a-ride service may be a solution to serving residents in this area with a first mile/last mile service using smaller vehicles.

El Aguila Interview

An interview was conducted with the Director of the El Aguila Rural Transit System. El Aguila operates rural transportation in Webb County and the system has made several improvements to their service since the last coordinated plan. Several topics were discussed and are listed below.

- **Service types:** El Aguila has grown its services since the last coordinated plan. In 2016 they were primarily operating 24-hour-in-advance rural demand response service. Today they also operate six rural fixed routes and a flex route. They have started a pilot project serving a previously unserved colonia in Webb County and they are currently looking into the possibility of a shopping shuttle that would serve different parts of the county on different days of the week. Marketing new services has been a struggle and it sometimes takes several months for services to reach optimal ridership.

- **Funding:** There is a lack of local funding to support the expansion of needed rural transportation services in Webb County. Webb County offers $100,000 of in-kind funding to help with matching funds for federal grant programs, and the county motor pool completes the preventative maintenance of El Aguila vehicles. As much of COVID funding has been eliminated, El Aguila is concerned about operational and vehicle replacement funding in the future. El Aguila will need some facility upgrades within the planning horizon of this effort. With the limited budget of Webb County, El Aguila is interested in nontraditional funding sources to support their services.

- **Operations:** Webb County is the sixth largest county in Texas. The deadhead required to get to the far reaches of the county and serve the more rural customers is not cost effective. This coupled with poor conditions of many rural roads increases the wear and tear on transit vehicles, further driving up the costs.

REAL Interview

An hour-long interview was conducted with the current Director of REAL which provides rural public transportation for Jim Hogg County. The interview focused mostly on the regional needs of county residents. The topics discussed include:

- **Regional and interregional trip needs**: Most regional trip needs for Jim Hogg County residents are for accessing medical appointments in Laredo. It was noted that several residents need non-

emergency medical transportation (NEMT) services to Corpus Christi which REAL provides on a limited basis. Veterans in particular need access to VA medical facilities in Corpus Christi.

- **Coordination**: REAL has an excellent working relationship with the other public transportation systems in deep south Texas. It was noted that there could be better coordination with Jim Hogg County, which operates some Section 5310 service in Hebbronville to avoid duplication and better utilize agency and county resources.

Valley Metro Interview

Valley Metro operates fixed route service in Starr County and demand response service in Starr and Zapata counties. In addition, Valley Metro operates much of the rural transportation in the adjacent Lower Rio Grande Valley region. An hour-long interview with the Director of Valley Metro was conducted focusing on service provision and coordination. Specific items discussed include the following:

- **Ridership:** Ridership was significantly impacted due to the pandemic, especially in Starr County where some services had to be suspended. Starr County is the most productive county in the South Texas planning area with local fixed routes in Rio Grande City and regional routes connecting Roma, Rio Grande City and the McAllen area. Colonias in the Starr County area are places of high transit demand with several low-income residents needing mobility options to conduct their daily business.

- **Operations:** Zapata County is very rural and the farthest away from the core of Valley Metro operations. As such operations can be difficult in cycling out vehicles for preventative maintenance as well as scheduling needed trips into Laredo (outside of the Valley Metro service area).

Gap Analysis

By coupling the demographic analysis, inventory of current services, and outreach efforts, service gaps and unmet needs are revealed. Table 3-8 summarizes these service gaps and unmet needs by:

- Geographic Location
- Time Related
- Population Analysis
- Transportation Service Type

- Marketing and Outreach
- Technology
- Funding
- Coordination

Table 3-8: Gap Analysis and Need Assessment Summary

📍 *Gaps and Needs:* Geographic Location

Inter-Regional Services

There is a need to access regional medical services in Corpus Christi throughout the region.

Starr County has significant trip needs in the Lower Rio Grande Valley.

Intra-County Service

Rural areas of Jim Hogg, Webb and Zapata counties indicated most of their regional trip needs are going into Laredo.

Are

⏱ *Gaps and Needs:* Time Related

In order for services to be used by commuters, arrival in the morning can be no later than 8:00 a.m. and the last departure no earlier than 6:00 p.m.

📈 *Gaps and Needs:* Population and Ridership

COVID had a significant impact on ridership not only due to the decrease of travel by ordinary customers but also due to restrictions on entry from Mexico.

Colonias continue to be areas of high need and many lower income residents are without access to a personal vehicle.

Older adults, lower income families and people with disabilities are the populations with the highest need. During the pandemic, many older adults and people with disabilities became isolated due to the lack of available services.

🚕🚌 *Gaps and Needs:* Transportation Service Type

There is a need for specialized transportation services for older adults and people with disabilities to fill in the gaps of the public transit network.

App based on-demand services using small vehicles can be a solution for accessing parts of Laredo outside of the current fixed route system that are not suitable for large heavy duty transit vehicles.

📢 *Gaps and Needs:* Marketing and Outreach

Branding of services should be a first step in implementing a marketing program for rural services. A system name and color scheme are, like any other business, an essential element to marketing

the service – a prudent business consideration. Differentiating between service types is an important aspect of marketing transit services.

There is a need for expanded outreach/marketing of transportation services and options for human service agency staff and the people they serve, who may be unaware of transportation services available to them.

Many residents of the region are unaware of transportation services available to them, and increased marketing and education are needed. Specific events and marketing efforts should be planned to raise awareness of mobility options.

There is a need to address the regional one-call center that has been discussed in previous planning efforts but never implemented.

Gaps and Needs: **Technology**

Technology can be used more extensively to communicate options for demand response customers and provide them with real-time arrival information.

Improved service and technology integration is needed between transportation providers, and that would allow expanded use of mobile applications across agencies and be a component of regional fare integration.

Gaps and Needs: **Funding**

Local funding support is needed to increase transportation services in the region. This could include private sector funding.

There can be greater use of FTA Section 5310 grant program funds administered by TxDOT to expand service for seniors and persons with disabilities in the region.

Cont'd...

Coordination of Services

El Metro and El Aguila need to sustain their coordination successes as new transfer locations are developed in Laredo ensuring timed and seamless connections between the systems.

There is a need to coordinate with veteran organizations to improve veteran mobility in the rural areas of the region.

Summary of Overall Needs

When combining the demographic, land-use, and commuter trends contained within this section, the following needs and themes emerge:

- The population growth in the South Texas Region has been on the rise in the past five years, with some variation in the smaller counties, and the future population is expected to decline slowly in the next three decades according to the latest population projections.

- The TDIP analysis showed that a high percentage of population (nearly 60% and above) is transit dependent in most parts of the South Texas Region (especially in counties). Even though these areas are mostly rural, a high percentage of people residing in them belong to one or more of the transit dependency cohorts. Additionally, a large portion of the area has a high number of seniors that live outside the cities.

- While Laredo is the major trip destination for the South Texas Region, Zapata, Rio Grande City, Roma, and Hebbronville also qualify as important trip origins and destinations due to the concentration of a variety of trip generators such as regional hospitals, major employers, higher educational facilities, big box grocery stores, human service agencies and multi-unit housing apartments. Colonias continue to be a major trip generator, but can be difficult for public transit to serve due to the lack of paved roads to access the locations.

- The journey to work data postulates that a smaller percentage of the South Texas Region workers commute to neighboring counties for employment. The largest employment locations for primary jobs are in Webb, Starr, and Zapata counties which make up roughly over one-third of the top work destinations.

Section 4:
Planning for Comprehensive Services

Introduction

South Texas Development Council (STDC), representing four rural counties has been the lead rural planning agency since 1956. It is focused on community services and economic development for the rural areas of the region particularly for low-income residents, older adults and people with disabilities. STDC has established an excellent working relationship with the area transit providers El Metro, El Aguila, REAL and Valley Metro as well as the various human service transportation providers and other human service agencies that represent clients with mobility and transportation needs. Without question, STDC has demonstrated, time and again, their capacity to plan comprehensively and work with local agencies to improve mobility options for South Texas residents.

Comprehensive Planning

As the region's council of governments, STDC conducts a wide range of activities that require a comprehensive planning effort. As stated above, STDC has been operating transit since the 1950s when they helped coordinate aging programs, persons with disabilities, Medicaid transportation and a variety of other community development programs.

This five-year plan includes the wide variety of human services managed by STDC, including, but not limited to: Aging Programs; Community Development, Economic Development, Regional Transportation, Disability Services and Workforce. These programs and the transportation aspects are all planned through STDC as part of their mission. In addition, STDC works closely with the state MHMR to ensure transportation for their clients. STDC also works with a consortium of regional health and human service advocates and agencies including veteran organizations. They also work closely with all Section 5310 providers in the region including transit agencies, congregate meal centers and other specialized human service transportation providers in the region.

The final piece of the puzzle is coordination with non-emergency Medicaid transportation (NEMT). This activity is recommended in a subsequent section. NEMT has far more funding and transportation need than all of the other programs combined. Further NEMT funds are treated as local match for rural areas, increasing their value to a rural transit system.

Currently, there are five out of state brokers that schedule NEMT services in the region with a network of private for-profit transportation providers.

Summary

STDC conducts much of the planning for comprehensive services in house, as part of their overall responsibility for most of the programs engaged in transportation. In addition, STDC works closely with the human service agencies that are housed outside of their organization. STDC will continue to work closely with human service and healthcare providers.

Section 5:
Integrated Planning Process

Introduction

The four rural counties that comprise the South Texas study area have had little in the way of planning beyond the coordinated planning process, until recently. The planning that was conducted was usually in-house at STDC, the Laredo - Webb MPO or by El Metro. These plans are reviewed as follows.

Previous Regional Plans

This section reviews previous regional plans to ensure that this coordinated planning effort does not conflict with other passenger transportation plans in the region.

2021-2024 Laredo – Webb MPO Transportation Improvement Program

The Laredo – Webb MPO develops Transportation Improvement Programs (TIPs), which become part of the State Transportation Improvement Program (STIP). The latest TIP was approved in May 2020 in cooperation with state and local transit operators. Proposed transit improvement projects (revised April 2018) include:

- Construction and improvement of small passenger shelters, information kiosks and rail storage/maintenance facilities.

- Bus transfer facilities where minor amounts of additional land are required.

- Transit operating assistance, preventative maintenance of transit vehicles and facilities.

- Acquisition of third-party transit services, and transit marketing, and mobility management/ coordination.

- Purchase of new buses and rail cars to replace existing vehicles or for minor fleet expansions.

2015 Laredo – Webb County MPO Texas Urban Mobility Plan

The Laredo – Webb MPO completed this plan in 2015, which was prepared by TxDOT, U.S. DOT, FHA and FTA. The plan recommends relieving congestion and improving safety by eliminating level-of-service "F" conditions which would result in greater reliability and benefits to the public. Safety features such as intersection improvements, traffic signal enhancements and intelligent transportation system deployment were recommended. The plan also covers need for enhancing infrastructure maintenance and the overall transportation system to support economic development.

2017 Five Year Public Transit Human-Service Transportation Plan

This plan was completed in 2017 for the following transportation providers in the South Texas region:

- El Metro – City of Laredo/Laredo Transit Management Inc.
- El Aguila Rural Transit System – Webb County Community Action Agency
- Valley Metro – Lower Rio Grande Valley Development Council
- Rural Economic Assistance League, Inc. (REAL Inc.)

The plan includes multiple coordination strategies and recommendations for facility planning, public information and other coordination efforts.

The STDC recommended securing a site to plan and develop a south end transfer facility near some medical, shopping and college hubs in the area. This was previously established by a comprehensive transit plan by the City of Laredo and El Metro. Potential partners needed to secure the site include: City of Laredo, El Metro, El Aguila, South Texas Development Council (STDC), TxDOT, and Laredo Community College.

The STDC identified the need for a Regional Mobility Manager with the aid of the providers, funding agencies and other interested stakeholders. The Mobility Manager would provide centralized leadership and assist stakeholders and regional providers with partnerships and fund a regional network of transit services. Tasks include seeking public/private funding and partnerships, coordinating various operators and timed meets in the Laredo area, coordinating human service transportation, conducting potential rideshare and vanpool efforts, and organizing and staff committees.

One key project is developing rural bus stop connectivity, including an agreement between El Metro and El Aguila to share stops with a modified closed-door policy to better serve the passengers and improve connections. Rural connectivity would also be served by supporting a south side transit center, and increasing the number of stops along US-83 in the Roma-Rio Grande City Corridor. The Mobility Manager would also work with colonias advocacy groups and partners to secure funding to service colonias in the region.

2017 STDC Title VI Plan

This plan was completed in 2017 for STDC to assist limited English proficient (LEP) persons to access transit options in south Texas through the South Texas Regional Coordination Transportation Plan (STRCTP) as well as through bilingual staff in the South Texas Development Council. The STRCTP was created to provide coordination to channel resources consistent with state and federal requirements. To do this, the STDC created a forum to bring together all stakeholders in the area including community organizations, state and local government agencies, transit providers and users of public transportation services.

Public Transportation Provider Plans

2016 El Metro Transit Development Plan

The latest plan was completed in 2016 for El Metro Transit in coordination with the City or Laredo Planning Department and Laredo Transit Management, Inc (El Metro). The plan's topics included fleet replacement, modifying poor performance routes, an automated bus pass system, a new operations and fleet maintenance facility, bus stop improvements, improved frequency on higher performing routes, and implementation of new routes. The plan points out that by 2021, almost half of all buses in the fleet would be past its minimum useful life and that new routes would not be possible without replacing the existing fleet. The plan also pointed out the need for funding these specific short- and long-term needs: bus stop inventory/safe conditions analysis, structural systemwide study and a comprehensive operational analysis.

Previous studies in the region include a 2011 Bus Rapid Transit Feasibility Study for Laredo, and the Laredo 2040 Metropolitan Transportation Plan (MTP).

2017 Lower Rio Grande Valley Transportation Coordination Plan

This plan was prepared for Lower Rio Grande Valley Development Council (LRGVDC) and the Regional Transportation Advisory Panel (RTAP) as an update to the 2011 plan to focus on implementing strategies to eliminate gaps in services. The plan notes that the best way to support the needs of human service agency clients and transit dependent riders is to focus on excellent public transportation rather than expensive one-on-one specialized service (with exceptions). For example, the plan notes that to build the public transit network and maximize ridership, the region needs a coordinated effort to provide fixed-route and fixed-schedule services in rural areas. To do this, the plan describes five key goals: improving the quality of customers' transit experience, providing increased transit alternatives to people in the region, coordinating transit agency functions, improving the image of transit across the region and developing a fiscal system for transit in the region.

2021 Comprehensive Operational Analysis of El Metro

This Comprehensive Operational Analysis (COA) of El Metro provides a great opportunity to understand the challenges facing El Metro today and develop recommendations to improve the system's service, efficiency, and effectiveness and prepare Laredo for a bright future. The COA consisted of the following tasks:

- Stakeholder Engagement
- Background Data Analysis
- System Efficiency and Effectiveness Review
- Gap Analysis
- El Metro Network Plan
- Supporting Recommendations
- Implementation Plan
- Scheduling and Runcutting

The goals of the COA and its recommendations are to:

1. Improve transit service by increasing frequencies and improving route alignments.

2. Enhance the customer experience through increases in service efficiency and effectiveness, connections within the system and with other providers and maintaining excellent service through the pandemic.

3. Expand El Metro's value to Laredo.

Section 6:
South Texas Coordination Goals and Objectives

Introduction

One of elements of the updated five-year regionally coordinated transportation plan is the development of clearly articulated goals for meeting unmet needs, expanding mobility, and improving the efficiency of service delivery in the region – and objectives for achieving these goals.

These goals and objectives were fully developed through a deliberative process actively involving the key regional stakeholders. This section presents the goals and objectives designed to help guide the coordinated transportation planning process. It begins with a review of 2017 goals followed by the 2022 Coordination Goals and Objectives.

Review of 2017 Goals

2017 Goal No. 1 – Enhance the quality of the customer's travel experience.

Status: There has been significant progress made on this goal since 2017. Rural services including new fixed route services in Webb County and Starr County have been implemented increasing access to the transportation network for those that need it most. In addition, the urban service in Laredo has continued to plan and implement service and infrastructure improvements that benefit transit customers in the city. There are still additional improvements that can be implemented and the transit systems in the region continue to work on this effort.

2017 Goal No. 2 – Expand the availability of services to those who are unserved.

Status: This goal has seen significant progress since 2017. El Agulia in Webb County has expanded services and implemented pilot projects to serve high need areas in their service area. In addition, Valley Metro has implements fixed route services connecting Starr County to the Lower Rio Grande Valley.

2017 Goal No. 3 – Increase the cost-effectiveness and efficiency of service delivery.

Status: This goal has been partially achieved with El Aguila operating new and more cost-effective services. Regional transportation partners continue to work on connecting services and avoiding duplication where possible. More work can be done to improve cost effectiveness with potential new service models that improve productivity without significant increases in cost. This can be achieved by a transition from 24 hour in advanced rural demand response to fixed route or mobility on demand/microtransit where appropriate.

2017 Goal No. 4 – Investigate new sources of local revenue for public transit through partnerships, sponsorships, and contracting for service.

Status: This goal has largely been unachieved and is still a major concern for local passenger transportation providers in the region.

2017 Goal No. 5 – Establish and sustain communications and decision-making mechanisms among sponsors and stakeholders to guide effective implementation of the Regional Public Transportation Coordination Plan.

Status: This has not been accomplished beyond the excellent working relationship among the regional transit providers.

2017 Goal No. 6 – Improve the image of transit across the region.

Status: With the improvement of rural services in the region the image of transit has improved. The pandemic has hindered the growth of transit service and work in the post-covid reality must be done to keep the strong regional image of transit in the community.

Overarching Goal

For each of our projects we have one overarching goal which we believe is shared by all of our clients:

Help provide for more trips for more people while providing cost effective, high quality, and safe transportation for our community.

Coordination Project Goals and Objectives

These are the study goals that directed the planning effort.

Goal No. 1: Ensure sustainability for existing and new services

This goal seeks to strengthen the support for new and existing transportation services. There is a significant need for local support of transportation services particularly if services are to be expanded. There is also a need for expanded grant support to help fill in he gaps in transportation services in the region.

Objectives

    a. Develop partnerships and sponsorships with private and public sectors.
        i. There are a number of sponsorship and partnership opportunities available for all sizes of businesses

    b. Secure additional vehicles to meet the needs, as necessary.

    c. Secure Section 5310 funds to enhance services for seniors and persons with disabilities.

    d. Seek federal COVID funding and other funding for expanded service.

    e. Now is the time to plan. STDC, urban and rural transit operators, and human service providers should have grant applications ready to go when the plan is complete.

    f. Seek sustaining federal, state, and local support for existing pilot projects in the region.

Goal No. 2: Continue to expand services to communities that need transportation services the most

The South Texas region is one of the lowest income planning regions in the state of Texas. As such there are many areas of high needs in both the urban and rural areas. This is particularly true for colonias, where multi-generational housing coupled with low incomes and limited access to personal vehicles make it difficult to travel. In addition, many of these areas do not have the roadway or pedestrian infrastructure to support public transit services.

Objectives

a. Continue to assess ways to serve colonias in the rural areas of the region.

b. Use Section 5310 grant programs to expand specialized services to older adults or people with disabilities that may have trouble navigating the public transit systems.

c. Coordinate with local municipalities and counties to improve roadway networks and pedestrian infrastructure in ways that can support public transit vehicles and pedestrian access to bus stops.

Goal No. 3: Deploy strategies to improve service, coordination and generate higher ridership

This critical goal seeks to ensure that the most appropriate services are deployed using the right tools for the assignment. Strategies include addressing unmet needs, improving service performance and seeking coordination opportunities.

Objectives

a. Develop strategies to serve the unmet needs:
   i. Introduce new service designs and strategies to serve the existing riders as well as those with unmet needs.
   ii. Address regional service issues such as appropriate connections with El Metro.
   iii. Address local service issues such as first mile/last mile connections on the outlying areas of Laredo.

b. Develop strategies to improve transportation performance and efficiency of service delivery:
   i. Continue to improve internal operations:
      1. Ensure internal staffing to meet the needs
      2. Continue to ensure low vehicle operator turnover
   ii. Improve service for rural service providers and other local human service and health care transportation services through coordinated training and vehicle maintenance.
   iii. Invest in the latest technologies as needed and appropriate.
   iv. Seek improvements in operating efficiencies as appropriate.

c. Coordinate services by reducing siloed services:
   i. Seek economies of scale. Transit services can virtually always gain through economies of scale.
   ii. Develop strategies to improve coordination and reduce costs:
      1. NEMT service should be coordinated with each public transit system.
      2. Continue to coordinate with Veterans Transportation services.

Goal No. 4: Plan for new services

While the region has seen significant growth in fixed route services, particularly connecting rural areas of Webb County to Laredo as well as Starr County to the McAllen area, there is potential to expand services and changes service delivery to better accommodate transit customers and local residents. This includes examining where a transition for the 1990's model of transit service delivery to the 2020's model for service delivery.

Objectives

- Assess feasibility for mobility on demand/microtransit services in appropriate areas.

- Look for cost neutral service changes that will improve productivity.

- Coordinate with El Metro to ensure timed connections with rural services at new and existing transfer points.

Section 7:
Sustainability and Implementation Planning: Strategies

Introduction

This section reviews the region's ability to sustain its coordinated planning efforts. At the same time, it examines STDC and its regional transportation partners efforts to implement the services in the region.

These activities focus on the process of sustaining the planning effort which had become unsustainable.

Organizational Infrastructure – Capacity

South Texas Development Council, representing four counties, has been assisting in the planning of rural community and human services since the mid-1950s. While STDC has the capacity to sustain planning efforts and help its regional partners implement transit programs, it must ensure that it can demonstrate that capacity to funding and regulatory agencies.

Demonstrate STDC Capacity

STDC is in a unique position as an agency that leads the coordinated planning effort in South Texas and houses many human service programs and functions that have a transportation component and need to them. Additionally, STDC has an excellent working relationship with the transportation providers in the South Texas region. To build upon this success STDC must demonstrate the agency's capacity to continue this work and expand upon it when needed. This is particularly important if the agency would like to start providing specialized transportation for older adults and people with disabilities using Section 5310 grant funding. Without a history of using FTA grant funding in the past capacity to run such a program must be demonstrated to the regulatory agencies that oversee these programs in the state. Strategies for demonstrating this capacity include:

- **Grant Management** – grants must be managed in a timely manner ensuring that deadlines are met consistently and responses to regulatory agencies are made within 24 hours of receiving the initial correspondence.

- **Compliance** – it is imperative that the agency demonstrate that they are compliant with all grant guidelines and regulations before submitting grant requests. This is particularly true for first time grant recipients.

- **Billing** – billings to TxDOT and other agencies must be on time. Without consistent billing it is difficult to demonstrate capacity to manage new programs with new funding.

- **Inter-Agency Support** – If applying for grant funding for the first time to provide transportation services to help fill in the gaps of the public transit network, obtaining letters of support from the members of the public transportation network shows that there is effective planning and consensus building to support the new service and funding.

- **Staffing and Organization** - STDC is the lead planning agency for this effort and will be in charge of implementing the future planning activities associated with this plan. The specific planning strategies listed below include formalizing the Regional Transportation Coordination Committee (RTCC) and expanding mobility management functions in the region. STDC should fill the vacant Regional Services Planner position within the agency to assist with RTCC scheduling and meetings. This will further demonstrate capacity to carry out planning and transportation coordination activities in the region. Should future development of mobility management require additional capacity, a full time Mobility Manager maybe needed in the future.

Many of the strategies detailed in Section 8 of this plan are within the purview of each transportation provider and not the lead planning agency. Some of these strategies are cost neutral or focus on leveraging grant opportunities as well as private sector funding.

Formalize and Support a Regional Transportation Coordination Committee

The South Texas Regional Transportation Coordination Committee is not a formalized group that meets regularly. While the public transportation providers have a solid working relationship, the incorporation of human service agencies into regularly scheduled coordination meeting is something that has not happened. This was a strategy that was developed as part of the 2017 coordinated planning process and was not achieved partly due to the global pandemic. A Regional Transportation Coordination Committee (RTCC) should at a minimum:

- Include all relevant passenger transportation providers in the region, including:
  - Public transit providers
  - Human service transportation providers
  - Private transportation providers including representatives of the taxi and jitney industry
  - Medical transportation providers

- Include human service agencies that represent clients with high transportation needs.

- Meet quarterly.

These are the minimum expectations for a RTCC from TxDOT and the amount of funding for continuation of activities available through TxDOT will be dependent on meeting these expectations.

Strategy: Formalize an RTCC

TxDOT has made it clear that the spirit of an RTCC should be to collectively identify and address issues. An onerous and bureaucratic structure is not necessary to complete this mission:

- A formal structure with restrictive bylaws is not necessary making way for greater flexibility.
- Entities based or having a stake in the region can be eligible to vote. This would include representatives of organizations: persons with disabilities, seniors, children, persons with low incomes, veterans and other members of the public.
- No quorum requirements are necessary – An incentive to show up at the meeting knowing a vote will be taken.
- Meet quarterly and more frequently if there is an important issue.

The regional transportation stakeholders should consider this strategy in order to move better coordinate in the future. Filling the vacant Transportation Coordinator position within STDC will help this this strategy as this person will take the lead on scheduling and organizing meetings.

Regional Mobility Manager

The 2017 Coordinated Plan calls for a Regional Mobility Manager. While there have been some formalized mobility management functions in the region, this strategy builds upon the 2017 plan to increase the effectiveness of mobility management in South Texas. An excellent model of mobility management coordination is found at Capital Area Rural Transportation System (CARTS) and Capital Metro (Capital Metro) in Austin and the surrounding counties.

A recent national research project conducted through the Transportation Research Board of the National Academy of Sciences[1] highlighted this mobility management collaboration. This is summarized in this section, the detailed case study is presented in Appendix B.

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[1] Transit Cooperative Research Program - TCRP Report No. 223 *Guidebook for Communities to Improve Transportation to Health Care.*

There are two potential alternatives to support the mobility manager position, the first is the all-inclusive model where all three transit entities could form a mobility manager. The second would have STDC form its own mobility manager to support the four-county rural service area.

Funding options can include:

- Transit system funding
- Infrastructure funding
- Grant funding for a mobility manager
- Securing sponsor funding (health care providers, big box and grocery retailers, and others)
- Local government
- Any number of combinations

Strategy: All-Inclusive Mobility Management

Capital Area Office of Mobility Management

Two transit agencies in central Texas—the Capital Metropolitan Transportation Authority (Capital Metro) and the Capital Area Rural Transportation System (CARTS) — partnered to develop a Regional Mobility Manager charged with expanding transit for those in need in the nine-county Capital Region surrounding Austin. The resulting Office of Mobility Management (OMM) has coordinated funding and services with numerous health care providers in:

- Capital Metro's service area of Austin and some close in suburbs.
- Rural parts of nine counties surrounding Austin; six of those counties are entirely rural.

Additionally, the OMM helped build a number of transportation services in the geographic area between the two transit agencies' service areas that previously had no service (including Georgetown).

The coordinated efforts of Capital Metro, an urban transit agency, and CARTS a rural transit agency, now provide access to almost 30 community partners through the OMM, which is dedicated to meeting the transportation needs of seniors, people with disabilities, veterans, and others in need. This collaborative effort has increased fixed route and specialized transportation, improving access to health care through the expansion of public transit service in formerly under and unserved areas.

Mobility management among the three local transit systems is potentially a valuable resource. In the example above, the whole is clearly greater than the sum of its parts. The key will be to develop by-laws

and procedures that ensure each entity is getting its fair share. Staffing could include existing staff from each entity splitting responsibilities or all can contribute funding and staff time. The office of mobility management can use Section 5310 funds to support a mobility manager position. This could be supplemented by an existing agency applying for Section 5310 funds to support the rural portion of the mobility manager.

Alternative Strategy: Continue and Expand Mobility Management Functions in Four Counties

A second mobility management alternative would be for STDC or another entity to form its own mobility management function, either with existing staff, through the Regional Planning Organization (RPO), or if grant funding is secured, a full or part-time mobility manager position. If this approach is used, the agency should apply for Section 5310 funding as soon as possible. The ultimate decision for which agency should house this position should be decided by local stakeholders through coordination with the RTCC.

Section 8:
Strategies for the Future

Introduction

This section of the plan presents a wide range of organizational, operational, financial/sustainable, and coordination strategies to move the South Texas region forward. We will first set the stage for the introduction of strategies by reviewing previous strategies and progress toward the goals. The focus will be on the following:

- Progress toward projects from the previous plan
- Organizational and coordination strategies
- Operating strategies for the future
- Sustainability and financial strategies
- Implementation activities

Coordination Doesn't Just Happen

Coordination does not simply happen because it may be a good idea. Coordination requires:

- Trust between the coordinating entities
- Leadership
- An appropriate political environment
- A business arrangement/plan that works for all

When these requirements are aligned, coordination can happen. Without trust, however, coordination may be minimal.

2017 Strategies – A Review

There were fourteen strategies in the 2017 plan which focused on coordination, service and financial solutions to the needs in South Texas.

2017 Strategy 1: Coordinated Facility Planning

The City of Laredo and El Metro had just completed a comprehensive transit plan that includes a variety of facility recommendations. One recommendation is to secure a site to plan and develop a south end

transfer facility near some of the medical, shopping and college hubs in the area. El Metro continues to work on this strategy as new transfer facilities are developed.

2017 Strategy 2: Development of a Regional Mobility Manager

The South Texas Development Council, working with each of the providers, funding agencies, and other interested stakeholders will identify the regional Mobility Manager that will coordinate a wide variety of public and private transportation service in addition to acting as the regional rideshare manager for the four counties. STDC provides some mobility management functions in 2022.

2017 Strategy 3: Formalize Coordination Working Group

The key participants in the region should continue to work together in a formalized setting allowing all participants and other interested parties to participate. A committee should be formed to include: all major operators, funding agencies, private sector transit providers, other agencies, and consumers. Also, every effort should be made to include local political and/or business leaders. The coordination working group does not meet regularly in 2022 and has not met regularly since the onset of the global pandemic in 2020.

2017 Strategy 4: Work with Human Service Partners – Developing a Mentoring Program

While some agencies and organizations with small scale operations will not want to be involved in a large scale coordination effort, there are areas where these agencies can benefit from coordination. These transit services, typically in support of other programs, include one and two van adult day care operators, senior centers, veterans groups, hospital shuttles, as well as other entities. These transportation services stated that they have no interest in relinquishing their service to a larger system. In fact, it is important that agencies maintain their identities because their strength comes from their passion, dedication, and volunteerism, which would disappear in a coordinated network. This plan wants to encourage that passion by nurturing the agencies and allowing them to flourish. This strategy has not been completed.

2017 Strategy 5: Improve Coordination and Support a Seamless Family of Public Transportation Services

Each system and locale should strive to be a part of one seamless network of services in the region. The idea is to coordinate and consolidate services without consolidating the organizations. This way the transit user sees a regional network and each entity maintains its autonomy. There has been significant progress made on this strategy in Webb, Zapata and Starr Counties.

2017 Strategy 6: Coordinated Long Distance Schedules and Ridesharing

This strategy expands opportunities for seniors and others, giving more access to Laredo or the McAllen area. The three rural providers in Starr, Jim Hogg, and Zapata counties will coordinate service to Laredo and McAllen. Rather than having two or three operators going on the same day, providers can share in this service and schedule one vehicle each day of the week, giving customers a much higher quality service that is more dependable. This strategy has not been completed.

2017 Strategy 7: Rural Bus Stop Connectivity

Rural transit customers can greatly benefit through the increase in shared stops between El Metro and El Aguila. El Aguila can operate their service as "alighting only" for the inbound portion of their routes and "boarding only" for the outbound portion while in El Metro's service area. This type of closed-door agreement is common in other transit systems across the country. El Metro and El Aguila continue to succeed at this strategy in 2022.

2017 Strategy 8: Rural Services

The objective in this strategy is to improve efficiency and effectiveness in rural areas. After coordinated schedules have been identified and implemented, the coordination working group will look at group driver training, maintenance assistance, and other support. This strategy has partially been completed.

2017 Strategy 9: Fixed Route / Fixed Schedules to Colonias

El Aguila has made significant headway on this strategy developing new routes that serve colonias in Webb County. Many colonias in Zapata County and Starr County remain underserved.

2017 Strategy 10: Urban Service

With the influx of COVID-related funding El Metro has been able to sustain and improve services since the 2017 plan was completed.

2017 Strategy 11: Commuter, Job Training, Education, and Medical Service

The demographic review and analysis of travel patterns, surveys of operators, public meetings and discussions with other stakeholders reveal an agreement that more commuter opportunities into Laredo and Hidalgo County should be in place for work, training, school and medical service. This strategy will need to be revisited in the post pandemic context as many of programs and activities have been halted.

2017 Strategy 12: Shopper Shuttles

With peak hour vehicles available for other services during midday, it may be possible to offer shopper shuttle services to sponsors willing to support the transit system. The shopper shuttle targets neighborhoods with high numbers of transit dependent populations, typically seniors and persons with disabilities and frequent destinations (e.g., Walmart, HEB, and medical centers), and can be very effective during off peak hours. El Aguila operates some shopper-based service but this strategy has largely been unaccomplished in the region.

2017 Strategy 13: Coordinate 5310 Services in the Region

The pandemic saw a suspension of many programs supported by Section 5310 transportation services. Using Section 5310 funds to fill in the specialized transportation gaps in the public transit network is still a need for the region.

2017 Strategy 14: Develop a Partnership/Sponsorship Program

While some transit agencies are leveraging advertising revenue most regional transit partners could benefit from a more robust sponsorship program.

Introducing the Strategies for the Future

The 2022 coordinated planning effort has resulted in the development of new strategies to build upon the success of the 2017 plan. These new strategies are summarized in Table 8-1.

1. Organizational and Coordination Strategies
2. Operating Strategies for the Future
3. Sustainability and Financial Strategies

Setting Priorities

All of the strategies are important and therefore priorities are based on which activities need to be conducted first. Following the section on prioritizing strategies is the section called Priorities: Implementation Activities. It is here that the priorities are set.

Table 8-1: A Summary of Strategies by Categories

Categories	Strategies	Application
Organizational and Coordination Strategies	1. Formalize Regional Transportation Coordination Committee	a) Expand and support quarterly meetings of the RTCC
	2. Create the Office of Mobility Management	a) All-inclusive mobility management (first option – if feasible) b) Conduct mobility management functions in five counties
	3. Regional Connectivity	a) Ensure timed connections with rural and regional services with El Metro in Laredo b) Ensure timed connections with local and regional services in the Lower Rio Grande Valley
Operating Strategies for the Future	1. Expand Section 5310 Services - To fill in specialized gaps of local transportation services	a) Secure Section 5310 funding for specialized services focusing on people with disabilities and older adults
	2. Support Services in High Need Areas	a) Seek opportunities to expand services to colonias throughout the region
	3. Plan for New Services	a) Microtransit in urban areas. First mile/last mile b) Fixed schedule services in rural areas
Sustainability and Financial Strategies	1. Securing Additional Federal Funding	a) Aggressively seeking funding for new and innovative projects b) Securing Section 5310 funds
	2. Securing Local Funding	a) Initiate a private sector sponsorship program b) Work local municipalities and governments on infrastructure improvements

Organizational and Coordination Strategies

Organizational issues revolve around operational coordination which continues to be a success in South Texas as many transportation providers and human service agencies have excellent working relationships. The strategies look to build upon that success

1. Coordinated Planning Committee – The RTCC should meet at least quarterly and be flexible with by-laws conducive to moving forward.

2. Mobility Management – Called for in the previous coordinated plan, there are a number of models, coordinated and not coordinated.

3. Regional Connectivity – Transit agencies should work together to ensure timed connection at transfer locations reducing duplication of services and improving the customer experience.

Organizational and Coordination – Strategies

The following strategies look at coordination and organizational change.

1.1 Formalize Regional Transportation Coordination Committee

The South Texas regional transportation coordination committee is not a formalized group that meets regularly. While the public transportation providers have a solid working relationship, the incorporation of human service agencies into regularly scheduled coordination meeting is something that has not happened as regularly. This was a strategy developed as part of the 2017 coordinated planning process and was not achieved partly due to the global pandemic. A Regional Transportation Coordination Committee should at a minimum:

- Include all relevant passenger transportation providers in the region including:
  - Public transit providers
  - Human service transportation providers
  - Private transportation providers including representatives of the taxi and jitney industry
  - Medical transportation providers

- Include human service agencies that represent clients with high transportation needs.

- Meet quarterly.

1.2 Office of Mobility Management

The 2017 Coordinated Plan calls for expanded mobility management functions. This strategy takes that a step further by formalizing these functions into an office and position that can better serve the public and regional partners. An excellent model of mobility management coordination, discussed in Section

7 (Sustainability and Implementation Planning), is found at CARTS and Capital Metro in Austin and the surrounding counties.

There are two potential strategies to support the mobility manager position, the first is the all-inclusive model where all three transit entities could form a mobility manager program. The second model would have STDC form its own mobility manager program to support the four-county service area.

In each strategy, there are a number of potential funding options including:

- Transit system funding
- Infrastructure funding
- Grant funding for a mobility manager
- Securing sponsor funding (health care providers, big box and grocery retailers, and others)
- Local government
- Any number of combinations

Strategy 1.2.1: All-Inclusive Mobility Management

Mobility management among the four local transit systems is potentially a valuable resource. In the example above, the whole is clearly greater than the sum of its parts. The key will be to develop by-laws and procedures that ensure each entity is getting its fair share. Staffing and funding could include existing staff from each entity splitting responsibilities or all can contribute, or secure grant funding to support a mobility manager position and office space for that person.

Strategy 1.2.2: Conduct Mobility Management Functions within an Existing Organization

A second mobility management strategy would be for STDC to form its own mobility management program, either with existing staff, through STDC or if grant funding is secured, a full-time mobility manager position.

1.3 Regional Connectivity

Laredo is the major regional destination for residents in Jim Hogg, Webb and Zapata counties. In Starr County connections to the McAllen area are needed.

- **Laredo:** El Metro continues to improve transfer facilities on the periphery of their service area. El Metro should continue to coordinate with El Aguila, REAL and Valley Metro to ensure timed connections to their services at these locations, particularly if new locations are developed.

- **Lower Rio Grande Valley**: Valley Metro runs fixed route service between Rio Grande City and the McAllen Area. It is imperative that this route, as well as any other rural demand response service, have timed connections with other Valley Metro services as well as McAllen Metro services.

Operational Strategies

The operational strategies are focused on service initiated in the four counties:

- Service area needs
- Service designs and productivity
- Specific operating strategies

Service Area Needs

Different parts of the service area call for different services. The basic service area needs to include:

> *The best way to coordinate service is to have excellent public transportation that most human service clients and health care patients can use.*
> *Specialized service should be available for those with special needs.*

1. **Improved Section 5310 service** – Specialized services for high-need individuals that may have a difficult time navigating the existing public transit network or may serve places and times that are difficult for local transit services. Existing and new Section 5310 services should strive to be coordinated.

2. **Colonias** – Colonias continue to be high need areas within the region. El Aguila has expanded services to colonias in Webb County. Zapata County and Starr County have significant underserved colonias, sometimes due to the lack of infrastructure to support transportation services

3. **New service potential** – The transit industry is transitional out of the 1990's model of service delivery. New technology and new service designs are helping transit agencies improve productivity at minimal cost. Investigating the potential for microtransit solution for first mile/last mile needs in the Laredo area and planning for fixed schedule services in the most rural areas of the region will benefit transit agencies and their customers alike.

Service Designs in South Texas Region

The service design is critical to quality service and operating costs. Service designs that are unproductive will never be cost effective. Proper service design is essential to the success of any transit system. Improper service typologies and designs often result in lower ridership, lower productivity (measured as one-way trips per vehicle hour) and higher per trip costs, while applying the right service design can improve performance often at no extra cost.

Countywide paratransit, with unscheduled service to Laredo and other out-of-county destinations, restricts the ability to group trips and serves a limited number of people. As a result, countywide paratransit is the least productive and most expensive service that rural operators could operate. This section reviews the concepts of grouping trips, increasing productivity, and reducing per trip costs.

Productivity measured as the number of one-way trips per vehicle hour, is essential to enhancing ridership and lowering costs. The service design used will dictate the productivity and the cost of the service. For example, currently all service in Jim Hogg County and Zapata County is day-in-advance demand response, the costliest and least effective service design. New fixed schedule services are being utilized across the country that improve productivity at no additional cost.

Grouping Trips: Essential for Success

Productivity drives the cost per trip and ultimately system costs. Productivity is measured as one-way trips per vehicle service hour. Productivity must be balanced with providing a safe, timely and comfortable service.

Why is productivity important?

One of the best ways to lower transportation costs is through productivity improvements. The end result will depend on different modes or types of service, which will yield different productivities (and costs per trip); see Table 8-2.

Productivity: One-way passenger trips per vehicle hour

- In this example, it costs a transit system $50 per hour to provide service:

    o Productivity of 1.5 trips per hour will yield a cost of **$33.33** per trip
    o 3 one-way trips per hour bring the cost to **$16.67** per trip
    o 10 trips per hour **- $5**
    o 25 trips per hour **- $2**

Table 8-2: Typical Productivity for Rural Service Types

Service Type	Productivity
Countywide Paratransit	1-2 trips per hour
Urban Paratransit	1-6 trips per hour
On-Demand: Towns and Small Cities	2-6 trips per hour
Fixed Schedule: Rural and Out-of-County	4-8 trips per hour

Source: Rural Transit Service Design - Matching Service to Meet Needs: An Introduction, Rural, and Intercity Bus Conference, October 2018, KFH Group

Potential Service Designs

The past five years have seen an explosion of new service designs, some driven in part by technology and others just good ideas that are catching on. In this section, the study team will introduce the concepts and in the next section, strategies will be introduced for future consideration.

Providing Greater Ridership - Doing More with Less

Each of the following service designs can be implemented with **no additional operating expenses**. They are all capable of doubling and tripling ridership and productivity and reducing per trip costs by the same margins.

- **On-demand** in Laredo – It takes seconds to schedule a trip, not 24 hours. With an existing demand response fleet in town at any time, this may be accomplished through the existing scheduling software in real time. This will generate higher ridership, and can be a particularly advantageous way to serve areas at the periphery of the El Metro service area that are not suitable for large heavy duty urban buses.

- Consideration should be given to **fixed schedule service** in rural areas of each county. This is where the vehicle will be scheduled for different parts of the service area on different days and times. These schedules should be well marketed and posted throughout each community and online. It is important to get the cooperation of health care organizations. This includes regional trips as well.

The Operating Strategies

The operating strategies will be based on the research and analysis conducted in the first part of the study. It is here that using the most appropriate service design, regional transportation providers can:

- Increase ridership
- Improve service quality, make it easy to ride

All are dependent on appropriate marketing and branding which will be discussed at the end of this section.

Strategy 2.1: Expand Section 5310 services to fill in the specialized gaps of local transportation services.

Expanded coordinated efforts in the region can help increase the efficiency of services and expand the availability of services through economies of scale. Currently service in the region is fragmented. There are three rural FTA Section 5311 providers and four rural FTA Section 5310 providers. Many of the county managed 5310 programs are limited as the entities are only getting FTA funding for preventative maintenance.

A strategy to have one entity set up a rural transit district for Zapata, Jim Hogg and Starr counties to secure Section 5310 funding and purchase service through contracts with the existing providers will give the region an 80/20 match for operations instead of preventative maintenance. This entity can also assist each operator with the procurement of new vehicles and brand the vehicles as a cohesive regional service. The goal is to operate regional service as a whole and provide additional operating funds so that services can be expanded. As the success grows services can be branded together (including 5311 providers and Webb County rural service) while each county and service provider maintain its programs. Essentially the services become consolidated while the organizations remain intact.

Strategy 2.2: Support Services in High Need Areas

In South Texas there are several neighborhoods that can be classified as colonias. Colonias are substandard housing developments, often found along the Texas-Mexico border, where residents lack basic services such as drinking water, sewage treatment, and paved roads. Many colonias residents lack access to personal automobiles and have low incomes. As a result, many residents of colonias have a need for affordable mobility options to access employment and basic goods and services.

El Aguila has two services that are specifically oriented toward serving colonias. Valley Metro has also expanded services to colonias in the Lower Rio Gande Valley. Zapata County and Starr County still have many colonias that are under served. Valley Metro would benefit from analyzing the opportunity for scheduled services connecting colonias to essential medical and daily business locations throughout the region. El Aguila should aggressively seek support of current pilot projects serving colonias.

Strategy 2.3 Plan for New Services

On-demand service is now becoming the norm in urban areas for first mile/last mile solutions. Instead of having to call the day before the trip, customers can access the service in as little as one hour or less.

Using existing vehicles and level of funding in all of the cities and towns in the service area, in town service can become real time on demand. That is, the vehicle will arrive within 15 minutes to an hour of the call or using the app. Service can be door-to-door, curb-to-curb or corner-to-corner. This service is generically called microtransit and before the development of the automated apps, was called "Dial a Ride."

Microtransit – This app-based or phone based service is a general public shared ride service designed for the population densities typically found in small towns and cities as well as suburban areas, where fixed route may be ineffective and calling a day in advance is not necessary. Further, these apps (if marketed properly) often require almost no interaction with the dispatcher, reducing the demands on that position.

Using capital grant funding, El Metro should procure a microtransit app and deploy a pilot in the communities just outside of their existing fixed route service area so that those residents can easily access the El Metro network.

Strategy 2.3.1: Microtransit in the Larger Cities

The largest cities in each county have the capability of initiating first mile/last mile microtransit in their communities. As this service is designed to help people access the local transit network that may be just out of reach. It may be possible to secure sponsors in these communities. This will be discussed in the section on Sustainability and Financial Strategies.

Implementation

The first step is to secure the technology through a grant and then select 2 - 3 areas as pilot projects to determine exactly how to implement service. These should be the communities El Metro has identified as needing service but are currently outside of the service area. It should be noted that TxDOT will be developing a microtransit "How To" in the next few months as a guidebook for implementing this new service design.

Strategy 2.3.2 Fixed Schedule Service

Fixed schedule service allocates resources in a productive manner for intra-county trips, typically to the largest city in the region. By informing rural riders of specific days and times of travel, it is possible to group trips. Exhibit 8-1 depicts just such a schedule. Using existing ridership, daily patterns will emerge to help determine which areas receive service when.

- Works well in **larger/remote rural areas** when there are not enough resources to cover all parts of the service area at all times.

- Serves different areas according to a schedule that is clearly posted and well marketed.
- Can be one or more days per week.

- Experience indicates that passengers accept this approach, and doctors and hospitals will cooperate.

Fixed schedule service has proven to be far more productive and less expensive than one-on-one paratransit. By scheduling a time, those interested in traveling within the county (or adjacent county) will ride together instead of a constant one-on-one set of trips that is very expensive. The grouping of trips can reduce costs. This type of service also encourages in-county shopping, healthcare and other local needs.

Implementation

Schedules can be set up based on current or historical travel patterns. Dialysis trips will often determine the schedule in a particular area. Each county can be divided into 4 -5 quadrants, based on typical ridership patterns. The quadrants will be scheduled for different times and perhaps different days. The frequency of service will be determined by existing and potential ridership.

1. Conduct a pilot – select a county to implement scheduled service.

2. Secure sponsors who may serve to gain by this service.

3. Using the existing service needs, set a schedule that to some extent mirrors current needs. For example, if there are dialysis customers that use the service at 6 a.m., Monday, Wednesday and Friday with a return at noon, then the published schedule should reflect those needs.

4. Promote and advertise the service. The best marketing tool is a good looking and professionally painted bus that is seen all over the county.
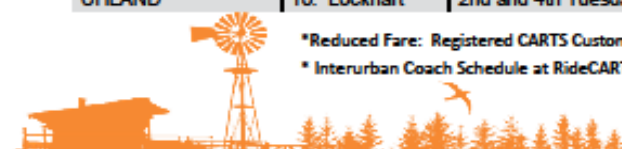
As with most of the services presented in this section, there are no additional operating expenses associated as they do not require additional vehicles and/or service hours.

Like the fixed schedule service, intercounty service should be on a schedule based on current and future ridership. Dialysis trips will at times determine the schedule of at least one set of trips, but schedules will vary based on need. For example, one county might warrant three days per week service to Laredo with two round trips each day, while another may need service just one day per week.

An example of this service is depicted in Exhibit 8-1 where all out-of-county service is scheduled on specific days and times. This allows rural providers to provide more trips for the same level of service. Experience in Texas and across the country tells us that customers get comfortable with schedules very quickly and health care facilities are willing to work with the schedules.

Exhibit 8-1: Example of Fixed Schedule Service

CARTS

Effective date January 4, 2016

CARTS RIDE LINE 1-512-456-RIDE (7433)

CALDWELL COUNTY

RIDES ARE SCHEDULED MONDAY-FRIDAY FROM 8:00 AM TO 4:00 PM / 24 HOURS ADVANCE NOTICE RECOMMENDED LOCAL
VEHICLES SERVE NEIGHBORING TOWNS SO LOCAL RIDE TIMES MAY VARY

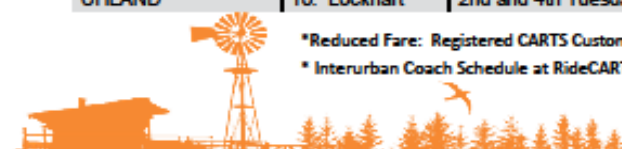| Community Served	Destination	Route Day	Departure	Return	One-Way Fare	Reduced Fare*
DALE	To: San Marcos	Monday & Friday	7:30a	12:00p	$6.00	$3.00
	To: Lockhart	Monday & Friday	7:30a	12:00p	$4.00	$2.00
FENTRESS	To: San Marcos	Thursday	9:00a	12:00p	$6.00	$3.00
	To: Lockhart	Monday	9:00a	1:00p	$4.00	$2.00
	To: Luling	Friday	9:00a	12:00p	$4.00	$2.00
LOCKHART	**Local Service**	**Monday thru Friday**	**8:00a to 4:30p**		**$2.00**	**$1.00**
	To: Austin	On the Interurban Coach *	Mon, Wed. and Fri.		$6.00 All Day Pass	
	To: San Marcos	Monday, Wednesday & Friday	8:00a & 2:00p	12:00a & 3:00p	$6.00	$3.00
	To: Luling	Tuesday & Thursday	9:00a	1:00p	$4.00	$3.00
LULING	**Local Service**	**Monday thru Friday**	**8:00a to 4:30p**		**$2.00**	**$1.00**
	To: Austin	On the Interurban Coach *	Mon, Wed. and Fri.		$6.00 All Day Pass	
	To: Lockhart	Tuesday & Thursday	8:00a	2:00p	$4.00	$2.00
	To: San Marcos	Thursday	9:00a	12:00p	$6.00	$3.00
	To: Seguin	Wednesday	9:00a	12:00p	$6.00	$3.00
LYTTON SPRINGS	To: Lockhart	2nd & 4th Thursday	8:45a	1:00p	$4.00	$2.00
MARTINDALE	To: Austin	Monday & Wednesday	8:15a	2:00p	$6.00	$3.00
	To: San Marcos	Monday, Wednesday & Friday	9:15a	3:00p	$6.00	$3.00
	To: Lockhart	Wednesday	11:30a	2:00a	$4.00	$2.00
MAXWELL	To: Austin	Tuesday & Thursday	8:30a	2:00p	$6.00	$3.00
	To: San Marcos	Monday, Wednesday & Friday	9:30a	3:00p	$6.00	$3.00
	To: Lockhart	Wednesday	11:30a	2:00p	$4.00	$2.00
McMAHAN	To: Lockhart	1st and 3rd Monday	8:45a	12:00p	$4.00	$2.00
McNEIL	To: Lockhart	Monday	9:00a	12:00p	$4.00	$2.00
	To: Lulling	Friday	9:00a	12:00p	$4.00	$2.00
MENDOZA	To: Lockhart	2nd & 4th Thursday	8:30a	1:00p	$4.00	$2.00
NEIDERLAND	To: San Marcos	Tuesday & Thursday	9:00a	12:00p	$6.00	$3.00
	To: Lockhart	2nd & 4th Thursday	8:30a	1:00p	$4.00	$2.00
PRAIRIE LEA	To: Lulling	Friday	9:00a	12:00p	$4.00	$2.00
	To: San Marcos	Thursday	9:00a	12:00p	$6.00	$3.00
REEDVILLE	To: San Marcos	Monday, Wednesday & Friday	8:30a	12:00p	$6.00	$3.00
	To: Austin	Monday & Wednesday	8:00a	2:00p	$6.00	$3.00
STAIRTOWN	To: Luling	Friday	9:00a	12:00p	$4.00	$2.00
	To: San Marcos	Thursday	9:00a	12:00p	$6.00	$3.00
UHLAND	To: Lockhart	2nd and 4th Tuesday	8:30a	1:00p	$4.00	$2.00

*Reduced Fare: Registered CARTS Customers, Seniors 65 and older, Persons with Disabilities, and Children Under 12

* Interurban Coach Schedule at RideCARTS.com

RideCARTS.com

Branding and Marketing

An essential element in any service-related business is appropriate branding and marketing of the service. REAL was identified in the needs assessment phase as needing improved branding and marketing. El Aguila can also benefit from some improved marketing activities.

Recommendations - Marketing

Most effective rural transit marketing is grassroots or low cost in nature. REAL is in need of a partial branding effort to develop an image as public transit and not just the senior bus in the community. The branding and marketing effort should be treated as a business decision, designed to help promote the system and ultimately encourage and increase ridership and service levels.

Developing the Brand

In parallel with the development of the new services, a branding effort should begin. It is here that the brand should be determined. This can be done professionally or in-house but must look and sound professional in every way. It may be possible to take advantage of local resources such as colleges and high schools for naming or branding ideas. The following steps should be taken:

- **System name or nickname** – This is the name most will use. Perhaps a contest among students, combined with a full rebrand celebration.

    o **Recognizable** - Like VIA in San Antonio, the HOP, CARTS, Santa Fe Trails or any number of different systems that are recognized by their names. Sometimes a simple name like Paris Metro says it all.

    o **Identifies with the area** – South Texas is a theme. The color and nickname should be symbolic of the service area. For example: South Texas Transit.

o **Catchy** – The Blue Bus is the system's nickname and is an instant identifier as all of their vehicles are bright blue.

o **Avoid acronyms in most cases** – Names like SCAT (the absolute worst), CUATS, and ETHRA, for example, have little to no meaning and sound terrible. REAL also has no meaning to transit customers and can be pronounced two different ways.

- **Vehicle colors and paint scheme** – This requires eye-catching vehicles that will be noticed and can instill pride. Is there a local color that symbolizes the area? This scheme should be developed. White cut-away vehicles indicate institutional or senior bus.

- **Bring in system sponsors** – Having sponsor names on the sides of the vehicles perhaps in a corner, can lend credibility to the system.

- **Establish a website and Facebook/social media presence** – Rural providers in South Texas can all make better use of social media and improve the quality of their website to ensure better dissemination of information to transit customers..

Implementation

Initiation of the rebranding campaign should begin at the same time as the planning for the new services. The rebranding campaign should be initiated one month prior to implementation of new service.

1. Determine the number of brands:
   a. One brand for all.
   b. Separate brands for in-town, county and intercounty service. Perhaps service names and different color scheme for example.

Sustainability and Financial Strategies

Sustainability is critical to all transit systems. There is a need for funding stability because if services come and go for lack of funding, ridership will be very quickly lost and won't come back. At the present time, there is a significant amount of funding available for capital and operations.

One of the greatest threats to rural transit systems is the lack of local funding for service. Lack of local funding can severely limit a system's ability to grow and meet more needs. That is the case for El Aguila, REAL and Valley Metro. Local funding is needed to match FTA grants and in this time of COVID-19, it is still to be determined how funds will be allocated for recovery and if local match will be required.

The following strategies are designed to ensure sustainability and growth:

- Efficiency and effectiveness - Having the organizational staffing to sustain and grow the service.
- Securing federal transit funding and infrastructure funding.
- Securing funding from human service, health care providers, local counties, and the private sector.

Efficiency and Effectiveness

The first step in sustainability is operating efficiently (doing things right) and economizing where needed. With that, is operating effectively (doing the right things). Strategies designed to improve efficiency and effectiveness are detailed in the operational strategies.

Securing Federal, State, Local, and Other Funding

With the CARES Act and the new infrastructure bill's passage, there is and will be an abundance of FTA funding for operations and capital. The key is to seek it out, develop a solid plan and write a winning grant.

3.1 Securing Additional Federal Funding

El Aguila, REAL and Valley Metro should be actively writing grants to secure FTA funding for capital and operating services. This will help guide rural transit agencies in directing proposed services and seeking funding.

Strategy 3.1.1: Aggressively Seeking Funding for New and Innovative Projects

Rural transit providers should embark on an effort to secure grants for service and additional planning. Mobility management activities can also be considered a good investment as the mobility manager role includes securing funding for transit.

Strategy 3.1.2: Securing 5310 Funds

Section 5310 funds should be sought for vehicle preventive maintenance or new vehicles to serve persons with disabilities and seniors. STDC can be a lead agency in coordinating 5310 funding and service throughout the South Texas Region. If an Office of Mobility Management is enacted it can help in this effort.

Securing Local Funding

Local funding has always been an issue for rural transit systems. Now however rural providers should turn to the private sector for sponsorships. Rural transit systems have had success generating revenue from the private for-profit sector.

Strategy 3.2.1: Initiate a Private Sector Sponsorship Program

Transit has a long history of providing advertising on and in buses for additional revenue. Many systems have engaged in advertising over the years, but a sponsorship program is more than simply advertising. Instead of the usual selling of just one form of advertising, El Agulia, REAL and Valley Metro should sell sponsorship packages. Since sponsorship and advertising funds are an important source of local funding, this program can help expand the service. Large corporations have been known to participate in sponsorship programs and typically companies (such as Walmart) have far more money than all the cities and counties in the service area combined.

This activity should be implemented at the end with rebranding of new vehicles in the new paint scheme and new name. Potential sponsors want to be associated with a first-class service that the community can take pride in.

Implementation

Funding must be a major propriety. These two strategies should be implemented as soon as possible. As with federal funding, these activities should be supported by STDC and each of the transit providers.

Strategy 3.2.2: Work Local Municipalities and Governments on Infrastructure Improvements

In cities such as Laredo and Rio Grande City there is often inadequate roadway or pedestrian infrastructure to support transit expansion into high need areas. For rural services, colonias may be difficult to access due to the lack of paved roads. Infrastructure improvements throughout the region that support passenger transportation should be sought.

Implementation

Regional transit partners should make sure they are involved in county and city infrastructure planning efforts. MPO TIP plans and other regional roadway improvement efforts should include transit needs and transit agencies should make sure they are involved in these collaborative efforts.

Priorities: Implementation Activities

The service area priorities are directly reflected in the implementation activities. As all of these strategies should be implemented, some simultaneously, the best way to prioritize is to put strategies in place in order of implementation activities. Regional transit partners will need to be working on multiple activities over the next five years. This effort will require support from STDC and other agencies throughout the region in a number of areas until a mobility manager who has as part of their job description securing government and private sector funding. The list of activities is prioritized in order of importance and timing.

Immediate Needs

The following activities should be conducted immediately:

1. **Secure funding and replace aging vehicles** – Due to the international delays in vehicle delivery, it is now taking two years at a minimum to receive vehicles from the date they are ordered. While the transit agencies in South Texas are following their vehicle replacement plans this extra time in securing vehicles along with the influx of federal funding should be taken into consideration. If properly maintained and upgraded the older vehicles may be able to last longer. The consultant team believes this world-wide problem may be getting worse.

2. **Secure funding for technology and mobility management –** Hiring a mobility manager for South Texas to help secure funding, conduct a wide range of coordination activities and other business development strategies. This position is critical to funding and should be a top priority.

Second Level of Activities/Priorities

The immediate needs are significant and will take time. Once activities have been initiated and funding is being sought from all quarters, then the second level of activities can take place. These will consist of planning and preparing to initiate the new brand and the new services together.

These activities should be implemented within six to eight months after completion and approval of the plan.

1. **Secure private sector sponsors –** This will be a mobility management function that should be initiated shortly after hire.

Planning and Implementation Priorities

Implementing new service and expanding ridership are the next steps in the process of meeting the needs. This will include the selection and implementation of pilot projects and the branding effort.

The pilot projects should be implemented over time, starting eight to twelve months after the start of the process, through the five year timeline of the plan.

1. **Plan and implement pilot fixed schedule service** – In this activity, rural providers such as Valley Metro should select a county to initiate fixed schedule service. Zapata County is an excellent choice for a pilot due to the rural nature of the area.

   a. Select county: Look at low ridership counties that should see higher ridership: Zapata County for example.
   b. Focus on high need locations such as colonias.
   c. Review ridership patterns and dialysis needs, then divide the county into quadrants, and develop schedules based on existing needs. In essence, schedules should be able to meet the needs of existing riders.
   d. Determine if any adjustments are needed to the schedules.
   e. Brand the service/system.
   f. Secure route sponsors.
   g. Market the new service – grass roots activities work well. Possibly have a series of kick-off events in each county.
   h. Be prepared for every contingency.
   i. Train staff.
   j. Implement service.
   k. Monitor ridership, miles and hours daily.
   l. Then start over with the other three counties.

2. **Plan and implement on-demand service** – Also a similar approach:
   a. Select 2 - 3 pilot areas in Laredo.
   b. Install and test the on-demand software and app in a simulated environment.
   c. Brand the service/system.
   d. Secure sponsors.
   e. Market the new service – grass roots activities work well. Possibly have a series of kick-off events in each city.
   f. Be prepared for every contingency.
   g. Train staff.
   h. Implement service.
   i. Monitor ridership, miles and hours by community, daily.
   j. Then start over with other areas.

Section 9:
Goals and Performance Measures

There are two parts to tracking performance. The first is tracking progress toward the goals and objectives first reviewed in Section 6: South Texas Coordination Goals and Objectives. The second part is tracking performance of the transit system, a critical element to managing the service and identifying trends in their earliest stages.

STDC will be responsible for tracking performance related to this planning process. Most, if not all, of the data management needed to track performance of the individual transit services (to be completed by transit agencies) on a regular basis is tracked in the PTN 128 report. Each agency is required to report on the PTN 128 and should have access to their own data on hand.

Tracking Performance: Coordinated Planning

In addition to performance data needed in the next part of this review, the progress toward the goals and objectives should be tracked.

Overarching Goal

For each of our projects we have one overarching goal which we believe is shared by all of our clients:

Help provide for more trips for more people while providing cost effective, high quality, and safe transportation for our community.

Performance Measure: Measured by ridership.

Coordination Project Goals and Objectives

Next, overall initial project goals and objectives are identified. The Study Advisory Committee should review the following to ensure they are in sync with what STDC and the stakeholders desire. Following are the goals to date.

Goal No. 1: Ensure sustainability for existing and new services

This goal seeks to ensure that service levels in South Texas are not lowered and when possible service expansion can be made.

> **Performance Measure:** No reduction in service or funding. Additionally, sustained or increased funding levels for partners/sponsors, vehicles, Section 5310, FTA, COVID-relief and other funds.

Goal No. 2: Continue to expand services to communities that need transportation services the most.

Goal 2 goal focuses on high need areas such as colonias and ensuring that people that need transportation services the most have access to said services.

> **Performance Measure:** Increased ridership in rural areas.

Goal No. 3: Develop strategies to improve service, coordination and generate higher ridership

This critical goal seeks to ensure that the most appropriate services are deployed using the right tools for the assignment. Strategies include addressing: unmet needs, improving service performance and seeking coordination opportunities.

> **Performance Measures:** Develop and implement new services.

Goal No. 4: Plan for new services

New services that improve access for the community and productivity for the provider are a key to success.

> **Performance Measure:** New service implemented.

System Performance Measures

The bottom line: The best coordinated service is excellent public transportation. This focuses on the information regional transit agencies need to properly manage the service. But it's more than just the numbers and measures. Some measures should be collected daily, weekly or monthly. And each county should be compiled separately.

The best description of performance measures needed by South Texas transit providers is in the Transit Cooperative Research Program's (TCRP) Research Report No. 136: *Guidebook for Rural Demand-Response Transportation: Measuring, Assessing, and Improving Performance.*
http://www.trb.org/Publications/Blurbs/162701.aspx

This publication was written by the KFH Group. Attention should be focused on Chapter 4 which details the measures management should be reviewing. This combined with the following narrative will give South Texas public transit providers the knowledge necessary to review the crucial data to improve performance.

The activities presented in this section should be set up to implement the enhanced tracking of service, using TCRP Report 136 as a guide.

Determine Performance Measures to be used to Manage Performance

Transit agencies file a PTN 128 report documenting a wide variety of data and performance measures for TxDOT. While these numbers and measures are important to track, this effort will focus on those numbers and measures critical to operating performance. Further, this does not preclude the monitoring of any other activities – these should be considered a minimum.

Data Collection

1. One-way trips
2. Vehicle hours
3. Vehicle miles
4. Cost data
5. Accidents, incidents

6. On-time performance
7. No-shows
8. Missed trips
9. Road calls/breakdowns
10. Complaints/compliments

Performance Measures

Performance measures are critical to monitoring performance. Some are tracked on a daily basis, while most others can be tracked on a monthly basis. Following are the recommended key measures for management to use as guidance in operations. In all cases these numbers and measures should be disaggregated by county. All should be collected monthly with the exception of those indicated that should be collected daily.

> *The key is to rapidly identify an issue before it becomes a problem; and then find solutions.*

Key Measures

1. <u>Passenger Trips per Vehicle-Hour</u> **– Daily** - This is productivity and is the most critical performance measure (excluding safety). It drives operating cost per trip and ultimately overall system cost.

2. <u>Operating Cost per Vehicle-Hour</u> – This is an important unit of cost and easily measurable. It reflects the cost to operate one vehicle for one hour. It should not fluctuate significantly from month to month unless a large one time payment is made. It should not fluctuate significantly from year to year, unless costs such as fuel, insurance or other costs increase.

3. <u>Operating Cost per Vehicle-Mile</u> – Similar to operating cost per hour.

4. <u>Operating Cost per Passenger Trip</u> – This is partially a reflection of operating cost per hour but is most affected by system productivity, as is discussed below.

5. <u>Safety Incidents per 100,000 Vehicle-Miles</u> – **Daily** - Can be tracked separately for incidents, accidents and other problems.

6. <u>On-Time Performance</u> – **Daily** – Percentage of trips that are on time compared to all completed trips.

Other Important Measures

All measures should be reported and reviewed monthly, with most reported daily.

1. <u>No-Shows, Missed Trips</u> - **Daily** – Either actual number or percentage of total trips.

2. <u>Road Calls/Breakdowns</u> - Per 100,000 miles (daily numbers).

3. <u>Complaints/Complements</u> - **Daily**

4. <u>Miles per Hour and Average Trip Length</u> – These should be used monthly to test accuracy of other measures. Monthly fluctuations of more than a few percentage points should be investigated, verified and explained. If fluctuations occur, this should be tracked daily until the problem is resolved.

The next step is to set up the software to track this information on a regular basis. Once this is complete, initiate the monitoring of service. After two to three post COVID-19 months have been measured, initial benchmarks can be set.

Appendix A:
Major Trip Generators

Name	County	Type
Misison Regional Medical Center	Hidalgo	Regional Medical
Rio Grande Regional Hospital	Hidalgo	Regional Medical
Cornerstone Regional Hospital	Hidalgo	Regional Medical
Rural Health at Starr County Memorial Hospital	Starr	Regional Medical
Laredo Regional Medical Center	Webb	Regional Medical
Walmart	Webb	Shopping
Walmart Supercenter	Webb	Shopping
Walmart Supercenter	Webb	Shopping
Walmart Supercenter	Webb	Shopping
Walmart Supercenter	Starr	Shopping
Walmart Supercenter	Hidalgo	Shopping
Lowes Food Market	Jim Hogg	Shopping
Lowe's Super S Foods	Zapata	Shopping
Border Town Food	Starr	Shopping
Border Town Food	Starr	Shopping
Border Town Food	Starr	Shopping
Border Town Food	Hidalgo	Shopping
H-E-B Grocery	Webb	Shopping
H-E-B Grocery	Webb	Shopping
H-E-B Grocery	Webb	Shopping
H-E-B Grocery	Webb	Shopping
H-E-B Grocery	Starr	Shopping
The Outlet Shoppes at Laredo	Webb	Shopping
Target	Webb	Shopping
Target	Webb	Shopping
Lanes Cafe & Market	Starr	Shopping
C & C Kountry Store and Meat Market	Webb	Shopping
59 Grocery & Meat Market	Webb	Shopping
Grulla High School	Starr	Education
Rio Grande City High School	Starr	Education
Early College High School	Starr	Education
Zapata High School	Zapata	Education

Name	County	Type
Early College High School	Webb	Education
Jose A. Valdez High School	Webb	Education
Premier High School - Laredo	Webb	Education
United South High School	Webb	Education
Lyndon B. Johnson High School	Webb	Education
Hebbronville High School	Jim Hogg	Education
Texas A&M International University	Webb	Education
Laredo College South Campus	Webb	Education
Laredo College	Webb	Education
South Texas College	Starr	Education
Roma High School	Starr	Education
San Isidro High School	Starr	Education
Santa Teresita Community Center	Webb	Human Service
Ernesto J. Salinas Community	Webb	Human Service
Santa Monica Catholic Mission	Starr	Human Service
Rio Bravo Community Center	Webb	Human Service
Human Service Department	Jim Hogg	Human Service
Meridian Care of Hebbronville	Jim Hogg	Human Service
El Parque Adult Day Care	Starr	Human Service
Regent Care Center of Laredo	Webb	Human Service
AARP Senior Center	Webb	Human Service
Retama Manor Nursing Center/Laredo - West	Webb	Human Service
Catholic Charities Senior Center	Webb	Human Service
El Paraiso Senior Center	Webb	Human Service
Senior Wyze Senior Care & Assisted Living Laredo TX	Webb	Human Service
GABRIEL VILLARREAL Senior Citizen Nutrition Center	Zapata	Human Service
La Joya Senior Citizens Center	Hidalgo	Human Service
Alton Senior Citizens Center	Hidalgo	Human Service
Cross Roads Senior Center	Hidalgo	Human Service
Serving Children & Adults in Need, Inc	Webb	Human Service
South Texas Food Bank	Webb	Human Service
Bethany House Shelter	Webb	Human Service

Name	County	Type
Food Distribution Center - Zapata Helping Hands Food Pantry	Zapata	Human Service
Buckner Children & Family Services	Hidalgo	Human Service
Food Distribution Center - Colonias Unidas	Starr	Human Service
Food Distribution Center - Pentecostal Church Of God	Starr	Human Service
Healthy Start Laredo	Webb	Human Service
Lutheran Social Services	Webb	Human Service
South Texas Development Council	Webb	Human Service
Border Area Nutrition Council	Webb	Human Service
Child Protective Services	Webb	Human Service
Food Stamps Information	Jim Hogg	Human Service
Aging & Disability Services Department	Zapata	Human Service
Human Service Department	Starr	Human Service
Human Services Department	Starr	Human Service
Rio Grande City Public Library	Starr	Human Service
Starr County Roma Public Library	Starr	Human Service
Olga V. Figueroa Zapata County Public Library	Zapata	Human Service
Joe A. Guerra Laredo Public Library	Webb	Human Service
Sophie Christen McKendrick, Francisco Ochoa, and Fernando A. Salinas Branch Library	Webb	Human Service
Bruni Plaza Branch Library	Webb	Human Service
Barbara Fasken Branch Library	Webb	Human Service
Jim Hogg County Library	Jim Hogg	Human Service
Border Region Behavioral Health Center	Zapata	Human Service
Border Region Behavioral Health Center	Starr	Human Service
Border Region Behavioral Health Center	Jim Hogg	Human Service
Recovery Behavioral Program Counseling Services	Webb	Human Service
Laredo Mental Health	Webb	Human Service
New Beginnings Counseling	Webb	Human Service
Concentrix	Webb	Other Employer
ATM (International Bank of Commerce)	Webb	Other Employer
Werner Enterprises, Inc.	Webb	Other Employer

Appendix B:
Case Study on Mobility Management Collaboration

Mobility Management Improving Access to Health Care in Central Texas:
Capital Metro Transportation Authority and Capital Area Rural Transportation System

Source: Transit Cooperative Research Program - TCRP Report No. 223 Guidebook for Communities to Improve Transportation to Health Care.

OFFICE OF MOBILITY MANAGEMENT
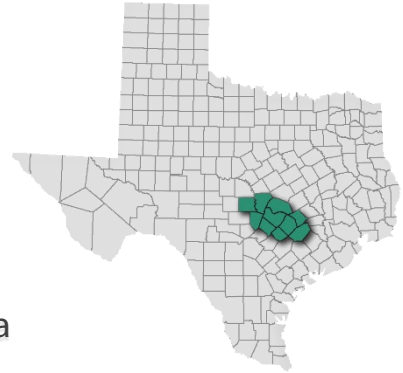
CENTRAL TEXAS

Mobility Management Improving Access to Health Care in Central Texas:

Capital Metro Transportation Authority and Capital Area Rural Transportation System

Snapshot of Collaboration

Two transit agencies in central Texas—the Capital Metropolitan Transportation Authority (Capital Metro) and the Capital Area Rural Transportation System (CARTS)— partnered to develop a regional mobility manager charged with expanding transit for those in need in the nine-county Capital Region surrounding Austin. The resulting Office of Mobility Management (OMM) has coordinated funding and services with numerous health care providers in:

- Capital Metro's service area of Austin and some close in suburbs.
- Rural parts of nine counties surrounding Austin; six of those counties are entirely rural.

Additionally, the OMM helped build a number of transportation services in the geographic area between the two transit agencies' service areas that previously had no service.

One of the key issues in development of the OMM was determining how to expand transit service to support health care access. OMM's response: the office strives to integrate the region's network of transit services to help connect people to needed goods and services in the Capital Region.

The coordinated efforts of Capital Metro, an urban transit agency and CARTS, a rural agency, now provide access to almost 30 community partners through the OMM, which is dedicated to meeting the transportation needs of seniors, people with disabilities, veterans and others in need. This collaborative effort has increased fixed route and specialized transportation, improving access to health care through the expansion of public transit service in formerly under and unserved areas.

Pickup by Capital Metro
Photo courtesy of KFH Group

How Did the Collaboration Start?

Rapid growth brought changes to Central Texas. Areas previously served by CARTS had become urbanized and were no longer eligible for CARTS service. These newly urbanized areas were also not in Capital Metro's service area, leaving them in a transit desert with no service.

The collaboration was initiated by CARTS and Capital Metro in response to this loss of service and new unmet needs. The two organizations formed the OMM, which is hosted and funded predominantly by Capital Metro. The OMM was charged with building transit services in areas of high needs. Soon, Travis County joined forces and ultimately service was coordinated with the Transit Empowerment Fund.

Texas's Capital Area Region

Initiating the Effort

Two important factors facilitated development of the OMM. One was the establishment of the Transit Empowerment Fund with its funding support. The second was the close working relationship between Capital Metro and CARTS that helped the establishment of the OMM and with efforts supporting its work.

The Transit Empowerment Fund

The Transit Empowerment Fund was established in 2011 through a partnership between Capital Metro, Austin's public transportation provider, and One Voice Central Texas, a coalition of more than 100 health and human service non-profit organizations. The goal was to address the impact of rising public transit fares on low-income individuals.

Capital Metro contributed $250,000 in seed funding in 2012 and, in 2013, the transit agency increased its annual contribution to $350,000. An independent volunteer board representing non-profit health care and human service agencies, the business community, and Capital Metro oversees the work of the Transit Empowerment Fund.

Since 2012, the Transit Empowerment Fund has distributed thousands of Capital Metro transit passes to local non-profits for use by their clients. Recipients of the transit passes must be low-income, reside in the Capital Metro service area, and use public transportation.

The Transit Empowerment Fund Board's target populations are: adults over the age of 65, people with disabilities, youth under the age of 18, low-income workers or those enrolled in job training programs, refugees, people experiencing homelessness, Medicare card holders, Medicaid recipients, and veterans. The goal of the program is to promote self-sufficiency by providing transportation for employment, health care, education, and social services.

Additionally, the Transit Empowerment Fund Board has funded the following demonstration projects to expand transit services in underserved areas in the Central Texas region:

- In 2013, the Transit Empowerment Fund invested in a demonstration project that provides transportation to clients of a non-profit living in designated areas in order to access the organization's Parent-Child Education programs.

- In 2014, the Transit Empowerment Fund partnered with AGE of Central Texas, a non-profit serving older adults, to identify transportation gaps and resources and to create a plan to address identified transportation needs of older adults in the Austin area. The plan was completed in February 2015 and is guiding the future work of the Board to expand transportation access for seniors in the Austin community.

- In 2017, the Transit Empowerment Fund provided a grant to Ride Austin, a local app-based, on-demand transportation service. This grant allowed the non-profit ride-sourcing organization to partner with a collaboration of Central Health and a regional hospital for a pilot program in which those without the means to pay for health care transportation are able to request no-cost rides to health care appointments or pharmacies within the collaborative' s network.

- Also in 2017, the Transit Empowerment Fund awarded the Housing Authority of the City of Austin funds intended to expand and enhance the impact of its "Smart Work, Learn Play-Mobility Equity Program."

Development

Capital Metro and CARTS developed the OMM in 2013 to address findings of studies and local stakeholder concerns about gaps in transportation services arising from the growing urban area and shrinking rural area. Transportation needs were appearing in suburban, exurban and smaller communities between 10,000 and 120,000 population that were not served by either the urban transit agency, Capital Metro, or the rural provider, CARTS.

After its initiation in 2013, the OMM has been funded and is sustained primarily by Capital Metro, with additional funding from FTA Section 5310 grants. Critical to the development of the office is ensuring that all participants understand the needs, constraints and capabilities of each type of participating organization. The approach of this mobility manager is that fixed route should always be the first choice of service for an individual, when such service is appropriate and feasible.

The low transit fares, subsidized through Capital Metro, help the mobility manager accommodate many of the health care transportation needs very cost-effectively. Approximately 50 percent of the trip purposes associated with the bus pass program is for health care access.

Description

The Office of Mobility Management conducts a wide array of services and activities in support of expanded access to destinations throughout the region:

- Conducts planning efforts.

  - Planning efforts have focused on unserved and underserved areas in the large region, with plans completed for multiple small cities ranging in size from 10,000 to 120,000 population. So far, two of the small cities have implemented transportation service as a result of the planning efforts.

- Pursues funding and sustainability.

  - Pursue grant funding through the Georgetown Health Foundation, which has provided $200,000 annually to the City of Georgetown for transit for three years.

  - Obtain funding from Travis County,

    - Secured funding from the county and United Way for "Access to Health Care," a program serving lower income areas that were unserved outside of both Capital Metro and CARTS service areas.

    - Funding of low cost bus passes (one-quarter fare).

  - Capital Metro funds portions of service in Georgetown and Round Rock.

  - Coordinate funding with the Transit Empowerment Fund and Travis County.

- Builds new public service where none existed.

  - Travis County – expansion of transit service in unserved exurbs and suburbs, a crucial service driven by health care needs.

- o Round Rock and Georgetown both initiated fixed route service through the efforts of the OMM, expanding access to health care and other needed services.

- o The City of Manor - through the OMM, the city initiated a loop route shuttle that had very low ridership. This service was revised to an app-based on-demand service provided by VIA and ridership has increased significantly, with many of the trips providing access to health care.

- Engages with the Community Health Impact Plan.

- Provides a Trip Planner – 90 percent of trip planning is for access to health care.

- Developed the "Greater Austin Transportation Services and Senior Ride Guide," a comprehensive rider's guide of transportation services in the region.

- Administers Section 5310 funding, ensuring coordination of services.

The Need for Transportation

While Capital Metro and CARTS provide excellent transit service, there are still gaps as identified in a recent coordinated plan.[1] These areas are not eligible for federal transit funds as is typical for parts of an urban area that are outside of the transit system's service coverage. Over 200,000 people live outside of Capital Metro's service area yet still in the urban area.

Exhibit 6-1 depicts gaps in service in Central Texas in 2016. Since that time, two of the cities where the OMM conducted transportation plans have implemented some transit service. In addition, the OMM has teamed with Travis County to provide service in the unincorporated areas of eastern Travis County that are not in the Capital Metro or CARTS service area.

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[1] Central Texas Coordinated Public Transit – Health and Human Services Transportation Plan, Pg. 4-9 2017, Austin, TX

Exhibit 6-1: 2017 Service Gaps in Central Texas
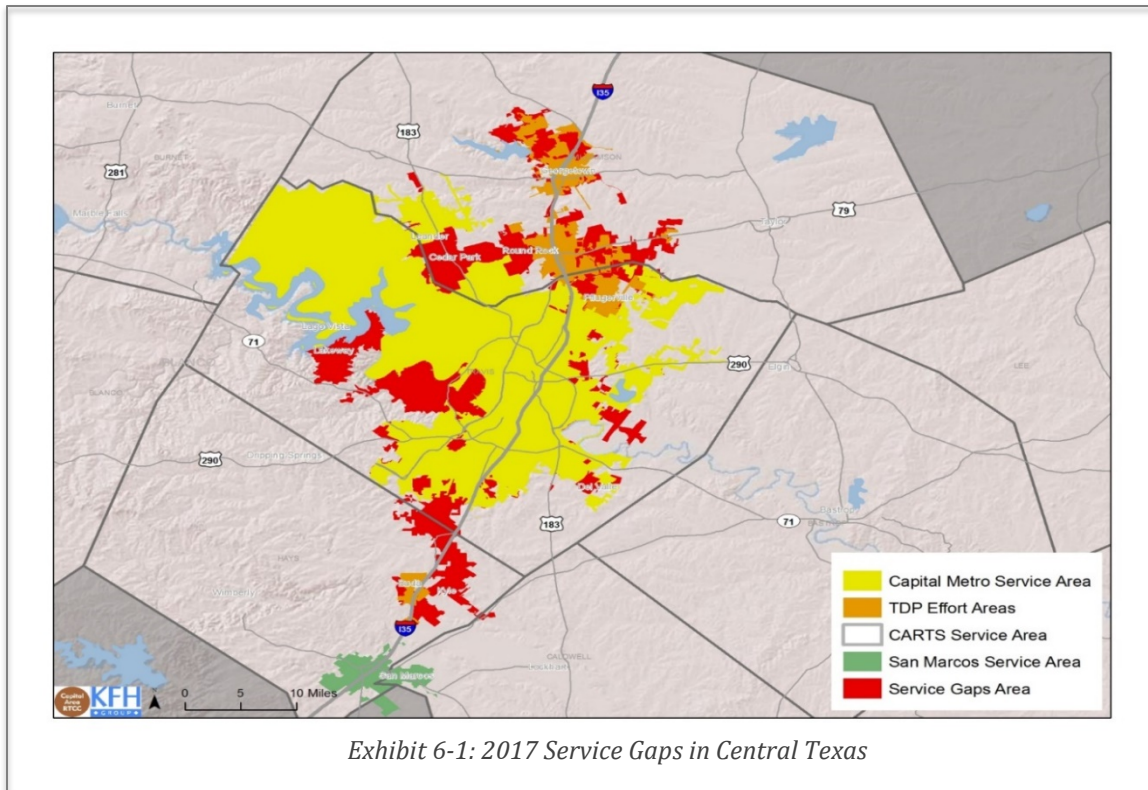
Filling Transportation Gaps

Many transportation needs can be met through fixed route service, unless the individual cannot get to the service due to distance or mobility limitations or where there is no fixed route service. For those that cannot use fixed route, other services will be needed. OMM has worked hard to fill these gaps with appropriate service through its partnership arrangements.

Partners – Participating Organizations

The greatest strength of the OMM is its ability to build services through partnerships with a diverse group of organizations, including:

- Local governments
- Transportation providers
- Health care organizations
- Human service agencies

The OMM has close to 30 partners, most of whom provide support. These are depicted in Appendix 1 to the case study and are summarized as follows.

Health Care and Human Service Agencies

Numerous health care providers serve as partners. As noted above, the OMM has succeeded in securing funding from various health care entities, the United Way, and human service agencies. The Georgetown Health Foundation has contributed over $200,000 to Georgetown's new transit service.

The OMM has been active in the development of the Community Health Improvement Plan-Year 1 Action Plan.[2] This plan sets forward a wide range of goals to improve health care. The goals pertaining to transit are in Appendix 2 to the case study.

Local Governments

Travis County provides funding on a per trip basis and the Austin-Travis County health service, known as Central Health, has been actively involved in transportation and mobility management activities. This organization has been working actively with the OMM to implement health care transportation for the isolated lower income communities beyond the Capital Metro and CARTS service areas.

The cities of Round Rock and Georgetown implemented some fixed route services to support those accessing health care, jobs and other needs. These services were planned and supported by the OMM, CARTS and Capital Metro.

Technology and Innovation

CARTS, in partnership with Capital Metro and Travis County, recently planned a service change in the City of Manor, which is a rapidly expanding suburb of Austin (9,200 population as of 2017). The service is now "micro-transit" – an app-based on-demand service that has proven to be very successful. Ridership has gone from an average of 40 one-way trips per month before the change to currently 100 per day in peak times[3].

CARTS and Capital Metro use fare payment cards and paratransit software and supporting technologies in their paratransit systems.

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[2] Community Health Improvement Plan Austin/Travis County, Texas August 2018, Year 1 Action Plan.
[3] Interview with CARTS Management and observation of the technology, January 3, 2020

Facilitators of Success

The initiative started with a partnership between CARTS and Capital Metro. These two organizations continue to lead and facilitate new service development through the OMM. Strong leadership and collaborative skills of OMM, CARTS and Capital Metro management continue to facilitate success. The funding provided by Capital Metro continues to ensure the sustainability of these services.

Barriers, Constraints and Challenges

The OMM staff reported early challenges in gathering the coalition together and working with local governments to fund local transit service. Yet because the transportation needs were so evident, the OMM found most of the organizations willing to participate and support the improvement of transportation services.

Funding and Sustainability

There have been four primary sources of funding for transportation services in the Capital Region. First and foremost, the funding provided by Capital Metro to support both the OMM (in conjunction with CARTS) and the Transit Empowerment Fund is critical to both. Capital Metro has also provided FTA Section 5307 funding to Travis County as well as the cities of Round Rock and Georgetown, both outside the Capital Metro's service area.

Second, the Transit Empowerment Fund has been extremely supportive of the entire process of improving transportation services in Austin's Travis County. The fund provides a number of options for funding in concert with the OMM including:

- Micro grants which provide additional opportunities to meet the Transit Empowerment Fund mission of enhancing access to transportation for low-income, transit-dependent individuals in the Austin area.
- Free and deeply discounted transit passes provided to non-profit health care and human service organizations and governmental entities in Central Texas to help meet the transportation needs of low income clients.

Third, local governments have been supportive of new transit services in Travis County, as well as in the cities of Round Rock and Georgetown. Without such local support, the transit services in these jurisdictions would be non-existent.

Fourth is funding from health care and human service organizations that provide matching funds for bus passes and other services in support of their programs. The Health Foundation of Georgetown, in particular, provided $200,000 per year for three years for public transit in Georgetown.

Overall, the OMM has been able to secure funding to implement much needed services. The staff believes that if the project is worthy, the funding will come. This echoes comments of transit managers leading innovative agencies that were reported in earlier TCRP research:

"(Innovative) Managers do not let funding issues get in their way. They realize that if the service has merit, someone will pay for it." [4]

Lessons Learned

OMM staff cited the following steps that have led to their successful activities and efforts in providing mobility management in the Capital Region of Texas:

- Get engaged early in the process when transportation needs become evident and understand the stakeholders' needs.
- Make sure "the right people are at the table"—decision makers and people with influence in the community.
- Seek funding from a variety of sources.
- Offer an array of services.
- Be resourceful and relentless in the pursuit of opportunities to provide transportation.

Transferability

Mobility management functions and activities are diverse. The OMM has chosen to focus on building transportation services and providing information to those who need it. These functions can be adopted by other agencies or organizations that pursue mobility management.

Advocating for individuals in the community who are transit dependent includes:

- Provide information on transportation resources as well as trip planning services.
- Identify and secure a variety of sources of funding to help ensure transit sustainability.
- Be resourceful in the pursuit of the mobility management objectives.

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[4] TCRP Report No. 70: *Guidebook for Change and Innovation at Rural and Small Urban Transit Systems,* KFH Group, et al. Transportation Research Board, Washington, D.C., 2001.

Contact Info

Office of Mobility Management

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http://mytxride.com/

Guidebook for Communities to Improve
Transportation to Health Care
    6-11
Chapter 6—Case Studies

Appendices to Case Study of Capital Metro and CARTS *Office of Mobility Management for Central Texas*

Appendix No. 1: Partnering Organizations

Transportation Providers

- CARTS
- Capital Metro
- City of Round Rock – Transit
- The HOP
- Burnet County Vet-Rides
- Drive a Senior – Health Care

Health Care Organizations

- Austin-Travis County Integral Care
- Central Health, Austin-Travis County
- La Grange VA Outreach Clinic
- Easter Seals of Central Texas
- Hays County Veteran Medical Transportation Services
- Health Foundation of Georgetown
- Hill County Mental Health and Developmental Disability Center
- Road to Recovery – American Cancer Society
- Medicaid Transportation
- Multiple health care providers

Agencies Supporting the *Social Determinants of Health*

- Age of Central Texas
- ARCIL, Inc.
- Area Agency on Aging

- Austin Parks and Recreation Department
- Bastrop County Emergency Food Pantry & Support Center
- Bluebonnet Trails Community Services
- Community Action, Inc. of Central Texas
- Hutto Community Resource Center
- Mary Lee Foundation

Others

- Commute Solutions
- Regional Transportation Coordination Council
- United for the People