



GEORGIA TRANSIT ASSOCIATION 2017 STATE LEGISLATIVE AGENDA

More than 120 public transportation systems currently operate in the State of Georgia – the large systems in the Atlanta region, such as MARTA, GRTA Xpress, and the Cobb and Gwinnett bus systems; other comprehensive bus systems in cities such as Savannah, Macon, Columbus, Rome, Athens, Albany, Hinesville, Rome, and Augusta; and more than 100 small bus and van services, in most cases operated by local governments, which in addition to addressing general purposes, shuttle citizens to and from medical appointments and employment opportunities on an as-needed basis. Georgia also has four regional rural transit systems serving multiple counties.

TRANSIT GOVERNANCE AND FUNDING

Transit Governance: GTA supports the General Assembly’s efforts to create an effective statewide transit governance framework, and to explore a permanent source of funding for both capital and operations to support public transit within the state for urban, suburban, and rural communities. More effective, efficient, and coordinated transit service delivery in all areas could be facilitated by a new governance structure, which ideally should preserve the ability of local transit systems to meet their specific needs through a variety of funding sources. GTA also supports regional transit governance models, where appropriate, which may be different depending on the area of the state, but which should maintain the principles of economies of scale and local independence and/or control, to promote coordinated transit service delivery that increases effectiveness and efficiency for customers and the taxpaying public.

Need Remains for Additional Resources, Particularly for Operations: Georgia’s transit needs continue to grow due to the lifestyle preferences of a wide variety of transit users, including young people who cannot yet drive, students, millennials, workforce households, and baby boomer generations. The economic benefits of transit are impressive. According to the American Public Transportation Association (APTA), every \$1 invested in public transportation generates approximately \$4 in economic returns. Unfortunately, the American Society of Civil Engineers (ASCE) rated Georgia in 2014 as a “D-” for transit, primarily due to the fact that Georgia has no reliable source of transit funding. While we lag behind, Georgia’s competitors in the Southeast and across the country are developing multi-modal transportation networks, with a specific emphasis on transit. Those states’ partnerships between local, state, and federal stakeholders contrast starkly with Georgia, where transit is primarily funded, up to 95%, by local governments and the federal government working together, with little state investment or state-level economic benefits realized.

New Potential Revenue Sources: The General Assembly laid the groundwork to enable the State’s transit systems to compete more effectively with the passage of the Transportation Funding Act of 2015 (HB 170). In addition, legislation in 2015 and 2016 opened the door for individual counties to hold voter referenda on new sales taxes that could be used to fund transit capital and operating costs, as well as to allow the City of Atlanta to invest more than \$2.5 billion in MARTA expansion over the next 40 years. These steps are positive, and GTA supports continued efforts to create new revenue streams for transit capital and operating needs in Georgia.

GTA urges the General Assembly to create a permanent reliable state funding stream for the operating and capital needs of Georgia’s urban, suburban, and rural transit systems, and to create a statewide transit governance framework with sustainable funding for Georgia’s 120+ local transit systems, which are delivering mobility for life-sustaining services every day.

Find out more about transit in your legislative district – data.gatransit.org



Maximizing Transit Opportunities Under the New T-SPLOST Provision: The General Assembly in 2015 created a mechanism whereby individual counties could place before their voters a sales tax of up to one cent, designated for transportation purposes that may include transit capital and operations (T-SPLOST). However, such a tax if passed is limited to only five years, which is not sufficient to compete effectively for discretionary federal grants to invest in major capital projects, such as rail projects in Atlanta or Savannah that are of great interest to those communities. This shorter period also limits the possibilities of public-private partnerships (P3s), which typically require 20-30 year commitments. Additionally, the current statute does not allow multiple counties to join together to fund cross-jurisdictional projects without being subject to individual county referendum approval. Such flexibility is needed to fund large-scale rail projects or regional bus services, and is relevant for smaller counties where people need transit to reach quality educational, medical, and job opportunities across county lines.

GTA urges the General Assembly to amend the new T-SPLOST law to allow for a longer period of tax collection (up to 20 years) for jurisdictions that wish to present their voters with a transit investment program, and also allow for counties to join together to fund regional public transit projects.

Permanent Motor Fuel Tax Exemption for Transit Systems: For many years, local transit systems, including the over 80 small rural systems, were exempt from paying state motor fuel taxes (MFT), but this exemption was discontinued in 2015. Not only are transit systems now subject to these taxes, the increase from 7.5 cents-per-gallon in MFT to 26-cents-per-gallon has hit transit systems very hard, and in some cases required service cuts.

GTA requests that the General Assembly enact legislation establishing a permanent exemption from taxes paid on motor fuel purchases by transit systems.

Regional Transportation Planning and Service Coordination: Cost efficiencies and service enhancements can be gained by developing models of comprehensive regional transportation planning and service coordination. Current federal transportation law provides the opportunity for GDOT to designate regional transportation planning organizations, which would enhance planning, coordination and implementation of statewide long-range transportation plans and transportation improvement programs, with an emphasis on addressing the needs of nonmetropolitan/rural areas of the state, as well as coordinate local planning, land use and economic development plans, and provide technical assistance. GDOT already contracts with some Regional Commissions (RCs) to carry out a limited scope of regional and rural transportation planning activities annually, including rural transit development plans, scenic byways planning, bicycle and pedestrian plans, evaluations, maps, education and outreach, and Safe Route to Schools Plans. A myriad of potential federal transportation funding, including multiple sources aimed at social service-related transportation, exist, and stronger coordination of these services would benefit the State. Unfortunately, the General Assembly in 2015 passed legislation dissolving the Georgia Coordinating Committee for Rural and Human Services Transportation, which had been the only entity collecting data on statewide transit system performance and coordination efforts. Transit systems across Georgia cannot formulate strategies for improvements without solid verifiable information, action steps for improvements, and monitoring for compliance.

GTA requests the General Assembly pass legislation authorizing the establishment of a comprehensive regionalized transportation, planning and delivery process, including the coordination of human services transportation, with a statewide focus on strategic planning for transit.

