

Executive Summary

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If transportation formula funding were more concerned with how much land a transit agency has to cover than the number of people it has to serve, the Texas Panhandle would be in the money. With 26 counties, and nearly 26,000 square miles, the Panhandle is larger than ten of the nation’s states. However, at 403,000 people, it is also one of the least populated regions with less than eight people per square mile in all but two counties. Combine this basic operating environment with a population that displays a high percentage of elderly, a high incidence of disability; and some persistent rural poverty, and these socioeconomic characteristics suggest significant challenges to the basic activities of daily living, such as mobility.

The Panhandle Transportation Coordination Study presents transportation providers’ and users’ concerns, records a local process of information gathering, and recommends strategies to begin meeting the challenge of effectively and efficiently improving the mobility of all the Panhandle’s citizens, but especially those who are elderly, disabled, and/or low-income. This study was initiated in response the Texas Legislature’s passage of H.B. 3588 and the Federal Transportation Administration’s (FTA) guidelines regarding the planning requirements for federal Job Access Reverse Commute (JARC) and New Freedom (NF) funding.

The study has been led by a 19-member advisory group, the Regional Transportation Advisory Group or RTAG. The goals and objectives adopted by the RTAG are aligned with the legislative intent of H.B. 3588 and are outlined in the table below.

Table ES1: Panhandle Goals and Objectives for Coordinated Transit

Goals	Objective
1. Improve delivery of service	Improve financial capacity of ACT and Panhandle Transit to meet current and future demand and fill critical gaps in service.
2. Generate efficiencies in operations	Increase utilization of existing services. Reduce or eliminate duplicative services.
3. Enhance customer satisfaction	Develop new mobility options to fill critical gaps that are not met by existing services.
4. Encourage cooperation and coordination	Reduce and remove barriers to coordination in order to improve future planning efforts.

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Transit Gaps: Amarillo City Transit (ACT) is the urban operator for the City of Amarillo. It provides fixed route and ADA-complementary para-transit service from 6:30 am to 6:30 pm, Monday through Saturday. Panhandle Transit is the rural operator. It provides demand-response service to all 26 counties (excluding the City of Amarillo) from 8:00 am to 5:00 pm, Monday through Friday. Between these two agencies, all counties have access to basic transportation services during their normal operating hours. However, some health and human services agencies or members of the public have expressed the needs for additional levels of service including: 1) better access to rural job sites; 2) after-hours or same-day para-transit service for medical or other essential trips; and 3) more flexible and/or higher levels of personal support for senior transportation.

Transit Overlaps: Little to no transit vehicle overlap was identified in the rural areas outside of Amarillo. In the rural regions, there is no public transportation provider besides Panhandle Transit, including taxis. Excluding Potter County, Panhandle Transit operates 40 vehicles to serve the remaining 25 counties. Only 19 additional vehicles were identified through the Panhandle Transportation Inventory as being operated by other agencies. There is a higher concentration of resources within the City of Amarillo. This is expected as it is the region's population center and the headquarters for many agencies. Areas where agencies have each invested resources include maintenance facilities, travel training, and reservation/scheduling/dispatch software. In these instances, there may be potential to share resources; however this would require additional resources in-and-of themselves in order to upgrade, expand, and/or hire additional personnel. At this time, the RTAG has decided to pursue joint travel training through the Panhandle Independent Living Center.

Unmet Needs: Coordination supposes that there is a fundamentally sound system that can serve as the core or backbone for the coordinated efforts. Within Amarillo, this is not the case. ACT is facing an increasingly tight funding and will soon be in a position where it will need to consider an alternative to fixed route with a complementary paratransit service. Over a period of six years (from 2004 to 2010), ACT will experience a permanent reduction of \$272,824 in state support – from \$672,980 to \$400,156. Decreases in state funding are due to a recently adopted Texas

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Department of Transportation (TxDOT) funding formula for public transit which link funding levels to performance, transit need, and local financial commitment to transit. Based on these TxDOT's standards, ACT's funding is projected to decrease during the 2004 – 2009 timeframe. TxDOT has indicated that it will re-evaluate its formula beginning in FY2008 at which time, future year state funding for ACT may change.

Furthermore, ACT will potentially lose about \$1.34 million in federal funding support for operations if Amarillo's population exceeds 200,000; this is an event expected by the 2010 census. The financial and operational health of ACT is important because, without a healthy core, other initiatives, like coordination planning, are disadvantaged.

JARC and NF Funding: It is anticipated that there will be a call for JARC and NF projects in early 2007 and that the funding available will include FY06 and FY07 allocations (approximately \$15.4 million). Funding for projects will be competitive across the state; projects proposed by small urban recipients will be evaluated against their peers as will a rural recipient's projects. One objective of the Panhandle Transportation Coordination Study is to select multiple, sustainable projects that reflect the transportation needs of the community; incorporate a coordinated approach to better utilize the region's resources; and can be reasonably implemented. A brief description of eligible projects for each funding category follows.

Job Access and Reverse Commute (JARC): The purpose of the JARC program is to provide funding for local programs that offer job access and reverse commute transportation services to low-income individuals. Eligible projects include, but are not limited to:

- Demand-response van service;
- Ridesharing and carpooling activities;
- Expanding fixed-route transit service areas;
- Late-night and weekend service
- Guaranteed ride home service;
- Shuttle service; and
- Bicycling.

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Marketing and promotional activities to encourage use of transit by workers with non-traditional schedules and use of transit voucher program by appropriate agencies for welfare recipients and other low-income individuals are also eligible activities.

New Freedom (NF): The purpose of the NF is to encourage services and facility improvements to address the transportation needs of individuals with disabilities that are either new and/or go beyond those that are required by the ADA of 1990. Eligible projects may include, but are not limited to:

- Purchasing vehicles and supporting accessible taxi, ride sharing, and vanpooling programs; including staff training, administration, and maintenance;
- Administering voucher and transit pass programs for transportation services offered by transit and human services providers;
- Administering volunteer driver and aide programs to support the management of driver recruitment, safety, background checks, scheduling, coordination with riders and other related support functions;
- Training for individual users on awareness, knowledge, and skills of public and alternative transportation options available in their communities. This includes travel training services; and
- Coordinate transportation service access beyond those served by one agency or organization within a community. For example, a non-profit agency receiving funding through NF could not limit the services it provides to its own clientele. These services are intended to build cooperation with other existing providers.

The following are considered eligible mobility management activities:

- The development of coordinated plans;
- Support of state and local coordination policy bodies and councils;
- The maintenance and operation of transportation brokerages to coordinate providers, funding agencies, and riders;

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- The development and maintenance of other transportation coordination bodies and their activities, including employer-oriented Transportation Management Organizations and neighborhood travel coordination activities;
- The development and support of one-stop transportation call centers to coordinate transportation information on all travel modes and to manage eligibility requirements and arrangements for customers among supporting programs; and
- The acquisition and operation of intelligent transportation technologies to help plan and operate coordinated systems including GIS mapping, coordinated vehicle scheduling, dispatching, and monitoring technologies, as well as technologies to track costs and billing in a coordinated system.

Action Plans: Through a public participation process that included ten public meetings, seven workshops, and numerous stakeholder phone interviews or site visits, seven action plans were adopted by the RTAG for inclusion in this study. Each of these plans met or largely met the criteria adopted by the RTAG for plan inclusion. These criteria include: 1) met the goals adopted by the RTAG; 2) the project attempts to coordinate resources; 3) the project meets identified needs; 4) the project has support and is realistically achievable; and 5) the project is ready to move forward.

Actions plans adopted by the RTAG include:

- Provide job-access service in the Childress region;
- Provide job-access service in the Hereford region;
- Provide increased travel training through Panhandle Independent Living Center;
- Provide same-day, non-emergency medical transportation to Spec-Trans eligible riders with a voucher program; and
- Institute a transit-coordination/mobility management position to sustain the development of coordination efforts throughout the region;
- Support the implementation of flex routing by ACT; and
- Support the creation of an Independent Transportation Network by the Senior Ambassadors Coalition.