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**FINAL REPORT OF THE SENATE STUDY COMMITTEE ON
PUBLIC TRANSPORTATION IN THE METROPOLITAN ATLANTA REGION**

COMMITTEE MEMBERS

Honorable Brandon Beach
District 21
Chairman

Honorable Steve Gooch
District 51

Honorable Fran Millar
District 40

Honorable Vincent Fort
District 39

Honorable Jason Carter
District 42

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INTRODUCTION

Senate Resolution 618, which passed the Senate during the 2013 Legislative Session, created the Senate Study Committee on Public Transportation in the Metropolitan Atlanta Region (Committee) to examine the current makeup of public transportation in the metropolitan Atlanta region and look for workable solutions to the gridlock.

The Committee was composed of five members of the Senate: Senator Brandon Beach, serving as Chairman; Senator Steve Gooch; Senator Fran Millar; Senator Vincent Fort; and Senator Jason Carter.

Additionally, the legislative staff members assigned to the Committee were: Ms. Gerri Pringle, Legislative Assistant to Senator Brandon Beach; Ms. Emily Williams, Senate Press Office; Ms. Jenna Wolfe, Legislative Counsel; and Ms. Angie Fiese, Senate Research Office.

The Committee held three meetings. The first meeting was held at the Georgia Department of Transportation on August 22nd, 2013. At this meeting, the Committee heard testimony from: Mr. Keith Parker, Metropolitan Atlanta Rapid Transit Authority; Ms. Jannine Miller, Georgia Regional Transit Authority; Ms. Faye DiMassimo, Cobb County Transit; Ms. Kim Conroy, Gwinnett County Transit; and Mr. Tad Leithead, Atlanta Regional Commission. The second meeting was held at the Capitol on September 19th, 2013. At this meeting, the Committee heard testimony from: Mr. Hill Hardman, Route Match Technology; Mr. Cain Williamson, Atlanta Regional Commission; and Ms. Jannine Miller, Georgia Regional Transit Authority. The final meeting was held at the Capitol on December 17th, 2013. The Committee discussed its recommendation and heard comments from its members and presenters.

BACKGROUND

According to the annual population estimates of the Atlanta Regional Commission (ARC), the 10-county Atlanta region added approximately 40,100 people between April 1, 2012, and April 1, 2013. That growth puts the region's total population at 4,219,600, a number larger than the populations of 24 states. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, metro Atlanta was the 6th fastest growing metro region in the United States during 2012-2013. According to ARC, in the years 2010 through 2040, the 20-county Atlanta region is projected to add 2.8 million residents for a total population of nearly 8.3 million. The Bureau of Labor Statistics found that metro Atlanta added more than 72,000 jobs during the past year (June 2012 to June 2013), the fifth largest gain in new jobs in the nation.

Transportation is a critical resource in the Atlanta region. It is essential to commerce and the provision of goods and services to the people of the region, as well as providing a means for people to get to the workplace, medical facilities, and educational institutions. According to a recent public opinion survey released by ARC, more than 71 percent of respondents replied that improved public transportation was "very important" for the Atlanta region's future.

The Atlanta region is currently served by four public transportation providers that, together, form the backbone of the regional transit system. These providers are the Metropolitan Atlanta Rapid Transit Authority (MARTA), Cobb Community Transit (CCT), Gwinnett County Transit (GCT), and GRTA *Xpress* (Georgia Regional Transportation Authority). In August of 2013, Chairman Beach documented his public transit ride from Kennesaw State University to Gwinnett Arena.

He also wrote an Op-Ed column for the Atlanta-Journal Constitution on his transit experience. To plan his ride, he had to visit three websites to review schedules and organize his trip. He then rode two buses on CCT to the MARTA Arts Center Station, and then boarded a train to the Lindbergh Station. There, he changed trains to the Doraville line, then boarded a Gwinnett bus that took him two blocks from the Gwinnett Arena. The 32-mile trip took 3 hours 35 minutes. A person can fly to New York City faster. Senator Beach also had to pay three different times, with exact change. No debit cards were accepted. This journey highlighted the reason for, and mission of, the Committee – there was no coordination or collaboration among the transit agencies. The goal is recommend solutions to bring these transit assets together to work seamlessly for customers. You can see Chairman Beach’s journey at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zLzKeJtMBwI#t=12>.

STUDY COMMITTEE MEETINGS

August 22, 2013

Chairman Beach opened the first meeting by stating that the goal of the Committee is to examine the current transit systems and see if we can work together in a more collaborative, coordinated, and seamless fashion. Most of the transit discussions in the past have focused on funding or the structure of a regional transit board/entity. This Committee will look at the transit issue from the rider’s perspective, namely, how we can best get the customer to their job on-time. Senator Beach also informed the Committee of his recent public transit ride from Kennesaw State University to Gwinnett Arena. He started at 10:50 A.M. and did not arrive at the arena until 2:25. While the transit rides were all clean, friendly and safe, he was required to provide exact change and there was no coordination or collaboration among the agencies.

Mr. Keith Parker, with MARTA, provided the Committee with MARTA facts: 413,500 average weekday boardings (all modes) which are mostly comprised of work trips (56 percent); MARTA represents 94 percent of all transit trips in the region (with 32 percent of transfers to MARTA from GRTA, Cobb, and Gwinnett); MARTA is the 9th largest transit system in the U.S.; and it is the largest transit system in the southern U.S. The rail system consists of: 38 stations; 48 miles of double track service; 338 rail cars/318 active; and three rail yards. The busy system consists of: 531 large buses; 91 bus routes; three bus garages; and a heavy maintenance facility. The Paratransit system includes 175 L-Vans and one garage. There are five police precincts.

MARTA’s Breeze Card System includes Smart Card fare collection with “tap-and-go” card readers on rail entry gates, buses, and Paratransit vehicles; and a state-of-the-art computer system linking the region together. The Breeze Card stores fares, cash value, or a discount pass for travel. GRTA, Gwinnett, and Cobb customers may use Breeze Cards to travel on their systems. Mr. Parker stated that they are trying to make the Smart Card better. He referred to the Regional Multi-Modal Public Transit Automated Fare Collection Study commissioned by ARC last year. The focus of the ARC-led study is to survey the relative strengths and weaknesses of fare collection systems for nationally, to identify promising technologies and recommend the best practices for the specific needs of our region. The study’s recommendations are due at the end of the year.

Mr. Parker then highlighted MARTA’s economic impact (\$1.4 billion economic activity supported annually) and its challenges (fare increases, reduced bus routes, elimination of positions). MARTA’s transformation initiatives which involve Transit-Oriented Development projects, security enhancements, real-time bus information for a traveler (on a cellphone or computer) that uses satellite technology to estimate vehicle arrivals, and a new code of conduct which raises the standard of acceptable behavior by implementing a customer suspension process. Mr. Parker concluded his remarks with MARTA’s operating budget (\$410 million) and its capital budget (\$103 million).

Ms. Jannine Miller, with GRTA, informed the Committee that *Xpress*, a public transportation service provided by GRTA, has been in operation for more than a decade and has saved the region's commuters more than \$140 million per year from reduced traffic congestion costs. These savings, combined with the low cost of operating the *Xpress* service, translate into a 4-to-1 return on investment. *Xpress* has 33 routes, served by 175 coaches, which carry more than 2 million passenger trips annually, providing workers with reliable, stress-free commutes to/from major employment centers. There are 30 park and ride lots in 12 metro Atlanta counties, and the services draw ridership from nearly 40 counties. *Xpress* takes 1.5 million cars off of metro Atlanta's roads every year; it saves Georgians 5 million gallons of gas, and reduces by 10 percent the number of cars getting off the Downtown Connector during rush hour. A future *Xpress* study will focus on optimizing service in managed land corridors. Ms. Miller also stated that *Xpress* works with its regional partners to provide coordinated services: participates in regional fare media (Breeze Card); contracts with Cobb and Gwinnett to operate some *Xpress* routes; and is working on developing unified downtown/midtown bus stop signage. *Xpress* is also improving its communication channels for customer engagement (Twitter, quarterly newsletters, and a newly-designed website).

Ms. Faye DiMassimo provided testimony regarding Cobb County Transit (CCT). The CCT is the second largest transit system in Georgia behind MARTA. Approximately four million trips are taken each year. The CCT has 23 buses and 21 paratransit vehicles. It serves the Cumberland area, which is the 5th largest area in the state. Cobb County is continuing to study transit improvements in the Northwest Corridor through the Connect Cobb Environmental Assessment (EA). The EA is the next phase in the process of developing and implementing a solution to the mobility needs on US 41 and I-75 between Cobb County and the city of Atlanta. The Northwest Corridor is one of the most congested areas in the metropolitan region. With over 675,000 residents in Cobb County, US 41 and I-75 experience heavy traffic and delays on a daily basis. Nearly 40 percent of Cobb residents now work in Cobb County, with a large percentage beginning or ending their trips along US 41. The EA will take a close look at benefits, impacts, and potential mitigation measures of the locally preferred alternative (LPA) identified through the Connect Cobb Alternatives Analysis (AA). Initiated in August of 2011, the AA was an intensive 14-month process that evaluated a variety of transit routes and technologies, incorporating both technical analysis and extensive stakeholder and public involvement. The purpose of the AA was to develop an LPA that identifies a high capacity transit system best suited for the corridor. The selection of the LPA involved analyzing several types of fixed guideway transits including light rails, bus rapid transits and dedicated busways. The results of the LPA are a combination of: express buses providing long-haul services from and through Cobb County to other regional destinations for peak period commuting trips; and arterial bus rapid transits providing localized access to and between major activity centers in the Northwest Corridor.

Specifically, the EA will evaluate the natural, social and transportation benefits and the impacts of the LPA. Also during the EA phase, transit ridership and travel time forecasts will be refined, the financial strategy will be further defined, and a comparison of the project benefits and costs will be developed. The EA is anticipated to continue through the beginning of 2014.

Ms. Kim Conroy, with GCT, provided the Committee with facts on its system: GCT provides express and local fixed routes, and Paratransit services; 450 daily revenue hours; 9,500 daily revenue miles; a fleet of 98 buses and paratransit vehicles; and had 2,026,000 passenger boardings in 2012 (1,254,000 local, 753,000 express, 19,000 paratransit). The express service has seven routes (including three operated by GRTA) to Atlanta, Monday-Friday. Six routes use I-85 managed/HOV lanes. One route uses 1-20 HOV lanes. The local service has six routes that connect Lawrenceville, Duluth, Lilburn, Norcross, and the surrounding area Monday-Friday. There are three transfer hubs. One route operates Saturdays. Paratransit has 70 average daily riders.

Its estimated operating budget for 2014 is \$15.4 million, which includes the operating contract with the private service provider and county administration/contract oversight costs, utilities, leases, and Breeze Card fare collection.

Senator Millar asked the presenters what the percent of occupancy is on all buses. All responded that there is a high occupancy - the use of buses is more prevalent with managed lanes (development is outward). More businesses are locating outside the perimeter. Young professionals want to live downtown; the reverse commute will become more prevalent as well. Ms. Miller commented that it is consumed if it is available; not consumed if it not available. Transit agencies do not want to put buses out there if they will not be used – focus on what the customer base is. Senator Fort asked about the possibility of distance-based fares. The presenters highlighted the ARC study that is focused on a regional solution to fares. Ms. DiMassimo commented that this needs to be done on a collaborative, cooperative platform. Mr. Parker stated that distance-based fares will not get new money from the “airport guy” who lives far away but will travel to the airport. It will impact the lower wealth population that take shorter trips and transfer a number of times. Senator Millar commented that employers are also subsidizing fares and that this should be a cost of doing business (33 cents on a dollar from the farebox).

Senator Gooch asked if all four agencies are receiving subsidies. Yes – Mr. Parker informed the Committee that it is very rare to find a transit agency get as much from fare box revenue. Senator Gooch also asked if there have been any studies done that focused on combining all agencies and rebranding. Mr. Tad Leithead, ARC, stated that ARC’s Regional Transit Committee has looked at Transit Governance and created legislation to this effect. Senator Beach asked if we need legislation. Intergovernmental agreements can be used; however, Senator Millar commented that legislation will be needed for future funding statewide. One-hundred twenty-nine counties have some form of transit. Senator Carter questioned the presenters as to what would be key to increasing ridership. Is there a point of too much ridership? Mr. Parker answered that there is a significant amount of demand because service is inadequate (infrequent service). We need more of an investment. Ms. Miller commented that word of mouth (outreach) is key to generating ridership. Ms. DiMassimo stated that we need to provide reliable trips – two of her routes connect into larger systems. These need to be reliable to create reliable times on the larger systems.

Mr. Ron Siphon, a private citizen, commented that it is a mistake to build additional transit fixed guidelines. Atlanta has the lowest population density in the world. It is expensive and suited for high density. There needs to be better-suited transit – *Xpress* buses with unlimited stops operating in managed lanes. Ms. Yvonne Williams, President of the Perimeter CID, informed the Committee that it is investing \$30,000 in a shuttle for UPS.

September 19, 2013

Senator Beach opened the second meeting by thanking everyone who attended and participated in the last meeting, as well as those in attendance and part of this meeting. This is all about the customer/rider’s perspective. Senator Millar informed the Committee of a recent MARTA meeting which discussed a unified payment method.

Mr. Hill Hardmann, with RouteMatch Software, informed the Committee that RouteMatch was created to develop and provide dynamic, enterprise intelligent transportation systems (ITS) to the public and private transit sectors. The software provides realtime passenger information, including an estimated real time of arrival of a bus or train. The software also provides the transit operator with route optimization. This is especially important for paratransit providers. The route may be optimized every 24 hours based on cancellations. A fixed route may be optimized about two to three times per year. It is helpful to leverage a fixed route service with a paratransit service because paratransit is so expensive.

Both Coweta County Transit and Henry County Transit have used RouteMatch's automated scheduling and dispatching solution to reduce or eliminate paperwork, accommodate more trip requests and verifications, and improve routing. The company now offers tablets, which have revolutionized operations in Philadelphia, Rhode Island, and Denver. On the tablets, which may be placed on each vehicle or provided to each driver, drivers can get turn-by-turn navigation, manage route and scheduling information, and access automatic vehicle local data. Each vehicle contains vehicle logic units which provide automated passenger counting. These units also provide the operator with an automated vehicle location with a GPS device and camera. Coweta County has installed the tablets on each of their vehicles. Henry County uses RouteMatch's notification module, which provides riders with automated outbound information via phone about upcoming trips and reservations. The company offers GDOT with a RouteMatch DOT Dashboard which is a unique tool to capture user defined key performance indicators from multiple transit agencies for display on graphical dashboards that are both easy to use and navigate. GDOT can use this tool to obtain information on how grantees are operating their services along with the capability of monitoring regional and statewide performance data, realtime. Senator Millar asked Mr. Hardman if the state decides to go with a regional governance model, would his company be able to integrate. Yes – we need good data before asking for state funding. Senator Carter followed up this question by asking Mr. Hardman if integration can happen as long as everyone shares their data. Mr. Hardman agreed.

Mr. Cain Williamson, with ARC, provided the Committee with testimony on transit coordination in the Atlanta region. In 2005, ARC completed the Regional Transit Institutional Analysis which examined how the Atlanta region is currently organized to plan, build, fund, and operate transit service and recommended strategies to provide a more cohesive, truly regional transit system. As a result of the Regional Transit Institutional Analysis Study, a partnership of local governments, state agencies, and current transit providers came together to discuss the establishment of a seamless, integrated transit system in the Atlanta region. The Transit Planning Board, or TPB, was created to focus on the development of a regional transit plan, improve regional system coordination, improve system performance measurement, and act as an advocate for increased federal funding for the regional transit system. Established in January 2010, the Regional Transit Committee (RTC) is currently guiding the implementation of Concept 3, the long-range transit vision for the Atlanta region developed by the board's predecessors, the Transit Planning Board (TPB), and the Transit Implementation Board.

Concept 3 was recently updated in 2012 with the highest priority projects included in the financially constrained Regional Transportation Plan. The ARC is currently conducting a regional multi-modal public transit automated fare collection study, the purpose of which is to move forward in making policy and funding decisions for governance, coordination, and future regional fare collection systems. Another one of ARC's projects is focused on designing unified bus stop signage to better identify major bus locations, provide useful and easy-to-understand routes, stops and schedule information, and reduce sign clutter. The Regional Transit Data Warehouse was created in 2011 as a central clearinghouse enabling a regional approach to the collection, management, and distribution of transit system data.

The RTC adopted Concept Regional Transit Governance Legislation of January of 2011. It creates a structure for a regional transit governing and decision-making entity to: improve the ability of transit riders to move around their community; and efficiently manage the current transit systems and plan for where it is needed and desired in the future. The guiding principles are: local control; jurisdictional participation defined as those who directly support transit services; proportional representation based on jurisdiction's population and financial contribution to region's transit system; and unified decision-making that can plan, finance, build, own, operate, and maintain (or contract for) cross-jurisdictional transit infrastructure and service.

The legislation: describes two types of multi-jurisdictional transit authorities in Georgia; administrative costs are recovered through member dues; defines board membership and enables creation of an executive committee; outlines general powers of transit authorities; prohibits the authority from having power to direct or manage operations of the existing operator without consent of that operator; requires the authority to adopt a Transit System Plan, five-year capital program, and an annual budget; and creates a citizens' advisory committee. A legal review was conducted in 2012 of ARC's power and authorities in context of regional transit governance. The review found that ARC: could continue intergovernmental coordination, regional planning, cross-jurisdictional coordination, and technical assistance; cannot own transportation capital assets; and is capable of additional work if it is done under contract with local governments acting as their agent (negotiate and administer contracts, system operation, and management of construction).

Senator Fort asked about proportional representation. What considerations should be given to each agency's ability to move people? (90 percent service). Population and money contributed equals the most influence. Senator Fort followed up his question by asking Mr. Williamson if there is a model in the country for governance. The RTC prefers the Chicago model. Senator Gooch asked what happens to the MARTA Boards, etc. Nothing happens to them. Senator Carter asked if we need regional transit governance in order to get the coordination we want. There is coordination currently taking place, largely as a result of the creation of the RTC. There will be a point at which institutional mechanisms will be needed to further the coordination. We need a unified force and a new, independent, third party. Senator Carter then asked how this will be enforced. Legislation would give management of federal funds to the unifying entity. Use leverage of funds to force the agencies to do certain things. If there is an agreement, agencies would have to ask the ARC for federal money because ARC is the designated metropolitan planning organization. Senator Beach asked Senator Fort if GRTA was asked to be the regional entity in years past. Yes – it was asked to do some of these things. Could GRTA be the new entity? Yes; however, the RTC would emphasize local control. Senator Beach questioned if there are federal funds available for a demonstration project? This would depend on the amount/reason for the money; however, there would be a stronger case if there was a unified front. Senator Fort asked the final question regarding Clayton County Transit removal of service. ARC has met with them. The FTA has stated that it would not invest dollars until Clayton invests its own money.

Ms. Miller provided testimony to the Committee regarding metro Atlanta transit system coordination. *Xpress* collaborates with regional partners to coordinate services: administrative coordination includes participation in the regional Breeze Card clearinghouse and contracting with CCT and GCT to operate some routes; customer-oriented coordination, which includes providing free transfers to/from MARTA, plans for unified downtown/midtown bus stop signage, and provides the connection of customers to 11 major MARTA rail stations.

The GRTA started working with MARTA in 1999 as it began to explore new fare technology to replace the previous system. GRTA collaborated with transit partners on the Breezecard Regional Task Force to begin region-wide implementation in 2004. MARTA began to use Breeze in 2006. The state has funded \$1.5 million to equip *Xpress* buses to accept Breeze; went "live" in 2008. Today, MARTA serves as the "regional clearinghouse" for Breeze, managing and supporting the system and facilitating the transfer of payments through agreements with GRTA, CCT, and GCT. *Xpress* customers have several options to pay fares, including the Breeze Card: (1) Buy a new Breeze card and reload cash value onto the Breeze card at breezecard.com (allows for free transfer between *Xpress* and MARTA); (2) purchase an *Xpress* pass from an employer online (onlinesales.xpressga.com), in person at the GRTA office, or through one of the transit partners for routes operated by CCT and GCT; (3) pay cash on the bus (exact amount of fare – this is required because it would take too long for drivers to make change, resulting in a delay of service).

The Breeze Card contract is with MARTA exclusively. GRTA was going to opt into Breeze; however, it determined it was cost-prohibitive. The GRTA continues its partnerships to improve customers' experience with Breeze by updating fare information in the Breeze system, improving Breeze vending machines to integrate transit operators' fare products, distributing passes on behalf of transit partners to state employees, and participating in ARC's fare collection study. Concepts for additional customer-oriented improvements include: an increased awareness of the Breeze Card as an option to pay fares on all of metro Atlanta's transit systems; more ways to buy a Breeze Card (i.e., in retail outlets, buy with cash, etc.); and mobile-phone payment.

Mr. Bob Dallas, a private citizen, commented that while the agencies are working well together, the private sector is the solution to provide capital and manage the system. Mr. Ron Siphon, a private citizen, emphasized the need for a comprehensive, regional plan at a cost that is reasonable to taxpayers. A fixed guideway is very expensive.

December 17, 2013

Senator Beach began the meeting by providing an overview of the first two meetings. He stated the goal of the Committee is to have all four agencies come together and rebrand; however, the Committee understands the difficulty of this process and, therefore, finds that the transit system in general needs to be more consumer friendly. Senator Beach emphasized the difficulty he had in scheduling the trip he made from Kennesaw State University to Gwinnet Place Area – he had to go to three different websites to schedule rides. Therefore, he will be introducing an urging resolution to require the transit agencies to collaborate and develop one website (www.goatltransit.com) that the consumer has to visit to schedule a transit trip. He has met with UPS and they have agreed to loan IT personnel to help develop this website. GRTA will coordinate this effort, along with public outreach. Each transit agency will still maintain their individual websites. Senator Beach commented that to get the lifestyle rider to ride transit, we need to make it simple.

Mr. Parker, with MARTA, advised the Committee that it is very supportive of this effort. The agencies meet on a monthly basis to discuss ways to improve and this fits in well with what they have been discussing. The agencies understand that they need to be better about marketing services. All have requested ARC to jointly market their services. Ms. Miller, with GRTA, thanked Senator Beach for his leadership and for taking the next step. The website will be helpful to the general public. Mr. David Tucker, with Gwinnett County, thanked Senator Beach as well. He stated that Gwinnett focuses on local riders and is very supportive of this effort to expand and be a part of a more comprehensive and larger picture.

Senator Millar suggested to the agencies that they inform the citizens of the metropolitan Atlanta region the degree of cooperation among the agencies. He pointed out that the public became very interested in transit when the site of the proposed Braves' stadium was released. It is important to set the stage in each community and encourage people to ride mass transit. Mr. Williamson, with ARC, commented to the Committee that ARC is excited about the resolution. ARC is working on trip planning software, and there is a similar website for fare collection for the Breeze card.

COMMITTEE RECOMMENDATIONS

The Committee finds that reliable and timely transportation in the metropolitan Atlanta region is of primary importance to the State of Georgia. There are several transit providers in the region, each utilizing its own routing, scheduling, and payment systems. A transit rider who desires to travel across county lines must visit multiple websites to plan a trip. Transit users in the region would greatly benefit from the creation of a website that would allow riders to plan trips, choose routes, and pay for their trips all at one website.

Therefore, the Committee recommends that the General Assembly introduce legislation which provides for the creation and development of a website, www.goatltransit.com, to provide those desiring to utilize Atlanta's transit operators with an easy way to plan a trip across county lines. The metropolitan transit authorities should make the appropriate personnel and information available to achieve this important goal.

(Signatures on file in the Senate Research Office)