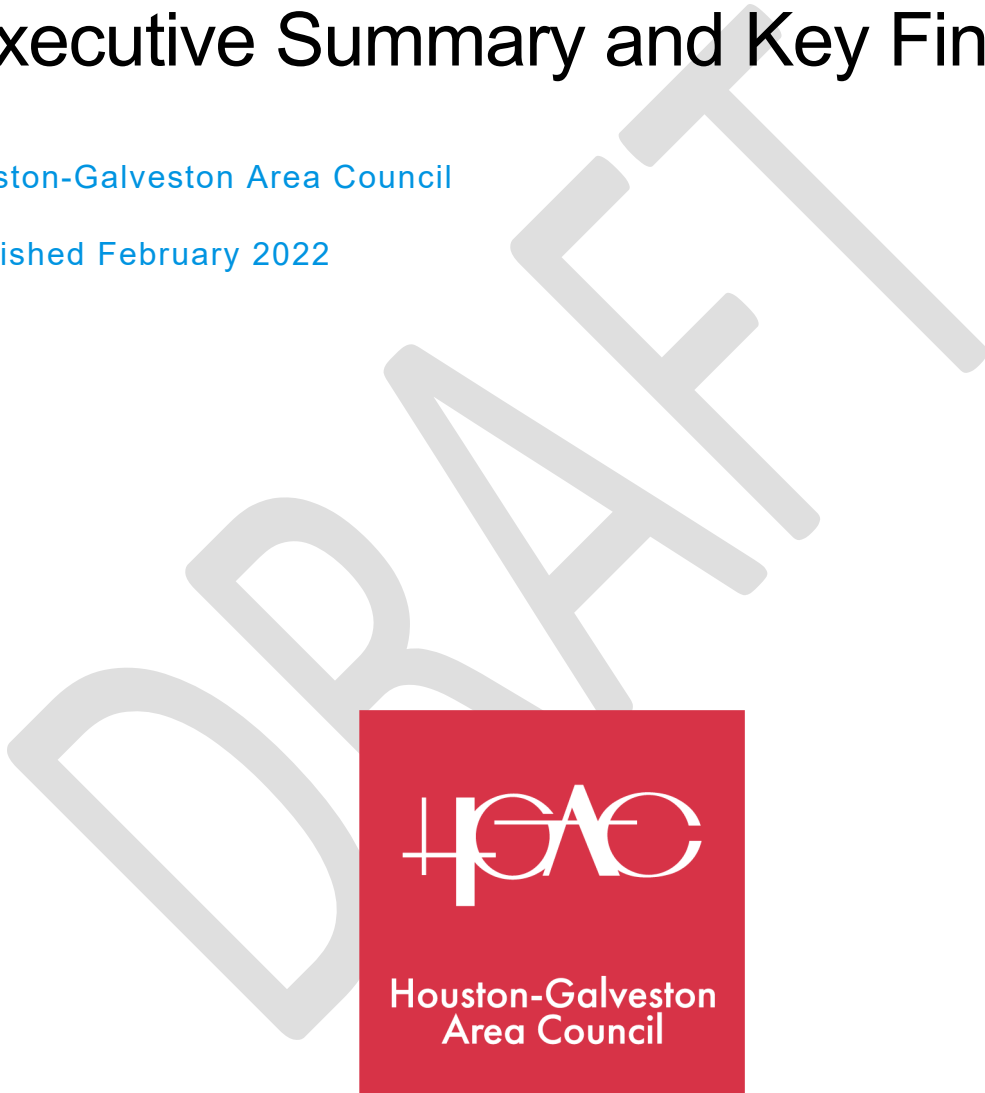


Regionally Coordinated Transportation Plan 2022-2026

Executive Summary and Key Findings

Houston-Galveston Area Council

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Executive Summary

The greater Houston region is growing rapidly, and this growth is expected to continue for the foreseeable future. Since 2015, the 13-county region covered by this report has grown by 3.4%, topping the seven million mark in total population. H-GAC growth estimates suggest that by 2050, the region's population will grow past 11 million¹. As the population keeps growing, the region's transportation needs will grow with it.

While the transportation needs and barriers of all the region's residents are considered in this plan, the Regionally Coordinated Transportation Plan (RCTP) update focuses on the needs of seniors, students, veterans, persons with disabilities, those with limited English proficiency, and other groups considered disproportionately likely to need help meeting their transportation needs. According to the US Census Bureau's American Community Survey (ACS), all of these groups are well-represented in the region: Among those seven million-plus residents are over 750,000 people over the age of 65, nearly 340,000 working-age adults with disabilities, more than one million who report limited English proficiency, and more than 2.5 million student-aged individuals. Many of these people live in areas with little or no transportation service.

Ninety-two million trips were taken on public transit in the region in 2019, almost 90 million of which were taken on Houston METRO, according to the U.S. Department of Transportation's Federal Transit Administration. While METRO is the largest transit agency in the region, a variety of public and private transit providers play vital roles in ensuring the region's residents can access jobs, healthcare, education, and other vital services. Transit providers in the region have faced many challenges in recent years. A lack of dedicated funding, in the form of taxes or fees that are reliable and exclusively allocated to transit, for agencies other than METRO limits the amount of service that can be provided. Road congestion and low-density development patterns make providing efficient, high-quality service difficult. On top of these long-term issues, the COVID-19 pandemic has brought additional challenges, including significant ridership declines and increased expenditures for enhanced cleaning and other precautions to

¹ H-GAC Regional Growth Forecast. Available at <https://www.h-gac.com/regional-growth-forecast>.

keep riders and agency employees safe. Through the Regionally Coordinated Transportation Plan Steering Committee (a working group of the Regional Transportation Coordination Subcommittee), staff have ensured that the region's transit providers have been involved at all stages of the process of developing this plan. In addition to the region's transit providers, the Steering Committee also included representatives of other key stakeholder organizations, such as persons with disabilities and veterans.

In addition to this stakeholder involvement, a robust public outreach process was conducted as part of this RCTP update. Due to restrictions placed on in-person gatherings as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, all outreach was conducted virtually. An engagement website was established for this project. An initial round of outreach, which took place in Summer 2021, included a series of virtual interactive events, an online survey, and a mapping activity. A second round of outreach, which took place in Fall 2021, consisted of a series of focus groups. This extensive public engagement process provided vital insight into the transportation needs of the region's residents, and the barriers they face trying to access transportation services.

This plan finds several key gaps that limit the effectiveness of current transportation services in the region, in turn limiting access for many residents of the region to the jobs and services they need. In some parts of the region, no transportation services are available at all, while many other parts of the region do not seem to provide enough service to meet their residents' needs, or do not provide service to the destinations those residents want to reach. Many in the region are unaware of the services available in their community, or struggle to find the vital information they need to make use of those services.

Even before these gaps can be filled, the region's transportation providers must find the resources to continue providing their current levels of service. Transit operating expenses are expected to rise across the region, and providers will need to find additional revenue to meet their riders' needs. With the recent passage of the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act, new federal funding streams will soon become available. The region's transit providers will need to find local matching funds from

resources like Transportation Development Credits to make the most of these new opportunities.

This plan finds four key opportunities for improved coordinated public transportation service in the region. The region should:

- **Add new services, and expand existing services**, both to address current unmet needs and to ensure that the region’s transportation options keep pace with the region’s rapid growth.
- **Better understand the information needs of transportation users in the region and ensure that information about transit is easily accessible to all.**
- **Improve non-emergency medical transportation and paratransit services**, to ensure that seniors and persons with disabilities have access to jobs, healthcare, and vital services.
- **Better coordinate with private non-profit and for-profit transportation providers**, as they are vital to meeting the region’s transportation needs.

Below, the plan’s vision, goals, and objectives are listed, followed by the plan’s recommendations. Recommendations are organized by which of the key opportunities listed above they address.

Vision, Goals, and Objectives

This section lists the vision, goals, and objectives for the 2022-2026 Regionally Coordinated Transportation Plan update.

Vision

Equitable access to jobs, healthcare, and other opportunities will be guaranteed to everyone in the Gulf Coast Region, through the provision of abundant, safe, reliable, and well-connected public and human service transportation.

Goals

1. Increase the percentage of residents in the region with access to public transportation services
2. Improve the safety of transportation services in the region

3. Enable the region's public and human service providers to provide a longer span of service
4. Reduce emissions caused by transportation in the region

Objectives

1. Increase awareness among officials and public of need for increased transit and human transportation services in Gulf Coast region
2. Seek to initiate new fixed route transit services or expand in areas where it is identified as needed
3. Seek to start demand response service in area where it is identified as needed
4. Endeavor to enhance regional coordination for transit and human service
5. Meet gaps with appropriate or innovative human and social transportation services in areas where service by adequate transit is difficult or not feasible
6. Identify additional means of funding transit, human and social service transportation services
7. Improve the level of service and span of existing providers
8. Develop innovative means to fund alternate mobility solutions such as microtransit - considering alternate funding sources and public private partnerships
9. Adjust and adapt to the evolving situations that occur as they relate to the COVID-19 pandemic.
10. Facilitate the use of electric and zero emissions vehicles in the development of new transit services

Recommendations

Finding #1: Transit Service Improvements

- Add new fixed-route services and/or extend existing fixed-route services, in areas with moderate or high Transit Need Index scores and unmet transit need, where fixed-route services are justified by population or employment density.
- Add new demand-response services and/or increase capacity of existing demand-response services, in areas with moderate or high Transit Need Index

scores, where fixed-route services are not justified by population or employment density.

- Implement demand-response services in parts of the region with no transit service, to ensure a baseline level of transportation availability for all residents of the region.
- Implement pilot projects to test microtransit and other emerging transit technologies, and expand implementation where pilots are successful.
- Expand frequency and hours of operation on existing transit services to increase capacity in areas currently served by transit.
- Help transportation providers build capacity to flexibly take advantage of emerging funding streams and meet demand for fixed-route and demand-response services.
- Implement community van programs to expand access to transportation services beyond the hours of operation of existing services, and to improve access to destinations currently not served by transit.
- Capitalize on existing regional carpool, vanpool, and TDM programs to provide additional tools to meet demand for transportation services.
- Use targeted investments to improve pedestrian and bicycle infrastructure near transit corridors to improve access to existing transportation services.

Finding #2: Transit Information Gaps

- Conduct additional studies to better understand information needs of travelers in the 13-county region.
- Develop evidence-based regional best practices for transportation information that center rider needs.
- Support initiatives to help transit providers better communicate with the public about their transportation services, including improvements to websites, signage, and community outreach.
- Improve Mobility Links service by developing a portal for transportation providers to add and update information about the services they offer.

- Improve Mobility Links service by implementing a trip planning tool for users to better understand all the services available to them for a given trip.
- Implement a regional Transportation Ambassador program, providing community leaders and other volunteers with the tools they need to spread information about transportation services via word-of-mouth.
- Supplement Mobility Links with a regional Mobility Manager program, allowing individuals to call and speak with a regional transit expert who can help them navigate transit trips that cross jurisdictional boundaries.
- Continue implementation of Regional Transit Connectivity project, including regional fare, regional trip planning tool, mobile app, data management tool and development of GTFS feeds for participating providers.

Finding #3: Unmet Needs Among ADA Paratransit and NEMT Users

- Create a regional advisory workgroup comprised of paratransit and NEMT users, and representatives of organizations that provide these transportation services, to promote collaborative efforts to meet the transportation needs of persons with disabilities, and to encourage providers to work together for more efficient dispatch and cost-sharing.
- Expand access to subsidized taxi and TNC services for seniors and persons with disabilities in areas where existing fixed-route and demand-response transit services do not meet the needs of seniors and persons with disabilities, and work with providers and users to ensure these services meet those riders' transportation needs.

Finding #4: Insufficient Coordination with Non-Profit and For-Profit Transportation Providers

- Increase collaboration with non-profit and for-profit transportation providers, proactively reaching out to them and including them as key stakeholders in future regional and sub-regional transportation studies.
- Work with regional partners to update Mobility Links provider database.