

**WARNER ROBINS AREA TRANSPORTATION STUDY (WRATS)**

**TRANSIT FEASIBILITY STUDY  
SUMMARY OF STAKEHOLDER INTERVIEWS  
07/12/12**

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## Study Introduction

The Metropolitan Planning Organization (MPO) for the Warner Robins Urbanized Area is the Warner Robins Area Transportation Study (WRATS). WRATS plans and coordinates transportation improvements for the Warner Robins metropolitan planning area consistent with federal surface transportation legislation.

The Warner Robins metropolitan planning area consists of all of Houston County and the northeastern portion of Peach County, Georgia. It includes the incorporated cities of Warner Robins, Byron, Centerville and Perry, as shown in Figure 1. The metropolitan planning area of Warner Robins consists of 417 square miles and approximately 149,000 people.

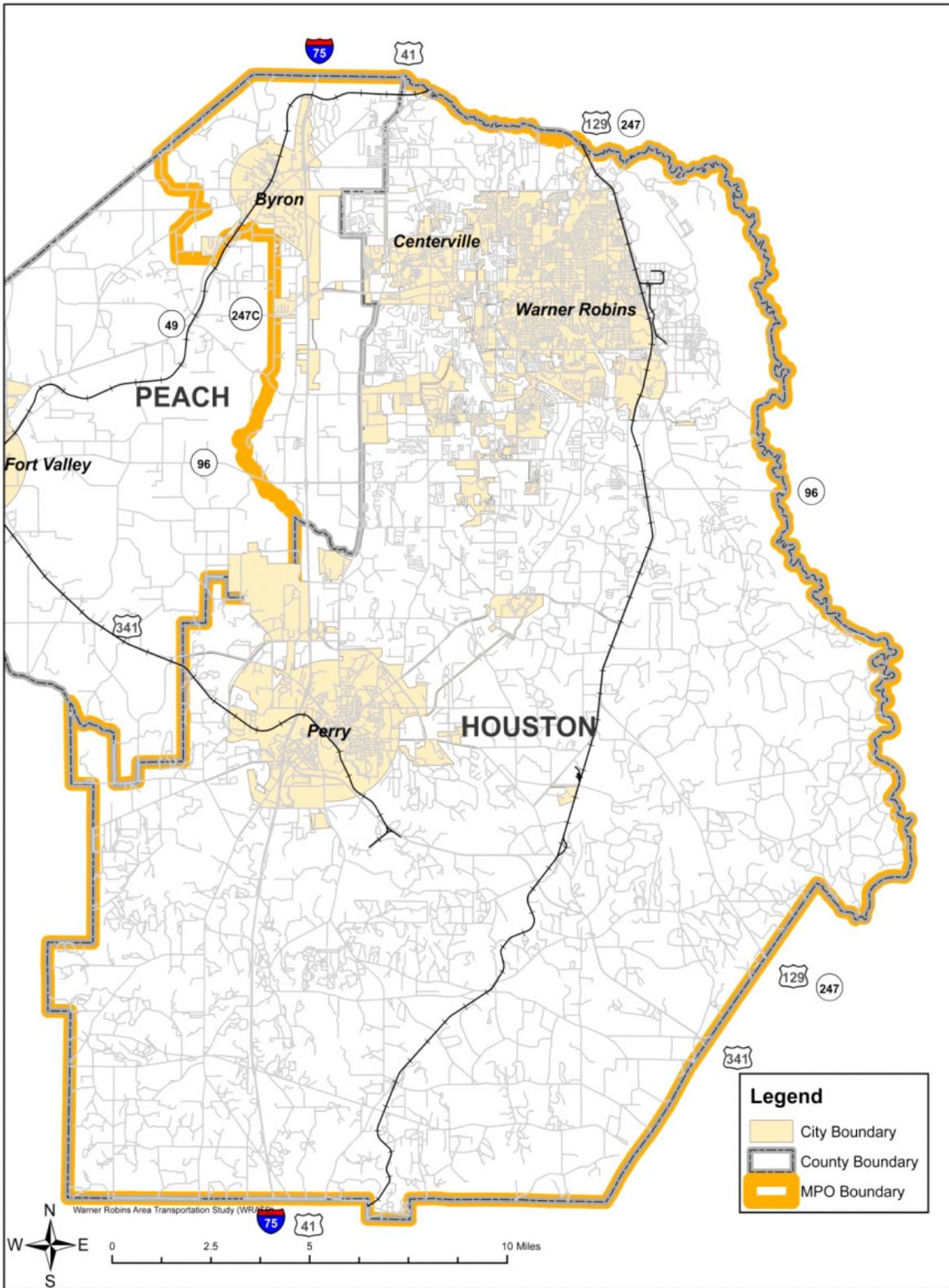
The Transit Feasibility Study (TFS) examines the need for transit services in the Warner Robins metropolitan planning area. As the area continues to grow and develop there is increasing interest in the potential for transit service. Recent success of the BiRD commuter bus service between Macon and Robins Air Force Base (RAFB) underscores the potential for similar service within the Warner Robins metropolitan area. In addition, numerous human service agencies and not for profits have stated that there is a need for transit service in Warner Robins among the populations they serve. RAFB has been a strong supporter of transit and vanpool service, on base shuttle service, and commute alternatives as a means of reducing the number of vehicles entering and exiting the base and the amount of parking necessary on the base.

A transit feasibility study conducted by WRATS in 2003 recommended possible phased transit service options and assessed probable ridership and costs. However no action was taken as a result of the 2003 TFS, in part due to concern about who would pay for transit operations and operate the service, and in part due to concerns about the effectiveness of transit service in Warner Robins. A 2001 transit route feasibility study for service between Macon and RAFB resulted in the successful BiRD commuter service.

The 2012 WRATS TFS will update the study conducted in 2003 to reassess the market for transit taking into account demographic and development changes since 2003, and collecting new information from the public and stakeholder agencies on their views about the need for transit service in the Warner Robins metropolitan area. The TFS will provide a Transit Master Plan that identifies costs and funding associated with any recommended transit service options and an Implementation Plan that addresses phasing, marketing and operations for any recommended transit services.

This document summarizes the results of 19 Stakeholder Interviews conducted as part of the TFS to understand the perspectives of key stakeholders regarding public transit service in the Warner Robins metropolitan planning area.

Figure 1 - WRATS Study Area



## Purpose of Stakeholder Interviews

The purpose of the stakeholder interviews was to understand the perspectives of key stakeholders regarding public transit service in the Warner Robins metropolitan planning area. More specifically, the interviews were intended to gain an understanding of the degree to which the community desires to be served by public transportation, the potential benefits of public transit, population groups that might most need transit, and trip needs and destinations that could support transit. These discussions also yielded input on the provision of public transportation, such as type of system, frequency of service, level of subsidy, etc.

## Stakeholders Interviewed

Nineteen stakeholders were selected by the consultant team, based on suggestions from the WRATS staff. The list of stakeholders was intended to include public officials, business leaders, civic leaders, education leaders, and directors of social service organizations. The stakeholders included representatives of local governments, regional planning agencies, agencies providing some level of transit in the area today, community and business groups, and local colleges and universities. Figure 2 lists the stakeholders that were interviewed.

The approach was intentionally selective and did not seek to represent the opinions of the general public. However, it does provide relatively important insight into the views of opinion leaders in the Warner Robins area. Furthermore, because the stakeholders were recognized for being civic-minded, it was possible to ask them for more detailed information than would be possible for a public opinion poll.

## Stakeholder Questionnaire

The survey instrument had 13 questions and was administered in person or over the telephone primarily in late April 2012, with some interviews extending into May. Interview questions were adapted from prior transit feasibility studies, with review by WRATS staff. The survey questions are attached. In addition to the set of questions asked of every stakeholder, discussions with some stakeholders included information requests tailored to the stakeholder.

**Figure 2 – List of Stakeholders**

<b>Stakeholder Organization</b>	<b>Representative(s) Interviewed</b>
Houston County	Robbie Dunbar, Director of Operations
City of Warner Robins/Warner Robins Area Transportation Study	Chuck Shaheen, Mayor Robert Sisa, WRATS Director Jesse Fountain, WRATS Consultant
City of Centerville	John Harley, Mayor Mike Brumfield, Utilities Superintendent
City of Perry	Mike Beecham, Community Development Director Willie King, Council Member
City of Byron	William McDaniel, Director of Public Works Tiffany Bibb, Assistant Director of Public Works
Macon-Bibb County Planning & Zoning Commission/Macon Area Transportation Study	Jim Thomas, Executive Director Ken North, Planner Greg Brown, Planner
Middle Georgia Regional Commission	Bob Rychel, Manager of Planning Programs
Houston County Development Authority	Angie Gheesling, Executive Director Andrea Griner, Projects Manager
Warner Robins Redevelopment Agency	Gary Lee, Executive Director
Macon-Bibb County Transit Authority	Rick Jones, General Manager/CEO
Middle Georgia Community Action Agency	Nancy Smith, Executive Director
Robins Air Force Base	John Pugh, 78 <sup>th</sup> Mission Support Group Deputy Director Bill Deaver, Traffic Engineer Pam Stauffer, 78 <sup>th</sup> Air Base Wing Public Affairs
21 <sup>st</sup> Century Partnership Group	Rick Goddard, Senior Advisor
Houston Healthcare	David Borghelli, Emergency Medical Service Director
Robins Regional Chamber of Commerce	Morgan Law, President/CEO
Middle Georgia Technical College	Rick Hutto, Grants Director
Macon State University – Warner Robins	Pella Murphy, Director of the Warner Robins Campuses David Carpenter, Dean of the Warner Robins Campuses
Fort Valley State University – Warner Robins	Ashley Ballard, Director of Distance Education Advisement & Enrollment Alfreda Hester Misty Cline
Georgia Military College – Warner Robins	Ted Ramsdell, Director

## Summary of Findings

The summary of findings from the stakeholder interviews is organized based on the major issues put forth in the interview questionnaire:

- Is some form of public transportation needed in the Warner Robins area?
- How high a priority is public transportation for the Warner Robins area?
- How would public transportation be beneficial to the area?

- Who are the people that most need to be served by public transportation and what locations should be targeted for service?
- What days and times is public transportation most needed?
- What types of public transportation options should be considered?
- Would the people of the Warner Robins area support some form of financial assistance for public transportation?

***Is some form of public transportation needed in the Warner Robins area, beyond the human services transportation and BiRD route already provided?***

Nearly all stakeholders responded in the affirmative to this question. Robins Air Force Base employees, those who don't drive for economic or physical reasons, and college students were most often cited as potential riders. There was, however, healthy skepticism among many stakeholders about the ability of transit to entice people to switch from driving, particularly given the area's auto-oriented development patterns. Several stakeholders were aware of the potential for the Macon-Bibb County Transit Authority (MTA) to become the public transit provider in the area.

***How high a priority is public transportation for the Warner Robins area?***

Responses to this question varied significantly, with most indicating it is somewhere in the medium to high range. It was acknowledged that transit is a high priority for some segments of the community (e.g., low-income, elderly, disabled, college students, etc.), but felt that the priority is low for most in the community. A common theme was that it would be beneficial, but there are higher priorities and concerns about how to pay for transit. For some, public transit is seen as having the potential to help relieve the growing traffic congestion problem in the vicinity of Robins Air Force Base, relieve parking shortages on the base, and maintain the region's air quality attainment status. Others saw transit as important to the area's ability to maintain and attract jobs. More than one stakeholder noted that if the region loses its air quality attainment status and/or Robins is threatened, transit would become a top priority.

***How would public transportation be beneficial to the area?***

Public transit would benefit the area socially, economically, and environmentally. The most commonly identified social benefits would be for the transportation disadvantaged segments of the population who have difficulty getting to jobs, local colleges, social services, medical appointments, shopping, recreation, and entertainment. It would promote a sense of independence for senior citizens who no longer drive and those with disabilities. With the lack of a traditional downtown, transit would provide connections between the older residential parts of the city and the outlying activity centers. Economically, access to jobs was identified as a major benefit of transit, not only for Robins, but also for employers that are interested in locating in the area. As transit is less expensive than driving, individuals could benefit by savings on auto-related expenses (particularly with high gas prices), with those savings reinvested in the local economy. Improving transit connections between Warner Robins and Macon would be mutually beneficial to the economies of both cities. As maintaining the region's air quality attainment status is a

priority, particularly for Robins, transit would be beneficial in terms of reducing the number of cars creating congestion on the roadway system, particularly during peak hours.

***Who are the people that most need to be served by public transportation and what locations should be targeted for service?***

The questionnaire listed six categories of potential riders as examples (workers, college students, shoppers, seniors, youth, and persons with disabilities). One other group that was frequently mentioned is persons with low-income. A few stakeholders said a transit system would need to be something the entire community would benefit from, while still acknowledging that some segments would be more likely to ride transit than others. The categories that were most often mentioned as being high priorities for transit service were workers, seniors, persons with disabilities, those with low-income, and college students.

In terms of using transit to get to jobs, stakeholders primarily focused on Robins, as the largest employer with associated traffic congestion, on-base parking, and air quality concerns. Transit serving Robins could free up parking spaces so that Robins can continue to build/expand. One stakeholder suggested that once transit is implemented to Robins, there should also be disincentives for driving to work, such as a bar code decal that would charge them for going on the base. One stakeholder also noted the BiRD route is carrying not only commuters from Macon to Warner Robins, but also from Warner Robins to Macon. Off-site defense contactors, many of which are located in the Warner Robins industrial park are also mentioned. Perdue Farms and Frito-Lay were also mentioned as large employers east of Perry, but acknowledged both are remotely located and transit to them may not be cost-efficient. Transit along the main corridors in Warner Robins (e.g., Watson Boulevard, Russell Parkway, SR 96) to get to concentrations of employment in the commercial centers and at area hotels was also mentioned by stakeholders.

Many interviewees focused on the trip needs of those with limited access to transportation. For example, transportation to work is a big need for low-income populations. Low-income residents live throughout the study area, but tend to be concentrated in certain areas, such as older areas of Warner Robins (e.g., Davis Drive, Elberta Road, and Green Street) and Perry, public housing, low-rent apartment complexes, and mobile home parks. Several stakeholders acknowledged transit needs of the growing senior population, including Robins retirees, who at some point in their lives will no longer be driving. Another population group with definite needs for transit is the physically disabled and mentally/emotionally challenged individuals. This population segment would benefit from transit serving government offices and social service agencies (particularly the social service offices on Cohen Walker Drive), medical facilities, basic shopping, senior centers, and adult day care centers. It was noted that while human services transportation is already provided to these populations, the needs are not being fully met because of restrictions on who can use the service and for what purposes.

College students were also fairly high on the priority list for some stakeholders. In particular, the majority of Middle Georgia Technical College (MGTC) students live at or below 150% of the federal

poverty level. The Warner Robins MGTC campus offers a number of programs that are not taught in Macon, and there are 150 full-time students who commute between Macon and the Warner Robins campus. Stakeholders from the Warner Robins campuses of Macon State, Ft. Valley State, and Georgia Military College also felt transit would be beneficial for their students who take taxis to school now or could save money by riding transit instead of driving.

Shoppers were seen as a lower priority by most stakeholders, given the suburban development pattern in the area, except for seniors and others without personal transportation options. Most stakeholders felt the potential for transit use by youth is low, particularly since school bus service is available or their parents drive them, with at least one stakeholder noting it could be helpful to parents and also good for access to summer jobs.

### ***What days and times is public transportation most needed?***

Most stakeholders viewed service during weekday peak periods for commuters as the highest priority, but noted that the peaks for Robins are a bit different from traditional peak periods. At Robins, the largest shift (about 6,000 employees) starts at 6:00 a.m. and ends between 2:30 and 3:30 p.m., but others start between 8:00 and 9:00 a.m. and leave by 6:00 p.m. Peak times for the colleges are also different, with MGTC classes throughout the day (but not many in the evenings), Macon State peaking at 11:00 a.m., 5:30 p.m., and 8:00 p.m., and Georgia Military College offering classes on weekends as well as weekdays. One stakeholder observed that to coordinate with retail hours (e.g., at the mall), service would need to be extended into the evening and on weekends.

Many stakeholders thought service is needed but could be reduced in the midday, to serve Robins employees going to lunch, transportation disadvantaged groups going to medical appointments, social services, and shopping. Transit service in the evenings and on Saturdays could also be at a reduced level, if at all. Most of the stakeholders did not think Sunday service is needed, as most churches have their own vans and it may be easier for people to get a ride if they have places they need to go (e.g., to retail employment). Others did not think weekend service is needed at all.

### ***What types of transportation options should be considered?***

Express bus service to Robins from surrounding communities supplementing the existing service from Macon (e.g., originating in strategically located park & ride lots in Byron, Perry, Fort Valley, and/or key I-75 interchanges with a few intermediate stops) was the most frequently mentioned priority for service. Many thought the Warner Robins area might be ready for a few local routes using small buses on major corridors like Watson Boulevard and Russell Parkway to hit key destinations. However, there was concern expressed about demand for this type of service, given the low density patterns and high automobile ownership. Some thought local bus service should not be considered at all.

Dial-a-ride service received mixed responses, with this type of specialized service seen as particularly beneficial for the elderly, disabled, and low income by many stakeholders. Dial-a-ride for the general public was seen as a good way to phase in transit service by some stakeholders, in the Warner Robins

area as well as in Perry. Opinions were mixed regarding carpooling and vanpooling, with those responding positively seeing expansion of this as a good option primarily for Robins employees. One stakeholder suggested having one provider for all types of services, including Medicaid transportation because it is 100% federally funded and can help support the rest of the system.

***Would the people of the Warner Robins area support some form of financial assistance for public transportation?***

Most stakeholders felt that if public transit is seen as a need, the community will support some form of financial assistance. Some noted the area has no choice, as transit would be a community service that would require local funding. Very few rejected the possibility of local funding for public transit. Several noted that it will be critical for local leaders to support and promote it, as the general public may be apprehensive initially. A community education process will be needed. Several stakeholders felt the community would be supportive, as long as it's reasonable. A few stakeholders noted that federal assistance will pay for a substantial portion of it, reducing the local commitment required, and that the area has been leaving federal money "on the table" for years. Regarding how to fund transit, a few stakeholders thought it should be entirely paid for by users, but most seemed supportive of a sales tax for transit, as it would then be paid for by residents and non-residents alike. It was noted that the current local SPLOST includes some money for transit capital expenses. SPLOST funding was mentioned as the best possible source by several stakeholders. One stakeholder said residents are supportive of capital improvements, but wouldn't be supportive of a perpetual money loser. An increase in property taxes was viewed as being a very tough sell to local tax payers, especially in the current economic climate.

## Stakeholder Interview Questionnaire

1. Had you heard about the Transit Feasibility Study? If so, how did you hear?
2. Do you think that the Warner Robins area, including Warner Robins, Centerville, Perry and Byron, needs some form of public transportation (beyond the human service transportation and service from Macon to Robins Air Force Base currently provided)? **If yes, continue with #3-11 and #13. If no, go to #12-13.**
3. Is it a high, medium or low priority? Please elaborate.
4. How do you think public transportation would be beneficial to the Warner Robins area (socially, economically, environmentally, etc.)?
5. How would you prioritize public transportation service needs for different segments of the population, such as:
  - Workers?
  - College students?
  - Shoppers?
  - Seniors?
  - Youth?
  - Persons with disabilities?
6. What locations should be given priority for service? Job sites? Health care facilities? Shopping sites? Educational sites? Identify specific locations.
7. At what times during the day do you think transit service is most needed (a.m. and p.m. peak, midday)?
8. Do you think it would be important to provide service in the evenings? On Saturdays? On Sundays?

9. What type(s) of service would you like to see provided in the area? Examples include:
- Carpooling/vanpooling?
  - Dial-a-ride van service for those with disabilities?
  - Dial-a-ride service for the general public?
  - Regularly scheduled bus service on specific routes within the area?
  - Express bus service connecting the area with surrounding communities?
10. Given that public transportation rarely pays for itself, would you support some form of public financial assistance? Sales tax? Property tax? Business license fees? Other?
11. Would you use the service? Do you believe the people you know and associate with would use the service?
12. If the answer to question #2 is no:
- a. What do you think are the most critical transportation problems facing the area?
  - b. What is the best way to provide transportation for people who do not or cannot drive?
  - c. Do you think the area will ever need public transit?
13. Are there other organizations or individuals you think we should talk to about this study?