

Atlanta Regional Commission

Regional Models of Cooperation Case Study Series

Pooled Resources Generates Unprecedented Transit Data Sharing in Atlanta

Population growth, increased development, and demographic changes in the Atlanta metropolitan region between 2000 and 2008 prompted the Atlanta Regional Commission (ARC), the regional planning and intergovernmental coordination agency for the 10-county area surrounding Atlanta, to think critically about the region's current and future transportation needs. Working with regional partners to pool funding and knowledge, ARC successfully conducted the [2009-2010 Regional On-Board Transit Survey](#), the largest survey of its kind in the United States.

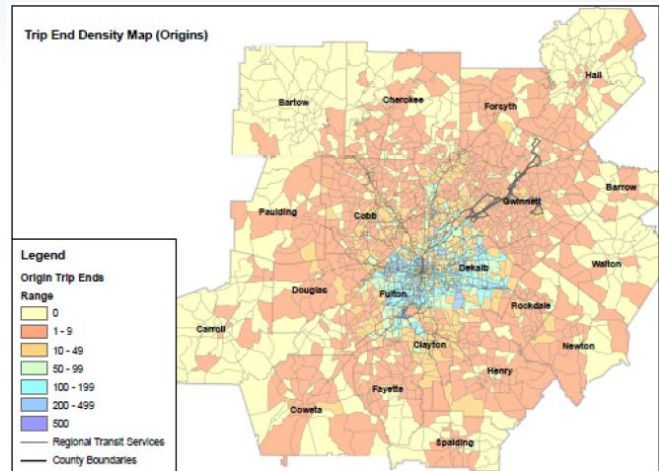
Motivation for Establishing the Collaboration

The Atlanta region has attracted a steady stream of new residents and development during the past decade. According to the ARC [Cities & Towns 2010 Yearbook of Growth and Change](#), nearly half a million people had moved to the region since 2000, which is a 42 percent increase, and suburban municipalities grew by almost 200 percent. Increasing numbers of African American, Asian, and Hispanic residents have moved into the area, considerably shifting the demographics of the region.

Based on these changes, and the outdated information ARC had available on transit behaviors in the region, the organization decided it was necessary to survey the region's residents regarding their travel behaviors and transportation needs. The previous survey from 2000 was missing market segments, such as zero car households, low-income communities, and several geographic areas. To obtain this information, ARC would need to expand its sample size, which would require much more funding than was initially anticipated and readily available. Instead of compromising the study's quality by working with a smaller budget, ARC contacted regional partners including Georgia Regional Transportation Authority (GRTA), the Metropolitan Atlanta Rapid Transit Authority (MARTA), and the Georgia Department of Transportation (GDOT) to pool funds and expertise to conduct the desired study.

Collaboration Structure

The four participating agencies – ARC, GRTA, MARTA, and GDOT – signed a memorandum of agreement (MOA) in 2008 that provided a framework to plan and conduct the On-Board Survey. The MOA outlined the responsibilities for ARC, which was the lead agency responsible for providing overall coordination and management of the strategy, as well as the roles of the “participants” (i.e. GRTA, MARTA, and GDOT).



This map represents ridership trip densities (origins) from the ARC Regional Onboard Transit Survey



From the beginning of the project, all four agencies agreed that the survey development and implementation process would be open and that everyone involved would have opportunities to contribute to the project and work with the data. Representatives from each agency convened to select a consultant that would conduct the survey and then met regularly throughout the process to collaborate on the survey design, study area, collection methods, and data analysis techniques.

In addition to a common understanding of the project goals and agency responsibilities and the signed MOA, the region collaborates separately on planning and operations issues through standing transit-related and project steering committees convened by ARC. One such committee is the Transit Operators Subcommittee (TOS), which is comprised of staff from the region's seven transit operators and third-party sponsors eligible for specific FTA funds. TOS provided suggestions and recommendations throughout the On-Board Survey project development and implementation. This provided a way for additional stakeholders to be involved in the study and for the project partners to meet in a venue in which they were already familiar.

Collaboration Accomplishments

The survey was an unprecedented success. More than 50,000 surveys—representing roughly 1 out of 10 riders in the region—were completed, encompassing a 20-county region that includes seven separate transit systems. In addition to providing regional planners with a better understanding of both basic and specialized needs in the region, the survey provided justification for several new transit routes and helped planners to minimize impacts on riders when a route had to be relocated.

The survey's success has traveled beyond the Atlanta metropolitan region and is shaping similar transit surveys in other regions nationwide. Within the region, the partners have begun preliminary discussions about pooling funding to replicate the survey in 2020.

Challenges and Lessons Learned

Each planning agency, transit operator, and government entity pursues a set of priorities specific to its mission and objectives—a situation that is not unique to the Atlanta region but one that causes competition for funding among and within Atlanta organizations. Region-wide committees, like TOS, have established a collaborative environment for the region and have helped to alleviate conflicts regarding policies, plans, boundaries, project designs, facilities management, and funding. The On-Board Survey, in particular, demonstrated that agencies with similar objectives can achieve more by working together than by working individually.

The On-Board Survey partners also attribute their success to support at all levels of the organizations from senior leadership to the technical coordinators. Everyone involved understood the significance of the project and felt that they had something to gain from their participation.

Shared data can be a powerful tool for enacting meaningful, thoughtful change in a region. To achieve successful data sharing, however, cooperation at the planning and policy levels must occur first. ARC, GRTA, MARTA, and GDOT realized the importance of communicating regularly, discussing complex and at times controversial issues, and pooling resources to achieve goals that are mutually beneficial for all.

