

# **Area Public Transportation Must Prepare for Future Needs**

*Laurence F. Jones and Kenneth L. Stewart*

*October 3, 2013*

Commuters in major US metropolitan areas spent 5.5 billion hours sitting in traffic during 2011 according to the latest Urban Mobility Report from the Texas A&M Transportation Institute. This is equivalent to the total time that businesses and individuals spend filing their annual tax returns.

Adding to this aggravation of big city traffic is an estimated 2.9 billion gallons of fuel used to move only feet or inches, plus the other unnecessary operating costs for those 18 wheelers that loomed around you last time you were jammed up at the Dallas mix-master. The Transportation Institute pegged the overall cost of lost time and wasted fuel from urban traffic congestion at \$121 billion in 2011. At least \$10 billion of that total accrued from standing traffic in Texas cities.

No doubt, that many residents count the relatively tame traffic in San Angelo and the wide-open spaces of the outlying region as one of the joys of living in the Concho Valley. According to Census Bureau estimates, the mean commute time for San Angelo residents is 15.6 minutes, which is considerably lower than the national average of 25.4 minutes.

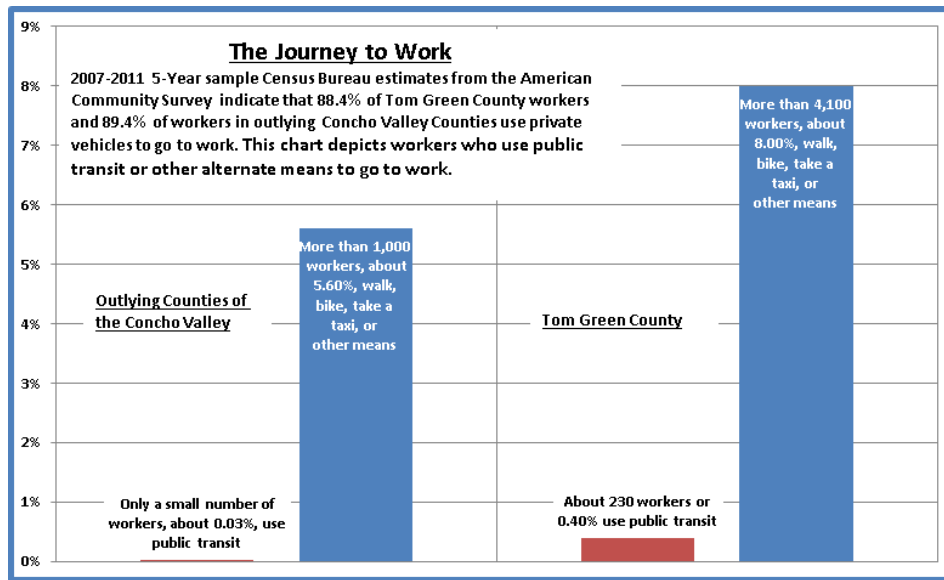
Folks might travel from ranches to the town or city for work around the various counties of the region. Irion County residents – many commuting to San Angelo -- have the longest average of 26.7 minutes. Those in Sutton County drive the least with an average commute of 12.4 minutes. The average commute time for the Concho Valley outside of Tom Green County is 17.6 minutes.

These relatively short commutes for the local workforce may help explain why less than one-half percent (0.4%) of the regional workforce uses public transit to go to work. This low percentage, however, hardly means that there is a lack of demand for regional public transit services. More evidence, in fact, indicates an increasingly diverse set of demands for public transit service emerging throughout the region.

A closer look at this Census data, for example, indicates that as many as 4,100 (or 8%) of Tom Green County workers do not travel to jobs either by public transit or private autos, trucks and vans. These individuals report going to work by walking, biking, taking taxicabs, and other alternative modes of transportation. Another 1,000 workers (5.6%) in the outlying counties of the Concho Valley also report traveling to work by these alternative means.

Of course, a small number of these individuals may prefer walking or biking to work sites that may be only a short distance from their residence. Many more, however, are part of a 2012 survey of local transportation needs conducted by ASU's Community Development Initiatives that uncovered numerous indications showing the public transit system lacks capacity to serve effectively vulnerable populations such as youth, students, seniors, individuals with special needs, and low-income residents.

## The Journey to Work



Because of that 2012 survey, Concho Valley Transit District (CVTD) planners collaborated with Community Development Initiatives to conduct a focus group series to assess unmet demand for CVTD transit services throughout the region. Current public transit users voiced their satisfaction with the affordability of rides and other features of the system.

Conversely, focus group participants frequently echoed concerns identified from the previous survey study that there are not enough routes and time schedules to meet their transit needs. These basic limitations in service capacity also help explain low usage of public transit in the region. Seemingly, thousands of residents turn to walking, biking and taxi cabs in part because public transit capacity falls short.

Especially disquieting and heart wrenching in the focus groups were concerns expressed in several sessions that public transit facilities and buses are not adequately accessible for those with special needs. Focus group participants told of experiences where drivers were not familiar with ADA requirements and times when wheelchair lifts did not function.

Across the focus group sessions, comments from participants corroborate that many Concho Valley residents do not have available transportation that could enable them to live more fulfilling lives and improve the health and vitality of local communities at the same time. The focus groups validate the Census data indications that thousands of regional residents find it difficult to get to town to shop, meet medical appointments, commute to better jobs, and engage with friends or important educational, civic, and community events and activities.

Too often, the limited capacity of the regional public transit system is mistaken for inefficiency or ineffective management of the system. Perhaps this misperception arises because so many of us enjoy the unhindered convenience of personal cars and pickup trucks providing lifelines to all those joys of living in the Concho Valley.

In reality, standard efficiency and effectiveness measures maintained by the Texas Department of Transportation (TxDOT) show that public transit in the Concho Valley is operated both

efficiently and effectively compared to other systems serving a city the size of San Angelo, or a sparsely populated rural land area of more than 15,000 square miles.

CVTD provides service to San Angelo at a lower expense per passenger-trip (\$9.06/trip in 2011) and a lower expense per mile of travel (\$3.65/mile in 2011) than the average for Texas cities of similar size. Despite the expanse of CVTD's rural transit services, it also delivers more passengers per 100 miles of travel (23 passengers) than the average (17 passengers) for Texas rural areas.

The key shortcoming of public transit in the Concho Valley is not inefficiency or ineffectiveness from an economic management standpoint. Instead, it is lack of capacity to meet growing and emerging demands on the system.

To be sure, planners and managers must strive to maximize current capacity through flexible routing and scheduling innovations, as well as by attracting additional riders onto the existing system by enhancing public information and awareness about available services. The public transit system also can build some additional capacity by reaching out to coordinate with alternate providers such as taxi and shuttle services.

Still, no matter how helpful added efficiencies and outreach steps like these may be, truly building capacity to meet the new and growing demand for regional public transit requires additional investment from communities. Only investment can enable extension of transit routes, additional routes, and higher frequency time schedules.

The San Angelo Chamber of Commerce pointed the way to building some local public transit capacity when it lead the effort to organize a community coalition that pooled resources and shared the cost of providing additional service to help Goodfellow AFB personnel in training get off base on weekends. In the end, public transit is a community asset that requires the understanding that we are all in it together.

Sharing the responsibility to address emerging transit demands is, in fact, the way other Texas communities are stepping up. The Capital Area Rural Transportation System serving 169 communities in a 7,500 square mile area stretching from Marble Falls to La Grange supplemented its federal and state public transit allocations with an 84 percent investment from local community sources in 2011. The average local investment in rural transit systems across the state that year was 52 percent according to TxDOT data. The Concho Valley's local investment level was 41 percent.

Many new public transit demands are emerging with the growth of college student populations at ASU and Howard College, shifting labor force needs sprouting in energy and spreading to other economic sectors, and reshaping of physical and mental health services. To sustain the benefits of these and other positive changes, San Angelo and the Concho Valley will must find ways to step up from 41 percent to finance the capacity of a community asset like public transit.