

1.1. PURPOSE OF STUDY

The Gastonia Transit Expansion Study was undertaken by the Gaston Urban Area MPO and funded locally by the City of Gastonia to determine opportunities for expanded public transit services in Gastonia and throughout Gaston County. Currently, transit services operated by Gastonia Transit (the local urban transit system) are limited to the area inside the city limits of Gastonia. Some general public transportation is provided by Gaston County ACCESS (the local community transit system), but it is limited in scale and scope. ACCESS primarily serves clients of human service agencies and other customers with special transportation needs.

Gaston County is experiencing growth pressures, and local leaders have expressed an interest in studying the potential need for expanded transit services. In recognition of the limited financial resources for transit, there is also a desire to explore opportunities to expand the reach of transit through increased coordination between Gastonia Transit and Gaston County ACCESS, as well as with systems in neighboring counties. This study was envisioned primarily to assess the feasibility of expanding current transit operations to better serve other municipalities outside of Gastonia in Gaston County; however, it is also taking a more comprehensive look at service needs in general, including the need for additional hours of operation, improvements to the frequency of service, development of expanded services to neighboring counties, and other enhancements.

In addition to improving the overall mobility of the residents of Gaston County, expanding the transit system may also help the region address its non-attainment status for ambient air quality and emissions, as well as issues related to limited or lack of funding for road improvements. One of the goals of the study is to identify transit system improvements that will encourage a mode shift from the automobile to transit, in an effort to address these issues.

The primary source of data for this study is input from local residents and stakeholders. A significant survey effort was conducted, as well as interviews with stakeholders from various jurisdictions in the county. These data were supplemented by other objective data including demographic analyses and an examination of existing transit services.

The product of this study effort is a series of recommendations for expanded transit service, including the cost of each alternative. The study is intended to be a short-range planning effort, with recommendations that could be implemented in the next three to five years (based on funding availability). To reach conclusions regarding near-term transit enhancements, the following tasks were conducted:

- *Task 1: Project Initiation*
This task includes project initiation activities such as the establishment of a “working group” to provide information and feedback during the planning process.
- *Task 2: Analysis of Existing Services*
This task is an objective and subjective examination of existing Gastonia Transit services, to determine strengths and opportunities for improvement.

- *Task 3: Needs Assessment*
This task utilizes a demographic analysis and the identification of unserved areas to help identify potential service expansion opportunities.
- *Task 4: Public and Stakeholder Input*
Along with other, more objective analyses conducted under Task 3, public input provides valuable information regarding transit needs and potential expansion opportunities. Several approaches were taken to solicit community input for these purposes.
- *Task 5: Development of Service Expansion Alternatives*
Based on the existing service evaluation and needs assessment, options for expanded transit services were developed for consideration.
- *Task 6: Investigation of Opportunities for Coordination / Consolidation*
The primary objective of this task is to develop strategies that could be used as a starting point for increased coordination between Gastonia Transit and Gaston County ACCESS, as well as coordination between Gastonia Transit and other systems in neighboring counties.
- *Task 7: Implementation Plan*
Recommendations for service expansion and coordination strategies are formulated and prioritized in this task.

1.2. STUDY AREA

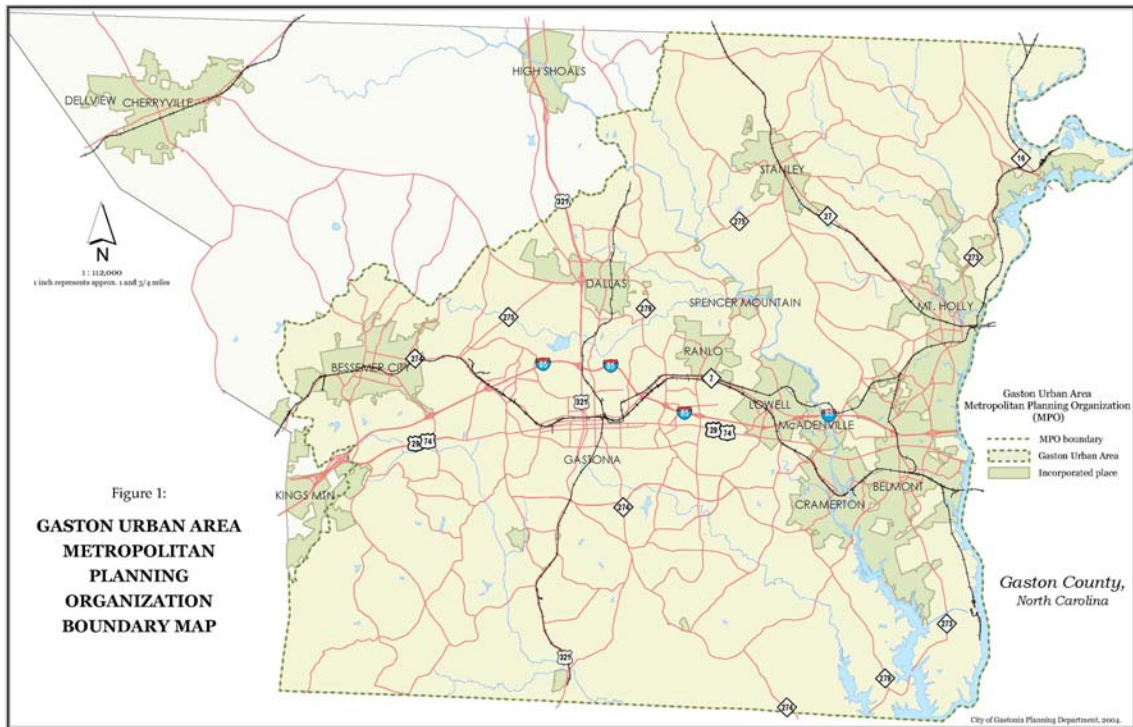
The study area for this project is Gaston County. Although the bulk of the focus was on the urbanized area within Gaston County, the remaining rural areas in the county were also considered. Likewise, connections to neighboring counties were also considered. Exhibit 1-1 illustrates the study area.

1.3. WORKING GROUP

A “working group”, comprised of Gaston Urban Area MPO staff and local stakeholders, was convened to discuss study progress and ideas regarding transit expansion and coordination options. This group met four times throughout the study process. The following municipalities and organizations were represented in the working group.

- City of Bessemer City
- Centralina Council of Governments
- Town of Cramerton
- Town of Dallas
- Gaston County ACCESS
- Gaston County Planning
- City of Gastonia (Gastonia Transit)
- City of Gastonia (Planning / MPO)
- Gastonia Police Department
- Town of McAdenville
- City of Mount Holly
- North Carolina Department of Transportation
- Private citizens

Exhibit 1-1: Transit Expansion Study Area



1.4. REPORT LAYOUT

The remainder of this report is organized as follows:

- Section 2 presents an analysis of current transit services that are available in Gaston County;
- Section 3 provides information collected as part of the transit needs assessment;
- Section 4 discusses scenarios for restructuring existing transit services;
- Section 5 illustrates various service expansion alternatives to be considered; and
- Section 6 describes the recommended implementation plan for improvements.

Appendices A-D provide supplementary data that support the discussions contained elsewhere in this document.

