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The Wilkinson County Rural Transit Development Plan was made possible through funding provided by the Georgia Department of Transportation (GDOT). The contents of this publication reflect the views of the authors, who are responsible for the facts and accuracy of the data presented herein. The opinions, findings, and conclusions in this publication are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the official views or policies of those of the Department of Transportation, State of Georgia or the Federal Highway Administration. This publication does not constitute a standard, specification or regulation.
EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Purpose of the Plan
The primary purpose of the Wilkinson County Transit Development Plan is to present transit alternatives and recommendations on how best to achieve the transportation goals and objectives identified by the community.

According to the Community Transportation Association of America (CTAA), more than one-third of America’s population lives outside of urbanized areas. Nearly 40 percent of the country’s transit-dependent population – primarily senior citizens, persons with disabilities and low-income individuals – resides in rural areas. Yet in many rural communities, public and community transportation services are extremely limited or absent. The demographics, mobility needs, and resources of rural areas are much different than those of urban areas.

This Transit Development Plan (TDP) is the strategic guide for public transportation in Wilkinson County over the next five years. The TDP includes an analysis of existing services, a review of demographic and travel behavior characteristics of the service area, and the development of transit-related goals and objectives.

Public transportation is a vital component in most rural communities, with Wilkinson County being no different. The availability of public transportation provides options to senior citizens, those without vehicles, and those who are physically or economically disadvantaged. The ability to provide a transportation alternative for those who live in a rural area is as important as for those who live in a high-density metropolitan setting.

The availability of reliable public transportation improves the quality of life in rural communities across the state by providing safe, efficient and economical service. It also serves as a vital component necessary for a healthy economy. The next five years in Wilkinson County are pivotal to shaping public mobility strategies to best help enhance the benefits of the county’s future growth, economic opportunity, and historic heritage.

Methodology
The Transit Development Plan includes an evaluation of existing services, an examination of other relevant studies and plans, a review and analysis of demographic data and travel behavior characteristics, the development of transit-related goals and objectives, a demand estimation and needs assessment, proposed transit alternatives, enhancements and recommendations, and projected capital and operations costs.

Plan Update
In 2019, with funding assistance again provided by the Georgia Department of Transportation, the Middle Georgia Regional Commission (MGRC) performed a comprehensive update to the community’s 2014 Transit Development Plan. During the update of the Transit Development Plan, all sections were re-examined and modified accordingly. Additionally, community
stakeholders were re-engaged in order to assess progress on community goals and objectives and to solicit inputs on additional transit alternatives and implementation activities. The plan was further enhanced with updated data tables and maps.

DEMOGRAPHIC ANALYSIS

Middle Georgia Profile

Population

The middle Georgia region is comprised of 11 counties. These include Baldwin, Crawford, Houston, Jones, Macon-Bibb, Monroe, Peach, Pulaski, Putnam, Twiggs, and Wilkinson Counties. According to 2017 population estimates, 496,288 people lived in the region, an increase of almost 8,000 people since the 2010 U.S. Census. The Georgia Governor’s Office of Planning and Budget projects that the region’s population will grow over the next 20 years, increasing by more than 70,000 people. However, the population growth will be uneven across the region as shown in Table 1. Houston County is expected to experience the most growth with some counties even losing population. As the population distribution of the region shifts and needs change, there may need to be consideration of regional collaboration or cooperation for transit services.

Table 1: Middle Georgia Region Population Projections, 2015-2040

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>County</th>
<th>2015</th>
<th>2017</th>
<th>2020</th>
<th>2025</th>
<th>2030</th>
<th>2035</th>
<th>2040</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Baldwin</td>
<td>46,457</td>
<td>44,823</td>
<td>47,487</td>
<td>48,359</td>
<td>48,902</td>
<td>49,154</td>
<td>49,185</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Crawford</td>
<td>12,453</td>
<td>12,318</td>
<td>12,285</td>
<td>12,013</td>
<td>11,629</td>
<td>11,145</td>
<td>10,589</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Houston</td>
<td>152,213</td>
<td>155,469</td>
<td>163,444</td>
<td>174,362</td>
<td>185,016</td>
<td>195,316</td>
<td>205,265</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jones</td>
<td>29,024</td>
<td>28,616</td>
<td>30,141</td>
<td>31,187</td>
<td>32,084</td>
<td>32,757</td>
<td>33,262</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Macon-Bibb</td>
<td>155,778</td>
<td>153,095</td>
<td>158,072</td>
<td>159,592</td>
<td>160,506</td>
<td>160,817</td>
<td>160,526</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Monroe</td>
<td>27,516</td>
<td>27,520</td>
<td>28,888</td>
<td>30,322</td>
<td>31,725</td>
<td>33,074</td>
<td>34,417</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peach</td>
<td>27,214</td>
<td>27,297</td>
<td>27,611</td>
<td>27,850</td>
<td>29,090</td>
<td>28,320</td>
<td>28,484</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pulaski</td>
<td>11,475</td>
<td>11,069</td>
<td>11,304</td>
<td>11,117</td>
<td>10,903</td>
<td>10,657</td>
<td>10,406</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Putnam</td>
<td>21,533</td>
<td>21,809</td>
<td>21,873</td>
<td>22,043</td>
<td>22,052</td>
<td>21,962</td>
<td>21,831</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Twiggs</td>
<td>8,337</td>
<td>8,188</td>
<td>7,953</td>
<td>7,497</td>
<td>6,957</td>
<td>6,370</td>
<td>5,771</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wilkinson</td>
<td>9,423</td>
<td>9,036</td>
<td>9,363</td>
<td>9,199</td>
<td>8,938</td>
<td>8,612</td>
<td>8,231</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*2018 data is a US Census Population Estimate. The other years are projected estimates developed by the Georgia Governor’s Office of Planning and Budget.
Wilkinson County Profile

Population

Wilkinson County

As of the 2013-2017 American Community Survey (ACS), Wilkinson County was home to 9,147 people. The population has declined over the past 20 years. According to the 2000 Census, there were 10,220 Wilkinson County residents. The number of residents declined over the next decade with Wilkinson County losing approximately 700 people. According to the 2010 Census, 9,563 people lived in the county. By 2017, the county had lost another 400 people. The cities in Wilkinson County also experienced some population fluctuations. It should be noted that the population change figures are based on estimates from the 2013-2017 ACS, and the increases or decreases often fall within the margin of error. Because of the high margins of error in these figures, it is difficult to assess the full extent to which population may have changed in the county and its cities.

Age

Wilkinson County

The age of the population has important implications for the demand for transit services within the county. Wilkinson County’s population has been aging as the median age for county residents has increased from 35.8 in 2000 to 42.5 in 2017. The aging of the population is also represented in the changing age distribution in the county. In 2000, adults over age 60 comprised 17.6 percent of the population compared to 24.9 percent of the population in 2017. Those age trends can be seen in Table 2.

Table 2: Age Distribution by Age Group, Wilkinson County

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age Group</th>
<th>2000</th>
<th></th>
<th>2010</th>
<th></th>
<th>2017</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>#</td>
<td>%</td>
<td>#</td>
<td>%</td>
<td>#</td>
<td>%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Under 18</td>
<td>2,783</td>
<td>27.2</td>
<td>2,324</td>
<td>24.3</td>
<td>2,119</td>
<td>23.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18 to 59</td>
<td>5,636</td>
<td>55.1</td>
<td>5,158</td>
<td>53.9</td>
<td>4,743</td>
<td>51.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>60 and above</td>
<td>1,801</td>
<td>17.6</td>
<td>2,081</td>
<td>21.8</td>
<td>2,285</td>
<td>24.9</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: 2013-2017 American Community Survey

Given that seniors are one of the groups that have the highest dependence on transit, the increasing numbers of those seniors in the county will impact the type, level, and extent of service needed in the county and throughout the region.

Income

Income level is another indicator of transit dependence, as low-income households are less able to purchase and maintain automobiles. A more specific measure of transit need is the population with incomes below the poverty level. A high poverty rate often translates into a greater need for various services, including public transportation.

Income is relevant to consider for Wilkinson County and other rural counties because rural areas generally have lower incomes and higher poverty rates than urban areas. Additionally, rural
residents drive more miles than urban residents, meaning their fuel and vehicle maintenance costs are higher than that of their urban peers. Income particularly becomes a transit need indicator when transportation costs, like gasoline, rise. While low-income populations are the most vulnerable to increases in fuel, other income groups could also find fuel prices cost-prohibitive and cause an increase in transit demand. While that additional demand is difficult to project, accounting for low-income households in transit planning has been a reliable measure for transit demand.

Wilkinson County
In 2017, 23.5 percent of Wilkinson County’s population was in poverty, slightly higher than the statewide estimate of 15.1 percent according to the Small Area Income and Poverty Estimates (SAIPE) program. The median household income is estimated to be $40,906, lower than the statewide median household income of $56,117.

Disability
Individuals with disabilities typically rely on public transit because their disabilities limit or completely deny them the ability to drive. In addition, some disabled individuals require vehicles with specialized equipment and may require “door-to-door” service with special assistance. Because the goal of any transportation system is to provide mobility options to individuals, regardless of ability, consideration of the disabled population is critical to public transportation planning.

Wilkinson County
Approximately 16.4 percent of Wilkinson County residents are considered to have a disability according to the 2013-2017 ACS. This amounts to approximately 1,500 people in the county. Eighty-four percent of those with a disability are over age 65. The most prevalent disability is an ambulatory disability followed by independent living and cognitive difficulty.

Commuting Patterns
Understanding commuting patterns for Wilkinson County residents can help influence future transit planning in the county, both within the county and between counties.

Wilkinson County
There are 3,144 workers age 16 and over in Wilkinson County. Of those, 46.9 percent work in the county, and 52.8 percent work outside the county according to the 2013-2017 ACS. The remaining 0.3 percent work in a different state. The majority of people that leave the county for work travel to Baldwin County, Laurens County, and Macon-Bibb County according to On the Map, a US Census tool that combines federal, state, and Census Bureau data about employers and employees.
Vehicle Access
Lack of access to a vehicle is another indicator of transit need. Access to a vehicle is particularly important in rural areas as amenities like a grocery store are not accessible by walking or biking, as they are in more urban areas.

Wilkinson County
According to 2013-2017 ACS Estimates, 8.2 percent of Wilkinson County households do not have access to a vehicle, which is higher than the statewide estimate of 6.7 percent of households without access to a vehicle. Because the population density is low throughout the county, it is difficult to precisely determine where many of those households are located. Based on a census tract analysis of this data, it appears that many of those households are in the central part of the county where Irwinton and McIntyre are located as shown in Map 1.

Map 1: Percent of Households Without Access to a Vehicle
TRANSIT SERVICES

Wilkinson County has two primary programs that provide transit services to its residents.

Department of Human Services (DHS) Coordinated Transportation System
Recognizing the importance of transportation in linking people with services and opportunities, the Department of Human Services (DHS) developed a statewide transportation system to meet the specialized transportation needs of its clients who are elderly, mentally and physically disabled and/or low-income. The goal is to provide safe, efficient and cost-effective transportation for these clients, allowing them access to essential services provided by the department.

The DHS coordinated transportation system provides contracted services and oversight statewide. Transportation services are provided to clients served by the Division of Aging Services (DAS), Division of Behavioral Health and Developmental Disabilities (DBHDD), Division of Family and Children Services (DFCS), and the Division of Public Health (DPH). The system also provides transportation services to clients of the Department of Labor’s Vocational Rehabilitation Services Program (DOL/VRS).

The Georgia Department of Human Services contracts with the Middle Georgia Regional Commission to administer the DHS Coordinated Transportation Program in the 11-county region including Wilkinson County. MGRC subcontracts with Macon-Bibb County Economic Opportunity Council (EOC) to provide transportation services for Wilkinson County residents that are clients of the following human service agencies or programs: Wilkinson County Community Service Center; Wilkinson County Division of Family and Children Services office; Wilkinson County Senior Center and, the Georgia Vocational Rehabilitation Agency-Milledgeville Hub.

Coordinated Transportation is an essential service in Wilkinson County in that it allows for greater access to human services for the elderly, the disabled, and those with limited transportation options. A total of four vehicles are currently being utilized to provide coordinated transportation service to Wilkinson County residents. Eligibility criteria and essential trip priorities are provided below for each DHS Division and for other programs served by Coordinated Transportation in Wilkinson County:

DHS Division of Aging Services
- Trips to and from Senior Centers,
- Trips to and from medical appointments (including dialysis, chemotherapy, etc.),
- Trips to and from preventative health screenings and appointments (including dental, vision, hearing, etc.),
- Trips for shopping (groceries, medications, etc.),
- Trips to and from work/employment,
- Field trips,
- Trips that support application and management of public benefits,
- Trips to pay bills, conduct banking, etc.,
- Trips that support civic engagement and continued involvement in the community (including cultural activities),
- Trips that support evidence-based programs offered through DAS and health/wellness activities offered in the community, and
- Trips that facilitate attendance at support group meetings for both caregiver services and kinship care services.

**DHS Division of Family and Children Services**
- Trips in support of TANF and SNAP Works Program recipients (employment, job training, job search, etc.),
- Trips to and from technical schools and adult education,
- Trips to and from work experience sites for food stamp recipients,
- Trips to and from medical appointments,
- Trips to and from mental health centers,
- Transitional support service trips,
- Other non-TANF trips,
- Trips to and from substance abuse treatment,
- Trips for Social Service consumers, and
- Trips for children in foster care and under child protective services.

**Department of Behavioral Health and Developmental Disabilities (DBHDD)**
- Trips to and from employment locations,
- Trips to and from mental health appointments,
- Trips to and from community training and integration activities,
- Trips to and from medical appointments, and
- Trips for social services.

**Department of Public Health (DPH)**
- Trips for immunizations,
- Trips to and from Public Health Clinic and to and from stores,
- Trips for prenatal visits to clinics and other prenatal appointments, and
- Trips to scheduled medical appointments.

**Georgia Vocational Rehabilitation Agency**
- Trips to and from school,
- Trips to and from employment,
- Trips for job search and job placement,
- Trips to and from job training, and
- Trips to and from workshops and assessment sites.
Transportation providers under these programs can provide the following types of service:

- **Subscription trips** – Trips that are scheduled with a pre-determined notice to meet the repetitive needs of passengers. They are performed on a continual basis.
- **Scheduled response** – Trips that are scheduled with a pre-determined notice and are not performed on a continual basis.
- **Demand Response Service** – Trips that are requested and performed on short notice.
- **Group Trips** – Trips that involve transporting multiple passengers with the same point of origin and the same destination.

For human service programs “relevant transportation” includes transportation for passengers who can safely and feasibly be transported in a coordinated system. It does not include transportation for those passengers who, because of the nature of their condition, cannot safely be transported in a coordinated system. The human service providers are responsible for determining which consumers are appropriate for services under the coordinated system. The coordinated system may incorporate the use of taxi service, private van service or public systems where such service is available and based on local system designs.

DHS seeks to provide the maximum amount of essential transportation services that can be accomplished with available resources. A priority listing of essential trips is established for each Division based on statewide input channeled through annual needs assessments. Transportation funding is committed to transit services for the highest priorities first. As funding increases or decreases, priority lists shift as to which essential trips will be performed.

Eligibility criteria vary between the divisions within DHS and other participating agencies in the Coordinated Transportation program. Information regarding eligibility determination, trip order process, etc. can be obtained by contacting the specific division/agency.

**Georgia Department of Transportation (GDOT) Section 5311 Program**

Section 5311 is the name of the funding program administered by the Federal Transit Administration (FTA) to aid with rural public transportation. Federal funds are allocated to the states on a formula basis and can be used for capital assistance, operating assistance, planning, and program administration. GDOT is responsible for administering the program within the State of Georgia. Section 5311 has had a significant influence on mobility in rural communities, and Wilkinson County’s continued participation in the program will positively impact mobility for its many transit-dependent residents.

In Wilkinson County, Section 5311 is administered and operated by the county. The county provides fare-based, demand-response, rural public transportation to all Wilkinson County residents. The nature of trips provided by the program includes medical, social services, personal shopping, business, recreation, and employment.
Private Transit
Currently, there are no private transportation services, such as taxis, vanpools, or ride-sharing in Wilkinson County. There are taxi and ride-sharing services available in neighboring counties that could provide services to a location in Wilkinson County, but rates are cost-prohibitive to use on a regular basis.

Barriers to Transit Service
According to a 2017 presentation to the Georgia House of Representatives Rural Development Council, there are three primary barriers to service:
   1. Funding – grant modifications at the federal level have resulted in reduced federal funds.
   2. Lack of available transportation providers in some areas of the state.
   3. Consumers live significant distances from services in rural areas, and in order to ensure consumers are not traveling too long, providers may not fill vehicles to capacity.

The presentation also included the following solutions to these barriers:
   1. Implement volunteer driver programs in areas where the need is greater than the funding.
   2. Implement voucher programs that reimburse non-family members to transport a consumer to services.
   3. Use a variety of vehicle types to meet the needs of an area.

The biggest issue facing the DHS Coordinated Transportation Program is that the cost to provide the service has increased over the last several years, while the funding for the program has remained constant or for some areas has been cut, thus making it very difficult to maintain the level of service to the DHS clients and for the transportation operators (who are few in number) to stay financially solvent.

CURRENT SERVICES
Wilkinson County 5311 Program
Wilkinson County’s rural public transportation system (5311 Program) is available Monday through Friday from 8:00 am to 5:00 pm. Advance reservations are not required. The fare is $2.00 per one-way trip. Out-of-county service is provided for a fee of $15.00 round-trip. A total of three vehicles are used in support of the program.

Service Indicators
The usage of the system has declined significantly over the past five calendar years as shown in Figure 1. There were 3,276 fewer trips in 2017-18 compared to 2013-2014, amounting to a 31.9 percent decline in usage. Most of these trips were for shopping, to one of the schools, or for other personal needs.
Figure 1: Wilkinson County Transit Use

Peer Comparisons
The following are comparisons between systems in some of Wilkinson County’s neighboring counties:

Baldwin County
Baldwin County offers reservation-based services. The system operates Monday to Friday, 7:45 am to 4:00 pm and charges $2.00 per trip. There are no services available outside Baldwin County. Reservations must be made at least 24 hours in advance.

Jones County
Jones County offers reservation-based services. The system operates Monday to Friday, 7:00 am to 4:00 pm. It costs $2.00 round trip and $0.50 for each additional stop up to $4.00 in the county. For out-of-county trips, it costs $4.00 plus $0.50 per stop up to $6.00. Medical trips cost $2.00.

Twiggs County
Twiggs County offers reservation-based services. The system operates Monday to Friday, 8:00 am to 5:00 pm. It costs $2.00 per stop up to $5.00 per day in the county and $4.00 for out-of-county trips within 50 miles. The out-of-county service area includes Houston County, Wilkinson County, and Macon-Bibb County.
Laurens County
Laurens County does not offer any transit services.

Johnson County
Johnson County does not offer any transit services.

Washington County
Washington County does not offer any transit services.

Department of Human Services (DHS) Coordinated Transportation
Under DHS’s Coordinated Transportation System, transportation services are made available 24 hours per day, 7 days per week. Core hours are between the hours of 6:00 am and 6:00 pm, Monday through Friday; however, scheduled trips beyond these core hours and days are available when demand warrants.

Figure 2 displays historical trip data from the human service providers available in Wilkinson County. According to this data, the total number of trips have declined by over 1,300 between 2015 and 2019. Three of the four service providers experienced an overall decline during this time period with the Vocational Rehab Program experiencing the only increase. It went from 0 trips in FY 2015 to 155 trips in FY 2019.

Figure 2: DHS Coordinated Transportation Trips
The decline in the number of trips is not necessarily correlated with a decline in operating expenses for each human service provider as seen in Table 3. The Wilkinson County Senior Center has seen an overall increase in operating expenses even as trip numbers fluctuated. Wilkinson County DFCS has experienced dramatic shifts in the five-year period and did not have any trips in FY 2017. The Wilkinson County Service Center (DBHDD) has been a consistent provider of service but has experienced a steep decline in the number of trips over the five-year period. The total operating expenses for DBHDD fluctuated during those years, reaching the lowest level of operating expenses in FY 2019. The Vocational Rehab Program has provided the fewest number of trips of all the service providers and has the highest cost per trip of all the providers.

Table 3: DHS Coordinated Transportation Providers Operating Expenses

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Human Service Provider</th>
<th>FY 2016</th>
<th>FY 2016</th>
<th>FY2017</th>
<th>FY 2018</th>
<th>FY 2019</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Operating Expenses</td>
<td>Cost Per Trip</td>
<td>Operating Expenses</td>
<td>Cost Per Trip</td>
<td>Operating Expenses</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wilkinson County Senior Center</td>
<td>$14,246</td>
<td>$9.42</td>
<td>$18,009</td>
<td>$11.93</td>
<td>$24,324</td>
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<tr>
<td>Wilkinson DFCS</td>
<td>$11,555</td>
<td>$18.37</td>
<td>$7,066</td>
<td>$21.03</td>
<td>$3,785</td>
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<td>Wilkinson County Service Center (DBHDD)</td>
<td>$32,911</td>
<td>$10.31</td>
<td>$42,796</td>
<td>$13.01</td>
<td>$39,741</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vocational Rehab Center</td>
<td>$0</td>
<td>$0</td>
<td>$451</td>
<td>$41.00</td>
<td>$1,006</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>$58,712</td>
<td>$68,322</td>
<td>$68,856</td>
<td>$54,993</td>
<td>$55,623</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Public Transit Needs Assessment

Stakeholder Input
Despite the availability of transit services provided under the 5311 Program and by human service providers, concerns have been raised about the current public transit services. One of the concerns on behalf of the county has been the declining ridership. There has been a decline of nearly 3,500 trips since FY 2014. This decline potentially puts the service at risk for residents if it is determined not to be effective. Another concern is the inability to offer out-of-county trips at an affordable rate, as well as lack of inter-county connectivity of transit services. This struggle to provide out-of-county service is particularly problematic in a rural county where there are few options for services such as medical care.

In addition to concerns about operations, other challenges related to public transit in Wilkinson County include awareness of the system and stigma of public transportation. The county primarily relies on word-of-mouth advertising and visibility of the buses in the county to advertise its services. However, this information may not be reaching all potential parties, and there may need to be exploration as to how to better advertise this service. Additionally, there is often a stigma associated with public transit that it is only used by individuals who cannot afford other modes of transportation. This stigma particularly applies to buses. If Wilkinson County wants to pursue an expansion of transit services, addressing this stigma would be essential in order to increase ridership and make the service more cost-effective.

Transit Dependence
The analysis in this section highlights the area of potentially transit-dependent populations. It examines population density, youth, seniors, those with incomes below the federal poverty level, households without vehicles, and individuals with disabilities at the census tract level.

The analysis used data from the American Community Survey five-year estimates (2013-2017). The census tracts are classified relative to the county, using a five-tiered ranking system of very low to very high, explained in the chart below.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Percentage of Vulnerable Persons/Households</th>
<th>Ranking</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>&lt; Study Area Percentage (SAP)</td>
<td>Very Low</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&gt; SAP and &lt;1.33 times the SAP</td>
<td>Low</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&gt;1.33 times the SAP and &lt;1.67 times the SAP</td>
<td>Moderate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&gt;1.67 times the SAP and &lt; 2.00 times the SAP</td>
<td>High</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&gt; 2 times the SAP</td>
<td>Very High</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

For this study, the SAP is the Wilkinson County percentage of persons or households within each category. For example, a tract with a lower percentage of seniors relative to the county’s percentage would be classified as Very Low as that transit-dependent population is lower than the overall county showing that there is not a concentration of senior population in this tract.
An aggregate analysis combining youth, seniors, those with incomes below the federal poverty level, and households without a vehicle which provides an overview of the potential need in the county. The results of this analysis, mapped and summarized below, highlights potential areas with the greatest need. This analysis can be used to inform transit service planning in the county.

**Population Density**

Population density is an important indicator of what type of transportation system is most viable. Areas with a high population density are often able to sustain fixed-route transit systems, while more rural areas rely on on-demand services or another transportation alternative. The overwhelming majority of Wilkinson County is rural with an overall population density of 20.24 persons per square mile. There is one census tract with a population density significantly greater than 20.24 persons per square mile – the tract with the Cities of Gordon and Ivey at the northeastern end of the county. With populations of 1,660 and 935 in Gordon and Ivey, respectively, this tract is the most densely settled area of the county. Density can help indicate where transit services may be most successful and serve the most people.

*Map 2: Population Density*
Seniors

Seniors, age 65 and above, are one of the groups that must be identified when identifying transit need. The senior population in Wilkinson County comprises 17.7 percent of the population. None of the census tracts in the counties have significantly higher concentrations of seniors relative to the county. The census tracts where Toomsboro, Allentown, McIntyre, and Irwinton are located have slightly higher proportions of seniors relative to the county. Approximately 19 percent of the McIntyre/Irwinton census tract’s population is 65 and over, and 21.2 percent of the Toomsboro/Allentown census tract’s population is 65 and over. The lack of a concentrated senior population offers minimal indication of where services may be better able to provide transportation for seniors.

Map 3: Concentration of Senior Population
Youth
Youth, ages 10 to 17, are another group commonly considered when identifying transit-dependent populations. Only 11.6 percent of Wilkinson County’s population is in this age group. There are no significant concentrations of people in this age group in the county. The only census tract where the proportion of youth is higher than that in the county is in the southernmost census tract with Toomsboro and Allentown. Individuals in this age group comprise 13.2 percent of the population in the census tract. Because all the tracts are mostly in accordance with the county’s overall proportion of youths, this metric does not offer much information in helping to serve this typically transit-dependent population.

Map 4: Concentration of Youth Population
Poverty

People living below the federal poverty line are also considered as a potentially transit-dependent population. While 23.3 percent of Wilkinson County’s population is identified as living below the poverty line, the distribution of that population is mostly even across the county. The Gordon/Ivey and Toomsboro/Allentown census tracts have slightly higher rates of poverty at 24.5 percent and 24.9 percent respectively. However, because these rates are not much higher than the county’s overall rate, the tracts are classified as low because there is minimal concentration. Because there are no tracts with high concentrations of poverty relative to the county, this metric offers minimal guidance for planning transit services.

*Map 5: Concentration of Population Below the Poverty Line*
Households Without Access to a Vehicle

Households without access to a vehicle are more likely to depend on public transit. Overall, 8.2 percent of Wilkinson County households do not have access to a vehicle. Only one of the census tracts in the county has a percentage higher than that. Approximately 9 percent of households in the McIntyre/Irwinton tract do not have access to a vehicle. This metric does not necessarily provide information to help develop more targeted transit services because households without access to vehicles are consistent across the county.

Map 6: Concentration of Households without Access to a Vehicle
Disabled Population

As previously noted, individuals with disabilities comprise part of the transit-dependent population. According to this analysis, there are no areas with high or very high concentrations of the disabled population relative to the entire county. Nearly 17 percent of Wilkinson County’s population is considered to have a disability. The only tract that has a higher proportion compared to the county is the Ivey/Gordon census tract where 17.7 percent of the population in that tract has a disability. Similar to the other transit-dependent population analyses, this information does not provide much for informing transit planning.

*Map 7: Concentration of Population with a Disability*
**Aggregate Analysis**

The aggregate analysis combining youth, seniors, those with incomes below the federal poverty level, and households without a vehicle, provides an overview of the potential need in the county. None of the census tracts were identified as having a significantly higher transit-dependent population relative to the rest of the county. There were minor variations between the tracts as shown in Map 8, but none of the tracts ranked as having high or even moderate transit-dependent populations. The tract with the highest score is the Gordon/Ivey tract which had higher proportions of disabled persons, seniors, and those below the poverty line compared to the rest of the county.

*Map 8: Aggregate Analysis of Transit-Dependent Populations*

The transit-dependent populations' analysis did not highlight any particular tracts in the county with a significantly greater need than other areas in the county. However, this analysis should not be interpreted as showing that there is no transit need in the county. Because this analysis is relative to Wilkinson County, it highlights that there are no tracts within the county that have a higher proportion of transit-dependent populations compared to the entire county. However, this does not indicate that there may be higher transit need relative to the larger region or state.
A similar type of analysis comparing the data to the region or state help determines if there is a transit need in Wilkinson County. Limitations to this approach are discussed later in the section “Analysis of Transit Dependence, Land Use and Development, and Current Usage”.

**Current Usage**

The following maps are a representation of the locations where passengers were picked up or dropped off by Wilkinson County transit services. These maps are not intended to capture every pick-up and drop-off point that the county serves, but rather provide an overview of where the services are used the most frequently.

**Pick-Up Locations**

The pick-up addresses represent the locations where people were picked up by the transit service. This could include their homes or a destination in a series of stops they were picked up from. For example, the senior center would be counted as a pick-up location when the user was leaving the senior center to return home. The three most frequent pickup locations were the Wilkinson County Middle/High School, the Piggly Wiggly in Gordon, and the Prairie Summit Apartments in Gordon. This is not intended to be a precise analysis of trips, but some trips may not be represented because of missing or inaccurate address data.

*Map 9: Transit Pick Up Points*
Drop-Off Locations
The following map represents the drop-off locations for the same time period as the Pick-Up Points map. This could include the first destination after departing their homes or the homes they returned to after the trip. The three most frequent drop-off destinations are the Gordon Drug Company, the Gordon Piggly Wiggly, and the Wilkinson County Middle/High School.

Map 10: Transit Drop Off Points

As seen in the Transit Pick-Up and Drop-Off Points maps, most of the locations that the transit system serves are in Toomsboro, Irwinton, and Gordon. The amenities, particularly the Dollar Generals and the Gordon Piggly Wiggly, are frequent pick-up and drop-off points. Based on this one-month analysis, it would appear that much of the southern and northeastern parts of the county either do not need transit services or are not aware of transit services offered by the county’s 5311 transit service. Population density is also a factor in these pick-up and drop-off frequencies. The southern portion of the county has only 7.35 persons per square mile. These maps do not include people who are served by DHS Coordinated Transportation Services.
Trip Denial
Wilkinson County Transit rarely denies a trip. Since the ridership numbers have decreased, the county has reduced its trip denials because of the declining demand. The declining demand has also enabled the county to be more flexible with trip arrangements. The county does not require reservations 24 hours in advance. They operate like an on-demand system and can have a bus available to pick someone up within approximately 20 minutes of their call. The transit service keeps buses centered in Gordon, Irwinton, and Toomsboro allowing that on-demand system to be responsive to clients. Additionally, the flexibility of Wilkinson County’s system contributes to the minimal trip denials because its three buses can respond to trip requests across the county, instead of relying on one bus to serve the entire county. The only occasion that the county might have to deny trips with its current operations schedule is if the bus is reserved for an out-of-county trip. Residents can pay $15 per person to use the bus for an out-of-county trip. This would then reduce the responsiveness of the remaining buses.

Land Use and Development
Wilkinson County is rural in nature and has seven small cities. Unlike most other middle Georgia counties, there is no single urban center where the majority of employers, schools, medical facilities, and shopping centers are located. In fact, there are no major facilities of any kind (i.e. medical, retail, colleges/universities) located within the county. The geography of Wilkinson County is such that no significant and identifiable destination points exist; whereby, studying the possible use of public transportation might serve beneficial.

Analysis of land use plans is another element of the transit needs assessment conducted during the planning process. Both current and future land use in Wilkinson County is indicative of the community’s rural character. The majority of the land is for agricultural and forestry purposes. Existing land use reflects industrial uses predominately in and around the Cities of Gordon and McIntyre. This is consistent with the strong presence of BASF Chemical Company in Gordon and UNIMIN Corporation and CARBO Ceramics located in the City of McIntyre.

Existing commercial development throughout the county (both within the cities and the unincorporated area of the county) primarily consists of general commercial uses, such as convenience stores, gas stations, and small businesses.
Future land use is characterized by increased residential development throughout the unincorporated portions of the county and projected industrial development along the transportation corridors, particularly US 441. Recent state highway improvements, such as the widening of US 441 and the Fall Line Freeway present opportunities for Wilkinson County and the Cities of Gordon, Irwinton, and McIntyre to coordinate future land use.

**Analysis of Transit Dependence, Land Use and Development, and Current Usage**

**Transit Dependent Populations**
The aggregate spatial analysis shown in Map 8 demonstrates that there are no specific areas in Wilkinson County with a high proportion of the transit-dependent population compared to the county as a whole. However, there are limitations with this analysis. As previously noted, because the transit-dependent analysis is relative to only Wilkinson County, it shows that there are no tracts within the county that have a higher proportion of transit-dependent populations compared to the entire county. This is not indicative of transit-dependent populations within the larger region. Another limitation is the scale of analysis. Because Wilkinson County is rural, with a small population, much of the data for this analysis is not available at a smaller geography like a block group. The US Census Bureau does not disaggregate the data for block groups for ACS Estimates because the number of sample cases is too small. As a result, the smallest geography available for analysis is the census tract. The three census tracts in Wilkinson County are 83, 143, and 226 square miles. The size of these census tracts limits the ability to accurately pinpoint transit need. To truly assess the transit demand in Wilkinson County would require a more detailed transit demand study of county residents.

While the transit-dependent population analysis for Wilkinson County did not yield any geospatial information that highlights transit need, a broader analysis comparing the county’s census tracts to the region or to the state may show the need for transit. However, as previously noted, the size of the census tracts still limits the ability to pinpoint transit need. A more detailed transit demand study of county residents is the best way to determine if there is a need for transit service.

**Land Use and Development**
As noted, Wilkinson County is predominantly rural with seven small cities across the county. None of these cities function as major urban centers with large non-industrial or agricultural employers or significant medical, retail, or educational facilities. As a result, many residents must go out of the county to work or to visit one of these facilities. However, there is no way to estimate the number of residents that need to go out-of-county but are unable to. Because the transit service is limited to the county, except for costly out-of-county trips, there is no metric to understand the interest out-of-county services and facilities. Wilkinson’s rural nature makes it necessary for residents to travel outside the county. If and how transit-dependent residents are currently doing that is unknown.
Because there are few major employers in the county, the transit service may be able to directly serve those entities and function as a van share from individual residents to these locations. This could expand the availability of job opportunities to those in the county who are unable to easily access BASF, UNIMIN, Zschimmer & Schwarz, or CARBO Ceramics.

**Current Usage**

As shown in the maps of pick-up and drop-off locations in Wilkinson County, the current usage for services is centered around Gordon, Irwinton, and Toomsboro. However, this frequency analysis may be a result of the fact that the buses are centered in each of those locations making it easier for those buses to use. Additionally, because the buses stay located in those areas, residents are more aware of them because of their visibility. Residents near Allentown and Danville may be unaware of the service because they rarely see the buses as evidenced by the few pick-ups or drop-offs that occurred in that part of the county. Because the visibility of the bus is the primary marketing tool of the county, there may be county residents who have no idea that there is a transit option because they never see the buses. The pick-up and drop-off maps show the current usage of the system and show that there is demand for transit, particularly for groceries and retail; however, the analysis does not indicate potential demand. An in-depth transit demand study would need to be conducted to assess that demand.

In lieu of a detailed transit demand study, advertisement of the service, particularly in areas where there is little to no usage may help increase ridership, improving the long-term sustainability of the service. Additionally, an analysis of pick-up and drop-off locations over a longer period may elicit more detail about usage patterns in the county, providing more insight for how the service could appeal to more people and increase ridership.

**Operations Plan**

**Capital Plan**

Wilkinson County’s current fleet consists of a total of three vehicles. Characteristics of the fleet are detailed in Table 4.

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<tr>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ford/Startrans Shuttle Vans</td>
<td>2017</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Wilkinson County’s vehicles are relatively new. They aim to replace the vehicles when they get 130,000 – 150,000 miles on them which usually gives them a lifespan of three to five years. It is recommended that Wilkinson County replace vehicles at an interval in order to avoid the financial burden of replacing an entire fleet at one time.
Financial Plan
Wilkinson County does not currently have a five-year financial plan. The county budgeted $130,502 for the 2017 fiscal year, which is the most recent data available. The county intends to keep the program operational in the coming years; however, the budget for this service has the potential to vary significantly in the coming years based on fuel prices and ridership.

Recommendations
Short Term (1-2 Years)
- Continue operation of 5311 services within Wilkinson County to provide transit services to users
- Develop and implement diverse marketing tools to inform county residents about public transit services
- Identify areas or segments of the population who are currently not being served.
- Target marketing tools to communities that do not ordinarily use the transit services (Ivey, Danville, Allentown)
- Develop and implement a program to quantify transit needs in Wilkinson County by using a variety of survey techniques and public input forums.

Medium Term (3-4 Years)
- Explore partnering with major Wilkinson County employers to determine if the transit service can enhance employee access to employers.
- Develop an affordable out-of-county transit option enabling residents to attend medical and retail facilities out of the county.

Long Term (5+ Years)
- Collaborate with transit services in other counties to develop a regional rural transit program.