



# ACCESS NORTH TEXAS

**Regional Public Transportation Coordination Plan for North Central Texas**

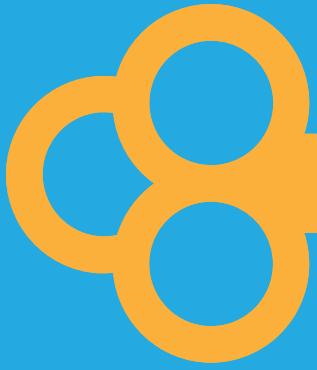
PREPARED BY THE NORTH CENTRAL TEXAS COUNCIL OF GOVERNMENTS | DRAFT





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CHAPTER 01



# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY



## INTRODUCTION

In recent years, the importance of providing individuals access to transportation services has become crucial as our region becomes more interconnected and individuals need to travel across city and county lines to meet daily needs. The cost of these longer trips has increased the need for more affordable services for those with fixed incomes to ensure they can access food, jobs, critical services, and educational resources that may not be available within their local communities. As population and job opportunities grow across the region and seniors decide to age in place, there is a greater need to coordinate the delivery and efficiency of transportation services.

Access North Texas is the public transit-human services transportation coordination plan for the 16 counties served by the North Central Texas Council of Governments (NCTCOG). The Federal Transit Administration (FTA) requires a coordinated public transit-human services transportation coordination plan be developed through a local process that includes participation by seniors, individuals with disabilities, representatives of public, private, and nonprofit transportation and human services providers and other members of the public. The plan was first adopted in 2013 and is updated every four to five years. It provides a framework to assist stakeholders in improving public transportation across the region by identifying the transportation needs of seniors, individuals with disabilities, and individuals with lower incomes. Based on a combination of research, technical analysis, and public input, the plan identifies strategies to better serve these vulnerable populations with public transportation. While the plan is not a funding document, it is used as a guide for agencies that provide transportation services when federal and State funding becomes available.

Seniors, individuals with disabilities, and individuals with lower incomes can have difficulty

finding public transportation options that connect them to medical appointments, work opportunities and education or job training. This plan identifies where these transportation connections do not exist or could be improved in both the region as well as county-by-county.

NCTCOG is designated by the Texas Department of Transportation (TxDOT) to develop the plan but works to ensure all voices are heard through the entirety of the planning process. NCTCOG is responsible for organizing public meetings, collecting data, performing research and analysis, and bringing that knowledge together to create a plan for the region.

## PLAN REQUIREMENTS

It is required federal transit law and for a coordinated public transit-human services plan to be “developed and approved through a process that included participation by seniors, individuals with disabilities, representatives of public, private, and nonprofit transportation and human services providers and other members of the public” utilizing transportation services. Furthermore, coordination is mandated in Texas among transportation providers, health and human service agencies and workforce boards by Texas Administrative Code Chapter 461. In North Central Texas, NCTCOG is the designated lead entity responsible for preparing and maintaining the region’s public transportation coordination plan.

Access North Texas provides a framework for project selection according to the requirements and guidelines described below for federal and state funding programs.

### *Federal Coordination Requirement*

Currently a coordinated public transit-human services plan is stipulated in the Federal Transit Administration’s Section 5310 Enhanced Mobility for Seniors and Individuals with Disabilities

Program. This type of coordination plan has been recommended or required for various programs since 2004, when President Bush signed Executive Order 13330 on Human Services Transportation Coordination, and since August 2005, when the President signed into law the Safe, Accountable, Flexible, Efficient Transportation Equity Act: A Legacy for Users (SAFETEA-LU). Most recently, it was also required in the FAST Act, the previous federal surface transportation legislation.

Projects funded with federal grants from the Enhanced Mobility of Seniors and Individuals with Disabilities Program (Section 5310) of the FAST Act must be included in a locally developed, coordinated public transit-human services transportation plan that was developed and approved through a process that included participation by seniors; individuals with disabilities; representatives of public, private, and nonprofit transportation; human services providers and other members of the public. Projects funded with Section 5310 grants must also, to the maximum extent feasible, be coordinated with transportation services assisted by other federal departments and agencies, including any transportation activities carried out by a recipient of a grant from the Department of Health and Human Services.

Federal guidance for other transit funding, such as new or continuing job access and reverse commute projects under the Urbanized Area Formula (Section 5307) Program, are not required to be developed through this coordinated planning process. However, the Federal Transit Administration encourages recipients to continue to use the coordinated planning process to identify and develop job access and reverse commute projects for funding under Section 5307. Access North Texas includes a broad approach to coordinating public transportation that considers general public transportation and services for transit-dependent populations that could be

funded by all of the Federal public transportation funding programs outlined above.

### ***State Coordination Requirement***

House Bill 3588, enacted by the 78th Texas Legislature in 2003, requires the coordination of public transportation in the State of Texas. Specifically, Article 13 of the legislation created Chapter 461 of the Texas Transportation Code, entitled “Statewide Coordination of Public Transportation,” which requires the coordination of public transportation services funded with federal, State, or local funds.

Chapter 461 cites the multiplicity of public transportation providers and services, coupled with a lack of coordination between state oversight agencies, as generating inefficiencies, overlaps in service, and confusion for consumers. The focus of Chapter 461 is the statewide coordination of transportation funding and resources among the Texas Health and Human Services Commission, Texas Workforce Commission, and the Texas Department of Transportation. The intent is to ensure that the benefits of the state’s public transportation resources are maximized through the coordination of services. The goals of coordination are to eliminate waste in the provision of public transportation services, to generate efficiencies that will permit increased levels of service, and to further the state’s efforts to reduce air pollution.

These statewide planning requirements are reflected in coordinated public transportation planning that occurs at the regional level within the boundaries of each of the 24 Council of Governments regions. Each region prepares a public transportation coordination plan to submit to the Texas Department of Transportation highlighting transportation needs, gaps in service and strategies for coordination to address those gaps in service and needs. Access North Texas

meets statewide planning requirements for the North Central Texas region.

## PROGRESS SINCE 2018

Access North Texas was first adopted in 2013 and updated in 2018. Significant progress has been made in implementing the recommendations from that plan. Examples of outcomes since the 2018 plan update are described below. See Appendix A, Access North Texas (2018): Summary and Status, for more information about which strategies have been accomplished since the plan was adopted.

### *Expansion of Micro-Transit Services*

The City of Arlington began a small pilot service to use Via Rideshare services around the Entertainment District and has since had multiple updates to expand the service, now covering the entire city. Trips are booked through an on-demand app and drivers will pick-up in a nearby location. In 2021, the Denton County Transportation Authority (DCTA) voted to introduce GoZone, an on-demand service with Via Rideshare, to meet the transportation needs of individuals in Denton, Lewisville, and Highland Village. The transition to GoZone aims to provide riders with safe, convenient, accessible, and affordable rides while extending service to areas that previously had limited access to fixed route bus service. The City of Grand Prairie also introduced on-demand services using the Via Rideshare platform in April 2022. Residents can use the new service Monday through Saturday to travel within city limits and to select college campuses.

### *Technology Innovation*

Dallas Area Rapid Transit (DART) initially launched the GoPass application through a Mobility on Demand Sandbox demonstration grant from the Federal Transit Administration. The app was developed to be an easy-to-use portal for riders to purchase transit tickets and view route

schedules from their phones. Recently, DART has been coordinating with other regional transportation providers such as Trinity Metro and STAR Transit to license and expand the use of application. Additionally, in March of 2022 the City of Arlington introduced their RAPID pilot service in Downtown Arlington and on the campus of University of Texas Arlington. This project supports the city's on-demand Via service by utilizing autonomous vehicles with a trained fleet attendant on board to provide an opportunity to explore potential uses of innovated technologies as part of a broader public transportation strategy.

### *Transit Programs for Low-Income Individuals & Job Seekers*

In 2020, DART and Trinity Metro introduced programs to make transit fares more affordable for riders. DART's Discount GoPass® Tap Card program allows riders to take DART bus and/or trains for half the regularly priced fares and the system will automatically monitor and cap daily and monthly fares for the riders. To be eligible, riders would need to provide proof of participation in any of the qualifying assistance programs. In response to the job losses at the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, Trinity Metro began providing free rides for job seekers to connect them to job fairs, interviews, or other employment opportunities. Free rides were offered on all buses, trains, ACCESS and ZIPZONE services in Tarrant County with nearly 40,000 trips being provided in the first year of the program.

### *My Ride North Texas 2.0*

As part of the Federal Transit Administration's Innovative Coordinated Access and Mobility (ICAM) 2018 Pilot Program Grant, the North Central Texas Council of Governments was awarded funding to implement My Ride North Texas 2.0, a regional mobility management program to improve the coordination of

transportation services and expand travel navigation.

Partners implemented a regional 1800 line for residents to reach travel navigators who can provide transit information for their area. As part of a broader coordination strategy, the North Central Texas Council of Governments has been hosting quarterly regional mobility managers meetings to discuss transit issues and connect partners across the 16-county region.

### ***Cooperative Vehicle Procurement***

Transportation providers within the 16-county region needed to increase the variety of vehicles in their fleet to better match vehicles to the service being provided and replace older vehicles to provide quality and reliable services to riders. To promote economies of scale that could benefit smaller transit providers, NCTCOG began a cooperative vehicle procurement in 2020 to obtain 80 vehicles for 5 regional transit providers. This approach ensured federal procurement requirements were met, the vehicles were purchased at the best rate, and helped transit providers better match vehicle type to service provided.

## **CURRENT TRENDS**

Since the last 2018 plan update, the region has experienced a rise in on-demand microtransit services and Transportation Network Companies (TNCs), such as Uber and Lyft, providing last-mile connections to supplement bus and rail services. This made it possible for transit agencies to introduce flexible solutions and center discussions on how to provide multi-modal transportation tailored to specific community needs. It also allowed agencies to pilot transit services in areas that previously had no or limited access to public transportation.

Additionally, to meet the transit needs and challenges of a growing region the largest three transit providers all examined their bus networks and voted to implement service changes that improve the customer experience and ensure riders have safe and easy access to food, jobs, critical services, and educational resources within their service areas. Both DART and Trinity Metro evaluated all their routes and rail services, and with community input, approved networks that provide riders with greater frequency, extended service hours, and improved access to destinations with expanded microtransit zones. DCTA underwent a two-year process to explore new options and decided to launch a new GoZone on-demand rideshare service to cover their service area with the goals of providing more coverage and longer service hours than their previous network. After much consideration, all three agencies approved redesigning their services and were able to incorporate microtransit solutions to connect riders within their service areas.

Starting in 2020 transit providers, much like the rest of the world, had to adapt to the challenges brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic. From transit rides to meal deliveries, public transportation providers were at the forefront of keeping riders and operators safe. Many of the agencies shifted their services and updated their operating processes to ensure they could keep their doors open for essential workers and transit-dependent populations. At the beginning of the pandemic DART partnered with the Dallas Independent School District to deliver meals to affected families and used their vehicles and drivers to connect North Texas residents to needed services and meals. Trinity Metro and other agencies temporarily implemented free fares on routes to further reduce contact and encourage physical distance between operators and customers. All transit providers have since installed protective equipment on buses and

increased cleaning procedures to ensure both drivers and riders can enjoy rides safely. Also, with rider demand decreasing during the pandemic the transit providers are finding ways to adjust their service using smaller vehicles and expanding microtransit options in areas with lower transit demand.

## METHODOLOGY OF CURRENT NEEDS

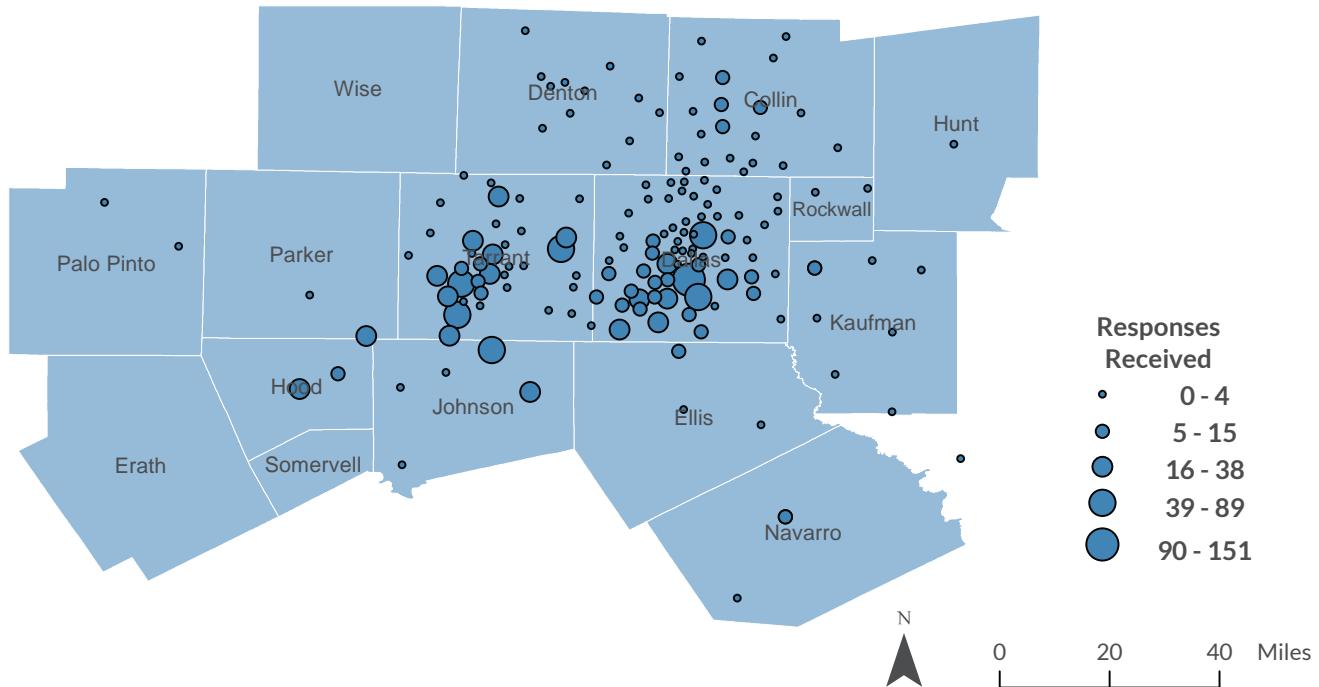
### Outreach Efforts

Members of the public including seniors, people with disabilities, individuals with lower incomes, and representatives of local government, transit agencies, workforce agencies, and educational institutions were invited to participate in outreach meetings across the region. Meetings were held in Spring and Summer of 2021 and due to the COVID-19 pandemic the meetings were hosted virtually through different platforms. In total,

28 virtual outreach meetings were held with over 1,450 stakeholders being invited across the 16-county region. Nearly 85 participants attended the virtual meetings to share their thoughts on public transportation needs. In addition, staff followed up with stakeholders representing local governments and transit dependent populations to gain a deeper understanding of the needs and to prepare strategies that can address those needs.

Invitations to the outreach meetings were emailed to stakeholders in each county. Meeting announcements and information were also posted online, promoted through social media and press releases, and information was shared with partner organizations to help increase visibility about the meetings through existing networks. During the outreach meetings, staff gave a brief welcome and introduction to Access North Texas. Following this, staff facilitated questions to prompt discussion

## Regional Distribution of Access North Texas Public Survey Responses



of transportation issues unique to each county. Through this discussion, community members and transit providers provided feedback on transportation issues within each county to help inform goals and strategies in this plan.

A transportation survey in English and Spanish was also available online and paper copies were shared via community partners. The survey collected first-hand data about public transportation in the region from both riders and organizations that work with transit-dependent populations. Questions completed by individuals reveal personal experiences with public transportation, while those completed by organizations on behalf of their clients illuminate issues seen by client advocates. Both forms of the survey provide personal views of public transportation environment in the region. A total of 1,522 surveys were completed, with 1,220 as a direct result of outreach and coordination efforts from community partners. Information collected through the survey informed both regional goals and county strategies. The distribution of survey responses can be seen in the map below.

### Data Sources

The current plan update brought together many sources of information to identify current needs and draft strategies to meet those needs. Sources included demographic research, research on local conditions, a transportation survey, an interactive map-based comment collecting tool for the public, outreach meetings, and consultation with regional stakeholders. All the data (qualitative and quantitative) was used to evaluate the needs for public transportation in the 16-county region as well as for each county. The regional goals and county-specific strategies were developed based on all the data collected and are described in the chapters.

### TAIT Tool/Environmental Justice

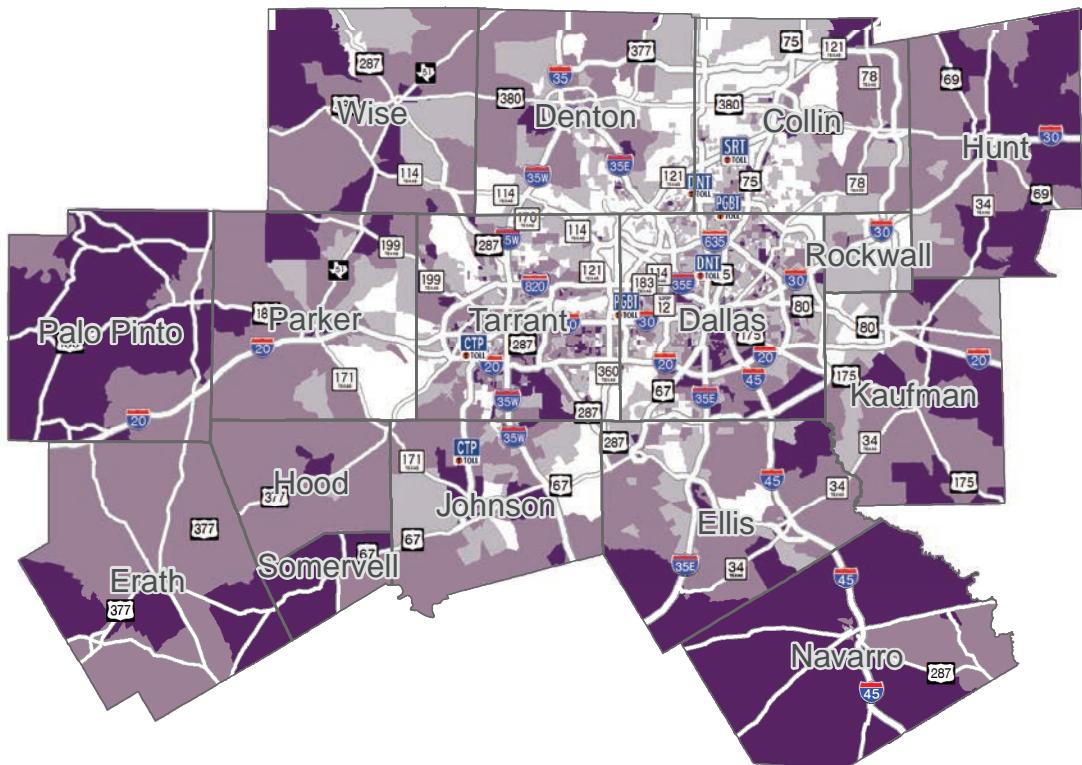
U.S. Census data was collected and incorporated into a Transit Accessibility Improvement Tool (TAIT). This tool was created to identify where populations that may have a greater need for access to public transportation are located in the 16-county North Central Texas region. The TAIT allows users to locate potential transit-dependent populations based on demographic traits. Transit planners can use the tool as a preliminary indicator of where service should be evaluated and to identify potential gaps in service. Since the geographic scale for the index is at the block group level, both local and regional planners can utilize the TAIT effectively for their area of interest. The populations included in this tool are adults 65 and over, individuals with disabilities, individuals with lower incomes, and households without cars. The shaded colors indicate when one or more variables are present. The TAIT data is explored in detail in each county's chapter following this Executive Summary.

VARIABLE	REGIONAL PERCENTAGE
Adults 65 and Over	11.1%
Individuals with Disabilities	9.5%
Individuals Below Poverty	16%
Zero Car Households	1.6%

*Source: 2019 American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates*

To provide a basic understanding of gaps in service, staff also gathered information about the geography and eligibility requirements for current public transportation services. The data sheds light on where gaps in service exist either geographically, temporally, or for certain populations. This information helped frame discussions at outreach meetings and

# Transit Accessibility Improvement Tool (TAIT) 16-County Region



## Legend

All Variables At or Below  
Regional Percentage

0      25      50 Miles



One Variable Above  
Regional Percentage

Two Variables Above  
Regional Percentage

All Variables Above  
Regional Percentage

Source: 2019 American Community  
Survey 5-Year Estimates

The Transit Accessibility Improvement Tool (TAIT) is a preliminary screening areas that may need additional analysis when considering transportation-disadvantaged groups in a plan, project, or program. The TAIT displays Census block groups above the regional percentage for three variables: Age 65 and Over, Below Poverty, and Persons with Disabilities.

conversations with stakeholders and influenced the final goals for the region as well as strategies for each county.

### ***Analysis and Synthesis***

In preparation for each outreach meeting staff researched local transit conditions such as available public transportation options and locally prepared plans by agencies and municipalities. Information was shared with stakeholders in each meeting to provide context for each county and help identify gaps in service.

Once all outreach meetings were completed and the survey period closed, the information gathered from Spring and Summer 2021 was sorted by the 16-counties covered by the Access North Texas plan. Open-ended responses to the survey and comments from participants were compiled into county-specific lists along with transit-specific information from the Map Your Experience tool and stakeholder meetings. Identifying details were excluded from the list to ensure respondents could stay confidential.

NCTCOG staff then analyzed the qualitative data using content analysis. A coding key was created to standardize categorization of data for purposes of analysis. This resulted in the following 6 themes: rider barriers, types of missed trips, desired modes, transit enhancements, locations, and miscellaneous. Data was coded independently and the staff analyzing the data met to establish consensus and confirm overall themes and sub-themes. Afterwards, the information was compiled into county-specific data summaries that also included demographic statistics from the U.S. Census 5-year 2019 American Community Survey.

### ***Development of Goals and Strategies***

Utilizing the data packages and themes identified in the coding process, information for each county was reviewed to highlight major issues and analyze patterns occurring within each county and across the region. The issues and challenges were categorized into similar groups to create the 5 regional goals listed in the RECOMMENDATIONS section. Regional efforts and actions over the next four years to improve public transportation for seniors, individuals with disabilities, and low-income populations across the 16-county region may be prioritized under these goals.

Within each of these defined goals, similar priorities were combined and rephrased to draft strategies that can be used across various counties. The strategies aim to provide more specific guidance on how goals could be implemented to address challenges and issues. For each county or group of counties, strategies under each goal were prioritized based on feedback received from outreach meetings, survey responses, and stakeholder discussions.

Also, public transportation short- and long-term studies prepared by NCTCOG were reviewed to ensure goals and strategies in Access North Texas were consistent and aligned with those recommendations. Access North Texas stakeholders and public transportation providers also had an opportunity to review draft goals and strategies to provide any initial comments or feedback.

Future progress on goals listed in Access North Texas will be measured by the types of projects implemented under the listed strategies and how they align with the priorities outlined in each chapter. These goals and strategies will also be used to evaluate projects under NCTCOG's Transit Strategic Partnership Program.

## Proposed 2022 Access North Texas Goals & Strategies

GOAL	STRATEGIES
<b>Plan and Develop Transportation Options by Assessing Community Need and Challenges</b>	A) Conduct planning activities to further identify public transportation needs of residents outside of existing transportation authorities and define additional coordination opportunities for existing providers B) Develop potential connections from commuter bus lines to light rail service C) Invest in programs to assist with filling gaps in public transportation and facilitate service for work-related trips D) Invest in programs that facilitate transportation trips to medical and healthcare appointments E) Launch a mobility toolbox to educate on and promote public transportation options such as fixed route, demand-respond, on-demand services, etc
<b>Implement Services by Enhancing Transportation Options and Expanding Where Service Gaps Exist</b>	A) Improve existing public transportation options to better fit the needs of riders and households with 1 or zero cars by increasing service frequency and availability B) Expand eligible trips for specialized public transportation services to include employment, social, religious, and well-being trips C) Increase access to employment, social (such as entertainment and shopping centers), religious, and well-being trips in areas with limited to no public transportation service D) Establish additional assistance or more specialized public transportation options for customers who are not ADA paratransit eligible or physically capable of utilizing regular public transportation services E) Expand service hours to support needs of low-income individuals in the service industry and outside traditional 9am-5pm jobs F) Expand public transportation services to key destinations throughout the region without comprehensive service and support regional integration of new services.

GOAL	STRATEGIES
<b>Coordinate with Transportation Providers, Public Agencies, and Stakeholders to Increase Efficiencies</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>A) Improve coordination among public transit providers and cities that lack public transportation</li> <li>B) Work with regional and local organizations to increase ease of travel across municipal and county boundaries</li> <li>C) Foster cooperation between public transit providers within counties to allow better connectivity and simplify regional trips</li> <li>D) Develop partnerships across transportation providers to improve access to trips in the evening and weekends</li> <li>E) Create and support partnerships between public transit providers and local organizations to increase opportunities to make fares more affordable for those in need</li> <li>F) Identify, evaluate, and implement where appropriate, non-traditional ways to deliver and support public transportation, including but not limited to partnerships among public transit agencies, private transportation providers, transportation network companies, shared use mobility programs, and volunteer drivers</li> </ul>
<b>Support Public Transportation Recovery and Growth</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>A) Promote safe and healthy practices on public transportation services</li> <li>B) Implement plans to safely return to shared mobility options so that vehicles can carry multiple riders in one trip</li> <li>C) Explore sources of local revenue for public transportation through partnerships, sponsorships, and contracting for service</li> <li>D) Advocate to integrate funding sources to maximize efficiency and increase availability of affordable public transportation options</li> <li>E) Partner with organizations to coordinate training and recruitment for future public transportation professionals and create pipelines with area schools</li> <li>F) Establish driver recruitment and retention programs for public transportation services to address difficulties in retaining drivers</li> </ul>
<b>Promote Access and Information about Available Transportation Options</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>A) Enhance communication and outreach programs to improve awareness of existing or new transportation options</li> <li>B) Conduct travel training to educate the public on available services and policies</li> <li>C) Partner with agencies, recreation centers, senior residencies, housing assisted living centers, and other organizations to publicize information</li> <li>D) Identify, recruit, educate, and support influential champions for public transportation (elected officials, community leaders, or business leaders) to promote and support public transportation through leadership, policy, or funding initiatives</li> </ul>

## RECOMMENDATIONS

The regional goals below identify and prioritize ways to address public transportation needs across the 16-county region. In addition to the regional strategies listed below, specific county strategies are identified within each county chapter.

### *Implementing the Plan*

Transportation providers and local stakeholders will collaborate to determine next steps, form needed partnerships, identify, and pursue funding, and ultimately implement selected strategies. Organizations that want to implement a strategy listed in this plan will need to develop strong partnerships with transportation providers, stakeholder agencies, communities, and counties. NCTCOG staff are available to help organizations identify potential partners and coordination opportunities. Organizations should also identify potential funding sources, which can be a mix of private and public funds, including funds from local, State, and federal sources. Local funds from public and private sources are important to demonstrate a community or organizational commitment to implementing specific strategies. Local funds are especially important to leverage State and federal dollars. The Texas Department of Transportation (TxDOT) has regular calls for projects and NCTCOG has a Transit Strategic

Partnership Program for awarding federal funds to projects supporting the strategies listed in this plan.

#### *Characteristics of a highly competitive project:*

- Is a multi-year proposal where a three-year request is recommended for projects providing transit service;
- Identifies an existing public transit provider or existing non-profit transportation provider as the implementing agency when proposing to provide transit service;
- Targets individuals with lower incomes for project requests under the Job Access/Reverse Commute funds;
- Targets seniors and individuals with disabilities for requests of Enhanced Mobility of Seniors and Individuals with Disabilities Program funds; and
- Supports one or more strategies outlined in this plan.

If a project is funded through NCTCOG or TxDOT, staff will document the project funding in the Transportation Improvement Program, coordinate necessary approvals, develop contract agreements, and work with implementing agencies to manage the project and all compliance activities associated with federal or State funding.