

1.0 Introduction

Due to population growth in Columbia County and the resulting increase in travel demand, the Georgia Department of Transportation (GDOT) Office of Planning in conjunction with Columbia County initiated a study to develop a Long Range Transportation Plan (LRTP) to serve the entire County through the planning horizon, 2025. Currently only the eastern portion of Columbia County is included in the Augusta Richmond County Metropolitan Planning Organization (MPO) area and the Augusta Richmond MPO has been conducting the transportation planning function. The intent of this study, though, was to develop a comprehensive transportation plan for all of Columbia County.

As part of this effort a travel demand model was developed to include the portion of the County not currently served by the Augusta-Richmond County Metropolitan Planning Organization (MPO). This area primarily consisted of the non-urbanized portion of the County. This model, named the “Columbia Model”, is an extension of the existing Augusta-Richmond Transportation Study (ARTS) model and was used to evaluate existing future travel conditions through Columbia County. The purpose of this study was to identify existing and future operating conditions for the transportation system within Columbia County. Ultimately the study identified multimodal improvements and prioritized project implementation in a Long Range Transportation Plan for the County.

TEI coordinated with GDOT, Columbia County, cities within the County and other partners in the planning, development, review, and approval of study alternatives and the LRTP. Additionally, a comprehensive and interactive public involvement program was conducted to ensure that alternative transportation improvements were not only coordinated with various governments, but afforded individual citizens and interested groups the opportunity to provide their input in developing and evaluating planned improvements to the transportation network.

The end product for this study was a Long Range Transportation Plan (LRTP) that provided for the efficient movement of people and goods within and through Columbia County through the horizon year of this study (2025). Interim year analysis was conducted for the years 2007 and 2012. As part of this effort existing and future operating conditions were documented for the following modes: highways, bicycle and pedestrian improvements, freight, transit, railways and airports.

1.1 Study Purpose

While Columbia County is not entirely within an MPO service area, the transportation plan development process followed the guidelines established for MPOs. This more rigorous process established a strong framework for transportation planning and decision-making. The format of the LRTP, and the process by which it was developed, is prescribed by federal legislation known as the Transportation Efficiency Act for the 21st Century (TEA-21). Each MPO is responsible for developing a Long Range

Transportation Plan every five years. The purpose of the LRTP is to identify long-range transportation needs, determine resources to meet those needs, and outline a framework of projects that meet the transportation needs of a community to the extent allowed by existing and future resources.

TEA-21 continues the emphasis on multi-modal planning that was introduced in the previous federal transportation legislation known as the Intermodal Surface Transportation Efficiency Act (ISTEA), which was passed in 1991. ISTEA also introduced 15 planning “factors”, or considerations, which had to be taken into account during the planning process. With TEA-21, these 15 factors have been consolidated into seven planning factors. These factors include:

- Support the economic vitality of the metropolitan area, especially by enabling global competitiveness, productivity, and efficiency;
- Increase the safety and security of the transportation system for motorized and non-motorized users;
- Increase the accessibility and mobility options available to people and for freight;
- Protect and enhance the environment, promote energy conservation, and improve quality of life;
- Enhance the integration and connectivity of the transportation system, across and between modes, for people and freight;
- Promote efficient system management and operation; and,
- Emphasize the preservation of the existing transportation system.

Implementation of the long-range planning process involves using these seven planning factors, along with other local concerns and considerations, to develop goals, objectives, and policies that guide the development of a long-range transportation plan.

Another mandate introduced by ISTEA and continued with TEA-21 is the concept of multi-modalism. This means that long-range transportation plans must address all available modes of transportation, including public transportation, bicycle, and pedestrian transportation modes in addition to automobile travel. Projects developed through the long-range transportation plan process should provide for an integrated mix of transportation modes, including those that would benefit the traditionally underserved.

Long-range transportation plans have a typical planning horizon of 20 or more years. This time frame provides a basic structure and overall goal for meeting the long-term transportation needs for the community. Since many factors influencing the development of the long-range plan, such as demographics, forecast revenue, and project costs, change over time, long-range transportation plans are updated at least every five years.

1.2 Study Area Description

Columbia County has experienced a moderate rate of population growth over the past several years. Some of this growth is the result of in-migration to the Augusta-Columbia County region; however, a significant percentage of the growth is attributable to residents leaving Augusta and Richmond County and relocating to Columbia County. It is anticipated that this trend will continue transforming parts of Columbia County into “bedroom communities” for Augusta. This development pattern has stressed existing transportation facilities linking Columbia County to Augusta area employment centers, resulting in congested east-west facilities including I20, Washington Road, Columbia Road and the Bobby Jones Expressway to name a few.

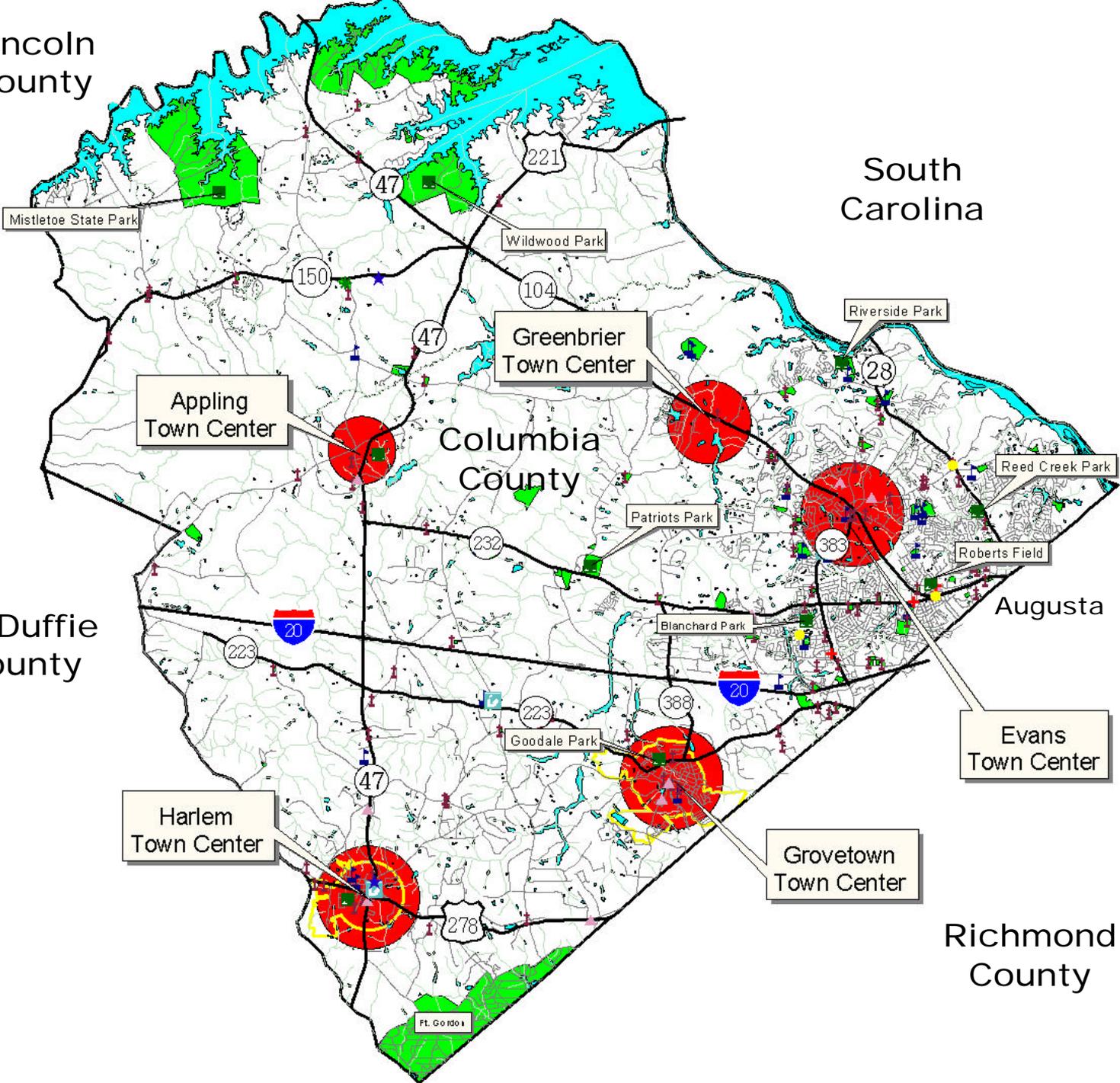
It is anticipated that this growth pattern will continue heightening the need for an integrated multimodal transportation system to move people and goods efficiently thorough Columbia County.

The study area is displayed in Figure 1.2.



Lincoln County

South Carolina



McDuffie County

Augusta

Evans Town Center

Grovetown Town Center

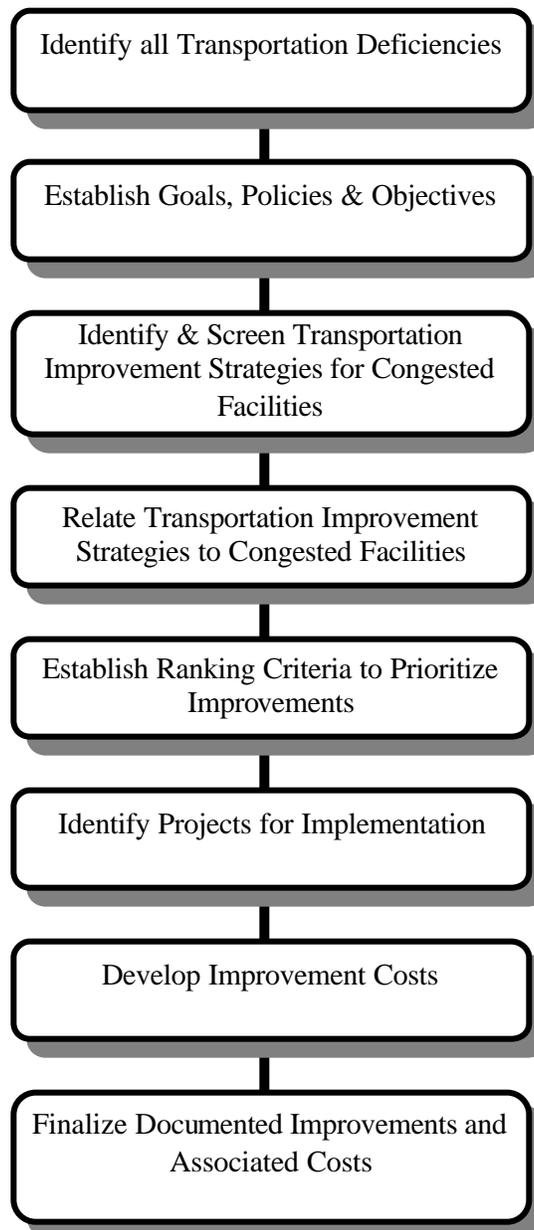
Richmond County

1.3 Study Process

There are several important steps in developing a LRTP. After all of the data has been collected and the model has been calibrated and validated, the deficiencies are identified and the rest of the process is used to address and prioritize improvements for these deficiencies.

Figure 1.3 displays a flow chart depicting the study process.

Figure 1.3
Study Process



1.4 Public and Stakeholder Involvement

The purpose of the public involvement program was to inform the public, while at the same time including them in the decision-making process. Public concerns were brought to the forefront so that they could be discussed and resolved. This approach engaged the end users (i.e. the residents of Columbia County) in the identification, development, evaluation, and selection of transportation improvements. The ultimate goal of the Public Involvement Plan was to build consensus for the recommended short-term and long-term improvements identified through the long range transportation planning process.

A public involvement program that encourages participation and interaction throughout the process has a good chance of attaining community consensus. If consensus is unattainable, an effective, well-planned and organized public involvement program helps anticipate and lessen negative perceptions, and can encourage acceptance of the study results. Throughout the study process, the Study Team implemented a public involvement program that utilized consensus-building techniques.

Individual citizens and interested groups were given several opportunities to become involved throughout the process. Citizens with an interest in the study were informed of the study's progress and provided various forums for input into the decision-making process. Through the public involvement process, the Study Team was able to identify improvements that meet the needs of stakeholders and residents of Columbia County.

1.4.1 Summary of Activities

Involving the public in the decision-making process was essential for developing consensus or acceptance among the community it is intended to serve. Throughout the process, the public was invited to provide information, offer alternatives, and present their interests and concerns. As stakeholders who live and travel through the study area, citizens were able to provide insightful input to technical and non-technical issues relevant to the project.

Several forums were available for citizens to voice their opinions, concerns, and ideas. Three (3) Open House workshops were conducted as part of the study. These workshops ensured that public input was reflected accurately for the evaluation and recommendation of the proposed transportation improvements. Each public workshop was used to encourage consensus among citizens, County staff, and area municipalities, as to the planned improvements for the Columbia County Transportation Network.

The public workshops and other proposed forums available throughout the study are described below.

Public Information Workshops

A formal presentation was given at each public workshop before any facilitation activities and/or informal review of display materials with the public. At least five members of the Study Team were available for one-on-one discussions at all of the workshops. In addition, public comment forms were available for citizens to officially record their comments. The public information workshops were advertised by Columbia County through the public information officer at least two weeks in advance of each workshop. This information was supplemented with fliers at eight locations throughout the County. As further encouragement for attendance, a contact list was established and interested participants were informed via phone prior to public information activities.

All workshops were conducted at Columbia County Government Center in Evans in the Community Meeting Room.

Workshop #1, June 24th, 2003 (***Introductory/Kick-off Workshop***) — This workshop informed the community of the initiation of the project, its purpose, the activities to be performed, the project schedule, and provided an overview of data collection activities; the study process; preliminary goals and objectives; and provided for citizen input into the identification of deficiencies and potential improvements. This workshop included a formal presentation, followed by an open house format to solicit public input, identify issues and concerns, and provide guidance to the Study Team in evaluation of existing and future deficiencies.

Workshop #2, October 28th, 2003 (***Overview of Existing and Future Operating Conditions***) — This workshop presented the Study Team findings to date, namely an overview of existing and future operating conditions and identified deficiencies. This workshop included a formal presentation and an open house format to solicit public input.

Workshop #3, December 15th, 2003 (***Present Preliminary Long Range Transportation Plan***) — At this workshop the Study Team presented the study findings to include preliminary recommendations for the Long Range Transportation Plan for public review and comment. A formal presentation of the study results will be followed by an open house format to solicit public input on the study recommendations.

To further assist the public with review and comments of proposed study improvements, documented at the third public workshop, the Columbia News-Times, which is an insert in the Augusta Chronicle, ran a story documenting the study results and recommendations. The story also included an email address for additional comments.

Other Meetings

The Study Team coordinated with interested agencies, representatives, organizations, and citizen groups via the distribution of project newsletters to elected officials, citizens, and local governments' engineering and planning staff, and local and state agencies.

Additionally, the Study Team was available for presentations to other groups. As part of this effort a presentation was made to the Columbia County Retired Teachers Association.

Public Comments

The following list is a summary of comments received by the public in regards to the LRTP for Columbia County:

- Grovetown is growing fast, please don't forget the little towns;
- Priority on widening SR 104 and greater connectivity in Evans;
- Speed up the SR 104 Widening Projects;
- Turn lanes needed in front of Evans Towne Center;
- Additional turn lanes needed on Washington Road;
- Dangerous intersections:
 - Old Evans Road and Washington Road
 - Evans to Locks Road and N Belair Road
 - North Belair Road and Ronald Reagan Drive
- Residential housing concerns for widening Flowing Wells Road;
- Widen North Belair Road;
- Build turn lanes on Washington Road from Flowing Wells Road to Gibbs Road or even Halali Farm Road;
- Reconstruct Bobby Jones Highway and Washington Road;
- Stop building in the County;
- Powell Church Road needs to be paved;
- Current paratransit service is inadequate to meet County needs;
- Wider shoulders and bike lanes along secondary roads; and,
- County lacks sidewalks and crosswalks.

1.4.2 Program Evaluation

It was important to document and evaluate the effectiveness of the Multimodal Transportation Study Public Involvement Plan. The following data was documented:

- Number of open house attendees;
- Number of public comments received; and,
- Number of newsletters and fact sheets distributed.

Feedback from GDOT, Advisory Group members and Environmental Justice representatives was evaluated to determine the effectiveness of the public involvement plan. Table 1.4.2 displays the public workshop participation information.

**Table 1.4.2
Public Workshop Participation**

Meetings	Date	Number of Newsletters & Fact Sheets	Number of Attendees	Number of Comments
Public Workshop #1	June 24 th , 2003	500	25	11
Public Workshop #2	October 28 th , 2003	500	30	18
Public Workshop #3	December 15 th , 2003	500	5	3