



Atlanta's Regional Transit Survey

Quick Information

Organization(s): Atlanta Regional Commission (ARC)

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Website: <http://www.atlantaregional.com/info-center/gis-data-maps>

Cooperation Topic(s): Transit Planning

Cooperation Practice(s): Data Sharing and Developing Common Modeling and Forecasting Tools

Cost Information: Survey cost \$2 million, split evenly among four participating agencies

Population growth, increased development, and demographic changes in the Atlanta metropolitan region between 2000 and 2008 prompted the Atlanta Regional Commission (ARC), the regional planning and intergovernmental coordination agency for the 10-county area surrounding Atlanta, to think critically about the region's current and future transportation needs. Working with regional partners to pool funding and knowledge, ARC successfully conducted the [2009-2010 Regional On-Board Transit Survey](#), the largest survey of its kind in the United States.

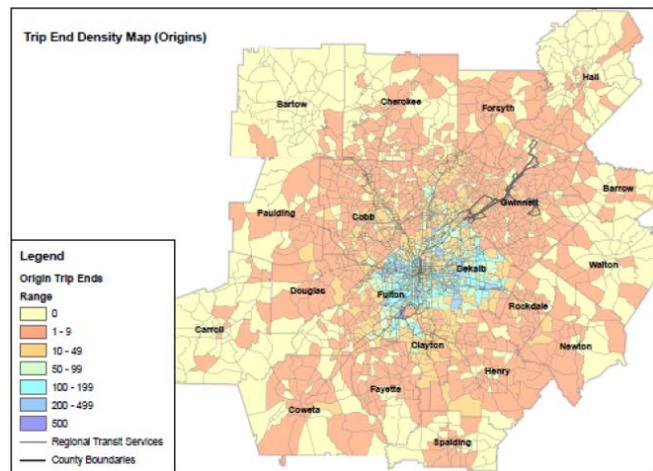


Figure 12. This map represents ridership trip densities (origins) from the ARC Regional Onboard Transit Survey. Source: ARC

Motivation for Establishing the Collaboration

The Atlanta region has attracted a steady stream of new residents and development during the past decade. According to the ARC [Cities & Towns 2010 Yearbook of Growth and Change](#), nearly half a million people moved to the region since 2000, which is a 42 percent increase, and suburban municipalities grew by almost 200 percent. Increasing numbers of African American, Asian, and Hispanic residents have moved into the area, considerably shifting the demographics of the region.

Based on these changes, and the outdated information ARC had on transit behaviors in the region, the organization decided it was necessary to survey the region's residents on their travel behaviors and transportation needs. The previous survey from 2000 was missing market segments, such as zero car households, low-income communities, and several geographic areas. To obtain this information, ARC would need to expand its sample size, which would require much more funding than was initially anticipated and readily available. Instead of compromising the study's quality by working with a smaller budget, ARC contacted regional partners including Georgia Regional Transportation Authority (GRTA), the Metropolitan Atlanta Rapid Transit

Authority (MARTA), and the Georgia Department of Transportation (GDOT) to pool funds and expertise to conduct the desired study.

Collaboration Structure

The four participating agencies—ARC, GRTA, MARTA, and GDOT—signed an MOA in 2008 that provided a framework to plan and conduct the On-Board Survey (see Appendix). The MOA outlined the responsibilities for ARC, which was the lead agency responsible for providing overall coordination and management of the strategy, as well as the roles of the “participants” (i.e., GRTA, MARTA, and GDOT).

From the beginning of the project, all four agencies agreed that the survey development and implementation process would be open and that everyone involved would have opportunities to contribute to the project and work with the data. The agencies decided to split the cost evenly, with each of the four contributing half a million dollars. Splitting the cost evenly ensured that each agency felt equal responsibility and commitment to the project. Representatives from each agency convened in an oversight committee to select a consultant that would conduct the survey and then met regularly throughout the process to collaborate on the survey design, study area, collection methods, and data analysis techniques.

Prior to the survey initiative, ARC had hosted monthly interagency meetings since the late 1990s to discuss air quality and other issues. As such, the group did not need to determine a new structure for communication and collaboration. Because ARC had hosted the interagency meetings and led a number of other large scale efforts, the organization took the lead in administering the logistics of the survey, including releasing the Request for Proposal (RFP) and leading the selection process. However, all of the agencies remained engaged and involved throughout the process. GRTA, MARTA, and GDOT built trust with ARC early on in the process and through their prior interagency meetings, and therefore, they felt comfortable with ARC leading the process.

The group agreed upon a single set of survey questions to use for the entire geographic reach of the survey. These questions met all of the needs of the different transit operators in the region. Using the same survey allowed for the region to more easily compare responses across areas.

The group hired consultants to conduct the survey, which reached a large sample size of around 50,000 people. The consultants used tablets to collect

Takeaways

- Working with regional partners to pool funding and knowledge, ARC successfully conducted the 2009-2010 Regional On-Board Transit Survey, the largest survey of its kind in the United States.
- Faced with rapid population growth and outdated information, ARC decided it was necessary to survey the transit users from the entire region on their travel behaviors and transportation needs.
- The four participating agencies—ARC, GRTA, MARTA, and GDOT—signed an MOA in 2008 that provided a framework to plan and conduct the On-Board Survey.
- The agencies split the cost of administering the survey equally and hired consultants to conduct the survey.
- The group agreed upon a single set of survey questions to use for the entire region, which allowed them to more easily compare responses.
- To help mitigate the high cost of administering ridership surveys, the group aims to incorporate more passive data collection efforts through cell phone, GPS, and other data sources in the future.
- The group learned that it was very beneficial to formalize their partnership through an MOA.

onboard surveys, which allowed them to geocode the responses and facilitated data analysis. The survey responses were entered anonymously using geographic coordinates into a SQL database, which the viewers can easily query.

In addition to a common understanding of the project goals and agency responsibilities as well as the signed MOA, the region collaborates separately on planning and operations issues through standing transit-related and project steering committees convened by ARC. One such committee is the Transit Operators Subcommittee (TOS), which is comprised of staff from the region's seven transit operators and third-party sponsors eligible for specific FTA funds. TOS provided suggestions and recommendations throughout the On-Board Survey project development and implementation phases. This provided a way for additional stakeholders to be involved in the study and for the project partners to meet in a venue in which they were already familiar.

Collaboration Accomplishments

The survey was an unprecedented success. More than 50,000 surveys—representing roughly 1 out of 10 riders in the region—were completed, encompassing a 20-county region that includes seven separate transit systems. The survey improved regional planners' understanding of both basic and specialized needs in the region. For example, the survey results allowed the region to quantify the number of Kiss and Ride users for the first time. As a result of the survey, the region found that 30 percent of its transit users used the Kiss and Ride stations. The survey also provided justification for several new transit routes and helped planners minimize impacts on riders when a route had to be relocated. For example, agencies are better able to reach out to different types of riders, such as choice riders, because they have a better understanding of their transit patterns. The survey's impact has traveled beyond the Atlanta metropolitan region and is shaping similar transit surveys in other regions nationwide. Within the region, the partners have begun preliminary discussions about pooling funding to replicate the survey in 2020.

The survey has also led ARC to collaborate with the metropolitan planning organizations (MPOs) in San Francisco, San Diego, and Seattle on a joint open source modeling effort. The group began working together after building relationships at meetings and conferences. They are funding the new open source modeling effort using Federal Metropolitan Planning funds.

Challenges and Lessons Learned

Each planning agency, transit operator, and government entity pursues a set of priorities specific to its mission and objectives—a situation that is not unique to the Atlanta region but one that causes competition for funding among and within Atlanta organizations. Region-wide committees, like TOS, have established a collaborative environment for the region and have helped to alleviate conflicts regarding policies, plans, boundaries, project designs,

facilities management, and funding. The On-Board Survey, in particular, demonstrated that agencies with similar objectives can achieve more by working together than by working individually.

The On-Board Survey partners also attribute their success to support at all levels of the organizations, from senior leadership to the technical coordinators. Everyone involved understood the significance of the project and felt that they had something to gain from their participation.

Despite the cost savings of conducting a shared survey, collecting data for a survey is an expensive process. Transit surveys are typically conducted every 10 years, in part due to the high cost, which means that the data is frequently outdated before a new survey is initiated. Looking forward, the group aims to incorporate more passive data collection efforts through cell phone, GPS, and other data sources in order to maintain more up-to-date ridership information.

Shared data can be a powerful tool for enacting meaningful, thoughtful change in a region. To achieve successful data sharing, however, cooperation at the planning and policy levels must occur first. ARC, GRTA, MARTA, and GDOT realized the importance of formalizing an agreement through an MOA, communicating regularly, discussing complex and at times controversial issues, and pooling resources to achieve goals that are mutually beneficial for all.

Additional Resources

- Memorandum of Agreement (see RMOC Handbook Appendix, p. 6)
- [2009-2010 Regional On-Board Transit Survey](#)
- [Cities & Towns 2010 Yearbook of Growth and Change](#)