

History of Douglas County Rideshare

Updated May 2019

The Beginning

Douglas County Rideshare had its beginnings in 1982. Hensley-Schmidt Engineers released the results of a transit feasibility study that had been authorized by the Board of Commissioners. The study recommended that Douglas County initiate a rideshare, vanpool and park and ride lot program.

On February 5, 1986, the Georgia Department of Transportation awarded a 50-50 matching grant to Douglas County to establish a rideshare/vanpool program. A \$50,000 budget was approved to provide a central office, a fulltime coordinator and one vanpool within one year.

Betty Jo Hammett was hired as the first Rideshare coordinator. She began overseeing the project, which provided DOT-assisted computerized carpool and vanpool matching, park and ride lots and vanpools.

Early Efforts

During the summer of 1986 Mrs. Hammett developed program procedures and project specifications. She planned a Federal Transit Administration Section 18 grant application and obtained bids from private sector transportation providers. Comparisons of these bids indicated that Douglas County could provide the project at a lower cost and with a wider range of services.

Also, during the summer of 1986, a park and ride lot with 45 spaces was opened at Lee Road and I-20 in Lithia Springs.

In October 1986, Douglas County submitted a Section 18 application for five vans at a cost of \$88,000. The vans were to provide a county operated vanpool for commuters employed outside Douglas County.

In November 1986 Douglas County purchased two vans from White County.

The First Vanpool

In December 1986, the first vanpool started, serving Spring Street and West Peachtree Street in Atlanta.

In May 1987, a second vanpool was started to Spring Street, Martin Luther King Drive and Capital Hill in Atlanta.

In September 1987, Douglas County was presented two certificates of honorable distinction from the Association of Commuter Transportation.

In January 1988, a third vanpool route was started into Atlanta. Six months later, a fourth route was started along Peachtree Street.

In April 1988, Douglas County was awarded the Friend of Ridesharing and Innovative Marketing Award at the Southeastern Rideshare Conference.

Change in Leadership

In March 1989, Mrs. Hammett resigned as Rideshare coordinator to pursue other interests.

In May 1989, Gary Watson took over as Rideshare Coordinator. In June 1989, Davidae Simmons was named Rideshare secretary.

In July 1989, the fifth vanpool route was started to the Southern Bell Center on Spring Street in Atlanta.

In November and December 1989, Rideshare tried the Holiday Shoppers Shuttle. This experiment involved using a van to pick up shoppers at various points and take them to stores, much like a regular bus service. Ridership was very low.

The Early 1990s

In 1990, work started on expanding the Lee Road park and ride lot to 145 spaces and on a new 110 space lot at Thornton Road. Eighty percent of the funding for this \$300,000 project came from the Federal Transit Administration, and another 10 percent came from the state DOT. Douglas County funded 10 percent of the costs.

In August 1990, Rideshare began an annual marketing campaign called "Plug the Pools." Merchants were asked to donate their message signs for one day for a ridesharing message. This project was a tremendous success, with as many as 50 merchants participating. Rideshare undertook the Plug the Pools campaign for four straight years.

Rideshare began submitting annual Section 15 reports to the FTA. These reports are a thorough accounting of financial and operating statistics. Now, these reports are called the National Transit Database.

Rideshare entered the computer age, as it started requesting and receiving FTA reimbursements via computer modem.

In June 1992, Rideshare received federal and state grants for about \$300,000 for six additional vans and a 72-space park and ride lot at Post Road and I-20.

In January 1993, Rideshare put into service a van equipped with a wheelchair lift. Bunny Gunn became Rideshare's first wheelchair rider.

Rideshare became very active in the southeast chapter of the Association for Commuter Transportation. Gary Watson was a featured speaker at three SEACT regional conferences.

In 1994, Rideshare received SEACT's Exhaust award for its efforts in reducing vehicle emissions.

In Spring of 1994, Rideshare became one of the leaders in experimenting with alternative fuels. Rideshare converted two vans to run on propane gas, and another two vans to run on compressed natural gas.

In Fall 1994, Rideshare Coordinator Gary Watson first began to think about a transportation center for Douglas County. He made a pencil sketch of a multimodal center located on Douglas Boulevard. A few weeks later, John Phillips of Georgia DOT refined Watson's initial sketch.

Continued Vanpool Growth

During the mid-nineties, the vanpool fleet continued to grow. By 1994, Rideshare was up to 10 daily vanpool routes.

In June 1994, Rideshare had its first Triennial Review conducted by the Federal Transit Administration. This is a comprehensive, on-site review of a transit provider's program and financial performance. Rideshare was in full compliance with all requirements.

Rideshare continued its innovative marketing efforts. In fall of 1995, Rideshare wrote and produced a four-minute video about vanpooling. Copies were placed in local libraries, and the video has been used at many transportation fairs.

In June 1996, Rideshare implemented a drug and alcohol testing policy for its employees and mechanics. The testing program was mandated by the Federal Transit Administration.

In the summer of 1996, the Olympics came to Atlanta. Rideshare had to change the schedule on most of its vans because of the altered work schedules and traffic patterns resulting from the Olympics.

In the fall of 1996, Rideshare started its 14th vanpool route.

As the decade of the nineties ended and Year 2000 began, Rideshare actively participated in the regional transit planning process through the Atlanta Regional Commission and its Transit Operators Task Force. Rideshare served as a resource for a number of communities seeking information on how to operate a successful vanpool program. Rideshare also fielded many questions about alternative fuels.

Transportation Center

In 1997, the Board of Commissioners gave Rideshare authorization to go forward with plans for the transportation center. In 1998, Douglas County was awarded \$492,000 from the Federal Transit Administration to assist in land acquisition and design services for the transportation center. The county identified 12 acres behind the new courthouse on Hospital Drive in Douglasville as the site for the transportation center, and in December 1998, eight of the 12 acres needed were purchased for \$292,000. After negotiations for the remaining property failed, Douglas County initiated condemnation proceedings, and in Spring 2000, a jury ruled that the county should pay \$275,000 for the four acres.

With the site identified, Rideshare hired a consultant to prepare a Master Plan for the transportation center. Pond and Company began work in spring 1999 on the Master Plan that included sketches, probable facilities and cost estimates for the transportation center.

While the Master Plan was being prepared, Douglas County purchased compressed natural gas fueling equipment from Okaloosa Gas District in Florida for \$110,000. The equipment was purchased to be moved to the transportation center to be used as the county converts its fleet from unleaded vehicles to natural gas.

In Spring 2000, Douglas County initiated the second step of the transportation center project. Consultants were hired to design the transportation center site and the customer service/administrative building. The documents were used to apply to the Federal Transit Administration for construction money.

Expanding Services

As the year 2001 began, Douglas County Rideshare was busy expanding its services. In February 2001, Rideshare started its 18th vanpool route to Colony Square in Atlanta. Later during the year, three more routes were started, giving Rideshare a total of 21 daily routes. Rideshare also made commitments to the Environmental Protection Agency and Atlanta Regional Commission to start 15 new routes over the next five years.

In August 2001, Rideshare finalized the design on its transportation center. Rideshare awarded a construction contract in October 2001, and the facility opened in March 2003. The transportation center will be built in three phases over a three to five-year period at an estimated cost of \$4 to \$5 million. Phase One has a 6,500 square foot administration/customer service building, 300 parking spaces and the compressed natural gas fueling station. Phase Two will include bus platforms and security features, and construction started in March 2004.

Phase Three will provide more parking spaces will come online in 2005 or 2006.

Rideshare held a groundbreaking ceremony for the transportation center January 16, 2002. Representatives from Douglas County, the Federal Transit Administration and Georgia Department of Transportation participated. From the location of the ceremony in the courthouse's overflow parking lot, guests at the groundbreaking could see heavy machinery moving dirt at the site of the Transportation Center.

Rideshare expects the transportation center to be a main link for the regional express bus service being implemented by the Georgia Regional Transportation Authority (GRTA). In Spring 2002, the Douglas County Board of Commissioners signed an Agreement in Principle with GRTA specifying the express bus routes that will serve Douglas County in Years 2003-05. As part of the agreement, Douglas County agreed to pay \$1.7 million in express bus operating expenses during the first three years of service in exchange for \$20 million in road improvement funds. However, GRTA encountered some obstacles in implementing the express service, pushing the anticipated starting date back to Summer 2004.

Moving to The Transportation Center

In March 2003, Rideshare moved into the new transportation center. The total cost for Phase One, including land acquisition, design and engineering and construction, was \$3 million. Also, design work continued on Phase Two of the Transportation Center, which includes a loading platform for the express bus service.

On May 6, 2003, Rideshare held dedication ceremonies for the transportation center. The Douglas County Board of Commissioners welcomed dignitaries from federal, state and local agencies as well as commuters and interested citizens to the event. Tom Thompson, Regional Deputy Director for the Federal Transit Administration, praised Douglas County for its efforts to provide transportation options to its citizens.

Several other key events at the transportation center closely followed the dedication. The Chamber of Commerce hosted a "card exchange" for its members on May 8, and in June 2003, Rideshare hosted its first driver/passenger appreciation program.

In January 2004, Rideshare hosted representatives from metro Atlanta transportation management associations to the transportation center to discuss cooperative marketing and promotional efforts. Titled "West Corridor Focus 2004," the meeting set the tone for much of Rideshare's marketing efforts for the year.

In March 2004, Rideshare initiated in three other major projects at the transportation center: construction of the express bus platform, the design phase for 300 additional parking spaces and site design work for a compressed natural gas fueling station.

While all of this work was going on, the Rideshare staff continued to add new vanpool routes serving the Dept. of Housing and Urban Development, Buckhead and the Cumberland Mall area.

Promoting walking as an alternate form of transportation, Rideshare kicked off “Fitness Connection 2004” in March. More than 250 county employees and citizens participated in the campaign, which involved walking from the courthouse to the transportation center and back every working day during March and April. The “connection” linked Rideshare’s emphasis on alternate transportation with the county government’s push for healthier employees.

Express Bus Service

One of the most significant events in the history of Rideshare occurred on July 6, 2004. The Georgia Regional Transportation Authority (GRTA) initiated express bus service from the transportation center to downtown Atlanta. By the end of October, ridership on the five express routes had grown to 250 people a day. The bus service seemed to serve as a compliment to the vanpool program, which continued to grow as well.

To better serve its vanpoolers and bus patrons, Rideshare expanded the hours of operation for the transportation center. On July 6, the transportation center started staying open from 5 a.m. to 7 p.m.

Rideshare honored its vanpool drivers and passengers in October 2004 with its second annual Appreciation program. A crowd of more than 175 was on hand at the Douglasville Downtown Convention Center when Rideshare named its Driver of the Year and cited several other riders for their years of faithful participation.

On Nov. 1, Rideshare christened its bus platform at the transportation center. Built at cost of \$700,000, the platform serves GRTA’s express bus service, and is large enough to accommodate expansion in the express program and well as other future modes of public transportation. Federal and state grants paid 90 percent of the construction costs.

Rideshare reached another significant milestone in November 2004 when it was a recipient of the Atlanta Regional Commission’s “CREATE Community” award. Rideshare was chosen from among 55 nominees to receive the award for efforts to improve air quality and mobility. Commission Chairman Rita Rainwater accepted the award for Rideshare at the annual State of the Region breakfast. The governor was guest

speaker. This award was one of the most meaningful Rideshare has ever received.

Also, throughout 2004, Rideshare took steps to make the transportation center more “user friendly.” New amenities included newspaper boxes, a courtesy phone and a resource table that provided information on public transportation services throughout the Atlanta region.

With the opening of the transportation center, the bus platform and the expansion of customer services, Douglas County solidified its role as one of the leaders among counties its size in providing commuting options to its residents.

In 2005, Rideshare continued to grow, adding eight new vanpool routes. Express bus service expanded as well, with three routes to the Cumberland Mall/Galleria area being added in June 2005. Unfortunately, after six months, the Cumberland/Galleria routes were discontinued due to low ridership, but GRTA replaced it with routes to Midtown Atlanta, which were very successful.

In early September 2005, a new record was set for the transportation center, as all 300 spaces were occupied. These spaces, added to the utilized spaces at four other park and ride locations, meant that, on that particular day, Douglas County’s alternate transportation options took 600 cars off the road. Throughout Fall of 2005, the transportation center’s parking lot was consistently at 85 to 95 percent capacity. Because of the heavy utilization of the transportation center, Rideshare expedited its efforts to add 350 parking spaces.

By spring 2006, the parking lot at the Transportation Center was maxed out, forcing Rideshare to request that some of its vanpool patrons begin parking at other locations. Rideshare was operating 38 van routes daily.

Work on the 350 new parking spaces was completed in October 2006. This \$825,000 project was funded by the Federal Transit Administration, Georgia DOT and the Douglas County Board of Commissioners.

Another Honor

Rideshare was honored on October 5, 2006 with the prestigious PACE Award given by the Clean Air Campaign. Rideshare was honored for its innovative programs that promote clean air and mobility.

On October 16, 2006, Rideshare celebrated its twentieth anniversary with an open house at the Transportation Center. Betty Jo Crook, the first director of Rideshare from 1985 to 1989, was the featured speaker.

About 350 people came to the Transportation Center to hear Mrs. Crook and other speakers, eat barbecue, listen to music and learn more about Rideshare.

Rideshare began 2007 with its annual review and modification of van routes to keep them efficient and economical, and started its newest route to Alpharetta. Also, Rideshare worked with local and state emergency management agencies on policies and procedures to enhance safety and security at the Transportation Center. The safety/security efforts included a full scale multi-agency exercise based on Transportation Center staff being taken hostage by an irate customer.

Also relating to safety, Rideshare began testing its volunteer van drivers for drug and alcohol abuse in March 2007. This was a precedent-setting initiative for vanpool programs.

In Spring 2007, Rideshare initiated several upgrades to the Transportation Center, including security/surveillance cameras in parking areas, automated doors for the front entrance of the building, and gutters on the bus platform.

Also, in Spring 2007, Rideshare started its first two routes to the Fulton Industrial Boulevard area.

Record Growth

In 2008, Rideshare experienced tremendous growth. As gas prices went over \$4 per gallon, Rideshare added 16 daily van routes for a total of 58 routes. By September 2008, Rideshare was serving 650 commuters per day with its vanpool program.

Rideshare also set a record in vanpool revenue by collecting about \$400,000 from passengers. This amount represented about 57 percent of Rideshare's total operating costs for the year.

Security cameras were added at the Post Road, Lee Road and Thornton Road park and ride lots.

In December 2008, Rideshare hosted a Holiday Open House at the Transportation Center that was attended by 300 vanpool and bus participants and the public.

The record growth led to an exciting announcement at the beginning of 2009. Rideshare and Douglas County agreed to team with GRTA to construct a 650 space park and ride lot on Douglas Boulevard. High utilization of the Transportation Center led to the decision to build the new park and ride lot on the west side of the City of Douglasville. This

new lot allowed Rideshare to improve the pickup and drop-off locations of a number of vans that had been using the parking spaces of private businesses along the Highway 5 corridor. Douglas County contributed almost \$1.6 million of its Federal Transit Administration Section 5307 grant money to this project.

To prepare for continued growth of public transportation and transit-related services and facilities, Rideshare was restructured to become a part of Multi-Modal Transportation Services, a division of the Douglas County Department of Transportation. This allowed a more unified approach to transportation planning and made available to Rideshare the staff and resources of the Department of Transportation.

2010

Gary Watson retired after twenty years as Rideshare Coordinator and was replaced by Jim Watson.

2011

Dorris Road was extended from Fairburn Road to the Transportation Center. This opened a second entrance and exit for the Transportation Center and provided easier, more efficient access to Fairburn Road and I-20 for vanpool and bus passengers.

An informal, low-key rebranding campaign got underway. Rideshare became one part of the more encompassing term “Douglas County Multi-Modal Transportation Services Division.” This move was made to reflect the county’s goal of expanding its alternative transportation services beyond vanpooling and express bus service.

Rideshare Coordinator Jim Watson left for a job with the Clean Air Campaign. His spot was filled by Ron Roberts, AICP.

2012

Wi-Fi was added to the Transportation Center as were security enhancements that included a glass partition at the customer service counter. In October the Lee Road park and ride lot was discontinued due to an interchange improvement that would impact the area. New park and ride locations are being discussed but the temporary solution was to route some vanpools to the Lithia Springs Park on Sweetwater Drive.

2013

Thanks to assistance from the Atlanta Regional Commission, Rideshare began incorporating “Trapeze” software into its vanpool data collection process. Trapeze eliminated a considerable amount of the hand-written entries, making the data process faster and more efficient. Rideshare began the process of gradually training all vanpool drivers to enter their data such as passenger trips and mileage using Trapeze.

Douglas County received a New Freedom grant from the Federal Transit Administration. This funding allowed Douglas County to initiate a voucher program that helps senior adults and disabled individuals pay for “quality of life” trips that can include everything from going to the mall to visiting friends and family. Participants pay for the trips using vouchers they purchase at a highly discounted rate from the county’s Mobility Coordinator. Douglas County’s initial round of federal funding for this program was \$51,900.

Former Rideshare Coordinator Gary Watson was named Douglas County’s first Mobility Coordinator on a part-time basis.

Rideshare Coordinator Ron Roberts left for a job in transportation consulting in the private sector.

2014

Gary Watson returned to his previous position as Rideshare Coordinator, which had been reclassified as Director of Multi-Multimodal Transportation Services. Prior to resuming his old duties, Watson had spent almost six months implementing the county’s new Transportation Voucher program for senior adults and disabled individuals.

Lawanda Jones assumed duties as Mobility Coordinator.

2015

Rideshare completed a Transportation Services Study. Utilizing in-depth research and comments from the public, the study provides a blueprint for transportation/transit services for Douglas County to consider over the next ten years.

Rideshare entered another new phase of its growth by purchasing four 21-passenger buses for the Senior Citizens’ program demand response service. The data from the Senior program will become part of Rideshare’s annual National Transit Database Report to the Federal Transit Administration.

Rideshare secured a second round of funding for the Senior and Disabled Transportation Voucher program. The number of clients being served rose to about 60.

Significant repairs and upgrades were undertaken at the Multi-Modal Transportation Center. Work included installing gutters on the Transportation Center building, painting the structural steel on the bus platform and resealing and restriping the parking areas.

2016

Rideshare continued to make improvements to the Transportation Center and its park and ride lots. Design work started on a 5,000 square addition to the Transportation Center, with construction scheduled to start in 2017.

Recommendations from the Transportation Services Study were submitted to the Board of Commissioners for their consideration.

2017

Douglas County began planning for implementation of fixed route bus service. A consultant was hired to help Douglas County identify routes for the bus service. These proposed routes will be used to help Douglas County receive funding to help pay costs of operating the bus system.

Upgrades were made to the Thornton Road and Post Road park and ride lots.

2018

The Board of Commissioners voted to move forward with implementation of fixed route bus service. This came after the Atlanta Regional Commission pre-approved Douglas County for \$4.8 million in federal Congestion Mitigation and Air Quality funds to help pay for the first three years of the bus service. The grant will be awarded through the Federal Transit Administration.

The process began to “retire” the name Douglas County Rideshare and replace it with Connect Douglas. The new name is more in line with the Douglas County mission of connecting its residents to the locations they need to have access to, such as doctors’ offices, shopping, employment and entertainment.

Douglas County identified a company as the proposed operator of the fixed route bus service. Contract negotiations with the company began, as did refining the four routes that were proposed.

Another year of funding was approved for the Transportation Voucher Program for senior adults and disabled. This new funding also allowed for the hiring of a part-time voucher clerk. The number of senior and disabled clients grew to 90.

2019

Fixed route bus service launched in June, with four routes services much of the county. A requirement of fixed route service is ADA paratransit service to assist individuals with disabilities.

Douglas County received a \$1.6 million grant from the Federal Transit

Administration to assist with funding the bus service. The grant is renewable for an additional two years.

Ground was broken for a 6,000 square foot addition to the Douglas County Transportation Center. The additional space will be used for administrative and training purposes. A federal grant is paying 80 percent of the construction and furnishings costs.