



Executive Summary

Draft

August 19, 2024



The objective of this document is to provide an overview of the findings and opportunities identified throughout the planning process to inform the public and decision makers. Supplemental support documents and a full Transit Development Plan will be published at the conclusion of the planning study. For more information, please contact Marybeth Soderstrom, Staff Services Director at 863-534-7130 or msoderstrom@cfRPC.org

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The Highlands Transit Plan will help establish a strategic vision to guide the planning, development, and potential implementation of public transportation service in Highlands County over the next 10 years

Public participation is solicited without regard to race, color, national origin, age, sex, religion, disability, income, or family status. Persons who require special accommodations under the Americans with Disabilities Act or persons who require translation services (free of charge) should contact Marybeth Soderstrom, HRTPO Title VI Liaison, 863-534-7130, extension 134 (voice), or via Florida Relay Service 711, or by email: msoderstrom@cfrpc.org.

INTRODUCTION

This Transit Development Plan (TDP) brings together technical analysis and community voices to create a 10-year Operating and Capital Plan to expand mobility and transportation options in Highlands County and was shaped by:

- > Input from residents, community partners, and stakeholders
- > Other planning documents like the Florida Transportation Plan and the region's Long Range Transportation Plan
- > An estimate of what the demand for transit might be based on demographic, land use, transportation, and transit data
- > An assessment of the land use and design patterns and how that might support or hinder the efficient provision of existing and future transit services

This is the second Transit Development Plan for Highlands County. With no transit agency or recipient of urban transit funds, this plan builds on the first TDP for Highlands County (2017) and an On-Demand Feasibility Study (2022) conducted by the Heartland Regional Transportation Planning Organization (HRTPO).

- > The Highlands Transit Plan includes the following key elements:
 - > Evaluating the study area for socioeconomic trends
 - > Understanding travel behavior/patterns
 - > Examining the areas where both the transit plan and other TPO documents coincide
 - > Assessment of existing public transportation options and demand for said options
 - > Summary of public involvement and community outreach efforts and input received
 - > Identification and prioritization of public transportation service and capital needs
 - > Ten-year service, financial, and implementation plan

Specific service options to meet the needs of the community may include those developed in this TDP or other options detailed in operations planning, which would be required before services are implemented. The TDP is a guide to local decision-making, but should not be considered as a budgetary document or as a commitment to implementation.

State Requirement

The Highlands Transit Plan is consistent with the requirements of the State of Florida Public Transit Block Grant Program, enacted by the Florida Legislature to provide a stable source of funding for public transportation. The Florida Department of Transportation (FDOT) requires recipients of Block Grant Program funds to prepare a major TDP update every five years. This requirement helps to ensure that the public transportation services being provided and planned for are consistent with the community's mobility needs.

Plan Development

Developing the Highlands Transit Plan involved a number of planning activities, including documenting the study area conditions, analyzing socio-economic characteristics, evaluating the existing Transportation Disadvantaged (TD) and rural public transportation services provided in Highlands County, gathering and analyzing public input, forecasting ridership, developing a situation appraisal, identifying transit needs, and preparing a cost-feasible 10-year service and financial plan.

PUBLIC INVOLVEMENT

Public involvement is a critical component in the TDP development process to assess a community’s vision for existing and future service needs. The Highlands Transit Plan draws from numerous public outreach activities that were conducted throughout the county to understand and obtain feedback from the community.

Public Involvement for the Highlands Transit Plan considers the public participation material that exists in other documents and plans to understand the public’s mobility needs and where the public perceives public transit to fit in that context.

During these participation efforts, the public was able to actively and continually engage mobility related questions, including the need for transit. Recent efforts include the 2024 Community Transportation Survey which is meant to gauge the frequency of service use, service satisfaction, and the need for on-demand or fixed-route services.

The 2045 Long Range Transportation Plan (LRTP) provides the most information regarding transit, where more than 50% of respondents said that transit and community transportation needed the most improvements. When asked how to prioritize funding for future transportation improvements, public transportation was selected as a high priority for many respondents.



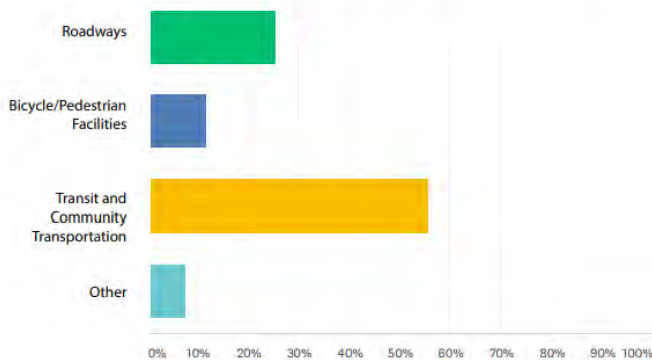
A lack of access to affordable, reliable transportation can limit a person’s ability to access basic needs for their family. Transportation issues have been cited as a primary concern among residents of Highlands County as it is seen to impact several areas of life, including access to employment, food, education, and healthcare.

- United Way United Community Needs Assessment, Highlands County Report, 2022

2045 LRTP Survey Results

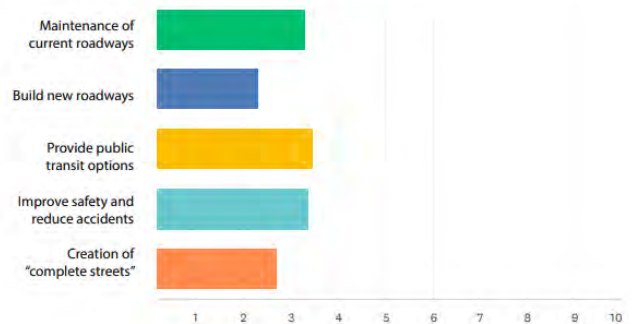
Q1 Which needs the most improvement?

Answered: 145 Skipped: 1



Q3 How would you prioritize funding for future transportation improvements?

Answered: 146 Skipped: 0





The United Way United Community Needs Assessment surveyed 914 Highlands County residents on various topics about transportation and the infrastructure in their community.

85%
agreed that public
transportation is
needed in their
community

66%
agreed that people in the
County would be willing
to fund more public
transportation options

United Community
Needs Assessment



VISION, MISSION, AND GOALS

Setting goals and objectives is a critical foundation for any successful planning effort and should stem from values inherent in the community’s vision for the future. A goal is a statement of what needs to be accomplished to implement the vision, and objectives and policies outline more specific actions needed to achieve the goal.

Goals, objectives, and policies to support the planning, implementation, and operation of Highlands County’s public transportation system over the next 10 years were formed in the various plans and efforts that have led into the Highlands Transit Plan development process.



Vision

Highlands County will have mobility choices allowing residents and visitors to travel easily and efficiently using accessible public transportation.

Mission

To provide Highlands County with safe, dependable, and cost efficient public transportation options.

PUBLIC TRANSPORTATION SERVICES

The HRTPO has evaluated several public transportation options that could potentially serve Highlands County. Proposals generally support service along the U.S. 27 Corridor in the Avon Park and Sebring area, often looking at connecting Lake Placid as well as the rest of Highlands County. While several modes of transportation exist, not all are capable of serving a given location. Two modes of transportation that have been proposed include fixed route transportation and Mobility-on-Demand (MOD).

Fixed Route

Fixed routes are generally effective in high density urban areas where the movement of people is both large and concentrated. The 2018-2027 Highlands Transit Plan recommended a combination of two express routes and three flex routes, connecting Lake Placid, Avon Park, and Sebring. An express route would connect the three cities with stops at key points along U.S. 27.

The flex routes would serve Avon Park, Sebring, and Lake Placid by following a route through the downtown areas of each location, and connecting nearby communities and important locations in each. The route is flexible because riders can request ahead of time a deviation from the route within 3/4 of a mile of the route.

Mobility-on-Demand

A service concept called Mobility-on-Demand (MOD) was first explored through the HRTPO's 2022 On-Demand Public Transit Feasibility Study. MOD is a real-time shared ride service available to the public within a defined service zone. With recent technology advancements, MOD is emerging as a popular service alternative in areas where fixed-route service may not work well or be cost-effective.

The study proposed that the area that would most benefit from an MOD zone would cover Avon Park and Sebring, and nearby areas, essentially covering the northwestern corner of Highlands County. The study also proposed a countywide MOD zone.

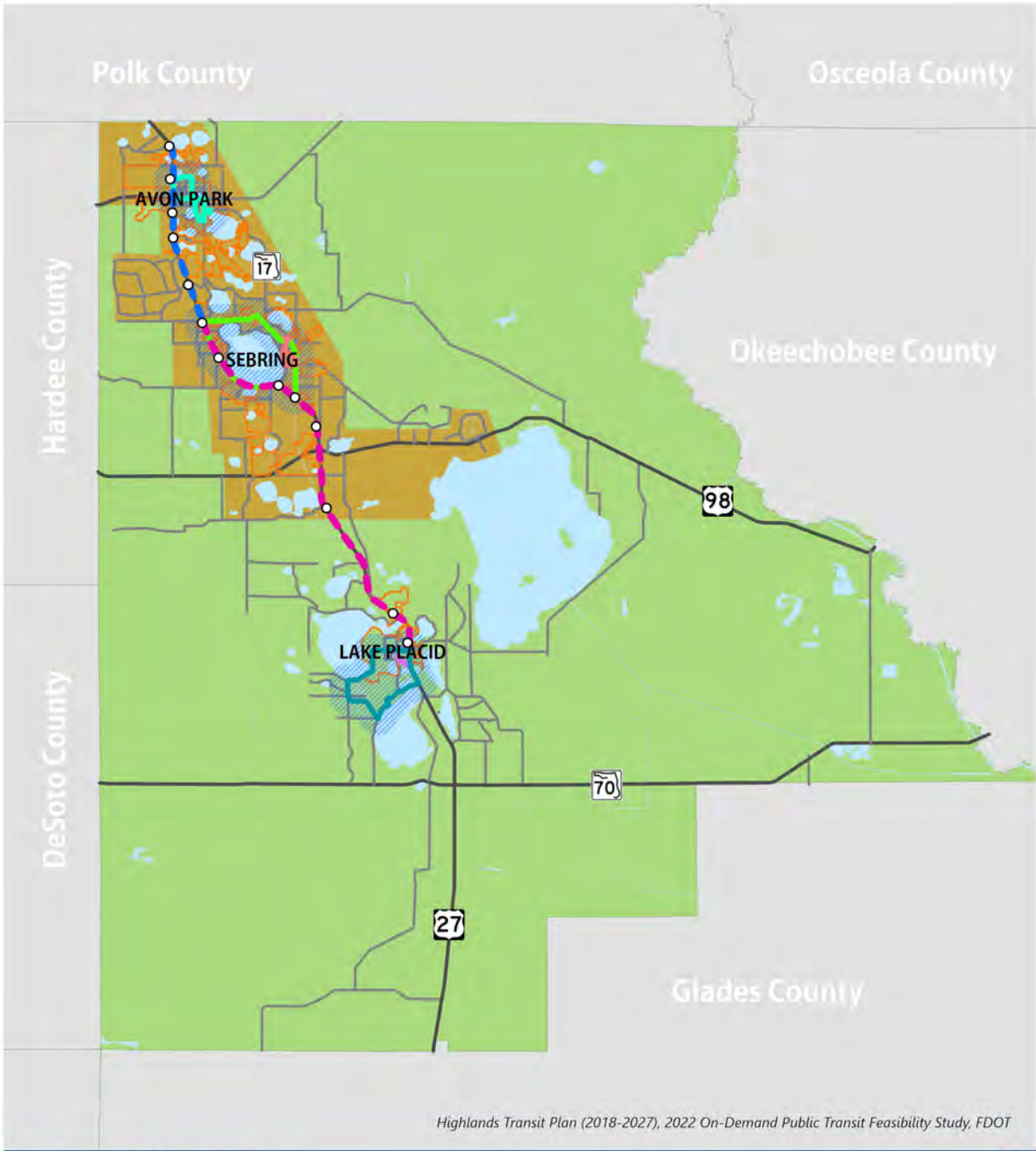
The map on the following page shows the proposed public transit options that were evaluated in the Highlands Transit Plan.

What is Mobility-on-Demand?

- Door-to-door flex service within a defined service zone
- Open to the public (no approval required)
- Rides can be requested via mobile app or by phone
- Expands overall transit service coverage area
- Can shift riders from more expensive paratransit services to MOD service



Left: Stream vehicle providing fixed route services in Glades and Hendry counties. Center: Votran vehicle providing flex service in New Smyrna Beach. Right: Breeze vehicle providing on demand service in parts of Sarasota County.



Service Alternatives



Legend

Proposed Alternatives

- Avon Park Flex
- Downtown Sebring Circulator
- Lake Jackson Circulator
- Downtown Lake Placid Circulator
- South Lake Placid Flex
- Sebring-Avon Park Express
- Sebring-Lake Placid Express
- Express Route Stops
- ▨ Flex Zones
- ▨ Avon Park-Sebring Microtransit Zone
- ▨ Highlands Microtransit Zone
- ▭ City Limits
- Major Roads
- Minor Roads
- Water



10-YEAR CAPITAL AND OPERATING PROGRAM

Public Transportation Service Options

The transportation services discussed previously were formed into three options through this TDP process and are presented as follows:

Option 1 - Flex and Express

This option supports the implementation of an Avon Park Flex route, Sebring flex route, and Lake Placid flex route with deviations up to 0.75 miles from the route. This option also includes the Avon Park-Sebring express route and the Sebring—Lake Placid express route to provide connecting fixed-route service between the three municipalities and their respective flex routes with limited stops in between for faster service. The flex routes are proposed at 30-minute frequencies, and the express routes are proposed at a 60-minute frequency. This option also includes two circulators in Downtown Lake Placid and Downtown Sebring, running at 15-minute frequency.

Option 2 - Mobility-on-Demand in Avon Park and Sebring

Under this option, an MOD vehicle can be hailed either through a mobile application, calling by phone, or online within the same day of desired service. The concentrated area covers Avon Park and Sebring and their surrounding area. It is expected that with this service area wait times after initial request can be on average about 15-minutes and provide no longer than 20-minute drop-offs to the desired destination.

Option 3 - Mobility-on-Demand Countywide

This option builds upon Option 2 by expanding the MOD zone to the entire county. While service demand can be expected to be concentrated in the Avon Park and Sebring areas, the expansion of such an MOD zone is expected to impact wait times after initial requests, with an average of about 30-minutes, and for trips that could last up to 40-minutes to the desired destination. This option however aims to serve the entire county area and connect distant sectors of Highlands County with the more urbanized areas.

Other Capital, Infrastructure, Maintenance, and Administrative Needs

Capital and Infrastructure Needs

Capital/infrastructure needs to be considered in the 10-year plan include:

- > **Vehicles** (buses) to provide the public transportation service. The Plan assumes the purchase of light-duty vehicles for MOD services and medium-duty vehicles for flex and express service. Light-duty vehicles include minivans, while medium-duty vehicles may refer to cutaway buses or similar minibuses.
- > **Bus stop infrastructure**, which includes, at a minimum, basic infrastructure such as a pole/bus stop sign and bench; other amenities typically provided at bus stops with higher ridership, such as transfer locations, include bus stop shelters, bicycle racks, trash cans, and lighting (if needed). These are only considered for Option 1.
- > **Radio communication equipment** between the bus operators and dispatch.



10-Year Vehicle Needs

Service Scenario	# of Light-Duty Vehicles	# of Medium-Duty Vehicles
Option 1 (Flex + Express)	N/A	5 initial, 4 replacement
Option 2 (Avon Park—Sebring MOD Zone)	4 initial, 3 replacement	N/A
Option 3 (Countywide MOD Zone)	6 initial, 5 replacement	N/A

Maintenance Needs

- > **Maintenance (routine or otherwise)** will need to be performed on buses and other major equipment. For a potential system of this size, this would be typically performed through a third-party maintenance contract.

Administrative and Service Planning Needs

- > **Staff resources to oversee public transportation operator contract** – Highlands County, as the assumed governing agency, will need the staff capacity to oversee a private contractor for additional public transportation service in the Urban Transit Area. Therefore, additional staff resources will need to be considered as part of the 10-year plan.
- > **Advertising and marketing materials** – includes developing a brand/theme for the new system, printing schedules and other materials, and conducting a major marketing campaign typically done leading up to system implementation, followed by annual costs for marketing and printing as needed.
- > **Transit Development Plan Major Update** – required five years following adoption of this initial Highlands Transit Plan. It is recommended that an on-board survey also be completed at the time of the major TDP update to evaluate if the service is effectively meeting the needs of the system’s customers. In between adoption of this plan and the next major update, annual progress reports will be due to the FDOT in March of each year.

Cost and Revenue Assumptions

The 10-year plan includes a number of cost and revenue assumptions for both the operating and capital components of implementing public transportation service. The tables on the following pages summarize the 10-year operating and capital costs and revenues and select service efficiency measures for the three proposed service options.

Next Steps

Any member of the public can submit comments on this TDP to the HRTPO by September 19, 2024 utilizing the following contact information:

- > Email: info@heartlandregionaltpo.org
- > Phone: 863-534-7130 x134
- > Mailing Address: 555 E Church St., Bartow, FL 33830

The HRTPO will be finalizing the TDP by selecting the most appropriate transportation option for the community and creating a proposed 10-year project timeline.

Option 1 Fixed-Route Services

	10-Year Total	Annual Average
CAPITAL		
Costs		
Operator Contract to Capital	\$9,934,949	\$993,495
Vehicles	\$999,890	\$99,989
Other Capital	\$383,359	\$38,336
Capital Costs - Subtotal	\$11,318,198	\$1,131,820
Revenue		
Federal Revenue		
Section 5307	\$9,054,558	\$905,456
State Revenue		
Soft Match Toll	\$2,263,640	\$226,364
Capital Revenue - Subtotal	\$11,318,198	\$1,131,820
Capital Costs & Revenues Balance	\$0	\$0
OPERATING		
Costs		
Service Operations	\$14,902,423	\$1,490,242
Planning Support	\$1,297,254	\$129,725
Operating Costs - Subtotal	\$16,199,677	\$1,619,968
Revenue		
Section 5307	\$8,069,095	\$806,909
State Revenue		
Block Grant	\$1,872,502	\$187,250
Local Revenue		
Estimated Farebox	\$659,122	\$65,912
Other Required Local Revenue	\$5,598,958	\$559,896
Operating Revenue - Subtotal	\$16,199,677	\$1,619,968
Operating Costs & Revenues Balance	\$0	\$0
PERCENT LOCAL GOVERNMENT SHARE OF TOTAL REVENUE		
% Local Government Share	20%	

Measure	Option 1
Population in Service Area	73,300
Estimated Annual Trips	78,285
Anticipated Revenue Hours	34,000
Average Trips per Revenue Hour	2.3
Annual Operating Cost per Trip	\$35.00



Option 2 Mobility-on-Demand in Avon Park and Sebring

Cost/Revenue Category	10-Year Total	Annual Average
CAPITAL		
Costs		
Operator Contract to Capital	\$9,934,949	\$993,495
Vehicles	\$620,938	\$62,094
Other Capital	\$431,789	\$43,179
Capital Costs - Subtotal	\$10,987,676	\$1,098,768
Revenue		
Federal Revenue		
Section 5307	\$8,790,141	\$879,014
State Revenue		
Soft Match Toll	\$2,197,535	\$219,754
Capital Revenue - Subtotal	\$10,987,676	\$1,098,768
Capital Costs & Revenues Balance	\$0	\$0
OPERATING		
Costs		
Service Operations	\$6,200,382	\$620,038
Planning Support	\$930,541	\$93,054
Operating Costs - Subtotal	\$7,130,924	\$713,092
Revenue		
Section 5307	\$3,534,718	\$353,472
State Revenue		
Block Grant	\$1,591,407	\$159,141
Local Revenue		
Estimated Farebox	\$428,191	\$42,819
Other Required Local Revenue	\$1,576,607	\$157,661
Operating Revenue - Subtotal	\$7,130,924	\$713,092
Operating Costs & Revenues Balance	\$0	\$0
PERCENT LOCAL GOVERNMENT SHARE OF TOTAL REVENUE		
% Local Government Share	9%	

Measure	Option 2
Population in Service Area	70,000
Estimated Annual Trips	66,267
Anticipated Revenue Hours	16,995
Average Trips per Revenue Hour	3.9
Annual Operating Cost per Trip	\$27.35

Option 3 Mobility-on-Demand Countywide

Cost/Revenue Category	10-Year Total	Annual Average
CAPITAL		
Costs		
Operator Contract to Capital	\$11,294,732	\$1,129,473
Vehicles	\$1,157,860	\$115,786
Other Capital	\$383,359	\$38,336
Capital Costs - Subtotal	\$12,835,951	\$1,283,595
Revenue		
Federal Revenue		
Section 5307	\$10,268,761	\$1,026,876
State Revenue		
Soft Match Toll	\$2,567,190	\$256,719
Capital Revenue - Subtotal	\$12,835,951	\$1,283,595
Capital Costs & Revenues Balance	\$0	\$0
OPERATING		
Costs		
Service Operations	\$16,942,098	\$1,694,210
Planning Support	\$930,541	\$93,054
Operating Costs - Subtotal	\$17,872,639	\$1,787,264
Revenue		
Section 5307	\$8,905,576	\$890,558
Section 5311	\$4,452,788	\$445,279
State Revenue		
Block Grant	\$1,872,502	\$187,250
Local Revenue		
Estimated Farebox	\$749,335	\$74,933
Other Required Local Revenue	\$1,892,438	\$189,244
Operating Revenue - Subtotal	\$17,872,639	\$1,787,264
Operating Costs & Revenues Balance	\$0	\$0
PERCENT LOCAL GOVERNMENT SHARE OF TOTAL REVENUE		
% Local Government Share	6%	

Measure	Option 3
Population in Service Area	105,618
Estimated Annual Trips	62,298
Anticipated Revenue Hours	21,850
Average Trips per Revenue Hour	2.9
Annual Operating Cost per Trip	\$49.30



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