14. Public Transportation

Existing System

Fixed-route transit service in the Charlotte Regional Transportation Planning Organization (CRTPO) area is available primarily within Mecklenburg County. The only fixed-route, fixed-schedule transit service in Union County is one express route connecting Uptown Charlotte and Monroe. There is currently no fixed-route, fixed-schedule transit service in Iredell County. However, both Union and Iredell Counties do operate demand-response public transportation systems as described in this chapter.

Mecklenburg County Public Transportation

Mecklenburg County voters passed a half-cent sales tax in 1998 to fund both long- and short-range improvements to transit service in the region. The Charlotte Area Transit System (CATS) was formed in 2000 as a result.
The CATS mission is to enhance the quality of life by “providing outstanding community-wide public transportation services, while proactively contributing to progressive, sustainable regional growth and development.”

CATS is a department of the City of Charlotte, but its policy board is the Metropolitan Transit Commission (MTC). The MTC is comprised of the chief elected official of each member jurisdiction and the Board of Transportation member from NCDOT’s Division 10. The MTC sets policy, approves CATS’ detailed work plans and budgets, and prioritizes transit projects for the system.

The following services are provided by CATS:

- Light rail rapid transit service;
- Fixed-route local, express and regional express bus services;
- Paratransit service;
- Community/neighborhood-based shuttle services; and
- Multi-county vanpool program for work trip origins/destinations in Mecklenburg County.

**Light Rail Service**

The LYNX Blue Line began revenue service in November 2007, and runs the length of a 9.6 mile corridor that includes 15 total stations extending from Uptown Charlotte south to I-485/South Boulevard in Pineville.

Ridership quickly exceeded first-year projections of 9,600 passengers per day, with 16,000 passengers per day for several months during the first year of operation. Total ridership in Fiscal Year (FY) 2013 was approximately 4.9 million, with the average weekday riders exceeding 15,000 per day. Service is available between 5:00 a.m. and 2:00 a.m. daily, and fares are equivalent to local bus service.

Funding has been identified to expand the LYNX Blue Line service, extending the line from its current terminus in Uptown Charlotte (7th Street) to the UNC Charlotte campus approximately 9.4 miles northeast of center city. Service is expected to begin on the Blue Line Extension (BLE) in late 2016 – early 2017. Additional information about the BLE is provided in this chapter.

**Fixed-Route Bus Service**

The fixed-route bus service operated by CATS includes 49 local routes, 14 express routes, and 5 regional commuter routes. Ridership in FY 2013 was approximately 20.7 million with an average weekday ridership exceeding 64,000 riders per day.
The fixed routes operated by CATS—local and express—are shown on the CATS Existing System Map (Figure 14-1). Regional Express bus service during weekday periods is provided to Cabarrus, Gaston, Union, and York counties.

According to the annual report, in FY 2012, the transit fleet included the following:

- 164 forty-foot buses;
- 91 over the road buses;
- 48 shuttle buses;
- 20 trolley buses;
- 87 paratransit shuttles/vans;
- 99 vanpool vans; and
- 23 light rail / vintage trolley.

Additionally, buses for the local and express route services are accessible (low floor or lifts) and are equipped with bicycle racks. Services are available every day, in varying frequencies, from about 5:00 a.m. to 2:00 a.m. Current one-way fares are $2.00 for local service, $2.75 for express service, and $4.00 for out-of-county commuter service.

**Sprinter Service**

Sprinter is an enhanced bus service that provides a direct connection from Charlotte’s city center to the Charlotte-Douglas International Airport. Enhanced bus service includes several passenger amenities such as frequent service (20 minutes on weekdays, 30 minutes on nights and weekends), efficient stop locations, and signature shelters. The service uses specially-designed hybrid fueled buses and is branded as a specialized service with a different logo and paint scheme.

Total ridership for the LYNX Blue Line in 2013 was approximately 4.9 million, with the average weekday riders exceeding 15,000 per day.
Paratransit Service

Paratransit service to qualified disabled residents in Mecklenburg County is provided by CATS Special Transportation Services (STS). Ridership in FY 2013 was over 235,000, with the average weekday ridership equaling 971 riders per day.

STS is a demand-response service, aided by mobile data terminals (MDTs), Automatic Vehicle Location (AVL), and computer dispatching and scheduling software. The active fleet includes 85 vehicles, and provides the paratransit service required by the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) of 1990. The ADA requires that paratransit service be provided to people who request pickups and drops-offs within three-quarters of a mile of all local bus routes during the same days and times that local buses operate. All requests for rides within Mecklenburg County beyond the ADA requirements are provided as capacity allows.

STSII is an expansion of the Special Transportation Service that provides limited service to the Towns of Cornelius, Davidson, Huntersville, and Mint Hill, and the unincorporated areas of Mecklenburg County with reduced operating hours and a premium fare.

STSII is a supplemental service to that of STS, and therefore not regulated by the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA). STSII is provided as capacity allows, as ride requests falling under STS have priority over those provided by STSII.

Community Circulators

CATS provides several services to cover smaller geographic areas with fixed-route or demand-response options, including shuttle routes and the North Meck Village Rider routes. There are seven shuttle routes that serve as major transfer points between community circulators and longer fixed route bus service. These shuttles serve the general area around designated transit centers in the service area, as well as targeted neighborhoods located in between the traditional line haul routes. The designated transit centers are the following:

- Charlotte Transportation Center;
- Eastland Station;
- South Park Station; and
- Rosa Parks Place Station.
In addition, there are three North Meck Village Rider routes serving the northern Mecklenburg County towns and surrounding area. The one-way fare for all of these services is currently $0.80.

The Gold Rush Circulator is a no-fare shuttle service that is served by rubber-wheeled trolley vehicles in Uptown Charlotte.

Vanpool Program

CATS Vanpool Program coordinates approximately 77 vanpools serving a 100-mile radius around Charlotte, with an approximate fiscal year 2013 ridership exceeding 233,000 riders. These vanpools operate seven days a week and provide service to patrons working first through third shifts. In FY 2013, the Vanpool Program eliminated an estimated 12.5 million commuter miles from the regional roadway system. It has a database that allows customers to identify vanpools and potential carpool matches by cross-referencing home and work locations and matching those with similar origins and destinations. This feature is described in more detail at www.sharetheridenc.com.
**Union County Public Transportation**

Transportation services are available for residents of Union County that are eligible to receive services from local Human Service Transportation (HST) agencies. The Union County HST agencies include the Union County Division of Social Services, the Arc of Union County, and the Vocational Rehabilitation and Veterans services. Limited transportation service is also available to residents of Union County who are not eligible for HST.

To be eligible, Union County residents must meet at least one of the following requirements:

- Senior citizen at least 60 years of age;
- Developmentally or physically disabled;
- Medicaid client;
- Veteran eligible for medical treatment at a VA hospital or clinic;
- Able to pay required fares; or
- Willing to work with existing schedules, space, and time availability.

According to the most recent information (FY 2012-2013), Union County operates 24 vehicles and made approximately 84,600 trips over the last reporting year. Union County provided approximately 728,665 total service miles and 44,712 vehicle service hours.

In FY 2012-13, Union County had total expenses of $1,378,917, with revenues of approximately $1,092,894. It was also reported that $286,023 in local funds were utilized to cover increased expenses over the last reporting year.

**Iredell County Public Transportation**

Iredell County operates a demand-response public transportation system for the residents of Iredell County through the Iredell County Area Transportation System (ICATS). Transportation services are provided to the clients of contracting human service agencies such as the Department of Social Services, the Department of Mental Health, the Council on Aging, and the Vocational Rehabilitation and Veterans services. The eligibility requirements are similar to those in Union County.
Clients sponsored by a human service agency pay no fare. Residents are able to request service from 7 a.m. to 4:30 p.m., Monday through Friday.

Limited transportation is also available to residents of Iredell County who are not eligible for transportation service through a human service agency. This is called Rural General Public (RGP) transportation. Such service is available from 7 a.m. to 5 p.m., Monday through Friday. Current fares range from $2 to $4 for a one-way trip within Iredell County.

According to the most recent information (FY 2012-2013), Iredell County operates 28 vehicles and carries approximately 91,000 passengers per year. Iredell County provided more than 702,000 total service miles accounting for an excess of 41,000 vehicle service hours. These figures are similar to prior year totals.

In FY 2012-13, Iredell County had total expenses of $1,440,109, with revenues of approximately $1,423,109. Both of these figures were higher than prior year totals, and the $17,250 deficit was covered by a fund balance.

As a supplement to the services already mentioned, ICATS and the Town of Mooresville began the Mooresville Main fixed route circulator bus in the summer of 2013. The bus serves the areas in and around downtown Mooresville, including hospital and retail locations along NC 150. One ICATS light transit vehicle (LTV) with a carrying capacity of 15 passengers and wheelchair accessibility is currently being utilized. Both ICATS and the town contribute to the cost of the service, which is also offset by rider paid fees.

Public Transportation Planning

Expansion of public transportation within the CRTPO planning area continues to be a high priority. Increases in service of varying modes, both short- and long-term, are being studied and implemented in the plans described below.

Comprehensive Corridor System Plan

Completed in 2002 and revised in 2006 (with a financial plan update in 2012), this plan calls for the development of enhanced transit service in the five corridors defined in the 2025 Integrated Transit/Land Use Plan. These services come in the form of light rail (South and Northeast), commuter rail (North), bus rapid transit or light rail (Southeast), and streetcar (West). In addition, the plan calls for development of the CityLYNX Gold Line streetcar system, to serve transit and circulation needs in Charlotte’s Uptown, as well as along some of the city’s most used transit routes – Central Avenue, Trade Street and Beatties Ford Road.

The City of Charlotte and other Mecklenburg County municipalities have used land use regulations to help implement the 2025 Integrated Transit/Land Use Plan, primarily through transit oriented development (TOD) zoning classifications along the South Corridor light rail line. The northern Mecklenburg County communities of Cornelius, Davidson, and Huntersville have also implemented zoning regulations that support dense, walkable development near future commuter rail stations.
The 2013-2017 Countywide Transit Services Plan (CTSP)

Approved by the MTC in February 2012, the 2013-2017 CTSP provides CATS with a five-year bus service improvement plan for Mecklenburg County, as well as the limited service areas in adjacent counties. The recommendations include a substantial restructuring of service in the Northeast Corridor in anticipation of the operation of the BLE light rail service. Other recommendations were also presented for the rest of the service area. The recommendations are subject to the availability of budget and capital resources.

In terms of the Blue Line Extension Bus/Rail Coordination, the MTC directed CATS to progress the Northeast Corridor/LYNX BLE through the Federal Transit Administration (FTA) project development process. The BLE is an extension of the successful LYNX Blue Line light rail service. The 9.4-mile BLE alignment extends from Ninth Street in Center City through the North Davidson (NoDa) and University areas, terminating on the UNC Charlotte campus. The line is scheduled to begin operations in late 2016 or early 2017.

In order to provide a seamless transition for Northeast Corridor customers, CATS has developed bus route proposals that coincide with the LYNX BLE proposed implementation. The Bus/Rail Integration Plan has been modified and is included as part of the CTSP.

Programmed Projects

The following series of projects have been included in the 2012-2018 Transportation Improvement Program (TIP) to carry out the Charlotte Area Transit System’s commitment to the implementation of both the 2025 Integrated Transit/Land Use Plan and Corridor System Plan. Funding for these projects is anticipated from the Section 5307 Urban Allocation, Section 5309 Capital Program, NCDOT Full Funding Grant Agreements, statewide earmarks, and other funding sources. Following is a summary of the various types of projects included in the TIP.

Facility Improvements

CATS continues to invest in the planning, design and construction of numerous bus facility improvements. This work ranges from coordinating new stop and shelter installations through the land development/capital improvement process, to the installation of new signs, shelters and other passenger amenities through CATS’ Transit Amenities program and the upgrade/expansion of maintenance facilities.
Intelligent Transportation Systems
CATS proposes the installation of various Intelligent Transportation System components, including automated interactive voice response systems, customer information technology at transit hubs, trip planning software, and other software licenses to improve the operating efficiency of the system.

Fare System Upgrade & Radio Upgrade
CATS is pursuing the purchase and installation of a new fare collection system and digital radio system upgrade for bus operations, as well as replacement of ticket vending machines at station locations along the LYNX line.

Miscellaneous Equipment
This includes the purchase of support equipment including shop, maintenance and office equipment; schedule racks; and, materials necessary for the upkeep of the Davidson Street bus garage.

Neighborhood Transit Centers
CATS’ Development Section works closely with Operations to monitor and assess changing market demands and service needs for new Neighborhood Transit Centers. The Neighborhood Transit Centers are larger and nicer bus stop locations that also serve as transfer points between a limited number of routes. Examples include East-West, Billingsley and Midtown at the Metropolitan. This ongoing program provides funding to continue the planning, design, and construction of these neighborhood transit centers identified in the Countywide Transit Services Plan. Funding to continue the implementation of these Neighborhood Transit Centers has been programmed.

Park and Ride Lots
CATS monitors the travel demand and market for drive approach passengers to determine park and ride needs and locations. CATS’ goal is to implement park and ride lots at locations that provide a high capture rate for choice riders and minimize travel time and operational costs to the transit system. The cost of this program is reflected in the capital portion of CATS’ long range financial plan.
Charlotte Gateway Station

The terminus of the North Transit Corridor project in Charlotte is the planned site of a joint-use multimodal facility that will include a CATS bus transfer facility, Amtrak service and inter-city bus service. The Charlotte Gateway station will be located at Graham, 4th and West Trade streets in Center City Charlotte. Construction of the Charlotte Gateway Station is a collaborative effort between the City of Charlotte and the State of North Carolina.

In addition to the above activities, CATS also provides funds for the protective purchase of future transit corridors, the lease or purchase of existing rail rights-of-way, and participation in public-private joint developments.

Horizon Year Recommendations

As noted in the Streets and Highways chapter, federal law requires that projects in the Metropolitan Transportation Plan (MTP) be categorized in financially constrained horizon years for air quality analysis. Horizon years are no more than ten years apart (and are based on calendar years, beginning January 1, rather than fiscal years).

This 2040 MTP uses the horizon years 2015, 2025, 2030, and 2040. The transit service improvements for these horizon years are based on the updated financial plan for the MTC-adopted 2030 Transit Corridor System Plan.

The 2007-2009 economic recession dramatically reduced CATS’ primary revenue source, the half-percent sales tax in Mecklenburg County. Although the sales tax has begun to recover, it has still not reached pre-recession revenue levels. This has resulted in significant delays in the implementation of the 2030 Transit Corridor System Plan. The following represents the transit projects that CATS believes it can achieve under the current financial conditions.
2015 and 2025 Transit Improvements

- **Corridor System Planning and Design**: CATS will continue to advance the planning of the Transit Corridor System Plan and the design of the LYNX BLE and the planned North Corridor Red Line through the 2015 and 2025 Horizon Years. In addition, studies to advance the Streetcar and to re-evaluate the rapid transit technology for the Southeast Corridor will be completed. However, budget constraints will prevent the completion of another Rapid Transit Corridor in the 2025 Horizon Year unless additional funding is identified in the near future.

- **LYNX Blue Line Extension (BLE)**: The LYNX Blue Line Extension project was awarded a federal full funding grant agreement in October 2012 and is currently under construction. The project extends the current LYNX light rail line from 7th Street in Center City Charlotte northeast to UNC Charlotte’s main Campus. The project will be complete and open for revenue service by 2017.

- **Blue Line Capacity Expansion (BLCE)**: The Blue Line Capacity Expansion project will upgrade the traction power for the existing LYNX Blue Line and lengthen platforms to accommodate three-car trains. The project is being funded with a Transportation Investment Generating Economic Recovery (TIGER) grant and is part of an ongoing program to expand the original LYNX Blue Line platforms to three-car capacity to handle the existing and future demand.

- **North Corridor Red Line**: The Red Line is planned as a commuter rail service that will use the Norfolk Southern “O” line from the Charlotte Gateway Station on West Trade Street in Uptown Charlotte (central business district) to a station serving southern Iredell County. This project is slated for revenue service to begin in the 2025 Horizon Year.

- **CityLYNX Gold Line (Phase One and Two)**: This project will be completed in two phases and is slated to begin revenue service by 2025. Phase One will include the construction of a modern streetcar system on Trade Street from Charlotte Transportation Center to Presbyterian Hospital. Phase Two will be an extension of Phase One west to Johnson C. Smith University and east to Sunnyside Ave.
- **Bus Fleet:** CATS will continue to enhance and optimize fixed route bus transit service throughout the region. Current plans call primarily for the replacement of older buses that have reached their useful life as regulated by federal standards. Expansions will be made as needed to meet system demand.

- **State of Good Repair:** In order to keep both bus and rail operations at maximum operating efficiency, CATS will maintain and expand its infrastructure as needed using available federal funding sources.

### 2030 Transit Improvements

- **CityLYNX Gold Line (Phase Three):** Phase Three of the LYNX Gold Line includes completing the modern streetcar service eastward along Central Avenue to Eastland Community Transit Center, westward from Johnson C. Smith University north along Beatties Ford Road to the Rosa Parks Place Community Transit Center. This project is slated to begin revenue service by 2030.

- **Bus Fleet:** CATS will continue to enhance and optimize fixed route bus transit service throughout the region. Current plans call primarily for the replacement of older buses that have reached their federal useful life and expansions as needed to meet system demand.

- **State of Good Repair:** In order to keep both bus and rail operations at maximum operating efficiency, CATS will maintain and expand its infrastructure as needed using available federal funding sources.

Construction is ongoing for Phase One of a modern streetcar system, similar to the system in Portland, Oregon.
2040 Transit Improvements

- **Bus Fleet:** CATS will continue to enhance and optimize fixed route bus transit service throughout the region. Current plans call primarily for the replacement of older buses that have reached their useful life as regulated by federal standards. Expansions will be made as needed to meet system demand.

- **State of Good Repair:** In order to keep both bus and rail operations at maximum operating efficiency, CATS will maintain and expand its infrastructure as needed using available federal funding sources.

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Project Identification and Prioritization

CATS, Union County public transportation, and ICATS do not submit projects for evaluation against traditional road projects in the MTP development process. All three typically operate through their own respective public transportation funding systems, and approve projects through their respective governing boards. CATS submits smaller-scale projects that are eligible for funding through Congestion Management and Air Quality (CMAQ), Job Access and Reverse Commute (JARC), and New Freedom (NF) Funds, which require CRTPO endorsement.

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Sources:

CATS Annual Report, 2012

Iredell County Community Transportation Services Plan
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List of Figures

14-1 .................. CATS EXISTING BUS ROUTES
14-2 .................. 2030 CATS SYSTEM MAP
Figure 14-2

Legend
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- LYNX Blue Line (Existing)
- CityLYNX Gold Line Station (Phase I Under Construction)
- CityLYNX Gold Line (Phase I Under Construction)
- LYNX Blue Line Station (Under Construction)
- LYNX Blue Line (Under Construction)
- North Corridor Red Line Station (Proposed)
- North Corridor Red Line (Proposed)

Source: CATS

Prepared by Charlotte-Mecklenburg Planning Department, April 2014