

Central Baldwin County: Tying Transportation to Economic Success

Technical Assistance Final Report

Presented to the Central Baldwin Chamber of Commerce, Eastern Shore MPO and Baldwin Regional Area Transit System

Prepared by Community Development Transportation Lending Services

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Overview

Community Development Transportation Development Lending Services (CDTLS) has provided technical assistance to the Central Baldwin Chamber of Commerce and its partners in Baldwin County, Alabama, all as part of an effort to help these partners build an already strong rural economy through regional transportation improvements. This project was funded through the United States Department of Agriculture, Rural Development, which is an Equal Opportunity Program.

There were two goals of this technical assistance project:

Technical Assistance Goal 1: Improve the economic vitality of central Baldwin County by increasing the amount of shared-ride and/or transit commuting between central Baldwin County origins and Mobile-area destinations.

Technical Assistance Goal 2: Improve the capacity to move workers through central Baldwin County to and from their employment locations on the Gulf Coast.

Based on the priorities expressed by business and community leaders in central Baldwin County as these two goals were pursued, attention was focused on the movement of workers in three corridors: (1) the movement of workers from Bay Minette and central Baldwin County communities to jobs in the south Baldwin County cities of Foley, Gulf Shores and Orange Beach, (2) the movement of central Baldwin County and Eastern Shore community residents to newly developing jobs in and around the Mobile Aeroplex, and (3) the movement of Mobile County residents to jobs in central Baldwin County. A fourth area of attention, improving the movement of people to and within the newly urbanized Eastern Shore cities of Daphne, Fairhope and Spanish Fort, also was identified, but the urban nature of that fourth priority kept it largely outside the scope of this USDA-sponsored technical assistance effort.

As a result of this technical assistance, three specific transportation strategies are in the process of being considered and implemented:

- (1) Improvement of BRATS' daily bus service connecting Baldwin County origins with destinations in both downtown Mobile and the Mobile Aeroplex, which not only will improve the commuting needs associated with job growth at the Aeroplex, but also may help alleviate congestion on the cross-bay "Bayway" and "Causeway" crossings;
- (2) Improvement of BRATS' daily service along state highway 59 between Bay Minette and south Baldwin County destinations, so as to better fit the commuting needs of workers living in central Baldwin County; and
- (3) Establishment of a vanpool program to facilitate the commuting of Mobile County residents to employment destinations in central Baldwin County.

The Technical Assistance Approach

CDTLS began providing this technical assistance to the Central Baldwin Chamber of Commerce and its local partners in October 2013. A final presentation on the technical assistance efforts and outcomes was made to these partners in March 2015. Chris Zeilinger of the CDTLS staff and James J. McLary, adjunct staff to CDTLS, performed most of the technical assistance activities of this project.

CDTLS followed six roughly sequential steps in carrying out this technical assistance:

- **Step 1:** Review previous transportation studies, plans and reports for the project area.
- **Step 2:** Meet with key stakeholders to review goals, objectives and responsibilities for the technical assistance project.
- **Step 3:** Document characteristics and levels of existing transportation services, and prepare a technical memorandum documenting these services and – to the extent possible – present this information visually through mapping.
- **Step 4:** Identify unmet transit demand in the project area, and prepare a technical memorandum documenting the identified unmet transit demand.
- **Step 5:** Develop a plan for providing transit and related services that accommodate the identified unmet need, and prepare a technical memorandum that presents this plan in sufficient detail for implementation, including any necessary timelines and direct organizational responsibilities for implementation.
- **Step 6:** Research and develop data that identify opportunities for job creation and economic growth in Central Baldwin County that are expected as a result of the agreed-upon service plan, and present this information as part of a comprehensive final report that will be presented to the Chamber and its partners upon completion of the technical assistance activities.

As these steps were conducted, results were summarized in a series of technical memoranda that were shared with the Central Baldwin Chamber of Commerce and its partners. An initial technical memorandum, prepared in October 2014, presented the findings and results from Steps 1 through 4 in the enumerated list above. Step 5 was addressed in a pair of memoranda; one memorandum (“Initial Draft Alternatives”) was presented in January 2015, and the other (“Recommendations”) was presented in May 2015. The following report summarizes the results of those steps, and presents the results of Step 6 in the technical assistance that CDTLS provided to the Central Baldwin Chamber of Commerce and its partners.

The Economic Geography of Central Baldwin County

At 2,027 square miles, Baldwin County has the largest land area of any county in Alabama. In the 2010 census, the county had a population of 182,265 residents. Sandwiched between the major metropolitan areas of Mobile (to the west) and Pensacola (to the east), Baldwin County continues to be

largely rural, but this is changing. In 2010, an urbanized area was designated in the Daphne-Fairhope-Spanish Fort area; also in 2010, most of the city of Orange Beach was designated as part of the Pensacola urbanized area (separately, the Baldwin County community of Lillian has been recognized as part of the Pensacola urbanized area since the 2000 census).

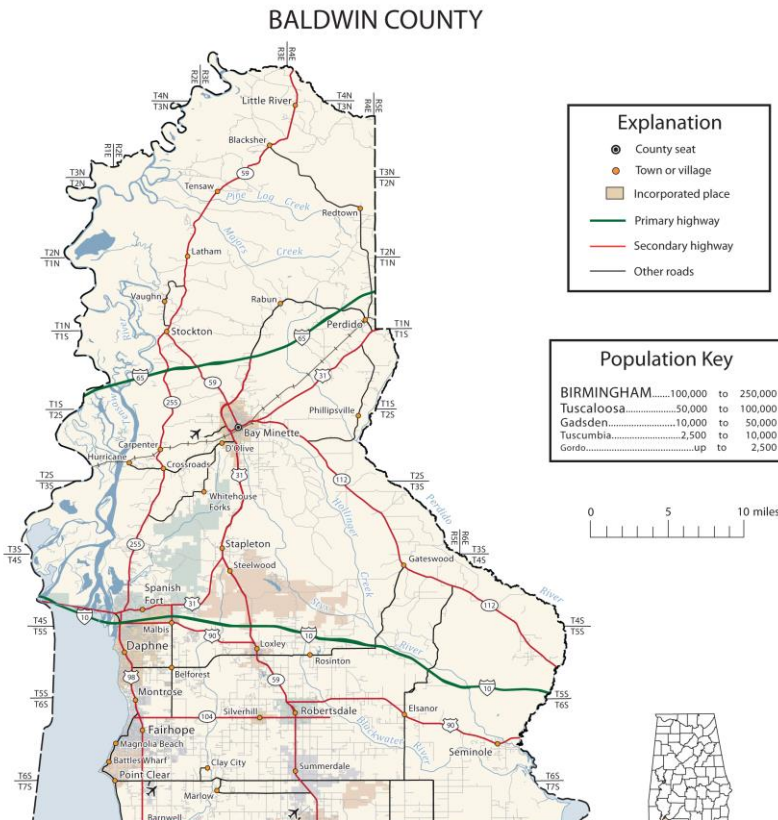
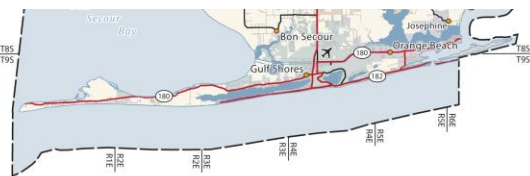


Figure 1 – A map of Baldwin County, Alabama



Central Baldwin County, the county’s rural core, is itself experiencing challenge and transformation. Historically agricultural, this area is experiencing a changing business climate. There are several aspects to this change: (1) the overall area of south Alabama and west Florida is becoming more industrial, most notably with expanded activity at the port of Mobile and with the establishment of an Airbus assembly line and related industries in Mobile’s Brookley Aeroplex; (2) increasingly, Baldwin County, including its central portion, is becoming

home to workers who commute to jobs in Mobile (and, to a much lesser degree, to Pensacola); (3) the “eastern shore” communities in Baldwin County themselves have grown to become a Census-designated urbanized area which includes much of central Baldwin County in its swath; and (4) the southern portion of Baldwin County is experiencing significant growth in both its tourism and

industrial sectors, which reflects on the housing, transportation and community development patterns in central Baldwin County.

For the purposes of this technical assistance, “central Baldwin County” refers to that portion of the county whose local businesses are members of the Central Baldwin Chamber of Commerce. In general, this refers to the municipalities of Robertsdale, Loxley, Summerdale, Silverhill and their surrounding unincorporated areas.

Collectively, central Baldwin County reported a population of approximately 8,500 persons in the 2010 Census; this was a 32.4 percent growth from central Baldwin’s 2000 population. The unemployment rate among central Baldwin residents hovers around 7.0 percent; approximately 11.3 percent of central Baldwin residents live in households with income below the federal poverty line. Despite the fact that Baldwin County is a generally prosperous county bordered by two thriving metropolitan areas, central Baldwin’s unemployment rate compares unfavorably with the state’s unemployment rate of approximately 6.0 percent. On the other hand, the relative prosperity of Baldwin County is reflected in its poverty statistics: central Baldwin’s poverty rate is much higher than the state’s rate of 18.6 percent of households living with incomes below the poverty line, and even exceeds the U.S. average of 15.4 percent of households with incomes below the federal poverty line.

Working and Living in Central Baldwin County

In 2013, there were 58,004 jobs held in Baldwin County. Of these jobs, Baldwin County residents held 37,443 jobs, and 8,834 residents of Mobile County commuted to jobs in Baldwin County. The remaining 11,727 jobs were held by residents who commuted from various other counties in south Alabama and west Florida.

Also in 2013, there were 70,122 employed persons who lived in Baldwin County. As mentioned above, 37,433 of these residents had jobs within Baldwin County, and 32,679 residents commuted to jobs outside the county, primarily to Mobile County, which is the place of work for more than 26 percent of all Baldwin County residents.

Looking at the four municipalities that make up central Baldwin County (i.e., Loxley, Robertsdale, Silverhill and Summerdale), this portion of the county had 2,874 employed persons. Only 15 percent of central Baldwin County residents have jobs in the area. Instead, Mobile is the largest single work destination of central Baldwin County residents, followed by the “Eastern Shore” communities (Daphne, Fairhope, Spanish Fort) and the south Baldwin County communities (Foley, Gulf Shores, Orange Beach).

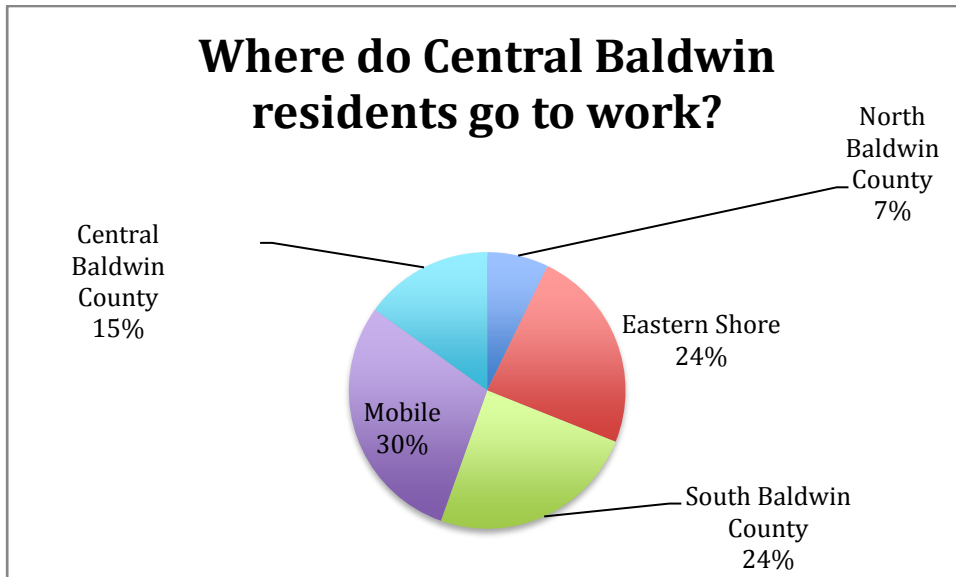


Figure 2 - Employment destinations of Central Baldwin County residents

Indicative of central Baldwin County's status as a hub of economic activity, the number of jobs in this area exceeds the number of working persons. There are 3,788 jobs in the central Baldwin County workforce. Central Baldwin County residents hold only 22 percent of these jobs. The city of Mobile is the single leading place of residence for central Baldwin County workers, accounting for 18 percent of the area's jobs. Collectively, the Eastern Shore communities (Daphne, Fairhope, Spanish Fort) account for 36 percent of central Baldwin workers' homes.

What these data reveal is that commuting is essential to the continuing economic vitality of central Baldwin County. The numbers may not seem staggering, but the fact that the majority of central Baldwin workers are commuting from Mobile or the Eastern Shore is hugely significant, as is the fact that more than 75 percent of central Baldwin residents commute to jobs in Mobile, the Eastern Shore, or south Baldwin County.

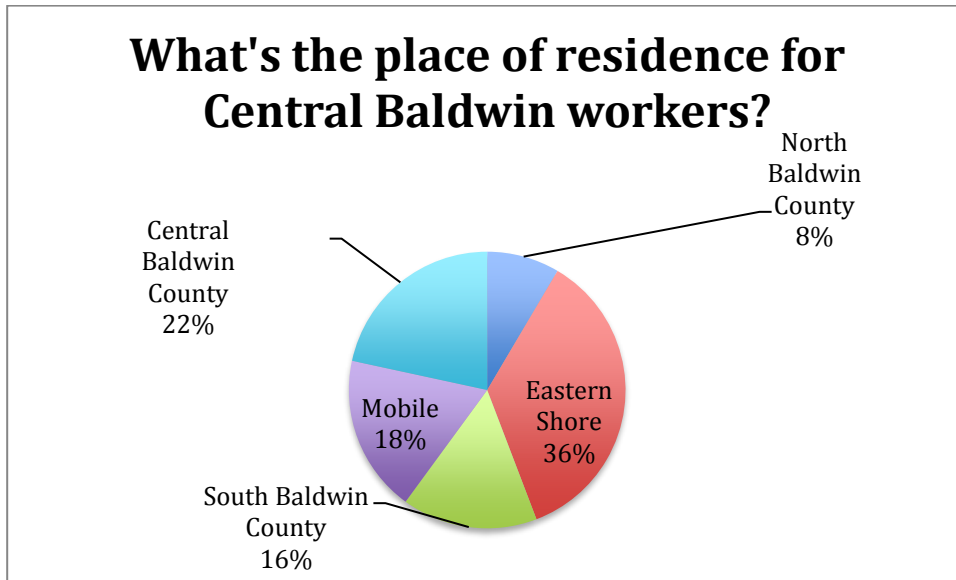


Figure 3 - Place of residence for persons employed in Central Baldwin County

Commuting & Transit in Baldwin County

What the labor market and commuting patterns of central Baldwin County illustrate is that there is a considerable flow of workers every day in both directions across the “Bayway” and “Causeway” bridges that link Baldwin County with the city of Mobile. With the growth of industry at both the Aeroplex and at Mobile’s port facilities, as well as growth of businesses and industry in central and south Baldwin County, this travel will continue to increase. This commuter traffic describes a well-defined 60-mile arc from Mobile through the Eastern Shore cities to central Baldwin County, and on to the south Baldwin cities of Foley, Gulf Shores and Orange Beach.

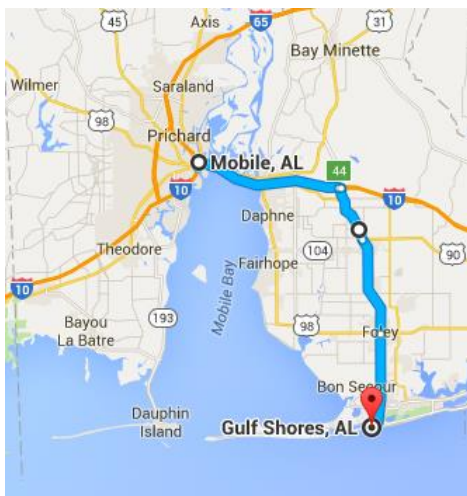


Figure 4 - The 60-mile "commuting arc" between Mobile and Gulf Shores, via Spanish Fort, Robertsedale, Foley and intermediate points

Recent commuting data from the U.S. Census Bureau and the U.S. Dept. of Labor can be summarized as follows.

Daily commuting from the City of Mobile to:

- Eastern Shore (Daphne, Fairhope, Spanish Fort) – 2,449 workers
- Central Baldwin County (Loxley, Robertsedale, Silverhill, Summerdale) – 242 workers
- South Baldwin County (Foley, Gulf Shores, Orange Beach) – 512 workers

Daily commuting to the City of Mobile from:

- South Baldwin County – 1,012 workers
- Central Baldwin County – 578 workers
- Eastern Shore – 5,346 workers

For a city the size of Mobile, these data are interesting, as they show that at least 4.3 percent of all employed people who live in the city of Mobile commute to jobs in the Eastern Shore, central Baldwin, and south Baldwin County, and at least 6.1 percent of all jobs in the city of Mobile are held by people who live in – and commute from – the Eastern Shore, central Baldwin, and south Baldwin County.

Given the relative proximity of the Eastern Shore to the city of Mobile, those particular commuting numbers are meaningful, but not necessarily surprising. What stands out are the numbers of commuters each way between Mobile and central Baldwin County, and the number of commuters who pass through central Baldwin each day on commutes both ways between Mobile and the south Baldwin County cities.

Central Baldwin County is adversely affected by seasonal traffic congestion along Highway 59. This congestion impacts both the ability of workers to get to and from employment on the Gulf coast and in Foley, and impacts the ability of Foley- and Central Baldwin-area businesses to send and receive the goods they handle and manufacture.

Congestion on the Interstate 10 and Highway 90 causeways that connect Spanish Fort with Mobile adversely affects commuting traffic in and out of Mobile, and adversely affects the ability of businesses and industries in Baldwin County move their goods and services to and through Mobile.

Any transportation strategy that can reduce the traffic congestion on the Mobile Bay causeways and on Highway 59 in central Baldwin County will improve quality of life for central Baldwin County residents and employees, and will improve the economic vitality of central Baldwin County, south Baldwin County, and the Eastern Shore.

The traditional approaches for addressing traffic congestion are present in Baldwin County, but utilization rates are low. Among central Baldwin County residents, 12.9 percent, or 371 employed persons, report using carpools or transit to get to and from their primary jobs.

Baldwin Regional Area Transit System (BRATS) is the countywide transit service operated by Baldwin County Commission; among BRATS's many services are a handful of regular services geared specifically for getting people to and from their jobs. These commuter services are offered on designated routes; however, deviations from these routes are available with advanced reservations. The work-related transit consists of:

- a once-daily "Beachlinc" service connecting Bay Minette (and intermediate points) to employment destinations along the Gulf coast, which delivered 3,322 trips in 2014,
- two daily "Northlinc" services, one from Foley to Bay Minette via Robertsdale and Loxley, and the other from Fairhope to Bay Minette via Daphne and Spanish Fort, which collectively delivered 3,318 trips in 2014, and
- three daily "Baylinc" round trips from Fairhope through Daphne and Spanish Fort to Mobile, which collectively delivered 15,962 trips in 2014.

As with all of BRATS's operations, those three services are quite productive by rural transit standards, but their impact is not even a drop in the bucket of overall commuting in Baldwin County, as they are fulfilling the commuting needs of approximately 7 workers on the Beachlinc route, 7 workers on the Northlinc routes, and approximately 32 workers on the Baylinc routes. In other words, out of nearly 7,000 people who commute daily into Mobile from Eastern Shore, central Baldwin, or south Baldwin County, only 32 – or 0.5 percent of the commuter traffic – are using the county's public transit system.

In addition, there are no transit services that connect Mobile residents with any of Baldwin County's employment destinations, nor do any of BRATS's current transit services connect central Baldwin County workers with Mobile employment destinations. This means that hardly any of central Baldwin County's workers or employees can consider transit as part of their commuting habit, at least not in its present configuration. Nevertheless, it appears that more than 1 in every 8 central Baldwin County working residents is carpooling to and from their place of employment. This suggests that shared-ride mobility options can be a viable part of the transportation mix in this region.

Given its location as a hub of both the highway network and the economic patterns of Baldwin County, there is no exaggeration in saying that "what is good for central Baldwin is good for all of Baldwin County." Where travel and commuting patterns are concerned, nearly all traffic between south Baldwin County and Mobile must pass through central Baldwin County, and as stated above, central Baldwin itself is both a destination and origin for Mobile-oriented commuter travel.

Mobility Options for a Growing Central Baldwin County

Based on its experience working with transit and mobility options in rural, small-urban and exurban communities across the country, the CDTLS team suggested a range of possible mobility strategies for central Baldwin County. These strategies, none of which are exclusive of one another, fell into three broad categories, as outlined below:

Strategy Set 1: Changes to BRATS service, addressing

- Direct service between Baldwin County and downtown Mobile’s WAVE transfer center,
- Direct service connecting residential concentrations with employment centers in both Baldwin and Mobile Counties,
- Enhanced transit service along Route 59 between Bay Minette and Gulf Shores, and
- Enhanced demand-response transit service to communities within Baldwin County.

Strategy Set 2: Regional shared-ride services, including

- Carpools, whether agency-administered through BRATS, the Eastern Shore MPO, the South Alabama Regional Planning Commission, or some other entity, or self-administered through such technology platforms as carpooling.com or zimride.com, and
- Vanpools, whether agency-administered through BRATS, the Eastern Shore MPO, the South Alabama Regional Planning Commission, or some other entity, or through third-party contracts with entities such as Enterprise Rideshare, vRide, etc.

Strategy Set 3: Mobility management activities, including

- Agency-based mobility manager, whether at BRATS, ESMPO, SARPC or elsewhere, and
- Guaranteed Ride Home programs, either agency administered or provided through a third party contract.

All of these strategies were discussed at some length with the Central Baldwin Chamber of Commerce and its partners. As stated above, none of these strategies were dependent upon or exclusive of any of the others, which means that any or all of them can be adopted, as desired by the area’s key stakeholders. Some key points of that discussion are as follows:

Strategy Set 1: Changes to BRATS Service

Mobility Strategy 1(A): Improved service to WAVE transfer center

Historically, all of BRATS’s “Bayline” services terminate at Bienville Square in downtown Mobile. This may be satisfactory for those commuters whose jobs are within easy walking distance of Bienville Square, but for those Baldwin County commuters whose jobs in Mobile are elsewhere, there is very limited connectivity to the bus routes and destinations served by WAVE (the city of Mobile’s public transit system). If arrangements could be made to allow BRATS buses to serve both Bienville Square and the WAVE transit center on Beauregard Street, with easy transfers to the WAVE bus network, the attractiveness of transit as an option for Mobile-bound Baldwin County commuters would be tremendously improved, and probably could be achieved at little to no extra cost to BRATS.

Mobility Strategy 1(B): Improved transit connections to employment destinations in both Baldwin and Mobile Counties

As detailed previously in this report, current employment transportation linkages are limited largely to the three buses traveling once a day into downtown Mobile from the Eastern Shore (which does not directly benefit central Baldwin County's commuters), two buses traveling once a day to Bay Minette from the Eastern Shore cities (one Northlinc bus) and from central Baldwin County (the other Northlinc bus), and one bus traveling once a day from Bay Minette through central Baldwin County to Gulf Shores and adjacent workplace destinations. There is additional BRATS service within the Eastern Shore and within central Baldwin County that may be providing a small amount of local employment transportation.

A number of incremental improvements to the "Baylinc" network of routes could yield tremendous benefits. These include:

- (i) extending the eastern termini of the Baylinc routes so that they begin in Gulf Shores, Summerdale and Bay Minette, passing through central Baldwin and Eastern Shore pickup points before proceeding into Mobile;
- (ii) extending the western termini of the Baylinc routes so that they serve not only Bienville Square (and the WAVE transit center, as explained above), but also the Port of Mobile and the Aeroplex; and
- (iii) establishing a "reverse commute" version of the Baylinc, starting at the WAVE transit center, and then serving Eastern Shore and central Baldwin dropoff points before terminating in Foley or Gulf Shores. (Attempted this and it failed.... Continue to offer with a 24 hour reservation.)

Mobility Strategy (1)(C): Enhanced transit service along Route 59

The distance from Bay Minette to Gulf Shores is nearly 60 miles. Gulf Shores, Orange Beach and Foley all have many service- and hospitality-sector jobs, plus Foley – like central Baldwin – has a growing number of light manufacturing and other commercial jobs. The numbers aren't huge, but quite a few of these south Baldwin workers commute from residences in central Baldwin and in Bay Minette. Foley, in particular, is a significant commuting destination for many central Baldwin residents. The current "Beachlinc" route serves all the right places, but is lightly patronized. The simplest improvement would be to present and offer this service as a more traditional fixed route commuter bus service – i.e., no longer requiring advance trip requests, having designated stops (ideally with some signage and passenger amenities), and sticking to an established schedule – which itself would be sure to improve the attractiveness and utilization of this route by south Baldwin workers. Once those easy, no-cost steps are taken, BRATS could assess whether additional service is warranted on any segments of this corridor (the evidence suggests there may be need for additional fixed-route service between Loxley and Gulf Shores, with several intermediate stops in Robertsdale, Summerdale and Foley). In addition, BRATS should consider providing service throughout the day along some (or all) of the Route 59 corridor, with hourly or half-hourly headways.

A related corridor worth examining would be to establish a variation on the Beachlinc, connecting Spanish Fort with Gulf Shores, having several intermediate stops in Daphne, Fairhope, Magnolia

Springs and Foley. From a countywide or regional perspective, that service could have a highly positive impact, but is unlikely to have a direct benefit for central Baldwin County.

Mobility Strategy (1)(D): Enhanced demand-response service to Baldwin County communities

Nominally, BRATS provides demand-response transit service throughout Baldwin County. That said, much of BRATS's service is limited, with many locations in Baldwin County typically receiving transit service only on one, two or three days a week, and only for a small number of hours at that. However, the larger communities in Baldwin County, including Bay Minette, the Eastern Shore cities, Robertsdale and Foley, generally have one or more BRATS vehicles in local transit service every day of the week.

An examination of BRATS's operating data suggests that the current configuration of service has a surprisingly large number of "deadhead" miles and hours, and lower passenger load factors, compared to what the CDTLS team would have expected to see in this sort of rural transit operation. It might feel challenging at first, but it should not be too difficult to improve the deployment and operation of BRATS's demand-response service in ways that would be even more responsive to local mobility needs. One easy way of addressing this can be to build on BRATS's current configuration, and base at least one demand-response vehicle in each of the county's municipalities, having that vehicle or vehicles assigned to provide demand-response service within the municipality and its immediately adjacent unincorporated areas.

The configuration and operation of public transit within the Eastern Shore urbanized area is a critically important and urgent question, but that is beyond the scope of this rural transportation technical assistance effort, and is best addressed through the Eastern Shore MPO's metropolitan transportation planning process.

Strategy Set 2: Regional Shared-Ride Services

Mobility Strategy 2(A): Carpooling strategies

The data suggest that much informal carpooling already is taking place, especially for central Baldwin County and other rural places having commuters to or from Mobile. The South Alabama Regional Planning Commission (SARPC) long has provided a ride-matching service to facilitate carpooling among Mobile County residents, largely to ease their commutes to Mobile County destinations. This service could be expanded to help facilitate carpooling among Baldwin County residents, and to facilitate carpooling between Mobile and Baldwin County, all at minimal cost.

Mobility Strategy 2(B): Vanpooling strategies

In many parts of the U.S., vanpools are a central part of the commuting network, especially when helping transport suburban or exurban workers to concentrated employment destinations in metropolitan cores, or when addressing "reverse commutes" in those circumstances where

conventional transit solutions would not be productive. Because both the capital acquisition and operating costs of vanpools typically are much lower than those of conventional transit services, vanpools can be the mode of best choice in many long-distance or low-density travel markets.

It therefore is surprising that there appear to be no vanpool services anywhere in south Alabama. There are numerous destinations in both Mobile County and Baldwin County that would seem ripe for successful vanpools; these could include the Port of Mobile, the Aeroplex, and downtown Mobile, and – in Baldwin County – the Foley industrial park, the major hotel/resort developments in Gulf Shores and Orange Beach, the medical complex in Fairhope, and possibly even the concentrated retail developments in Spanish Fort, Foley and Gulf Shores.

Given the relatively low number of workers who live in central Baldwin County, but who commute to specific destinations in the Mobile area and in south Baldwin, there is little doubt that vanpools could be the transit mode of choice for central Baldwin commuters.

There are many ways to structure and operate a vanpool service. One that is especially “low risk” is that provided by Enterprise Rideshare, in which a van is made available on a month-by-month basis to the vanpool sponsor. In this plan, the vanpool can continue for as long as it is successful, and larger or smaller vehicles can be used, depending on the participant demand. And if the vanpool is not working out, it can be dropped with only a month’s notice, thus sparing the vanpool sponsor the burden of being locked into unwanted or expensive years-long contractual relationships.

Strategy Set 3: Mobility Management Services

Mobility Strategy 3(A): Agency-based mobility manager

For many people, especially new or unfamiliar users of the transportation system, as well as those who may have transportation challenges associated with age, income and/or disability status, a mobility manager may be exactly what they need to make successful use of the transportation system. An effective mobility manager can help individuals connect with appropriate transportation services, whether these are the agency’s own services, those of other transportation providers, or those of the community’s formal or informal mobility networks. For those who may have difficulty or challenges in using the transportation services available to them, it may even be possible for a mobility manager to provide (or connect the user to) travel training services that help these individuals become more successful, independent users of the transportation system.

An added financial inducement for considering mobility management is that federal law allows FTA grantees and subrecipients to treat their mobility management costs, including the salaries and associated costs of mobility managers, as a capital item, with the federal government paying up to 80 percent of these mobility management costs.

Mobility Strategy 3(B): Guaranteed Ride Home services

Uncertainty is one of the leading reasons for commuters to eschew transit, ridesharing, vanpools or other alternatives to use of their personal vehicle for getting to and from work. Some workers have irregular hours. Parents and caregivers often have to be concerned about being able to leave work to look after unexpected needs of a child or family member. In many households, commute-related “trip-chaining” is a necessary part of the commuting experience, in which the worker needs to stop and attend to various other household needs such as shopping or child care while en route to or from work. Guaranteed ride home programs don’t address all those variables, but they do at least relieve some of the anxiety some workers have around the notion that they’re stuck at work without a personal vehicle.

In many ways, guaranteed ride home programs are like a form of insurance. They provide the assurance that the participant will get spontaneously needed transportation home from work if unplanned circumstances arise, often using the services of a taxi or other on-demand transportation service. Participants, their employers, or sometimes third parties such as local governments or transit entities will pay in to the guaranteed ride home program, basically buying “peace of mind” that certain unanticipated travel needs will be addressed. Decades of experience with guaranteed ride home programs have shown that actual utilization rates are quite low. This means that the costs of sponsoring such a program also can be rather low, since the pricing need only cover the actuarial likelihood of paying for transportation that is provided when guaranteed ride home benefits are being used.

The Selected Mobility Strategies for Central Baldwin County

Each of the eight mobility strategies outlined above could be carried out with relative ease by BRATS and its partners, but it is unrealistic to have all seven strategies launched all that the same time. Therefore, the CDTLS team met with BRATS and its partners in the spring of 2015 to review these strategies and select a more limited set of specific strategies to be pursued as the immediate results of this technical assistance.

Three strategies were selected by BRATS and its partners, and now are in various stages of being implemented.

Selected Strategy 1: Upgraded Baylinc Service to Mobile

One of the selected strategies is to increase the amount of scheduled transit service from Baldwin County origins to multiple Mobile destinations. This service enhancement includes the following elements:

- BRATS will explore establishing a fourth cross-bay service to connect Baldwin County origins with the Aeroplex.

- All four Baylinc services will have two stops in Mobile. For all four of these routes, one Mobile stop will continue to be Bienville Square. As just stated, one route then will proceed to the Aeroplex, and the other three routes will proceed from Bienville Square to the WAVE transit facility.
- At least one of the Baylinc routes will begin in Robertsdale and proceed from there to the currently established Eastern Shore stops. Another of the Baylinc routes will begin in Foley and proceed through central Baldwin County before picking up its current route in the Eastern Shore.

Selected Strategy 2: Upgraded Beachlinc Service

In the near term, there will not be any added Beachlinc service along the Route 59 corridor. However, BRATS will explore marketing and operating the existing service as a more traditional fixed-route commuter bus operation. In that scenario, there will be designated bus stops for the route, with signage and possibly passenger amenities. Passengers will be able to use the service simply by placing themselves at the stop shortly before the bus's arrival, and will not need to make advance reservations to ride the Beachlinc bus.

Selected Strategy 3: Regional Vanpool Service

As a low-risk, high-potential strategy for addressing the commuting needs of Mobile-area residents with Baldwin County jobs, BRATS and SARPC will work to establish both carpool and vanpool services that will operate from Mobile into Baldwin County. In contrast to prior approaches that SARPC and its peers used to deploy for promoting car- and vanpooling, there are new players and new approaches to vanpools and carpools.

In the carpooling arena, Mobile's CommuteSmart program is an established service for helping match people with rides, using a web-based platform for identifying drivers, riders and destinations. When launched in 2005, this service aimed to provide linkages to help Baldwin County commuters, but it has been largely dormant outside Mobile County. However, that can change, with local marketing and outreach to be performed by SARPC and Baldwin County. Given the steadily increasing numbers of commuters living in Mobile County and commuting to Baldwin County, and vice versa, there is little doubt that some number of these commuters can enjoy easier, more productive commutes through participation in CommuteSmart.

As time progresses, additional peer-to-peer forms of carpooling are likely to find deployment in southern Alabama. Some of these are "app-based" approaches that simply match available drivers and riders without direct staff involvement in making the matches; it's possible that some form of app-based peer-to-peer ridesharing may become a feature of Mobile's CommuteSmart service. There also are models in which matching of drivers and riders is done through app-based services that rely on business transactions, in which the app's platform includes some level of payment or reimbursement

to the driver; while there are numerous companies that use some form of this approach, one of the most widely known is Uber, whose presence in the city of Mobile recently was announced.

Given the increasing concentrations of employment at the Aeroplex, in Mobile's port facilities, in the Foley area, and elsewhere in Baldwin County and environs, there are sure to be instances when vanpools would be an even more attractive mobility option than carpooling or one-on-one ridesharing. Traditionally, vanpool arrangements depended on either a local agency directly acquiring its own vans for such a service, or entering into a year-long or multi-year contract with a third party vanpool company, such as vRide. These types of vanpool arrangements are well-suited to markets with established patterns of employment, commuting and vanpool use, but a 12-month contract often feels too risky for an area, such as Baldwin County, where there is not an established history of successful vanpooling.

However, the vanpool marketplace is evolving. One new strategy, which may be perfectly suited to Baldwin County's commuters, is that of month-by-month vanpool arrangements, such as that offered by Enterprise Rideshare. In such an arrangement, the duration of the vanpool commitment is only 30 days. Vehicles are offered to suit immediate demand, and can range from sedans to minivans to full-size standard vans (Enterprise is looking at the possibility, too, of providing larger vehicles, such as the Ford Transit or the Mercedes Benz Sprinter, for its vanpool services). If demand increases, the vanpool can upsize to a larger vehicle, or additional vehicles can be put into service. If demand decreases, the vanpool can downsize to a smaller vehicle. If the vanpool service simply does not work to the operator's or users' satisfaction, any part of the arrangement can be ended, penalty-free, with 30 days' notice.

In any case, the time is right for two actions to take place:

- SARPC and Baldwin County should expand the scope of CommuteSmart to serve those commuters with origins or destinations in Baldwin County, and should market the expansion of this service as a carpooling resource for Baldwin County residents and for Mobile County residents with Baldwin County jobs.
- BRATS, or some partner agency, should begin offering vanpool services for Baldwin County residents commuting to jobs in Baldwin and Mobile County, using the month-by-month Enterprise Rideshare program, or something comparable.

Implementation and Analysis of Selected Mobility Strategies

Operationally, all three mobility strategies described above are able to be implemented quickly by BRATS and its partners.

- Expanding the Baylinc service will require additional, or reallocated, capital and staffing resources within BRATS, but it may be possible for BRATS to achieve efficiencies elsewhere in

its operations to ease this service expansion. What will take more time is the designation of specific routes and stops, both in Baldwin and Mobile Counties, the negotiation of some service-related agreement with the city of Mobile and its transit system, the assurance to Alabama DOT that this service expansion is consistent with the federal Section 5311 and 5307 funds Alabama DOT distributes to Baldwin County, and the creation of informational materials and a marketing strategy that BRATS can use to launch and support this expansion. BRATS does not need to embark on this information and marketing strategy in isolation. It can work with the Central Baldwin Chamber of Commerce and other business groups in Baldwin County to help promote this and other employment-related service improvements, and can draw on local community groups and educational institutions to prototype or develop marketing materials.

- Upgrading the Beachline service requires very little additional effort from BRATS. There will need to be some fine-tuning of schedules and stops, particularly in central Baldwin County, and there will need to be informational materials and a marketing strategy that BRATS can use to launch and support this enhancement. BRATS does not need to embark on this information and marketing strategy in isolation. It can work with the Central Baldwin Chamber of Commerce and other business groups in Baldwin County to help promote this and other employment-related service improvements, and can draw on local community groups and educational institutions to prototype or develop marketing materials. With the upgrade of passenger stops along the Beachline route, there is the possibility for Central Baldwin Chamber of Commerce members and others to sponsor stops, take advantage of potential advertising opportunities, or find other ways that they can help support aspects of this service enhancement in ways that support their own businesses.
- While they are simple to operate, launching and supporting carpooling and vanpooling programs will require more upfront and behind-the-scenes effort by BRATS and its partners. Participating in the CommuteSmart program will require some formal commitment (and a very small participation fee) from the Baldwin County Commission. BRATS or any other entity that enters into an arrangement with Enterprise Rideshare or any other third-party vanpool contractor will need to review the necessary agreements and carry out appropriate due diligence to assure that the arrangements are executed properly and appropriately. The largest resource commitment, though, will be the ongoing promotion and support of these types of mobility services. Some print and web-based information will need to be developed and maintained, but BRATS can probably model these on the vanpooling and carpooling aspects of other local governments and transit systems. BRATS will benefit from designating a BRATS staff person as a mobility manager, with the primary mission of continually engaging with employers, businesses, riders and other prospective users of the carpooling and vanpooling services, to promote their use, help match users with appropriate services, and maintain awareness and support from among the employers who benefit from their workers' use of these vanpools and carpools. To be effective, a key element of that person's business community outreach should be centered on working with, and through, the Central Baldwin Chamber of Commerce and its counterparts in the area.

While all three strategies are both viable and valuable, they will not be instantaneous successes. Once launched, any new service should be kept in place for at least nine months, or preferably for a year or more, to see how its target audience is attracted to it over time, to see which elements are working, which elements are not working as well as anticipated, and to see what surprising new aspects of the service or its attractiveness emerge over time. Small fine-tuning adjustments can begin to be made after about six months, but no radical changes for at least nine months, unless some aspect of the service is becoming an embarrassing disaster of non-utilization.

- The Baylinc expansion will require the greatest commitment of newly deployed staffing and equipment, so it should receive a good deal of attention as it rolls through deployment.
- The Beachlinc service enhancement, while neither a huge investment of resources, nor a serious change in service configuration, may involve some long-term infrastructure investments, if there is any placement of shelters or other passenger amenities along its route. It therefore also will require ongoing attention, particularly if there are appear to be reasons to establish such fixed amenities.
- The carpooling and vanpooling service, while it has the greatest potential for growth, and may meet more of the identified transit need into and around Baldwin County than the other strategies, has the greatest elasticity in service risk: whatever is successful can be sustained, whatever needs to be expanded can be expanded, and whatever isn't working can be dropped, quietly, with no lasting risk to any of the sponsoring partners.

For all three of these strategies, the partners (some combination of BRATS, SARPC, ESMPO, Central Baldwin Chamber of Commerce, and other interested institutional stakeholders), should establish quarterly milestones and goals, and should confer regularly to see how these services are progressing, as measured against these milestones and goals. After a 12-month trial period, each service should be assessed in terms of “keep the service without major change,” “drop the service,” or “keep the service with changes as identified, based on experience.”

How Will These Strategies Improve the Baldwin County Economy?

Typically, successful transit investments will improve an area's economy in several dimensions, including:

- Alleviating traffic congestion, thus facilitating the more efficient movement of goods and people through a community;
- Providing convenient and cost-effective commuting, thus facilitating the efficient movement of workers to and from employment sites;
- Eliminating a barrier to workforce participation among an area's unemployment and non-working residents; and

- Permitting those residents who are not using personal vehicles (e.g., children and youth, adults with disabilities, older adults who are non-drivers) to continue residing in the area and engaging in the community's economy through their purchases of goods and services.

The particular transit and transit-related strategies outlined above are likely to generate positive economic returns for individual households, businesses, local government and the economy of south Alabama.

Strategy 1: Upgraded Baylinc Service to Mobile

Properly executed, this service expansion will make it possible for more residents of Baldwin County to commute to jobs in Mobile County. These commuters will fit one of four profiles: (a) workers current employed in Mobile County who are making a "mode shift" from personal vehicle commuting to the Baylinc service, (b) workers currently employed in Baldwin County who change jobs to get more attractive employment in Mobile County, taking advantage of the convenience offered by this transit service, (c) persons currently unemployed in Baldwin County who re-enter the workforce by obtaining employment in Mobile County, and for whom the convenience and affordability of transit make this employment possible, and (d) Baldwin County residents who have not been in the workforce, but are able to secure first-time employment in Mobile County, thanks to the convenience and affordability of transit.

Traffic congestion is an issue when persons are commuting from Baldwin County into Mobile. For instance, the Interstate 10 "Bayway" carries an average of nearly 80,000 vehicles a day, yet was designed for a traffic load of only 50,000 daily vehicles. Efforts are underway to secure funding to construct a new bridge and bay crossing, but it will be many years before such a project can be completed.

While Baylinc buses are susceptible to the same traffic congestion that vexes commuters in single-occupant vehicles, one of the advantages to transit is that the passengers can allocate their time in transit to tasks other than controlling the operation of a motor vehicle. They can sleep, read, quietly field mobile phone calls, and if the vehicle offers Internet connectivity, they may even be able to perform aspects of their professional duties while in transit.

A variety of economic factors also are influenced by – and also influence – commuting from Baldwin County into Mobile. For instance, prevailing wages in Mobile County are as much as 30 percent higher than comparable wages in Baldwin County. Plus, there simply are more jobs in Mobile County: 150,000 jobs, compared to Baldwin County's 60,000 jobs, which means there are more employment opportunities at every point in the wage spectrum, with Mobile County's jobs skewed slightly more heavily to better-paying industrial and professional jobs. Because the average cost of living in Baldwin County is approximately 8.5 percent higher than in Mobile County, there is added economic incentive for Baldwin County residents to secure the higher salaries they can obtain by working in Mobile.

Even if they work in their own county, Baldwin County residents drive longer distances to their jobs than do Mobile County's residents. The median length of commute for a Baldwin County resident is approximately 20 miles, compared to a median commute length of less than 10 miles for a Mobile County resident. Thus, the opportunity to commute into Mobile may not be all that discouraging for most Baldwin County residents.

Most Mobile-bound commuters from Baldwin County already have personal vehicles with which to make these commutes. Some will choose transit because of its convenience, and if priced at or near \$3.00 per one-way trip, the fare will be seen as something more attractive than the costs of driving a personal vehicle into Mobile. A small number of transit commuters from Baldwin into Mobile will find that they can manage to reduce the number of vehicles in their household, on account of the convenience of transit.

Some of Baldwin County's unemployed and non-working residents will be able to enter or re-enter the workforce through employment in Mobile County. For many of these entering or re-entering workers, the cost savings of transit will be a significantly attractive aspect, even if their household has vehicles available for such a commute. Again, the price point to make transit perceived as a viable option is when the trip's fare is \$3.00 per one-way trip.

These points notwithstanding, Baldwin County has a limited capacity for expanding the Bayline service. Basically, what is suggested in this strategy is to increase the number of Bayline routes from three to four, lengthening all of these routes to begin in Central (or South) Baldwin County and to serve additional destinations in Mobile. Service would continue to be provided in small buses, which can be used to cover other BRATS service in the middle of the day, when not needed to cover the Bayline routes. The number of individuals who'll take advantage of this service enhancement are modest: CDTLS predicts that average ridership will increase from 12 passengers per route to 16 on account of the service expansion, which would mean Bayline utilization would grow from 36 individual Baldwin County users to an estimated average of 64 users (i.e., growing from 18,000 annual passenger trips to 32,000 annual passenger trips).

CDTLS feels that no additional equipment is needed for this service expansion, but there would be an increase in staff-hours dedicated to the Bayline service, which CDTLS hopes can be offset through improved service efficiencies elsewhere in the BRATS operation. Assuming that to be the case, CDTLS forecasts modest net improvements to the Baldwin County economy as a result of the Bayline expansion, including:

- 12 currently employed Baldwin County residents gaining higher-paying jobs in Mobile County, 4 of whom achieve increased household savings by removing a no-longer necessary vehicle from their household: net increase to Baldwin County economy is approximately \$125,000 per year.

- 8 currently unemployed Baldwin County residents reenter the workforce by obtaining Mobile County jobs, and are able to achieve household savings by commuting to these jobs via Baylinc: net increase to Baldwin County economy is approximately \$200,000 per year.
- 4 Baldwin County residents become first-time workers by obtaining Mobile County jobs, which – since these tend to be lower-wage jobs – are economically viable only on account of using Baylinc as the commuting solution: net increase to Baldwin County economy is approximately \$60,000 per year.

The bottom-line benefit of this strategy to the Baldwin County economy, then, is approximately \$385,000 per year.

Strategy 2: Upgraded Beachlinc Service

This is the most modest of the three strategies that BRATS and its partners identified. It is expected to improve utilization of BRATS' Beachlinc service that connects Bay Minette with south Baldwin County. In doing so, it should improve commuting and employment opportunities for some central Baldwin County residents. By improving employment opportunities for central Baldwin residents, there will be some modest improvement of the central Baldwin County economy.

Although perceived traffic congestion along Highway 59 is an issue in central Baldwin County, BRATS is not committing the level of transit resource that will make a discernable difference in this congestion. In fact, BRATS' only plan under this strategy is to make modest adjustments to the existing Beachlinc service, and some minor capital improvements (bus stop signs, and possibly benches, shelters or other amenities) along the route. There will not be any increased level of service along the Beachlinc route or BRATS' other central Baldwin routes, but the increased visibility of the service, and improved marketing and service delivery, should attract additional riders.

Specifically, CDTLS estimates that as many as 8 currently unemployed, nonworking, or underemployed residents of central Baldwin County would begin using this revitalized Beachlinc service to access new jobs in Foley, Gulf Shores or Orange Beach. By doing so, Baldwin County payrolls would grow by approximately \$140,000, the county and state would experience a savings in some social service spending, and the contribution these workers would make to the overall Baldwin County economy would be approximately \$725,000.

Showing the value of creating opportunities for Baldwin County residents to access Baldwin County jobs, this small move, which would cost almost nothing to implement, may help grow the local economy by more than \$725,000, provided that BRATS can use these service improvements to attract new riders to this route.

Strategy 3: Regional Vanpool Service

From a dollars-and-cents point of view, vanpool services have tremendous attractiveness. For one thing, they're incredibly elastic: if demand increases, additional vans can be put into service, and they can be taken out of service if demand decreases; what's more, some vanpool programs, like that offered by Enterprise Rideshare, allow the size of vehicle itself to be adjusted on a month-by-month basis to fit current demand. Another economic attractiveness of vanpools is their low cost: since they do not use employed drivers (vanpool participants themselves drive these vehicles), the only operating costs are fuel and routine maintenance expenses, plus some allowance for administrative and marketing costs. These costs, plus the amortized capital costs of the vehicles that are used, can be priced at a level that is at or below the IRS threshold for non-taxed qualified transportation fringe benefits, and handled by employers either as a fringe benefit provided directly by the employer or as a "pre-tax" benefit given by the employer to its participating employees.

In an area such as Baldwin and Mobile Counties, where there are a number of dispersed concentrations of employment sites, and some relatively considerable distances that workers travel to get to and from their jobs, vanpools offer a market penetration that could never be effected by traditional fixed-route transit or commuter bus services.

The experience in most regions is that vanpools are of limited appeal to low-income and first-time workers, despite their effectiveness at providing reliable, flexible transportation at little cost. Vanpools' greatest appeal are for middle-income workers commuting longer distances, where the costs of driving personal vehicles can add up over time, and where the convenience of shared ride transportation has greater attractiveness.

Therefore, CDTLS anticipates the leading market for vanpool services in and around Baldwin County is inter-county connectivity, both in getting Mobile County residents to Baldwin County jobs, and in getting Baldwin County residents to Mobile County jobs.

It should not be difficult to use vanpools (plus the expanded Baylinc transit service described earlier) to attract modest growth of approximately one percent in the number of people commuting from one county to the other. If this were the case, then the quantitative goals, and their economic results, would be:

- 90 individuals commuting from Mobile County residences to Baldwin County jobs. While the \$2.7 million in payroll earned by these workers each year primarily would accrue to Mobile County and its tax base, these workers would be generating \$14.0 million in additional economic output for Baldwin County, with minimal cost to the county's schools, public services or infrastructure.
- 120 individuals commuting by vanpool from Baldwin County residences (primarily in central and south Baldwin County) to jobs in Mobile County. This does not include any of the workers using the expanded Baylinc services described earlier. While these workers primarily are contributing to the economic output of Mobile County, the fact remains that they are bringing

\$4.7 million in annual payrolls home to Baldwin County, where it is deployed in the local tax base, and in the purchase of locally provided goods and services.

Therefore, the economic bottom line of this vanpool deployment strategy, whose operation covers the entirety of its direct costs, is an economic benefit of approximately \$18.7 million to the Baldwin County economy.

Conclusion: It's All About Jobs

The technical assistance that CDTLS provided to the Central Baldwin Chamber of Commerce, BRATS and their partners centered on the use of transportation strategies to improve the Baldwin County economy in general, and central Baldwin County's economy in particular. While the greatest long-term transportation strategy that would improve Baldwin County's economy is a multimodal upgrade – one that expands both the capacity and versatility – of the entire Interstate 10 corridor from the Mobile Aeroplex, through downtown Mobile, across the Bayway, and across central Baldwin County toward Pensacola, that strategy is hundreds of millions of dollars away, and years into the future. Moreover, that strategy is beyond the scope of CDTLS' technical assistance.

CDTLS helped identify three readily achievable, incrementally low cost strategies that could begin to address improvements to the Baldwin County economy. These strategies are independent of each other, and none require any more than a minor commitment of Baldwin County public or private sector spending. These strategies are:

Expand BRATS' Bayline commuter bus service to provide additional destinations in Mobile, and additional origins in central and south Baldwin Counties, with offsetting efficiencies elsewhere in BRATS' operations. With these offsets, the net cost of providing the service is nearly zero, 28 additional Baldwin County residents gain employment, and **the benefit of this strategy to the Baldwin County economy is approximately \$385,000 per year.**

Upgrade BRATS' existing Beachline and other services along Highway 59 to provide passenger amenities in central Baldwin County, better marketing of the service, and remove the requirement to schedule trips on this corridor in advance. There would be minor costs for the one-time improvements, an estimated growth of 8 daily riders along this corridor, and **the benefit of this strategy to the Baldwin County economy is approximately \$725,000 per year.**

Establish vanpool services to facilitate increased, convenient commuting from Mobile into Baldwin County, and from Baldwin County into Mobile. Aside from a \$500 annual fee to participate in the CommuteSmart program, all costs would be borne entirely by the users of these vanpool services, making the cost of implementation negligible; nevertheless, **the benefit of this strategy to the Baldwin County economy is approximately \$18.7 million per year.**

If carried out effectively by BRATS and its partners, therefore, the overall benefit to Baldwin County of the strategies presented through CDTLS' technical assistance effort will be growth of Baldwin County's

economy by **\$19.8 million** per year, as reflected by increased economic output and increased payrolls spent in the local economy by Baldwin County residents.

The key to this sort of economic success is a dedicated focus by BRATS on targeting its services, whether the buses it directly operates, or vanpooling or ridesharing services that it facilitates, on getting people to jobs. The above economic benefit can be achieved simply by getting a little over 300 people to jobs using BRATS-provided service. In a county with a population of more than 180,000, it should not be difficult to find 300 people to use BRATS-provided services for getting to and from their jobs.