

6. Public Transportation

Introduction

Public transportation is a lifeline for many citizens in the Western Piedmont region. Transit services connect people to jobs, schools, grocery stores, medical care, recreational areas, and family.

Investments in public transportation lead directly and indirectly to the creation of other tangible economic and community benefits. Effective public transportation systems serve local businesses by providing additional travel options for customers and employees, reduce congestion and travel time, decrease oil dependency, while also providing citizens with an opportunity to interact and strengthen community ties. As municipalities across the country enhance and expand public commuting options, it is becoming increasingly evident that public transportation plays a key role in our nation's transportation network.

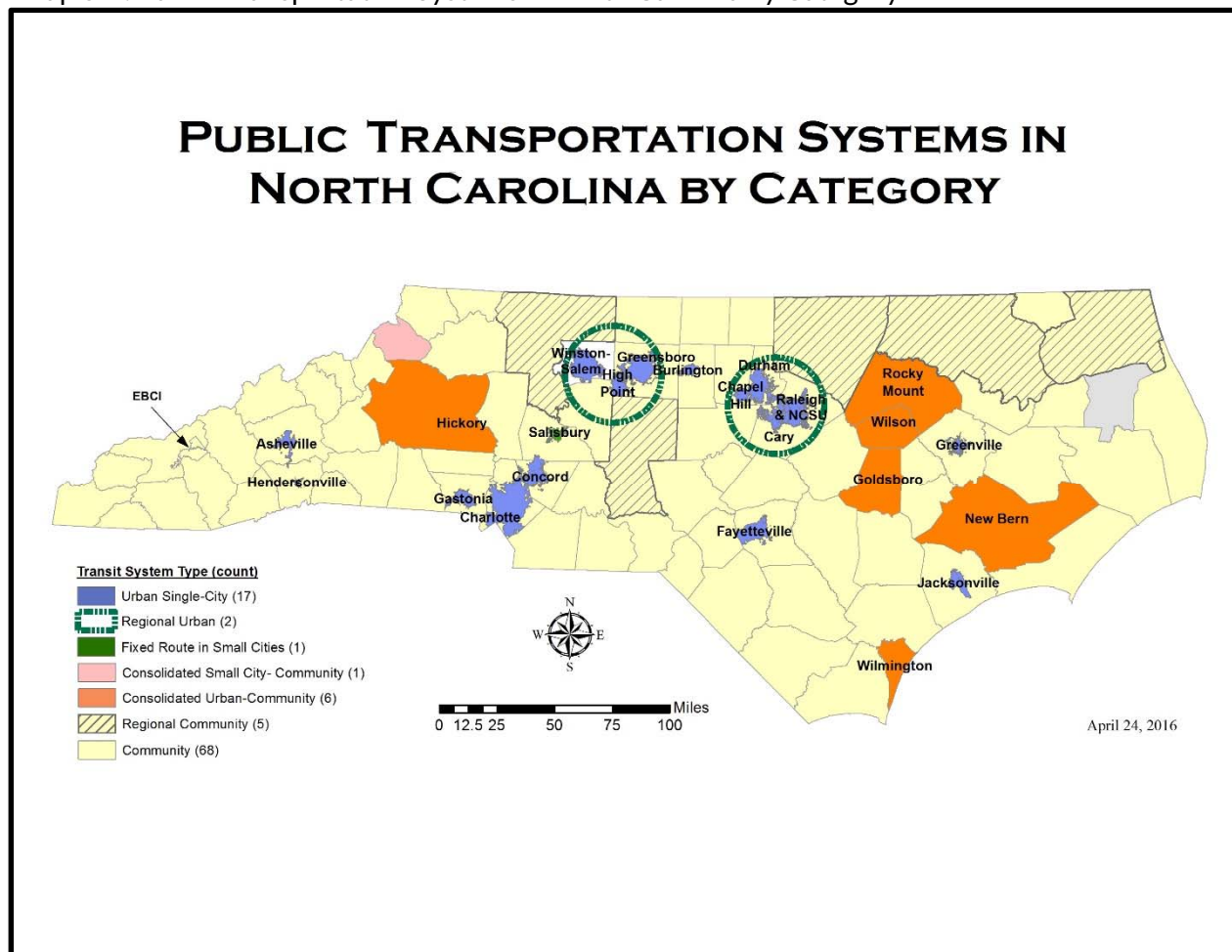
The Greater Hickory MPO planning area is served by the Western Piedmont Regional Transit Authority (WPRTA), currently operating as Greenway Public Transportation. Fixed route and demand-response service is currently provided in both rural and urban areas throughout Burke, Caldwell, Catawba and Alexander counties. The WPRTA is one of nearly 6,500 providers of public and community transportation nationwide. These systems are crucial to local economies across the U.S., and they provide Americans with the ability to travel, shop and commute without having to rely solely on a personal automobile.

Background and History

The Western Piedmont Regional Transit Authority (WPRTA) was formed in 2008, when the public transportation operations in Alexander, Burke, Caldwell, and Catawba Counties were consolidated. Before this consolidation, community transportation was provided separately by each county. In Alexander County, community transportation was provided by Alexander County Transportation (ACT); in Burke County, services were provided by the Burke County Transit Administration (BCTA); in Caldwell County, services were provided by the Caldwell County Area Transit System (CCATS); and in Catawba County, services were provided by the Piedmont Wagon Transit System (PWTS). The only areas of the four counties that had fixed route transit were the Catawba County cities of Hickory, Newton and Conover, which was provided by the PWTS.

Following the completion of an extensive evaluation and implementation period, the Western Piedmont Regional Transit Authority was established as the first rural - urban regional transit Authority in North Carolina (Map 6-1). Officials in Alexander, Burke, Caldwell, and Catawba counties, along with the municipalities of Hickory, Newton, and Conover all passed resolutions to create the Authority.

Map 6-1: Public Transportation Systems in North Carolina by Category



Source: North Carolina Department of Transportation.

Western Piedmont Regional Transit Authority: Implementation Plan

While the WPRTA Implementation Plan was not primarily a transit service planning study, some logical service expansion ideas were discussed during the planning process. These expansion concepts were based on the configuration of the region's urbanized areas, coupled with the current demand level for human service agency-based trips. Federal Section 5307 transit providers in small urban areas are allowed (under current funding flexibility guidelines) to introduce deviated fixed-route services. This funding flexibility could be applied to the region's two urbanized corridors that currently lack regular route service. Human service agency-based trips can be provided along these routes, and revenues derived from those agencies can be used as local matching funds for the federal funding.

The region's two urbanized corridors include the Lenoir to Hickory Corridor along US 321-A and the Morganton to Hickory Corridor along US 70. These potential corridor routes would have a fixed schedule with specific pick-up points. Additional time would be added to the schedule for

deviations. In order for these potential future routes to be cost effective, it is recommended that they be based on current human service agency demand.

Mission Statements and Goals

The mission of the Western Piedmont Regional Transit Authority is to develop and maintain an effective, efficient, and safe system of public transportation services within Alexander, Burke, Caldwell and Catawba Counties which is responsive to the mobility needs of the region.

Transportation services provided shall be designed to maintain and encourage the use of public transportation and shall contribute to the economic vitality of the community, the conservation of natural resources and the protection of the environment.

The goals of the WPRTA are as follows:

1. Provide cost effective transportation services which optimize the utilization of personnel, vehicles and other resources.
2. Provide transportation services which meet the mobility needs of the community, within available financial resources.
3. Develop funding options which assure the continued stable operation of transportation services at a public subsidy level acceptable to the community.
4. Develop policies which assure, as much as possible, that transit services are designed and operated to encourage maximum use by the community. Service should be provided first in areas where the greatest potential for use exists.
5. Promote the use of public transportation services within the community. This includes both providing adequate and up-to-date information on available services and aggressively marketing the transit system.
6. Expand public transportation to new areas of the community as demands estimates and population densities indicate that service will be sufficiently utilized within established service standards.

Currently Available Public Transportation Services Offered by the Western Piedmont Regional Transit Authority

- Urban fixed route transit services in Hickory, Newton and Conover (Map 6-2)
- Americans with disabilities (ADA) complementary $\frac{3}{4}$ mile paratransit service
- Deviated fixed route service in Taylorsville and West Taylorsville
- Rural and urban general demand response service in Alexander, Burke, Caldwell and Catawba Counties
 - DSS Medicaid transportation program
 - Vocational Rehabilitation Service
 - Burke Literacy
 - Caldwell Family Resource Center
 - Burke Council on Alcoholism

- Adult Day Care
- Developmentally disabled groups
- Home and Community Care Block Grant Programs that service elderly passengers
- General and Medical demand response transportation.
- Private transportation providers operate in Burke County, providing trips brokered by WPRTA.
- Department of Social Services Temporary Assistance for Needy Family (TANF) programs

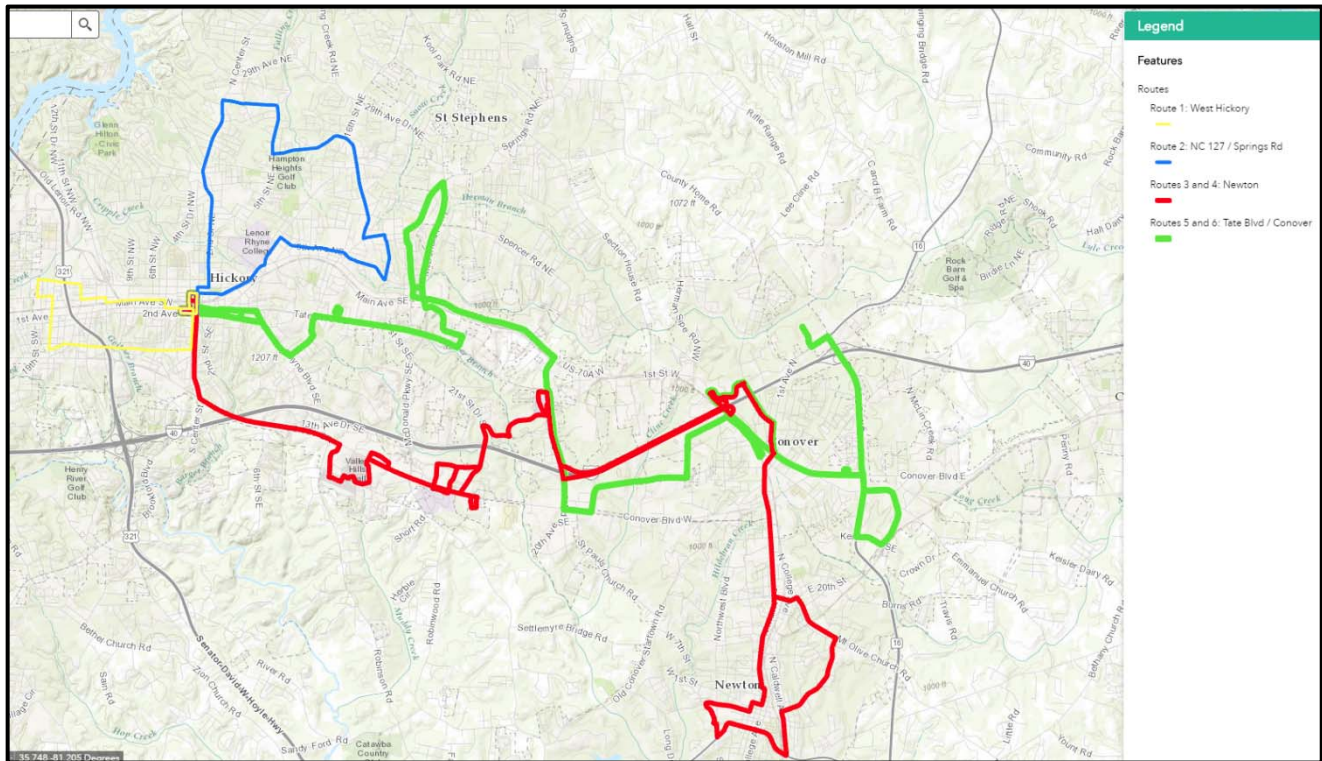
Other Public Human Service Transportation Providers

- Catawba County Department of Social Services
- Caldwell County Department of Social Services

Private Transportation Providers:

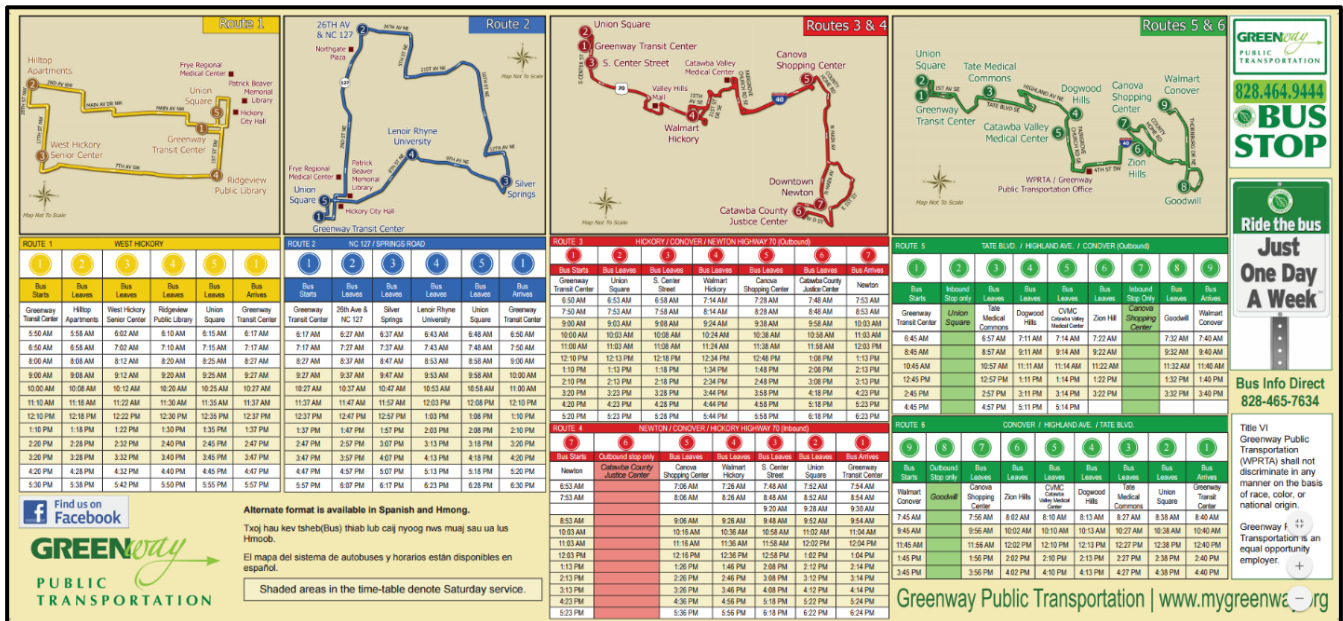
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|-----------------------------------|---|
| • Ace Cab | • Yellow/Diamond Cab |
| • Burke Christian Tours | • Pace |
| • Abby Cab | • Catawba County Medical Transportation |
| • Medi-Van | • Specialized Transportation |
| • Handi-Care | • Lake Hickory Transportation |
| • Lyft | |
| • Catawba Valley Medical Services | |
| • Premier Transportation | |
| • The Hickory Hop | |

Map 6-2: Current WPRTA Fixed Route Service – Cities of Hickory, Newton and Conover



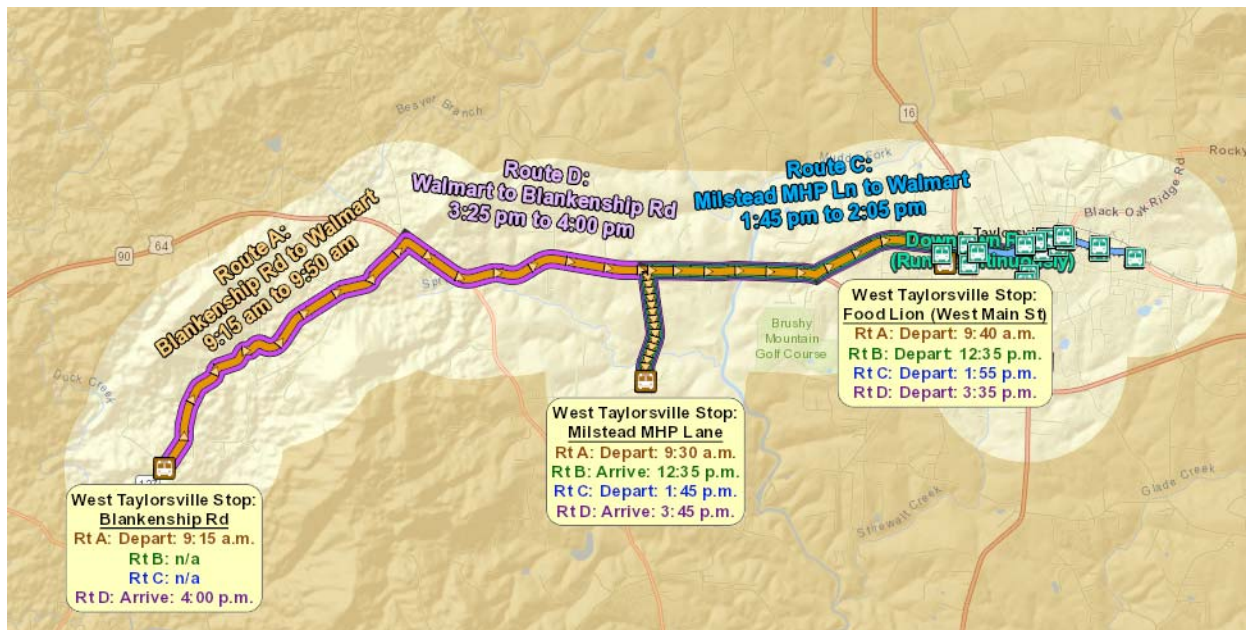
Source: Greenway Public Transportation.

Figure 6-1: Current WPRTA Urban Fixed Route Schedule – Cities of Hickory, Newton and Conover



Source: Greenway Transit.

Map 6-3: Current WPRTA Fixed Route Service – Town of Taylorsville



Taylorsville Bus Service Flex Route

Service operates on Monday, Wednesday, and Friday, except Holidays.



Source: Greenway Transit

Figure 6-2: Current WPRTA Taylorsville Fixed Route Schedule

Taylorsville		
Wal-Mart	Motel	Food Lion
10:00 am	10:10 am	10:20 am
10:30 am	10:40 am	10:50 am
11:00 am	11:10 am	11:20 am
11:30 am	11:40 am	11:50 am
12:00 pm	12:10 pm	12:20 pm
12:30 pm	12:40 pm	12:50 pm
1:00 pm	1:10 pm	1:20 pm
1:30 pm	1:40 pm	1:50 pm
2:00 pm	2:10 pm	2:20 pm
2:30 pm	2:40 pm	2:50 pm
3:00 pm	3:10 pm	3:20 pm
3:30 pm	3:40 pm	3:50 pm
4:00 pm	4:10 pm	4:20 pm
4:30 pm	4:40 pm	4:50pm
5:00 pm		

Source: Greenway Transit

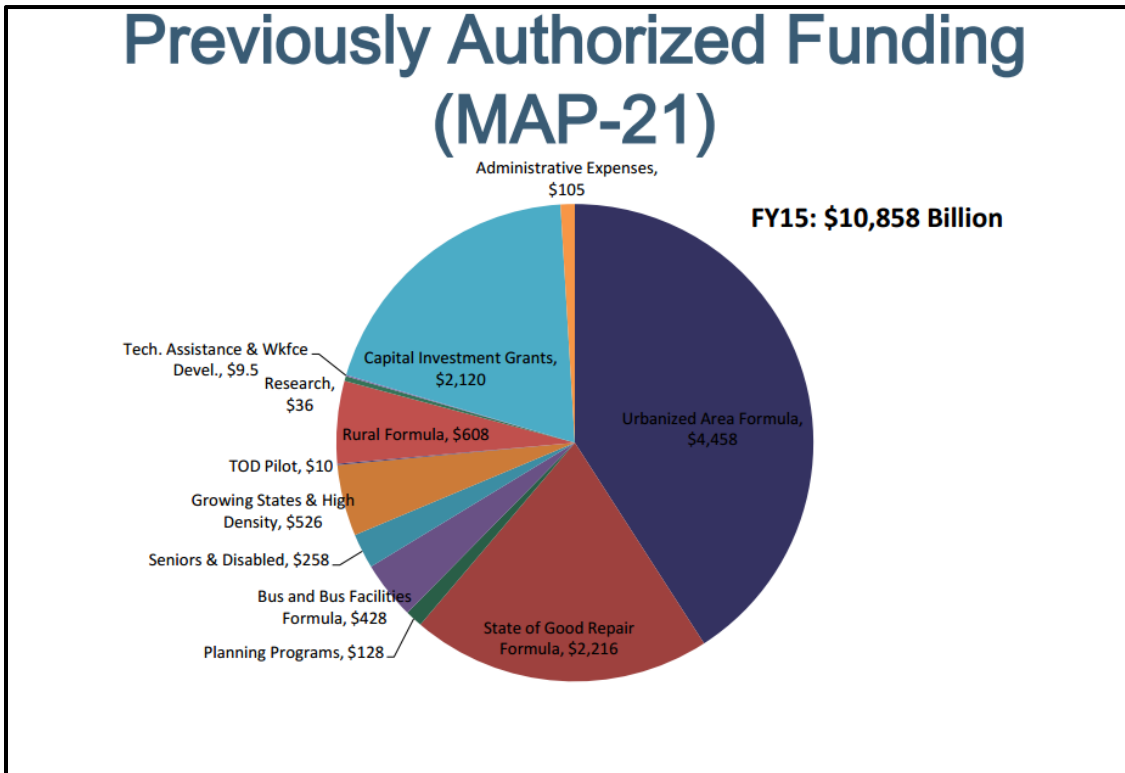
Fixing America's Surface Transportation (FAST) Act

In 2015, the Fixing America's Surface Transportation (FAST) Act (Pub. L. No. 114-94) into law. It was the first federal law in over a decade to provide long-term funding certainty for surface transportation infrastructure planning and investment. The FAST Act authorizes \$305 billion in improvements through 2020 for highway, highway and motor vehicle safety, public transportation, motor carrier safety, hazardous materials safety, rail, and research, technology, and statistics programs. The FAST Act maintains a clear focus on safety, keeps intact the established structure of various highway-related programs, continues efforts to streamline project delivery and, for the first time, provides a dedicated source of federal dollars for freight projects. With the enactment of the FAST Act, states and local governments are now moving forward with critical transportation projects with the confidence that they will have a federal partner over the long term.

Congress established the funding for Federal Transit Administration (FTA) programs through authorizing legislation that amends Chapter 53 of Title 49 of the U.S. Code. Previously authorized funding allocations (from MAP-21) are detailed in Figure 6-2; amended authorized funding under

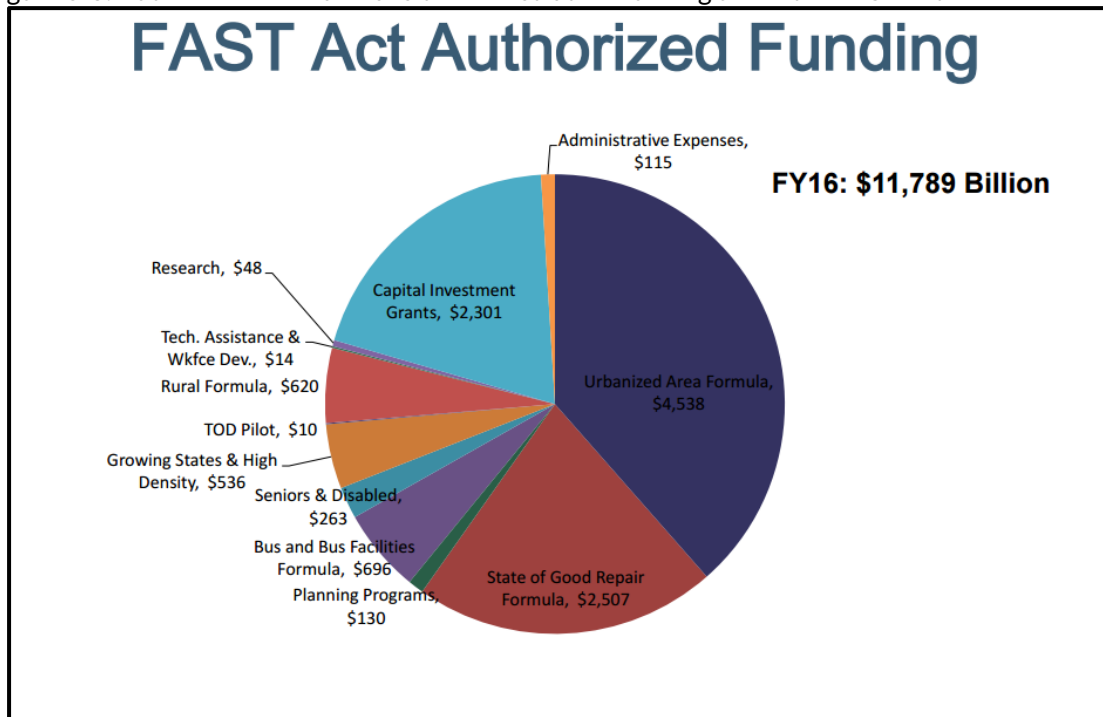
the FAST Act are shown in Figure 6-3. Program changes under the FAST ACT are summarized in Table 6-1.

Figure 6-2: Previously Authorized Federal Transit Administration is Funding under MAP 21



Source: United States Federal Transit Administration.

Figure 6-3: Authorized Federal Transit Administration Funding under the FAST Act



Source: United States Federal Transit Administration.

Table 6-1 Fast ACT Changes to Chapter 53 of Title 49 U.S. Code	
Bus and Bus Facilities (5339)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Includes a Pilot Program for Cost Effective Capital Investment, allowing a state to share bus funding resources among voluntarily participating designated recipients in order to allow them to procure more vehicles at a time at a lower cost
Expedited Project Delivery for CIG Pilot Program (3005(b))	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Creates a fast-track approval process for capital project construction grants, with a maximum of 25% federal share Replaces repealed subsection 20008(b) of MAP-21 Annual report and before/after studies are required
Pilot Program for Innovative Coordinated Access and Mobility (3006(b))	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> FTA will competitively distribute funding for innovative projects that improve the coordination of transportation services with non-emergency medical transportation services Eligible recipients are existing partnerships with specific goals for improving coordination
Research and TCRP (5312)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Renames 5312: Public Transportation Innovation Funds demonstration, deployment and evaluation research projects and maintains a match requirement for projects Research is now funded from both the trust and general funds
Technical Assistance and Workforce Development (5314)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Consolidates former 5314 and 5322 into a single section for both eligibilities, and maintains the National Transit Institute Workforce development remains a competitive program with outreach to additional populations, a focus on national training standards, increased outcome requirements, and a report to Congress
Metropolitan and Statewide Planning Program (5303/5304)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Adds resiliency and intercity bus into planning considerations Provides MPOs that serve Transportation Management Areas (TMAs) with an option to develop a Congestion Management Plan (CMP)
Urbanized Area Formula Program (5307)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> '100 bus rule' is modified to include non-ADA general population demand response transit area Allows 20% of allocation to be used for operations of ADA paratransit under certain conditions
Fixed Guideway Capital Investment Grants	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> New Starts: establishes a maximum 60% 5309 share, with up to 80% federal share (to be made up from other federal sources); no longer allows FTA to remove art and landscaping from the cost-effectiveness calculation
Enhances Mobility of Seniors with Individuals with Disabilities (5310)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Allows states or localities that provide transit service to be direct recipients under this section Requires FTA to develop a best practices guide for 5310 service providers
Public Transportation Safety Program (5329)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Requires the establishment of Minimum Safety Standards as part of the National Safety Plan Requires FTA to conduct a review of the safety standards and protocols used in public transportation systems to examine the efficacy of existing standards and protocols; Requires a final report on the findings of the review, with a comprehensive set of recommendations and further actions needed
State of Good Repair (5337)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Modifies the eligibility in the High intensity motorbus tier to cover only vehicle state of good repair costs

Transportation Needs of Special Populations

Population and Land Use

The 2010 Census indicated that the population in the Greater Hickory MPO was 365,497 people, an increase of 5.8% over the 2000 population of 342,142. State demographers estimate that the 2015 population for the four county area is approximately 365,471. The state's demographers have also predicted that the region's growth will slow over the next 20-year period - estimating that the region's 2025 population will have grown by 0.1% to 370,747 and the 2035 population will also have grown by 0.1% to 374,383. Alexander and Catawba Counties are predicted to grow at faster rates than Burke and Caldwell counties.

Growth in the region has been affected by the closure of several major manufacturing plants over the last ten years. The furniture and textile industries, which have historically been major employers in the region, have moved several facilities to other countries. Some of the lost manufacturing jobs have been replaced by positions in the retail and service sectors, which are both experiencing growth in the region.

Urbanized Area

There is a U.S. Census-designated "Urbanized Area" in the Western Piedmont region. This urbanized area is somewhat unusual, as the population density found in some areas within its boundaries would not suggest an "urban" designation. The area has the designation because there are several small municipalities within its contiguous borders that, when combined, have a population that is classified as "urban" by the U.S. Census (212,195 people, as of the 2010 Census). There is also a significant level of commuting between these jurisdictions, which is one of the other factors that the Census uses in its formula to determine urbanized areas. The urbanized area designation is significant for the MPO, as the FTA allocates public transit funding to specific urbanized areas.

Population Density

The mean population density of the region is 223.2 people per square mile, with Catawba County having the most concentrated population (390.8 people per square mile) and Alexander County have the least concentrated population (146 people per square mile). Burke County has a density of 175.7 persons per square mile and Caldwell has a density of 175.1 persons per square mile. Population density is an important demographic to study when planning transit services. Generally speaking, fixed-route transit can only be supported in areas with 1,500-2,000 people per square mile or more. Areas with lower densities require more targeted services, such as deviated fixed-route or demand-response services. The region's current fixed-route service network includes areas with fixed-route level population densities, as do areas of Lenoir and Morganton.

Employment Travel Patterns

Employment travel patterns based on the 2009-2013 American Community Survey were compiled and analyzed by the WPCOG in 2016. The analysis showed that Catawba County is significant employment destination for the three other counties in the region. These data can be useful in evaluating the feasibility of developing regionalized public transit services. The following commuting patterns were indicated in the WPCOG analysis.

- To Alexander County – 4,789 commuters from Catawba County (up 13.4% from 2010)
- From Burke County – 6,582 commuters to Catawba County (increase of 17.5% from 2010)
- To Caldwell County – 6,957 commuters from Catawba County (14.4% increase from 2010)

Local Coordinated Plan

In 2008, the Federal Transit Administration (FTA) began requiring the submittal of a Local Coordinated Public Transportation Plan in order for entities to be eligible to apply for funding from the Elderly and Disabled Individuals Transportation (FTA Section 5310), Job Access and Reverse Commute (FTA Section 5316) and New Freedom (FTA Section 5317) programs. In 2012 new legislation, the Moving Ahead for Progress in the 21st Century (MAP-21), went into effect. Changes as a result of the enactment of MAP-21 included a repeal of Section 5316 (JARC - Job Access and Reverse Commute) and Section 5317 (New Freedom) programs. New Freedom program elements were merged into an enhanced Section 5310 program which now serves as a single formula program to support the mobility of older adults and persons with disabilities.

The purpose of the Local Coordinated Public Transportation Plan is to identify the transportation needs of older adults, those with lower incomes, and individuals with disabilities. The plan then outlines a set of prioritized strategies that are developed specifically to meet those transportation needs. The primary reason for developing a Local Coordinated Public Transportation Plan is to promote transportation equity among those who may otherwise be transportation disadvantaged. Development of the plan also supports other important transportation goals, including the efficient management of limited resources, cooperation between agencies, and the creation economic development opportunities.

The Federal Transit Administration requires that Local Coordinated Public Transportation Plans contain the following:

- An assessment of available services that identifies current transportation providers (public, private, and nonprofit)
- An assessment of transportation needs for senior citizens and individuals with disabilities
- Strategies, activities, and/or projects which will address the identified gaps between current service levels and needs
- Opportunities to achieve effectiveness in service delivery
- Priorities for implementation based on resources, time, and feasibility

The most recent update to the Local Coordinated Plan was conducted in 2013. Plan updates occur every four (4) years. The Greater Hickory MPO and WPRTA will begin updating and amending the current plan in 2017.

Potential Projects

Circular Route in Burke County

In January 2017 the Hickory MPO, WPRTA, area non-profits, local governments, businesses and educational institutions began exploring options to fund the creation of an experimental fixed route service in Burke County. The proposed service would extend from Morganton, through Valdese and

connect to Connelly Springs. While the route is currently in the planning/fund development phase, early discussions include the establishment of a circular route in Morganton that would traverse U.S. 70 through Valdese, ultimately ending at Blue Ridge Healthcare Valdese. As currently envisioned, the proposed route would provide 26% of Burke County's residents with an additional transportation option, offering users a critical link to local shopping, education, and healthcare locations.

Multi-lingual surveys about the proposed route were distributed in July of 2016. Five hundred and fifteen surveys were returned (515) by the following September. The high number of returned survey indicated strong support for the project. Interested parties are currently discussing an implementation strategy and exploring funding options.

Additional Fixed and Demand Response Routes

Fixed route transit service is currently offered in just one of the three cities that constitute the Metropolitan Statistical Area (service is not currently provided in the cities of Morganton or Lenoir). Barriers to adding services to underserved areas include a lack of funding sources (local, state, and federal), a dispersed population, and a large land area. The MPO and WRPTA recognize the growing and evolving mobility needs of the region, and are dedicated to actively pursuing options which will expand resource availability and allow a broader portion of the region's population to be served.

Additionally, the MPO and WRPTA will continue to examine and research strategies to expand and upgrade existing service, including; expanding service on nights and weekends, as well as engaging in educational opportunities to inform the general public on the critical role public transportation plays in their respective communities.

Intercity Bus

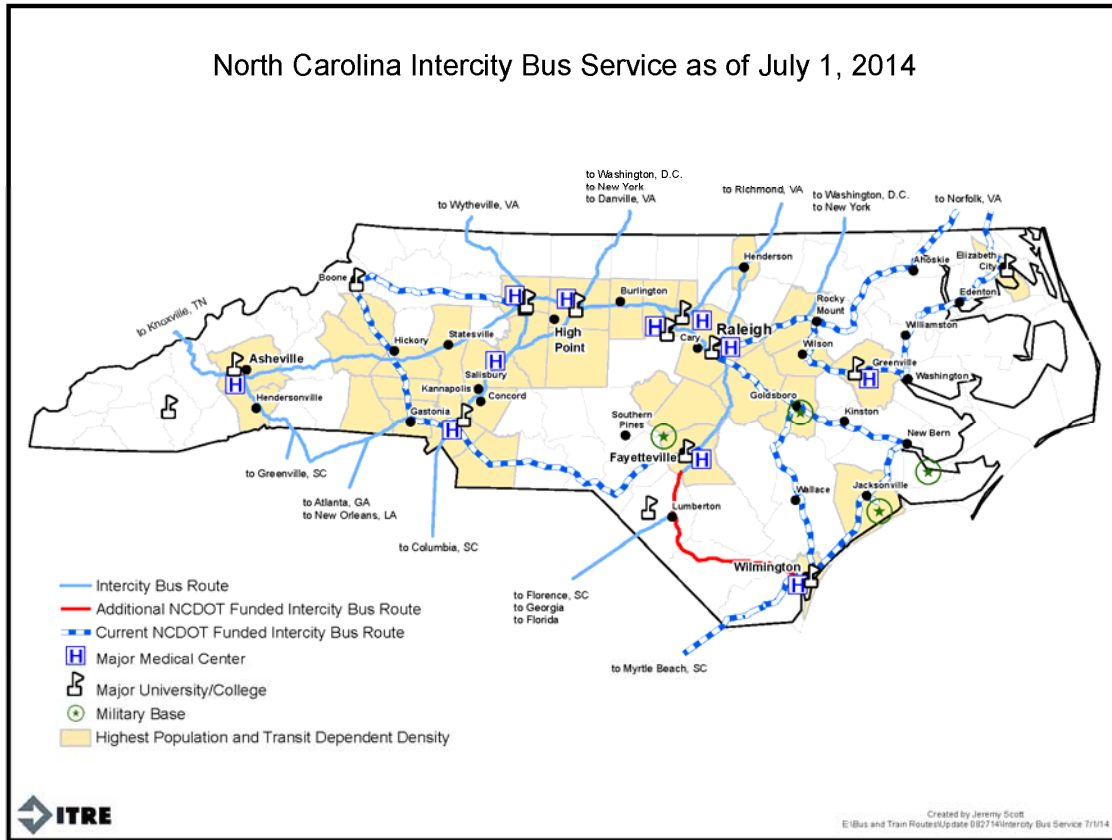
Intercity bus travel is currently offered by both Sunway Charters and Greyhound Lines, Inc. Sunway Charters, through a partnership with NCDOT, offers daily roundtrip service from Boone to Charlotte with stops in Newton and Lenoir. This fixed route service, designated the 'Mountaineer North/South Route,' creates possibilities for passengers to connect to several intra and intercity transportation choices along its route, including a link to Amtrak's Crescent Route.

Greyhound Lines Inc. offers service to several neighboring cities, including Asheville and Winston-Salem. At the current time, Greyhound's only stop in the four county planning area is located in Hickory. A map of the North Carolina's intercity bus network is detailed in Map 6-3.

Additionally, the privately-owned Hickory Hop provides citizens with airport shuttle service to and from the Hickory Regional Airport to Charlotte-Douglas International Airport.

The Greater Hickory MPO understands the significant need to enhance intercity travel across North Carolina, and continually monitors transportation trends that may applicable to the region. As such, the organization is committed to exploring and encouraging strategies that will enhance intercity transit.

Map 6-3: North Carolina Intercity Bus Service



Source: North Carolina Department of Transportation.

WPRTA Title VI Policy

The WPRTA is committed to ensuring that no person is excluded from participation in, or denied the benefits of its services on the basis of race, color or national origin per Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, as amended.

No person or group of persons will be discriminated against with regard to fares, routing, scheduling, or quality of transportation service that WPRTA / Greenway Public Transportation furnishes on the basis of race, color or national origin. Frequency of service, age and quality of Greenway Public Transportation vehicles assigned to routes, quality of Greenway Public Transportation stations serving Alexander, Burke, Caldwell, and Catawba counties, and the cities of Conover, Hickory and Newton, and location of routes will not be determined on the basis of race, color or national origin.

Continuing Efforts

Transit services in the Western Piedmont region must continue to expand in order to meet the growing mobility needs of the region, and to provide transportation options that help reduce automobile dependency. The MPO will strive to ensure future efforts benefit the area's population in a pragmatic and fiscally sound manner.

Upon adoption of this plan, the Greater Hickory MPO and WPRTA will monitor transit issues in the region in order to determine if modifications to the plan are necessary. Changes to existing transit conditions could require the addition, deletion, or re-prioritization of strategies or projects. Adjustments to the plan can be made by the policy committees of the MPO and Western Piedmont Regional Transit Authority through formalized amendment procedures.