

Brunswick Area Transportation Study Case Study

1990 Census Population	50,066
Central City	Brunswick, Georgia
Air Quality Status (1990)	Attainment
Governor Designation Date	1993
Voting Policy Board Members	Mayor of the City of Brunswick Chairman of Glynn County Commission Georgia DOT Jekyll Island Authority Georgia Ports Authority Chair, Citizens Advisory Committee
PL and 5303 Funding (Year of Designation)	
Initial Staff Size	3
Initial Staff Location	Glynn County Planning Department
Modeling Responsibility	Georgia DOT
GIS Responsibility	Glynn County
AQ Conformity Responsibility	N/A
Contacts	Ulysses Mitchell (current GDOT) Keith Golden (former GDOT liaison) Dan Reuter, (former BATS director) (805) Carolyn Segers, BATS (805)
Website	www.glynncounty.org



The Brunswick Area Transportation Study, or BATS, serves as the metropolitan planning organization (MPO) for the Brunswick, Georgia urbanized area. The urbanized area population barely passed the threshold for designation in the 1990 Census with 50,066 residents. In the 2000 Census, the population had increased slightly to 51,653. The Brunswick urbanized area covers the city of Brunswick and unincorporated areas of Glynn County. The City of Brunswick and Glynn County are the only two incorporated units of government within the urbanized area, which covers 45 square miles. The majority of the urbanized area population lives in unincorporated portions of Glynn County, as the city's population is roughly 15,000. Brunswick and Glynn County are next to the Atlantic Ocean, with one barrier island (St. Simons Island) included in the urbanized area. The Brunswick urbanized area is in attainment for federal air quality standards.

Steps to Designation

Before the 1990 Census was conducted, the Georgia Department of Transportation (GDOT) had already worked with Glynn County to develop their planning department's transportation planning capabilities. Similar programs in then non-MPO areas such as Valdosta and Gainesville were also maintained by GDOT. This assistance took the form of information exchange, modeling assistance and the formation of a technical committee. After the 1990 Census was conducted, state officials had reason to believe

that the Brunswick area would be designated an urbanized area and made this opinion known to officials at the county level. Local officials reacted positively to the information, although state officials tried to convey to them the burden of extra responsibilities that would have to be assumed should an MPO be formed.

In 1992 GDOT and local officials received confirmation that Brunswick had been designated an urbanized area. One of the first agreements made was to house the new MPO in the Glynn County planning department. According to the first BATS director, there was general consensus on this issue. Not only was the county home to the majority of the urbanized area's population, but their planning staff was also the only one in the area. The city of Brunswick did not have its own planning department. Although the county's planning efforts had focused more on permitting, zoning, and other land use issues, their existing relationship with GDOT through their non-MPO planning support was identified as a contributing factor to their approval as the BATS host. As a result, county employees serve as BATS staff. The employees work part time for the county and part time for BATS with at least one employee working primarily on BATS.

ISSUES AND CHALLENGES

Committee Membership

Although Glynn County would host the new MPO and was its largest stakeholder based on population, an effort was made to structure the policy committee in such a way as to ensure a diversity of opinion, representing the range of stakeholders in the Brunswick area. In addition to GDOT, and the county and the city, the Jekyll Island Authority and the Georgia Ports Authority were included as voting members of the policy committee. Jekyll Island is one of the several barrier islands that separate the city of Brunswick from the Atlantic Ocean. While St. Simon's Island is the only barrier island included in the urbanized area, both it and Jekyll Island are included in the MPO's study area (which encompasses all of Glynn County). The Jekyll Island Authority was created by the state of Georgia to guide development and protect natural resources on the island after its purchase by the state sixty years ago. The Georgia Ports Authority's main responsibility is managing waterborne freight out of the nation's 10th largest container port in Savannah—100 miles to the north. In 1959, the Ports Authority built a smaller facility in Brunswick and continues to manage it. An official from the Brunswick office represents the Ports Authority.

In addition to the policy committee, BATS has two other standing committees. The technical committee has been a continuation of the body created by the GDOT planning support process prior to MPO formation. The technical committee is composed of staff representing policy committee members, and a representative from the local airport authority. According to GDOT liaison to BATS, the airport authority was also invited to join the policy committee but declined to do so. The citizens committee provides a forum for other interest groups such as the chamber of commerce, representatives from the rail freight industry, and a citizens' organization from St. Simon's Island. The chair of the citizens committee is also a voting member of the policy committee.

Staffing and Early MPO Products

Within a year of designation, Glynn County had hired two transportation planners and a GIS specialist, in addition to the director, to handle MPO responsibilities. All three of the new staff split their time between BATS work and other county work, so that the total MPO staff size was between 2.5 and 3 full-time positions. The first director of BATS had prior experience working in other Georgia MPOs in Athens and Savannah. This experience was important because there was a lack of MPO experience at the time on the Glynn County planning staff. According to the first director, “there was no point of reference when it came to MPOs” since most of the staff had not worked in larger metropolitan areas. The director’s previous experience was useful in two ways. Since his work had been in other Georgia MPOs, he had an established working relationship with GDOT planning officials. His experience also made the development of the first certification documents less complicated than it would have been absent similar familiarity with the process. The county was responsible for collecting and maintaining a socioeconomic database based on Traffic Analysis Zones for GDOT. GDOT, which owned and operated the travel model, provided technical support to the BATS planning process.

The biggest challenge that BATS faced initially, according to a GDOT official involved in the MPO formation, was that they were unaccustomed to planning a capital program in a financially constrained environment. There had been numerous planning studies conducted in the past, but there had never been a financial constraint. The new MPO framework meant that Glynn County had to take a new approach to planning. Beyond adjusting to financial constraints, BATS staff also had to come to terms with local resistance to transportation improvements. One state official referred to the resistance on the part of residents of St. Simon’s Island to any road improvements, describing the mindset as “everyone wants to be the last new resident of the island.” This attitude was expressed in a recent campaign called “Blow up the Bridge” referring to the only point of access to St. Simon’s.

Absence of Public Transit

At the time the MPO was formed, there was no public transportation system serving Brunswick or Glynn County. The first BATS director conducted a transit feasibility study shortly after being hired. The study showed a basic fixed route transit system to be feasible with \$200,000 in GDOT program funds combined with a local match. He described the response by local officials and committee members as mixed. At the time, there may have still been a stigma about public transit in the Brunswick area. The fact that the parts of the urbanized area best able to support a fixed route system was the older dense downtown of Brunswick also created problems in generating support. The service was viewed as one that would only serve the relatively small number of residents living in the center of Brunswick, while the much larger number of residents living in outlying areas and on the barrier islands would be responsible for contributing the majority of the local matching funds. Concerns about operating and maintenance costs for the system were also raised. Because of these factors, local officials were unable to generate sufficient support for the creation of a new transit system. There is still no transit service in Brunswick.

Other Issues

Compared to other MPOs formed in the 1990s, the Brunswick urbanized area has not experienced rapid growth in the last decade. However, when the area was in danger of losing its urbanized area designation earlier this year, it was not because of falling population (there was an increase in 1,587 residents between 1990 and 2000). Instead, a change in the legal definition of what constitutes an urbanized area was the cause. The Census Bureau recently began operating under a rule change that considers urban settlements separated by more than a three-mile gap as separate urbanized areas. Since Brunswick is more than three miles inland from St. Simons Island, the population of this island could no longer be considered part of the same urbanized area. With a combined population of just over 50,000, neither the islands nor the city of Brunswick would qualify as an urbanized area under this rule change. The MPO designation was recently preserved, but only after an act of Congress passed allowing urban settlements separated by undevelopable land to be considered part of the same urbanized area.

Note: Five individuals involved with the Brunswick Area Transportation Study were contacted for this study. Three are current or former officials with the Georgia Department of Transportation. The first BATS director and a current BATS planner were also contacted.