

Case Study: City of San Marcos Partnership with Capital Area Rural Transportation Systems (CARTS)

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The partnership between the [City of San Marcos, Texas](#) and the [Capital Area Rural Transportation System \(CARTS\)](#) advances regional mobility in Central Texas by cultivating connections and bolstering transit services for the region's burgeoning population. Specifically, the case study highlights how effective rural transportation can foster equitable access to health and social services, enhance economic development, and provide tailored policy solutions to a geographically dispersed population.

Together, the City of San Marcos and CARTS provide weekday fixed-route, paratransit, and regional intercity bus service in the area. CARTS also provides additional weekday regional intercity bus service between Austin and San Marcos. In this regard, the partnership between the City of San Marcos and CARTS serves as a best practice on how to create sustainable transportation choices using a regional lens to transit accessibility in a fast-growing rural area.

Background and Demographics

The city of San Marcos and its environs are transitioning from a predominantly rural area to a more urbanized context. According to the American Community Survey five-year estimates, San Marcos's population grew approximately 12 percent from 59,935 in 2017 to 67,143 in 2022.¹

With its proximity to the Austin and San Antonio metropolitan areas, San Marcos has become a popular destination for people looking to live, work, and study in the region. Texas State University, one of the largest universities in Texas, further contributes to the city's growth and had a reported 35,378 students enrolled in Spring 2024, a three percent increase from the previous year. Population density in San Marcos is highest near the Texas State University campus. The University population significantly impacts

PROJECT SNAPSHOT

- The City of San Marcos and CARTS offer a variety of fixed-route, paratransit, and intercity services
- San Marcos, in partnership with Texas State University, deployed the [Spin Shared Mobility Program](#)

IMPLEMENTATION HIGHLIGHTS

- San Marcos recently transitioned to fare-free service
- The City of San Marcos launched a real-time bus tracker in 2023
- Get to Know CARTS Outreach Program initiated in July 2021

¹ U.S. Census Bureau, "Household Size by Vehicles Available." *American Community Survey, ACS 5-Year Estimates Detailed Tables, Table B08201, 2022.*

transportation demand, particularly during peak times such as the start and end of semesters, when students commute to and from campus.

In 2012, San Marcos received a small, urbanized area designation by the U.S Census, provided to metropolitan areas with over 50,000 residents.² This designation mandated the creation of an Urban Transit District (UTD), which provided San Marcos an allocation of Federal and State funds for public transportation. CARTS remained the transit provider to the urbanized area during that time and maintained the role of direct recipient of funds for the urbanized area until 2019, when the City of San Marcos assumed the role. San Marcos is facing growing pains typical of a municipality transitioning from rural to urban, including accommodating a growing student population, ensuring residents in outlying areas have public transit access, and maximizing resident accessibility to social services.

City of San Marcos and CARTS Service Delivery

For three decades, the City of San Marcos and CARTS have forged a unique relationship driven by the need to address the dearth of rural transportation options in the region. CARTS services the rural transportation district (RTD) and urban transportation district (UTD) for the San Marcos urbanized area.

In this relationship, San Marcos Transit (operating name “*The Bus*”) provides public transportation service to urban areas, while CARTS fulfills rural transportation needs. This strategic partnership allows San Marcos Transit to leverage CARTS’ experience with providing essential services to rural areas, ensuring that residents have access to reliable transportation solutions tailored to their specific requirements. San Marcos Transit, which is a division of the City of San Marcos’ Public Works Department, provides planning and administrative support. San Marcos has facilitated access to essential services and resources within the city for over two decades.

CARTS has served as the regional transportation provider for the non-urbanized areas of Central Texas for almost five decades, operating across a nine-county jurisdiction that encompasses over 100 municipalities as well as a large swath of non-incorporated areas. CARTS was established under Section 147 of the Rural Highway Transportation Program in 1978, a congressional initiative to address rural transportation needs with Federal subsidies.³

CARTS provides an array of transportation options, offering fixed-schedule routes (including interurban coach services), call-ahead services, and on-demand, curb-to-curb rides in select locations. The interurban coach service is a cornerstone of CARTS’ offerings, operating on fixed schedules, serving 15 Central Texas cities, including from Austin to rural areas in the CARTS service area. Moreover, CARTS coordinates schedules with Capital Metro, Austin’s public transportation provider. To enhance last-mile connectivity, some stops feature bike and scooter rentals. CARTS prioritizes the needs of specific demographic segments, offering tailored services such as the Grasshopper Line for passengers over the age of 65, a reservation-based curb-to-curb service. The Country Bus service caters specifically to rural areas, offering curb-to-curb transportation on designated days. CARTS’ commitment to innovation and inclusivity underscores its pivotal role in facilitating transportation solutions tailored to the unique needs of Central Texas residents.

The City of San Marcos and CARTS have adopted a people-focused framework to address rural and small urban transportation needs, emphasizing the importance of understanding the unique needs of the population it serves. To this end, the city employs various communication and outreach strategies tailored to these communities. Notably, San Marcos has transitioned to a fare-free model for all local transit services, including the paratransit services, ensuring accessibility and affordability for all. This specialized transportation service is available to individuals requiring mobility assistance, enabling these users to schedule rides from anywhere within the service area. The fare-free provision extends to anyone with a

² U.S. Census Bureau, “The Urban and Rural Classifications.”

<https://www2.census.gov/geo/pdfs/reference/GARM/Ch12GARM.pdf>

³ https://www.ridecarts.com/wp-content/uploads/2023/11/david_marshall_online-video-cutter.com_234.mp4

qualifying patient disability or 65 years of age or older.

In 2020, the City of San Marcos Transit Board adopted a comprehensive five-year plan, [San Marcos Transit Plan August 2020](#), aimed at anticipating and addressing the evolving needs of its service area. In the document, the City of San Marcos indicated a need to develop a dedicated transit facility with administrative and maintenance operations, as San Marcos Transit vehicles are maintained at CARTS' Lee Dildy Operations and Headquarters Complex facility. Key priorities in the 5-year plan for the city include expanding services to low-income communities and establishing more transparent transit policies to foster greater inclusivity and accessibility for residents.

Collaboration with Texas State University

Texas State University's growing enrollment has served as a key driver of San Marcos' recent population increase. The university's demographics and transportation needs has led San Marcos Transit and CARTS to create initiatives to meet the transit needs of students, faculty, and staff. Texas State University was a partner in the 2020 San Marcos Transit Plan, where the study looked at how the two systems can coordinate transit service.

Texas State is a volunteer NTD reporter for the area, and their reporting triggers Small Transit Intensive Cities (STIC) through the 5307 small urbanized area program. In 2022, the San Marcos City Council approved Texas State to become a sub-recipient of federal 5307 funds to help coordinate transit service. Currently, the city, in partnership with Texas State University, is working on a revised transit plan that looks at the fixed routes for the city and the university systems. The study aims to propose routes to better serve the San Marcos community and the Texas State population. The revised transit plan is scheduled to kick off late summer 2024.

Public Participation and Outreach

To help connect with the public and better understand their needs, the City of San Marcos and CARTS adopted a "meet the people where they are" approach, in which agency staff conduct outreach through existing community events. This strategy has proven effective as it allows agencies to engage directly with residents in familiar and accessible settings. CARTS focuses on community-centric events such as Rotary Club meetings and gatherings hosted by other service agencies. CARTS also maintained strong ties with local municipalities, who have helped facilitate outreach efforts through engagements like chamber of commerce luncheons and other local meetings.

In July 2021, CARTS launched the [Get to Know CARTS Outreach Program](#), which focused on increasing awareness of the agency's diverse array of services, boosting ridership by introducing new accommodations and soliciting community feedback for future planning initiatives. This program has proven invaluable in gathering essential input and insights regarding the direction that transit development for the San Marcos area should take. The program underscores the importance of community engagement and shaping transportation strategies and initiatives.

There have been significant positive effects as a result of this robust public engagement campaign. For example, both CARTS and San Marcos transit report that ridership is near pre-COVID-19 pandemic levels. San Marcos and CARTS are proactively exploring innovative methods to enhance public participation. The Public Participation Plan outlines several ways that the City of San Marcos conducts outreach measures, including a greater emphasis on hybrid outreach efforts that feature both in-person and virtual offerings. Additionally, city officials have pursued an approach of recording meetings and providing community members with a point of contact who will follow up within ten days.

Next Steps

Looking to the future, San Marcos Transit is seeking to further leverage its partnership with CARTS to

enhance transportation services. Embracing adaptability, San Marcos Transit aims to seamlessly accommodate the shifting locations of various social services across the region. San Marcos transit continues to adapt schedules and optimize routes for efficiency. These changes are anticipated to help connect residents access vital health and social services.

In addition to maintaining a strong partnership with San Marcos Transit, CARTS is currently planning to expand existing stations and develop new stations. CARTS Now *is* poised to extend its reach into two additional cities, Elgin and LaGrange, by Fall 2024. Furthermore, CARTS is in the planning stages of establishing a station in Flatonia to connect with the Amtrak rail line, developing a trip planner tool, and assessing the feasibility of a new station in Lockhart. The proposed Lockhart station will better serve Austin-bound travelers and by collaborating with Greyhound and FlixBus to enhance amenities in its stations.

The future of transportation in San Marcos is characterized by a deepening collaboration between San Marcos Transit and CARTS aimed at enhancing services for the growing Central Texas community. This partnership continues to engage stakeholders to serve the diverse needs of the community.

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Resources

[City of San Marcos Transit](#)

[City of San Marcos Transportation Master Plan](#)

[City of San Marcos Five-Year Transit Plan](#)

[CARTS Transit Development Plan](#)

[CARTS Community Outreach Report](#)

[CARTS Interurban Coach Service](#)

[CARTS Texas Rural Microtransit Guidebook](#)