

**Recommendations to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service:
Alternative Transportation at Lower Rio Grande Valley National
Wildlife Refuge / World Birding Center / South Texas Refuge Complex**

Provided by the Interagency Transportation Assistance Group (TAG)

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At the request of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS), an inter-agency Transportation Assistance Group (TAG) site review was conducted at the Lower Rio Grande Valley National Wildlife Refuge and the World Birding Center, in the South Texas Refuge Complex. The status of planning and the options for providing alternative transportation were reviewed. This report was prepared subsequent to the site visit and is based on interactions with federal and local government stakeholders. This report documents the conditions observed, transportation issues and considerations, and recommendations arising from the TAG analysis.

Background and Conditions

The Lower Rio Grande Valley (LRGV) has long been recognized as a world-class birding destination. State parks and national wildlife refuges owned and maintained by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS), the Texas Parks and Wildlife Department, and several other partners constitute the recently designated World Birding Center (WBC), that includes nine valley communities. The area stretches across a vast territory from South Padre Island in the east to Roma in the west, creating disparate transportation conditions in a variety of environments. The relative lack of alternative transportation options that exist in the area, combined with great distances between some sites, rapid growth, and urbanization, present unique challenges regarding access to and preservation of the natural resources in the valley.

The nine WBC sites and three national wildlife refuges in the LRGV are spread out linearly over nearly 120 miles, generally along U.S. 83 in south Texas, along and adjacent to the Rio Grande River. The 12 sites are identified below:

- Santa Ana National Wildlife Refuge (NWR), Alamo
- Laguna Atascosa National Wildlife Refuge, Rio Hondo
- Lower Rio Grande Valley National Wildlife Refuge, Alamo
- Bentsen-Rio Grande Valley State Park, Mission
- Edinburg Scenic Wetlands, Edinburg
- Estero Llano Grande State Park, Weslaco
- Harlingen Arroyo Colorado, Harlingen
- Old Hidalgo Pumphouse, Hidalgo
- Quinta Mazatlan, McAllen
- Resaca de la Palma State Park, Brownsville

- Roma Bluffs, Roma
- South Padre Island Birding and Nature Center, South Padre Island

Along with U.S. 83, major routes through the area include U.S. 77, U.S. 281 and Texas State Highway (SH) 100. Primary access to LRGV sites is by private automobile, with no alternative transportation provided between the sites. Within several sites, private vehicles are restricted and alternative transportation is provided. Examples of this include trams at the Santa Ana NWR and Bentsen Rio Grande State Park (a WBC site), a small shuttle at Old Hidalgo Pumphouse, and non-motorized multi-use paths and facilities at most of the sites.



Map of LRGV National Wildlife Refuge Complex and World Birding Center Sites

Visitation levels at the sites studied peak during the winter months, when birders combine with “Winter Texans” to enjoy the natural resources available in the LRGV. There are 60,000 recreational vehicle (RV) pads in the LRGV, which become winter homes for many northerners, and numerous airports provide access to the sites for bird-watching enthusiasts from far afield. These unique characteristics combine such that approximately 80% of visitors to the sites are birders (40%) and Winter Texans (40%). The remaining 20% of visitors are locals. Visitation by school groups, however, increases the share of local visitors to some sites. The make-up of visitors is likely to change, however, as the local population swells, previously agricultural land becomes developed, and tourism by Mexican nationals continues to increase.

Transportation Review Findings

Over the course of the site visit, the TAG team was introduced to numerous issues that face the region as a whole, as well as public lands within the region. These are issues that face many fast-growing metropolitan areas in the United States, including fast-shifting demographics, environmental and growth challenges, transit and transportation disconnects, and jurisdictional overlap. These issues, together with the distance between and number of public lands sites, create a complicated transportation situation.

Demographics

The LRGV is experiencing tremendous growth, both in Texas and across the border in Mexico. This shifting and growing population presents many challenges to the access and planning of recreational sites. The major demographic groups discussed include the local population, Winter Texans, birders and nature tourists, and Mexican nationals; all of these groups present unique challenges to the recreational sites and the regional transportation infrastructure.

The area also has significant numbers of lower income families, an aging population, and high rates of obesity and related health problems. Basic transportation services do not necessarily fully meet the needs of these populations. The LRGV is primarily auto-oriented, with limited transit services. Lower income families rely on older, less-reliable automobiles. There is a relative lack of outdoor recreational opportunities, especially as development continues rapidly and as a result exercise opportunities are reduced and obesity is high. Diabetes is a growing concern, especially since one related complication is blindness; the area has an estimated 70,000 people who are blind. There are volunteers who are enthusiastic about working to expand blind birder access and education, but more extensive outreach is hampered by the lack of transportation options for blind birders to access the WBC sites. Unreliable vehicles, high transportation costs and lack of transit make distant recreational sites out of reach to many local residents. As such, only 20% of visitation to these sites is from local residents.

Even without reliable alternative transportation, several WBC sites currently host groups of blind birders who rely on sound to identify species. Furthermore, in Cameron, Hidalgo, and Starr Counties, there are almost 309,000 pre-K through grade 12 students, and groups of students also visit the sites; these visits are often the first real exposure to nature that some children have. These children then return home and bring their parents back to the WBC sites, most of whom would otherwise be unaware of their existence. The TAG team was made aware of the lack of organized tour groups visiting the WBC sites.

The large number of seasonal residents (Winter Texans) also impacts the demographics of the area. This group comprises part-year residents who travel to the LRGV primarily from the upper-Midwest and Great Plains states. During the winter season, the roughly 500 RV parks, which contain about 60,000 RV pads, accommodate a large, temporary population drawn to the region for its relatively mild climate and recreational activities,

including the NWR and WBC sites. Winter Texans make up 40% of the visitation to many of these sites.

Finally, bird-watching enthusiasts flock to the area to catch sight of the approximately 515 species of birds that reside and migrate through the LRGV. Airports in McAllen, Harlingen and Brownsville, offer many flights to points in Texas and beyond, and many birders often make short trips to see particular species. Birders make up to 40% of visitation to area sites.

Another demographic factor affecting the LRGV is the large number of Mexican nationals that come to the area to shop and visit family. The recent strength of the Mexican peso, and the relative wealth of northern Mexico, has made the LRGV an attractive shopping destination, and as a result parking lots at large shopping areas are often observed to contain many vehicles from adjacent Mexican states. The “border wall” being proposed by the Department of Homeland Security is a significant unknown in terms of predicting future Mexican visitation to the LRGV. Currently, very few Mexican nationals visit the recreational sites in the LRGV; however, this might change as the Mexican economy continues to develop, and Mexican tourism habits evolve.

Environmental/Growth

Along with the expanding population and shifting demographics, the LRGV is also experiencing rapid urbanization, with agricultural land being converted to residential and commercial subdivisions that are encroaching upon the area’s open spaces and natural resources. In fact, the LRGV is recognized as a part of an emerging megalopolis in the Transportation Commission Report. The urban growth in the LRGV reflects typical suburban expansion seen in much of auto-dominated parts of America, with large big-box and strip-retail centers and residential subdivisions replacing agricultural land, which has dominated the region for more than a century.

The urban growth is encroaching upon many of the NWR and WBC sites. Some of the sites are actually located in urban settings, such as Quinta Mazatlan WBC, which is located adjacent to the McAllen Airport and an apartment complex. Roma Bluffs is located in the historic downtown of Roma (see figure below). Other sites, such as Santa Ana NWR and Estero-Llano Grande State Park WBC, are adjacent to agricultural areas that will likely be developed within the next five years. The protection of these resources includes ensuring that local support is strong; however, access to the sites is limited, creating a barrier to awareness. There is a strong local desire to protect and increase existing open space while accommodating the desire for economic development and population growth. The NWR and WBC sites and access to them are essential to ensuring that park and open space needs are met.



Roma World Birding Center visitor center.

Finally, compared to the national average, the LRGV has a dearth of open/park space. For instance, McAllen is only at about 60% of the national average for land set aside for parks and open space for a city of its size. Even at just the 60% of the national average, McAllen still is the most progressive city in the Valley when it comes to parks and greenway planning; most other communities are below this level. As the LRGV continues to urbanize, providing access to parks and open space will become more important.

Transit/Transportation

The pattern of growth—suburban and auto-oriented—does not facilitate transit demand and use. Without a conventional hub in the region, origin-destination patterns do not facilitate an aggressive transit strategy. Regarding the recreational sites, the large traffic generators are schools, elderly populations, and RV parks. The current local transit system in McAllen (MET), for instance, has routes radiating from the downtown transportation center. MET service does not operate on Sundays and schedule information is hard to access. Additionally, headways are rather long and service is generally uncoordinated with adjacent systems. The transportation center is a major hub for bus travelers to other regions and Mexico. All of this combines to disincentivize transit use. Demographic data indicate that only a few hundred people in the McAllen area ride transit to and from work. Few recreational sites have transit access, however some service does exist, for instance on South Padre Island, where local businesses contribute to support a free island shuttle called the Wave.

Recognizing the transportation and health benefits of bicycling, bicycle use is encouraged at some of the sites, and even promoted as a means of traveling through the sites, such as at Santa Ana NWR, Bentsen State Park, and Hidalgo Pumphouse (where bicycles and adult tricycles are available to rent). Bicycle connections to the sites from population centers, however, is generally lacking. McAllen is, however, seeking to install bicycle racks on their transit vehicles.

Due to the great distances between sites, alternative transportation connections between the sites are difficult. Existing non-motorized multi-use paths do not connect any of the sites. The only mode of connection is by personal vehicle. Transportation stakeholders indicated that providing alternative transit to recreational opportunities is seen both as an amenity and a possible tool for economic development, as they struggle to keep up with both growth and the needs of transit-dependent groups.

The Hidalgo County metropolitan planning organization (MPO) indicated that they face a \$1.4 billion shortfall (in 2006 dollars) over the next 20 years in transportation funding. The LRGV population swells with Winter Texans; however, in line with federal transportation legislation, federal transportation funding to the regional only takes into account the enumerated Census population, and not the Winter Texans, leading to a mismatch between road use and road funding: effectively, a deficit in appropriations of highway funds for the use levels now being experienced. State of Texas transit funding can be unstable; for instance, \$90 million was cut in 2007, before some funding was reinstated. Another challenge is that the Texas Department of Transportation (TXDOT) does not provide funding for bike lanes unless a highway project is adding vehicle capacity, and then only if funding is available.

Several stakeholders indicated that the relative ease of acquiring transit capital funding was offset by the lack of sufficient operating funds. This problem has been identified not only in regard to the ATPPL program, but for transit planning in general. The lack of dedicated transit funding, combined with a transient transit labor pool, creates a significant barrier to providing sufficient transit service in the LRGV.

Finally, Hidalgo County recently established a light-rail district, the first in south Texas. This designation will allow for the study of the feasibility of constructing light-rail in Hidalgo County.

Jurisdictions

The final issue facing the area concerns the many jurisdictions of the 12 sites studied. Although there are several engaged and apparently effective governing bodies in the region, there is no one single organization with jurisdiction over the entire study area. There are numerous regional Community Development Councils (CDCs) and MPOs in the area, in addition to the eleven cities and towns that are home to the twelve sites. Additionally, there are several transit providers, both public and private, which serve the LRGV. Finally, TXDOT plays an important role on state roadways, as mentioned above.

These overlapping entities create challenges to the NWRs and WBCs as they consider alternative transportation opportunities, not least because priorities and funding do not necessarily align; NWR and WBC interests may not command the attention of these groups as much as some of the other local issues mentioned earlier.

However, there are several prospective partners that have an interest in alternative transportation in the LRGV.

- **The Texas Department of Transportation (TXDOT).**
- **Municipalities** and regional governments surrounding the 12 sites recognize the importance of the sites as important natural resources and tourist attractions. Many of the WBC sites are located in either state or local parks, and the FWS sites are also seen as economically beneficial to the communities that surround them. The majority of visitors are either local residents of the LRGV communities, Winter Texans who are also spread throughout the LRGV, or birders who travel into the area by private vehicle or by air through the major airports in the LRGV. U.S. 83 and 281 are the primary routes connecting the communities and recreation sites in the LRGV.
 - The **City of McAllen's Parks and Recreation Department** has a strong desire to improve the City's non-motorized multi-use paths to add to the recently completed 2nd Street hike/bike trail corridor. They noted the difficulty in funding new non-motorized multi-use paths and are currently seeking an east-west non-motorized multi-use path route. The preferred route would use some of the existing railroad right-of-way along Business Route U.S. 83; there are ongoing negotiations with the railroad, which owns the track and right-of-way and still operates freight services. Elsewhere in McAllen, a non-motorized multi-use path leads to the Quinta Mazatlan WBC, but is not connected to other City paths.
 - The **Lower Rio Grande Valley Development Council (LRGVDC)** currently provides both intercity urban and rural transit services in the counties of Cameron, Hidalgo, and Willacy, and has expressed interest in improved transit in relation to the recreational sites discussed at the TAG. The LRGVDC has expressed concern, however, in the ability to provide such service as they struggle to meet existing demand for transit service to transit-dependent populations. The ability exists to combine future transit service that expands upon recreational transit between sites into transit-dependent communities.
 - The **McAllen Convention & Visitors Bureau** expressed strong interest in promoting the recreational sites as a means of expanding tourism opportunities not only within McAllen but throughout the LRGVDC. Establishing an eco-tourism plan is desirable.

Transportation Planning Studies

The need for alternative transportation between the recreational sites in the LRGV has not been studied in extensive detail. A field report was compiled in 2004 of alternative transportation needs at Santa Ana NWR as part of a nationwide study for the Federal Highway Administration. In addition, the following documents have been identified as relevant to alternative transportation in parks and public lands in the LRGV.

Funded ATPPL Grant Applications

Four ATPPL applications have been submitted from this area. Two of these grants have been approved. They are summarized below.

Santa Ana National Wildlife Refuge Tram Replacement Project, FY 2006. This grant was approved in the amount of \$510,000 and a new tram entered service in 2007. The tram replaced an aging, unreliable tram and is a popular attraction at the Refuge.



New, ATPPL-funded tram at Santa Ana National Wildlife Refuge.

Nature Friendly Visitor Transportation to Facilitate Ecotourism in Texas Parks and Wildlife-World Birding Center Parks, FY 2007. The funds were applied for by the Texas Parks and Wildlife Department, State Parks Division for use at Bentsen-Rio Grande Valley State Park (Mission); Estero Llano Grande State Park (Weslaco); and Resaca de la Palma State Park (Brownsville). The requested financial assistance would provide transportation for visitors via tram and electric shuttles for the three Texas Parks and Wildlife Department-managed WBC sites and their adjacent LRGV NWR lands. The grant was approved for \$400,000 in FY 2007.

ATPPL Grant Applications Not Funded

World Birding Center Alternative Transportation Project Study, FY2006. This application was designed to fund the research of the feasibility of an alternative transportation system to connect the WBC sites. The alternative transportation system was proposed to lower emissions, reduce congestion, and improve visitor, resident and commercial traffic safety. The request was for \$700,000 for FY 2007, \$1.5-2.5 million in FY 2008 and \$3 million in FY 2009.

Lower Rio Grande Valley National Wildlife Refuge Accessible Van/Shuttle Project, FY 2007. The funds were applied for by the FWS to permit LRGV NWR to purchase two accessible vans/light-duty shuttle buses to shuttle visitors from the new Roma Bluffs WBC site (managed by FWS) to birding sites throughout Starr County. The grant request was for \$116,300 in FY 2007, \$150,000 in FY 2008 and \$60,000 in FY 2009.

Although these projects were not funded by the ATPPL, they did form the basis for this TAG request.

Existing Alternative Transportation

Alternative transportation options available at LRGV sites exist only for internal purposes, for circulation within sites. These include the trams at Santa Ana NWR, Hidalgo Pumphouse WBC, and Bentsen Rio Grande State Park WBC; bicycle rentals at Hidalgo Pumphouse WBC and Bentsen Rio Grande State Park WBC; and bicycle racks at several additional sites.

The TAG experienced the tram at Hidalgo Pumphouse WBC, which is used on a limited basis to allow those unable to hike or bike longer distances to fully experience the site. The tram is old and has trouble climbing even minor grades with any significant load. The exhaust fumes are also problematic on this tram.



Tram at Hidalgo Pumphouse WBC.

Bicycles are also available to rent at the Hidalgo Pumphouse WBC and at Bentsen Rio Grande State Park WBC. This option allows visitors to access remote parts of the parks without long hikes.



Bicycles for rent at Hidalgo Pumphouse.



Bicycle/tricycle option at Bentsen WBC.

Trams are also available at Bentsen Rio Grande State Park WBC. The tram pictured below is being pulled by a pick-up truck because the regular tug was out of service for repair. The tug is actually an old airport tug that is not environmentally sensitive. The recent FY 2007 ATPPL grant for \$400,000, mentioned above, will replace this tram and purchase new trams and electric shuttles for the new WBC sites at Resaca de la Palma State Park and Estero Llano Grande State Park.



Tram at Bentsen Rio Grande State Park WBC.

Recommendations and Next Steps

1. **The World Birding Center mission should be clarified.** What does success mean in terms of visitation? Who is the target audience, in terms of numbers (overall visitation/by site), origin (locals, Winter Texans, Mexicans, other tourists, etc.), demographics, purpose of visit (e.g., recreation, birding, education), etc.? This recommendation ties into all other recommendations, because it will help to define what transportation system is truly needed, and why alternative transportation might be an appropriate component. What is the need for alternative transportation, and what will be the benefits? The answers to those questions may not be known at present, and can be informed by pursuing the recommendations listed below, but the questions can at least be framed, so that any further transportation efforts have some structure.
2. **Traveler information should be improved.** At the moment, WBC marketing does not necessarily tie together all nine sites, doesn't always make clear the local/state/federal partnership, and does not provide extensive traveler information, in terms of traveling to individual sites or between sites. Besides the web site; there is only one piece of physical marketing (a rack card) that addresses all of the sites – other materials, such as maps, are produced by the various jurisdictions and other organizations in the area, and are not official WBC or FWS materials. Prior to additional investments in transportation planning or infrastructure, traveler information delivery could be improved, giving better directions to sites, advice on the best (least congested) times to visit, what itineraries may make sense between sites, extended efforts to attract tour groups etc. Privately operated bus tours or shuttles could potentially be encouraged, to bring more people to the sites without bringing in more cars, and to raise awareness of the WBC. The process for getting trained and certified guides to natural and cultural resource sites in the LRGV will help in getting qualified personnel to conduct mid to large scale tours for local companies to the WBC and NWR sites.
3. **Cultivate transportation partnerships.** The various jurisdictions, organizations, and private enterprises (such as the McAllen transportation center and malls, which might serve as future alternative transportation nodes) can function together as an umbrella transportation partnership. However, it may be difficult, once such a group is formally assembled (at a “transportation summit” or as an ongoing partnership) to ensure continuing focus on the WBC or on recreational transportation in general, because nearly all of the potential partners have individual priorities that would also make sense to discuss as part of such a group. However, as data provided to the TAG team indicates, eco-tourism can be a significant industry that contributes to regional economic development; by explaining these benefits, perhaps focus can be kept on recreational transportation, especially if additional data (see below) becomes available to support the need for additional planning or investments. At the least, some kind of regularly meeting, regional transportation coordination group could ensure an

ongoing dialogue between all relevant parties, such as regional MPOs and FWS. The local participants at the TAG meetings should continue to meet in order to develop a longer-term transportation partnership between stakeholders. The Regional Office for the FWS may be able to facilitate this through their newly hired transportation coordinator.

4. **Conduct data analysis and/or visitor surveys to better quantify the need for, and market for, alternative transportation.** Some data on the potential market exists (such as the winter tourism study completed by the University of Texas Pan-American), but a better understanding of the market is needed both to determine what kind of transportation system would be best and to determine the potential “upside” of implementing such a system. Visitor surveys could be conducted (reaching all key visitor demographics) during a peak season to document transportation concerns, mobility problems, the willingness to use and pay for alternative transportation, and related factors. Surveys could also be conducted within the local communities to understand barriers to accessing local parks and open-space reserves and how those barriers could be overcome. Such surveys could be conducted by any of the WBC partners, although if FWS is the lead, the survey-approval requirements of the Office of Management and Budget will apply.
5. **Transportation revenue sources should be explored.** There is no ready source of operating funds for possible alternative transportation: indeed, as mentioned earlier, there are funding shortfalls for existing infrastructure needs. Although there is a sense that increases to area sales or lodging taxes are infeasible, there are other possible transportation-related revenue sources that could be considered in the context of a thorough, wide-ranging look at how alternative transportation services could be fairly financed. One possibility is a RV pad fee, which would impact mostly Winter Texans. (As mentioned earlier, Winter Texans use the regional transportation infrastructure, but because they are not enumerated in the Census, the region in effect receives less federal surface transportation funding than would be the case if the Winter Texans were year-round residents.) A transportation fee could also be considered at the WBC sites, or only at sites that make use of alternative transportation. Tax-increment financing, as used in the region more generally, is another possibility.
6. **Available transit assets should be inventoried.** Any spare transit capacity—whether from the City of McAllen, the school district, or McAllen Express Transit—should be inventoried, with an eye to determining whether any spare vehicles, or any available driver labor, could be used for WBC transit service. School and transit buses have their peaks during the morning and afternoon/evening rush hours during the week; WBC peak traffic would presumably be at mid-days during the week and on weekends. At this time, city transit buses are not active at all on Sundays.

7. **A program inventory should be conducted.** Because of the broad scope of the WBC, there are many potential sources of federal, state, local, and other funding for transportation initiatives in addition to transportation programs: education, health, environment/natural resources, open-space protection and preservation, workforce development, economic development, tourism, heritage/history, and potentially even the Department of Housing and Urban Development's Community Development Block Grant program.
8. **FWS seed funding for transportation planning could be pursued.** As discussed during the TAG, there is potentially some seed planning funding available as part of the funding allocation received by FWS from the Federal Lands Highway Program (in this case, the Central Federal Lands Highway Division, CFLHD). This would need to be coordinated with FWS and CFLHD.
9. **ATPPL planning funds could be pursued.** Whether for FY08 (application deadline Feb. 29, 2008) or beyond, an ATPPL proposal could be developed to seek planning funds to address several of the recommendations noted above. However, it may be the case that in order to have the strongest possible application, one that explains a clear need or problem to be addressed, some preliminary work, along the lines of the above recommendations, would need to be completed prior to an ATPPL application.
10. **A transit pilot could be considered.** If funding is available, perhaps through a transportation partnership as described, a transit pilot could be implemented, to supplement any study work, visitor surveying, and/or data collection with real-world experience, to determine from actual operations what kind of service might work best. Such a pilot could focus on one WBC site or on providing a connector or circulator service between multiple sites, improving access to existing park and open space reserves for the community; the exact configuration depends on when a pilot would be initiated and how funding (especially for operations) could be obtained.

The members of the TAG also would like to applaud the members of the transportation, recreation, resource management, and tourism communities in the LGRV for having the foresight to investigate the role of transportation in sustainable tourism and recreation before congestion and resource damage caused by increased or uncontrolled visitation. We hope that the initial energy and enthusiasm generated by the TAG can continue towards continued coordination between the community elements that contributed to the TAG's success.

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