



# VISION : 2020

Prepared by the staff of Central Midlands Transit—*The COMET* as guided by the Visioning Committee of The COMET's Board of Directors

## *Visioning Committee*

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### Connecting People & Building a Future:

The COMET's early implementation will be focused service enhancement supported by an emphasis on capital projects in order to maximize federal funds and provide the infrastructure to support growth.

#### The Focus

- New, innovative services that matches service with passenger and community needs—increased peak service on major corridors, park-and-ride commuter routes, feeder shuttle/routes in neighborhoods and flexible services
- Implementation of Compressed Natural Gas, to include on-site vehicle fueling station—reduce fuel costs, improve air quality and support American industry
- Fleet replacement and expansion with more diverse vehicles (smaller, more cost effective buses and park-and-ride vehicles)
- Aggressive technology expansion to build on existing automated vehicle location (AVL) to make transit information easier to access
- Amenities for passengers—shelters, benches & satellite transit hubs
- Analysis of real estate for park-and-ride property purchases for future services
- Value-added engineering for roadway and pedestrian projects to include transit elements

## The Priorities

- Improved frequency along high-capacity transit corridors
- Park-and-ride to improve traffic congestion, air quality and access to jobs
- Flexible services in low-density areas to connect passengers to high-capacity corridors
- Expanded fixed routes as density, demand and funding require

Additional resources and support may be provided through partnerships with employers, universities, non-profit organizations and local governments wishing to create specific services to meet their own organizational needs.

## Evolution of Transit Development:

### Years 1-4: Major Activities

- Aggressive grant application to access federal funds
- Grow technical capacity in critical areas of grants, finance, planning, technology
- Prioritized rebuilding transit services discontinued during the CMRTA's Balanced Budget Service Implementation Plan, but restored by The COMET's service plan
- Create a comprehensive Downtown Intermodal facility (bus, taxi, bike/pedestrian) with mixed-use (i.e., police substation or retail).
- Neighborhood-friendly buses and amenities (benches/shelters) with satellite transit hubs at connection centers and park-and-ride locations
- Funding assumptions:
  - \$12.5M operating budget with a separate \$2-4M in available match funds annually to apply for and receive between \$8-\$20M in annual federal funds
  - Service will trend with available revenues and availability of federal funds to purchase capital equipment

### Years 4-8: Major Activities

- Continued infrastructure expansion in support of high capacity corridors, park-and-ride and flexible services, especially buses, amenities and technology
- Critical emphasis on service expansion, especially park-and-ride, and increased frequencies during peak commuter hours
- Expanded marketing and planning functions to customize programs for employers, colleges/education and tourism
- Funding assumptions:
  - \$19M annually: Supports all operational programs while allowing The COMET to apply for and receive up to \$10M in annual federal funds
  - In eras of reduced federal funds, match funds are aside for discretionary items, single-purpose expenses or a reserve for large-scale infrastructure
  - Service is expected to "peak" in years 7-9 and then plateau or grow based on revenues and ridership. This peak will include approximately 100 transit vehicles in peak service

- Daily peak service is expected and approximated:
  - Twenty-five (25) buses along eight (8) high-capacity corridors with 20/30/40/60 minute service—based on ridership demand.
  - Forty (45) vehicles in low-density zones (to connect high-capacity corridors)—including fixed route, flexible and DART services
  - Twenty (20) vehicles performing park-and-ride services
  - Ten (10) vehicles for local circulators or similar programs

#### Years 8-12: Major activities:

- Service refinement through continuous evaluation of performance and costs
- System innovation and developing new partnerships for service growth
- Capital grant match and reserve funds for capital replacement in outlying years
- Adjustment expenses to match revenue forecasts ensure services are performing adequately and sustainably with local, state, federal and customer revenues
- Funding assumption: A \$19M annual expense with a 3% increase per annum beyond year #8. Service expansion occurs when a pattern of revenues will fund an increase (i.e., passenger fares, tax revenues, outside funding partners).

#### Years: 13-25: Major activities:

- Maintaining and expanding the most successful and viable services
- Developing and building innovative services to compete against single-occupant vehicles while supporting regional “smart growth” initiatives and high-density, transit-based, residential/retail investment
- Maximize federal funds to maintain high federal investment in the region, to capture the attention and support of the Federal Transit Administration programs. This allows The COMET to seize unique opportunities such as: experimental fuel types and equipment; Bus Rapid Transit start-ups (pre-cursor to rail corridors); property acquisition for rail corridors; or expanded park-and-ride garage facilities



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## Operations Roadmap

**Vision: 2020** presented by the Central Midlands Transit—*The COMET* proposes a new direction and approach to public transportation in the Midlands that will create a more innovative, connected and accessible system to facilitate a better quality of life for all Richland County citizens.

The conversion of compressed natural gas (CNG) as a new fuel source for the The COMET's transit fleet will not only be a major investment in the infrastructure for The COMET, helping the system save up to 40% of fuel cost while mitigating its impact on the environment, but it will also create much-needed infrastructure for the entire region that allows local businesses and governments to use and develop cleaner, American homegrown energy while boosting the economic development potential for the entire region.

The development of high-frequency service along high-capacity corridors will provide greater connectivity and added convenience for riders during peak hours so that they can get to work, school and retail in a more efficient manner.

The COMET will also restructure service to begin serving neighborhoods with lower-density routes with smaller buses to directly connect riders with the higher-capacity transit corridors. This change will enhance efficiency, provide opportunity for increased ridership and better connect neighborhoods to the downtown business corridors.

With new technologies and improved infrastructure The COMET will create a more intelligent transit system. Some of these measures include implementing the automated vehicle locator (AVL) and enhanced GPS- tracking to provide real-time arrival and departure information for

considerable federal funds and investment that can act as a catalyst for alternative fuel use in the Midlands.

- By opening the first permanent natural gas fuel station to the Midlands, it opens the doors to other fleets from Richland County, City of Columbia, State of South Carolina, University of South Carolina and School Bus fleets.
- The COMET will pursue a strong public-private partnership to bring CNG fuel to the retail market, allowing private citizens to purchase flex fuel, natural gas or hybrid-gas vehicles and fuel for local or regional travel. Emerging green technology—such as bio-gas production—will help establish new industries in the Midlands.
- Natural gas has lower tailpipe emissions, is a US-based fuel product that creates US jobs, costs about 40% less than diesel fuel and permits The COMET to stretch its dollars even-farther. It is very expensive to build the on-site infrastructure and buy the new transit fleet.
- **NEW SERVICE TYPE: Neighborhood Service & Flex Routes:**
  - Redesigns low-productivity transit routes and uses small buses in neighborhoods to directly connect people with high-capacity transit corridors.
  - Flex routes allow buses to leave neighborhood service routes to pick-up or drop-off customers in low-density areas. Usually operate in peak service only but use dial-a-ride options in mid-day, evening and on weekends.
  - Creates more independence and ridership options for persons with disabilities and the elderly.
  - High ridership and strong fare collection allows the small services to grow into full-service transit routes.
- **NEW SERVICE TYPE: Park & Ride Express Routes:**
  - Dedicated service to parking areas with express service to major employment sites via the region's interstate highway network but will also circulate through downtown to minimize transfers.
  - Connect people with jobs or events (downtown employers, events/concerts, USC, etc.) over a longer distance.
  - Operates only during peak periods or dedicated event times. All routes will travel into downtown Columbia in the morning and from downtown Columbia in the afternoon with connections to other routes.

Restores evenings and Saturdays with Sunday neighborhood service and flex services. Enhanced service to Midlands Technical College, Benedict College housing, Veterans' Administration Hospital and Shandon community.

- Corridor #7: Broad River/Harbison: Enhanced with 30-minute peak frequencies; enhanced evening and weekend service, including Sundays. Expanded frequency to Dutch Square Mall, state employment centers and Harbison Rd. retail/employment sites. High ridership builds toward a downtown-to-shopping weekend express service.
- Downtown Circulator: This high-frequency service into downtown Columbia creates the opportunity for a downtown circulator at a much lower cost. As buses arrive downtown, they will depart the new transit center and "orbit" downtown to connect the north and south ends to include Bull and Assembly streets. Quick access to downtown high-rises, University of South Carolina campus and The Vista without having to transfer routes to get there.

#### **Neighborhood Service Routes & Flex Routes:**

- Eau Claire: Connects Earlewood, Sunset Rd. and Eau Claire neighborhoods with Broad River and N. Main corridors. Fixed route services give customers quick access to shopping or connections into downtown and Palmetto Health Richland.
- Colonial Dr./W. Beltline: Connects the neighborhoods between N. Main St. and Two-Notch Rd. to downtown with connections at Farrow Rd. providing increased opportunity to reach job centers.
- Monticello Rd./Denny Terrace: Flex Route with possible dial-a-ride service to connect Denny Terrace, Eau Claire and N. Main St. communities with evening/weekend service.
- Fairfield Rd./ Wilson Rd.: Flex Route with possible dial-a-ride service to connect the Wilson Rd. and Northeast Richland County with the N. Main St and Farrow Rd. corridors. Allows for evening and weekend transit services.
- Forest Acres: Flex Route with possible dial-a-ride service to connect Forest Acres with Two Notch, Forest Dr. and possibly Devine/Garner's Ferry. Allows for evening and weekend transit services.
- Millwood/Shandon: Flex Route with possible dial-a-ride service to connect The Millwood and Shandon areas with the Forest Dr. as well as Devine/Garner's Ferry Corridors. Also provides connections into Five Points and the University of South Carolina campus. Allows for evening and weekend transit services.

services will plug outlying communities into the metro transportation network for access to higher education, medical care and employment. As demand builds, new fixed routes and park and rides will follow.

- Expanded DART service for persons with disabilities as service areas grow, as well as access to all fixed routes, and all dial-a-ride/flex services.

#### **New Routes Enhanced Park & Ride Express routes**

- Northwest (I-26) Express: New service from I-26 Exit 97 (Peak) through Columbiana Mall (Harbison) and then back to I-26 into downtown Columbia. Service will operate during peak periods will take commuters to job centers into the city and out to the suburbs.
- Northeast (I-77) Express: New service from Blythewood through Killian Road, Palmetto Health Richland to downtown Columbia. Service will operate during peak periods. This route will operate toward Columbia in the mornings and toward Blythewood in the afternoons.
- East (I-20) Richland Express: Creates a service that operates from the Village at Sandhill via Clemson Road, I-20, Columbia Place Mall, Palmetto Health/ Richland Hospital to downtown Columbia. Service will operate during peak periods. This route will operate bi-directionally bringing commuters to job centers into the city and out to the suburbs.
- Gamecock/Event Shuttles: New Park & Ride routes from the Northwest, Northeast and East Richland Park & Ride locations for University of South Carolina football games and special events. This premium-fare service will provide round trip express services from key locations to downtown for game day activities based on demand.

#### **Innovations for Partnerships & Transit Technologies**

- Downtown Circulator: In addition to the emphasis on connecting workers, students and visitors throughout downtown, new partnerships within the Richland/Columbia area will permit the creation of a circulator to connect hotels, convention centers and restaurants.
- Dedicated Job-Center Routes: As new industry arrives and existing businesses expand, shift work at major employment sites can become more challenging and can create increased burden on the local infrastructure (traffic, lack of surface parking). New partnerships with large employers allows for specialized transit routes (open to the public) from downtown to industrial parks, warehouses or manufacturing centers.

- New buses for all routes and services are vital to improving The COMET's services.
  - New buses for major corridors will be state-of-the-art, low-floor buses. New, on-board technologies will announce major stops, digitally display the cross-streets and include on-board security cameras. New ergonomic seating with stainless steel interiors (and on-board Wi-Fi for Park & Ride routes) will create the look and feel of a light-rail train car.
  - New neighborhood service and flex route buses will be smaller, less expensive to operate and more neighborhood friendly. In addition to being quieter, they have a lower profile, take up less of the road and support the feeling of community. They are less expensive to purchase and permit service in new areas until ridership grows.
- Larger-capacity bicycle racks to support growing use of transit for bicyclists—in partnership with business and employers—will encourage riders to bike to the route and ride transit to their destination.
- Brand new benches, shelters and signs with enhanced services at Super Stops and neighborhood connection points will feature solar lighting; reflective decals and real time arrival information at enhanced stops will make for safer and more convenient transfers. Trash and recycling bins will make it easier to keep the areas clean and neat. All bus stop signs will be replaced with high visibility signage to include the route and travel information.