

# THE COMET

Central Midlands Transit



## Central Midlands Regional Transit Authority 2019-2020 Annual Report

Central Midlands Regional Transit Authority  
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John Andoh, CCTM, CPM Executive Director/CEO  
Derrick Huggins, Chair, Allison Terracio, Vice Chair  
Christopher Lawson, Secretary, Andy Smith, Treasurer  
**Board Members:** Lill Mood, Carolyn Gleaton, Ron Anderson,  
Leon Howard, John Furgess, Joyce Dickerson, Dr. Robert Morris,  
Skip Jenkins, Debbie Summers, Mike Green, Geraldine Robinson,  
William (B.J.) Unthank, Al Koon, Barry Walker, Stephen Cain



January 31, 2021

Dear Member Agencies,

In accordance with South Carolina Code of Laws, Section 58-25-70, the Central Midlands Regional Transit Authority (The COMET) hereby submits the Annual Report for the year ending June 30, 2020.

### **Profile of the Central Midlands Regional Transit Authority**

Under South Carolina Code of Laws - Regional Transportation Authority Law - Title 58 - Public Utilities, Services and Carriers, a regional transportation authority may be organized in any county in South Carolina that is part of a designated regional transportation area.

The COMET is a regional transportation authority formed by the governments in Richland and Lexington Counties on April 24, 2000 by the Central Midlands Council of Governments. In May 2001, The COMET Board of Directors held its first meeting. On October 16, 2002, The COMET assumed operations of the bus services provided by South Carolina Electric and Gas Company utilizing a private contractor. In August 2011, The COMET was reconstituted between Richland County, Lexington County and the Cities of Columbia and Forest Acres.

A funding intergovernmental agreement was signed by Richland County, City of Columbia, City of Forest Acres and Lexington County to fund, operate and maintain public transit services in the Central Midlands area. The intergovernmental agreement took effect in July of 2013 based on receipt of new funding from Richland County for 22 years or \$300,991,000, whichever comes first. Lexington County agreed to provide an appropriation which is agreed to annually. Lexington County also pursues funding from the Cities of West Columbia and Cayce, the Town of Springdale and Lexington Medical Center to support transit services in Lexington County.

The COMET is the brand name of the transit services provided. As of June 30, 2020, The COMET provides countywide public transit services on 34 fixed routes, five ReFlex services and DART ADA complementary paratransit service throughout Richland and western Lexington Counties. The COMET transports approximately 2.45 million passenger trips a year on a fleet of 83 buses and vans. Transit services are provided under contract with Transdev Services, Inc. of Lombard, Illinois. In addition, The COMET has contracts with Enterprise Holdings, Bewegen Technologies, Uber Technologies and Lyft for vanpool, eight bikeshare stations in downtown Columbia and The COMET On The Go! program at night and to fresh grocery markets in The COMET service area. The COMET provides direct transit services to the Cities of Columbia, Forest Acres, West Columbia and Cayce, Towns of Eastover, Irmo, Chapin, Batesburg-Leesville and Springdale, as well as unincorporated areas of Richland and Lexington Counties. Presently, the Town of Arcadia Lakes, as well as towns in eastern Lexington County do not have The COMET transit services. The COMET also serves Town of Little Mountain and the Cities of Newberry and Sumter with Routes 44X and 93X.

Through Lexington County, the Cities of West Columbia and Cayce, Town of Springdale and Lexington Medical Center provides funding support for The COMET to provide bus services in their jurisdictional areas. The COMET also receives contract revenues from Richland One, Richland Two, Lexington Richland Five School Districts, University of South Carolina, Nephron Pharmaceuticals, Prisma Health, Midlands Technical College, Allen University, Columbia College and McEntire Produce.

The COMET Board of Directors sets overall policy and direction for the transit system. 11 voting Board Members representing the City of Columbia (3), Richland County (3), City of Forest Acres (1), Lexington County (3) and Richland County Delegation (3). Non-voting members include one (1) representative from the City of Cayce, City of West Columbia, Town of Eastover, Town of Springdale, Town of Chapin, Town of Irmo, Town of Batesburg-Leesville and Lexington County Legislative Delegation.

During the fiscal year, The COMET Board of Directors reviewed their service levels and restructured service to bring service levels in line with anticipated revenues due to the need to extend the use of the Transportation Penny provided by Richland County to The COMET and to ensure proper service equity between services in both counties. The Board of Directors also adopted a service equity policy.

The COMET has 12 employees, overseen by an Executive Director/CEO with support from staff in the Finance, Regulatory Compliance, Administration and Operations and Planning and Development departments. All other functions are contracted out to private vendors, including transit service delivery and maintenance, legal counsel, paratransit certification, engineering, marketing, community relations and government affairs, mobility management, bus stop amenities and bus stop advertising.

### **Motto**

Catch The COMET.....We will Get You There!

### **Mission Statement**

The COMET provides safe, reliable, efficient, and customer-friendly mobility services throughout the Midlands region and stimulates economic development and enhances quality of life.

### **Vision Statement**

A high-quality public transit service that contributes to economic development, environmental sustainability and mobility solutions throughout the Midlands.

### **Core Values**

- Safety
- Reliability
- Friendliness
- Cleanliness & Comfort
- Cost Effectiveness

### **Economic Conditions and Outlook in Richland and Lexington Counties**

The COMET service area is Richland and Lexington Counties. Actual transit service provided is concentrated more in the western, central and southern portions of Richland County and western Lexington County. The service area center is the City of Columbia, the State Capital of South Carolina, as well as the County Seat for Richland County. The combined population of The COMET service area is 646,895 based off the 2010 U.S. Census. In The COMET fixed route service area, within Richland and Lexington Counties, there are two cities, two towns in Richland County and two cities and two towns in Lexington County. Overall, Richland County has two cities and four towns and Lexington County has three cities and twelve towns.

### Richland County

Richland County continues to be an area of growth, due in part to the presence of the seats of State and County government, the University of South Carolina as well as Fort Jackson (the nation's largest and most active initial entry training center for the US Army). On average Fort Jackson instructs over 43,000 soldiers in basic and advanced training each year, with an additional 10,000 attending courses at the Soldier Support Institute, Armed Forces Chaplaincy Center, National Center for Credibility Assessment and Drill Sergeant School. Fort Jackson currently employs almost 3,500 civilians and provides services to over 46,000 military retirees and families.

The Richland County/City of Columbia area has continually been highlighted in the pages of national publications, including:

- 76th for business/careers, 114th for cost of doing business, 66th in job growth and 84th in education as ranked by Forbes Magazine
- 2nd America Most Livable Communities (Mid-Sized Cities) by Partners for Livable Communities.org
- 132nd Best-Performing MSA as ranked by Milken Institute
- 35th for recession recovery as ranked by Brookings Institution's Metro Monitor
- 5th Small metro area for Teleworking by Sperling's Best Places

The County is located halfway between New York and Miami and within direct access to the Port of Charleston, which puts it in the center of the growing Southeastern market and has led to an increase in service and industrial firms locating to the County. The County has benefited from the overall improvement in the economy.

This is evident through the June 30, 2019 County 3.6% unemployment rate as compared to the 3.5% South Carolina unemployment rate and the 4.5% US unemployment rate. As of June 30, 2019, the breakdown of the County workforce is as follows: 13% in government, 25% in education and health, 13% in wholesale and retail trade, 13% in services, 4% in manufacturing, 22% in finance, insurance and real estate, 3% in construction and 7% in transportation and utilities. The largest employers include Palmetto Health, University of South Carolina, Blue Cross Blue Shield of SC, Richland County School District 1 and Richland County School District 2.

### Lexington County

The County of Lexington is located in the central portion of South Carolina, adjacent to the capital city of Columbia. It is one of the fastest growing counties in the state. From 2000 to 2010, the state's population increased by 15.3%, while Lexington County's increased by 21.5%. The County's 2019 population adjusted from the 2010 census was 294,774 and is ranked sixth in the state. The County had a per capital income of \$30,316. Lexington County's June 2019 unemployment rate was 2.9% compared to the state unemployment rate of 3.5%

Lexington County issued 1,584 building permits during fiscal year 2017-18. Permits for residential buildings totaled 1,525 with the buildings valued at \$412 million. A total of 59 commercial permits were issued with the buildings valued at \$48 million. Permits issued for new single-family detached housing for calendar year 2018 is projected to be 1,585. This is a 1.1 percent increase from the 1,425 permits that were projected to be issued last calendar year. These economic conditions indicate there is stability in the economy.

Major employers in Lexington County include Amazon.com Fulfillment Center, Michelin North America Inc., General Information Services and Walter P. Rawl & Sons Inc. Major public-sector agencies in Lexington County include: Lexington Medical Center, Lexington County School District One, Richland and Lexington County School District Five and Lexington County.


## Major Initiatives

- Added more passenger amenities, including shelters, benches and bus stop seating.
- Formed and renewed partnerships to allow all students, employees and facility to ride The COMET services from Richland One and Richland Two, Lexington Richland Five, Columbia College, Allen University and McEntire Produce, Midlands Technical College, Prisma Health, Lexington Medical Center and Nephron Pharmaceuticals.
- Continued to help connect low income residents in food-desert areas through partnerships with Lyft and Uber.
- Created door to door services in Forest Acres and Downtown Columbia. as well as a new ReFlex service to Batesburg-Leesville.
- Implemented Route 7, Inclement Weather Shuttle with United Way and City of Columbia
- Received new Community Development Block Grant (CDBG), FTA CARES Act, FTA Section 5310 and Cities of Cayce, West Columbia and Richland County Hospitality Tax funds to support The COMET tourism, operational and capital needs.
- Completed all eight bikeshare stations and allowing The COMET users free access to bicycles through Blue Bike and linked COMET Card to Blue Bike kiosks.
- Re-launched the vanpool program to connect people to jobs and combat congestion with the addition of 7 vans in FY 2020.
- Received funding to start the “Reimagine The COMET” short range transit plan for Richland and Lexington Counties. Jarrett Walker and Associates is leading the effort.
- Awarded new contract with RATP Dev for the operations and maintenance of The COMET's transit services.
- Restructured the organization with new positions to provide additional management of marketing, customer service, mobility management and transit operations.
- Responded to the novel Coronavirus pandemic in March 2020 through service modifications, enhanced cleaning measures, payment of service recognition bonus to employees, provision of personal protective equipment and testing of employees.
- Received the Certificate of Financial Excellence award from Government Finance Officers Association for preparing a Comprehensive Annual Financial Report.
- Received the Government Finance Officers Association Distinguished Budget Presentation Award in FY 2021.
- Rescheduled the network allow for customers to make transfers at :15 and :45 past the hour at COMET Central (the renamed Sumter Street Transit Station) as well as ensure connectivity of routes at 13 SuperStops throughout the service area.
- Created a downtown Soda Cap Connector route called The Orbit serving Blossom, Assembly, Richland and Sumter Streets, seven days a week.
- Negotiated a new service contract to operate transit service for University of South Carolina.
- Complete a Vision 2020/COMPASS Progress Report to demonstrate to the community the progress The COMET has made since the passage of the Richland County Penny.
- Provide free transit services since March 17, 2020 due to the COVID-19 pandemic.
- Launched overflow paratransit taxi services with Blue Ribbon Taxi through Transdev/RATP Dev
- Installed 58 new fareboxes on The COMET fixed route buses and 23 refurbished fareboxes on the DART paratransit/ReFlex buses and implemented COMET Card, a smart card that is reloadable with bus passes, cash wallet fares as well as can be used on Blue Bike.
- Started an economic study to understand the value that The COMET provides to Richland and Lexington Counties.
- Negotiated with University of South Carolina regarding the operation of their transit services.
- Completed a new Marketing Plan, Social Media Manual and Brand Guidelines.
- Open a network of park and ride lots in Richland, Lexington, Sumter and Newberry Counties.



Should you have any questions on this annual report, please contact me at (803) 255-7087 or email [john.andoh@CatchTheCOMET.org](mailto:john.andoh@CatchTheCOMET.org).

Sincerely,



John Andoh  
Executive Director/CEO



# IS CATCHING ON!

New funding in November 2012 allowed Richland County and The City of Columbia to continue providing modern and cost-efficient transportation to their citizens. In 2020, we added updated fuel-efficient buses to our fleet, increased service and expanded route areas, among other things.

	FY 2012	FY 2019	FY 2020
Hours	61,557	234,044	243,607
Riders	1,498,818	2,729,566	2,458,740
Fleet	68	83	83

**\$49,200,851** FUNDS THROUGH FEDERAL MATCHING SINCE 2012

Connected low-income residents in food-desert areas to 23 fresh food markets through Lyft and Uber partnerships.

**01**

Received new Community Development Block Grant (CDBG), FTA CARES Act, FTA Section 5310 and Cities of Cayce, West Columbia and Richland County Hospitality Tax funds to support The COMET tourism, operational and capital needs.

**02**

Responded to the novel Coronavirus pandemic in March 2020 by providing fare free transit, modifying service, enhancing cleaning measures, paying service recognition bonus to employees, providing personal protective equipment and testing for employees.

**03**



Completed all eight Blue Bike bikeshare stations allowing The COMET users free access to bicycles and linking COMET Card to Blue Bike kiosks.

**04**



## NEW SERVICES



Launched overflow paratransit taxi services with Blue Ribbon Taxi through Transdev/RATP Dev.



Received funding to start the “Reimagine The COMET” transit plan for Richland and Lexington Counties. Jarrett Walker and Associates leads the effort.



Negotiated a new service contract to operate transit service for University of South Carolina, UofSC Transit – Powered by The COMET.



Added seven vans to re-launch the vanpool program, connecting people to jobs and combating congestion.



Created The Orbit, a downtown Soda Cap Connector route serving Blossom, Assembly, Richland and Sumter Streets, seven days a week.



Created door-to-door services in Forest Acres and Downtown Columbia, as well as a new ReFlex service to Batesburg-Leesville.



Implemented Route 7, Inclement Weather Shuttle with United Way and City of Columbia.

## CUSTOMER CARE



Increased efficiency by rescheduling network transfer times to :15 and :45 past the hour at the COMET Central transit hub ensuring connectivity of routes at 13 SuperStops throughout the service area.



Completed the Vision 2020/COMPASS Progress Report demonstrating the advancements The COMET has made since the passage of the Richland County Penny.



Renewed or formed new partnerships with Richland One and Richland Two, Lexington-Richland Five, Columbia College, Allen University, University of South Carolina, McEntire Produce, Midlands Technical College, Prisma Health, Lexington Medical Center and Nephron Pharmaceuticals. This allowed all students, employees, and faculty to ride The COMET at no charge.



Awarded new contract with RATP Dev USA for the operations and maintenance of The COMET’s transit services.

## IMPROVEMENTS



Added more passenger amenities, such as shelters, benches, and bus stop seating and made bus stops more accessible and connected to sidewalks.



Received the Certificate of Achievement for Excellence in Financial Reporting award from The Government Finance Officers Association of the United States and Canada (GFOA) for our Comprehensive Annual Financial Report (CAFR).



Restructured the organization with new positions to provide additional management of marketing, customer service, mobility management and transit operations.



Installed 58 new fareboxes on The COMET fixed route buses and 23 refurbished fareboxes on the DART paratransit/ReFlex buses. Implemented COMET Card, a smart card that is reloadable with bus passes and cash wallet fares which is also usable with Blue Bike.