

# BIG PICTURE

By Mike Martindill and Mitch Skyer

*Georgia Regents University implements a complex parking and transit master plan.*

New transit routes link the two campuses of the consolidated university.

**G**eorgia Regents University Augusta (GRU) is a newly-formed consolidation of two long standing universities: the Medical College of Georgia and Augusta State University. The schools are only a few miles apart in Augusta and were two of eight the Georgia Board of Regents elected to consolidate to share resources, combine curriculums, and provide better learning environments by joining together.

During the consolidation of the Medical College of Georgia and Augusta State University, it was clear to senior administration and other stakeholders that a comprehensive evaluation of both parking and transit was needed to help ensure better connectivity and improved use of the infrastructure that served the two institutions. Connectivity between campuses, proper allocation and sharing of parking resources, adequate parking, improved mobility, identifying technology enhancements, and the implementation of new parking management initiatives were all primary elements of the parking and transit master plan.





Connectivity between campuses, proper allocation and sharing of parking resources, improved mobility, technology enhancements, and new parking management initiatives played roles in the parking and transportation master plans that helped in the consolidation of two Georgia universities.



GRU engaged a qualified team of parking and transportation planners and specialists to assist in developing a comprehensive plan that would focus on transit planning, improving connectivity between the campuses, and enhancing the efficiency of the transit program. The team also studied current parking conditions, estimated future parking needs (including the sizing and siting of any new parking improvements), and addressed wayfinding, signage, and the condition of the existing parking assets and other parking-related needs/issues.

### **Working Together**

Initially, the team worked in a collaborative manner to study existing conditions and spent a significant amount of time at both campuses to better understand in-place systems during peak times of activity and how effectively transit and parking supported the respective needs of each institution. The team rode the buses, walked the campuses, met with stakeholders, conducted workshops to solicit input from various users, and performed a large amount of due diligence to develop models that represented current conditions. Team members used these models and other information to estimate future needs for both transit and parking, considering anticipated growth of the new institution during the next 10 years.

In addition, through a comprehensive due diligence effort, the team developed a series of parking management initiatives aimed at improving parking conditions, allocating parking properly among the various use groups, and improving and simplifying parking enforcement. Though parking and transit were managed as well as could be expected given the limited resources in place, it was clear that several new initiatives could take parking and transit to a higher level. From the outset, the team wanted to take advantage of its collective experience to recommend common best practices used throughout the country that have proven effective in improving parking and transit management while enhancing the experience of the users.

### **Challenges and Opportunities**

Throughout the study, the team met with a strategic planning firm to better understand the university's vision for improving the quality of life for students, staff, and visitors who will live, visit, and learn at the newly formed consolidated university. The Medical College of Georgia campus is quite dense and situated among the city's large Veterans Affairs medical center and another not-for-

profit hospital. Existing parking and traffic was very congested, with campus parking consisting of five parking garages, several parking lots, and some on-street parking. Typically, the college's parking was extremely well-utilized, especially for visitors and patients of the hospitals and medical office buildings making up the medical college campus. In addition, several academic buildings are located on campus, which further contributes to its parking woes. To provide adequate parking, several remote lots were needed that were not well-served by the college's transit system, let alone linked to nearby Augusta State.

At Augusta State, parking consists of surface parking at two campus locations. Though not nearly as dense as the Medical College of Georgia, finding a space on campus on busy days was a challenge. Neither campus had in place an effective parking enforcement program for ensuring the proper use of parking between the various user groups.

The original vision was to add more buildings at the less-dense Augusta State campus to improve the quality of life and create a different kind of campus environment than existed. However, as the goals and objectives advanced, the new (and current) vision is to expand the campus formerly known as the Medical College of Georgia.

### **The Solution**

The team assembled several new ideas for improving transit and parking conditions, paving the way for both the transit and parking systems to accommodate the long-term growth of the new consolidated campuses. The most important recommendation included the mission-critical proposal to hire a new champion for the consolidated university's parking and transit system. This person would be responsible for implementing many of the new initiatives the team recommended. The new director-level hire would report to the vice president of auxiliary services and needed to have a strong background in managing parking systems for both universities and medical centers. Once this person was on board, he or she would procure the parking and transit technology, parking equipment, software, and hardware necessary for managing the parking and transit between the two campuses. In essence, this person would start with a blank slate and create a new, sustainable parking and transit system to support GRU and its anticipated growth





and significance to the state of Georgia—a great opportunity.

After a presentation of the findings and recommendations, the study effort was expanded to collaborate with another master planning effort. This plan would take the consolidation in a different direction, placing more emphasis on vertical construction and expansion at the existing Medical College of Georgia campus. The expansion of the medical college campus was arguably more representative of the greater vision for consolidating the two schools and the creation of a superior public medical school. The transportation

and parking plan was then revised to support the new vision.

GRU has already implemented several of the initiatives outlined in this plan, including the development of a more efficient usage of the transit system, accessibility of remote parking lots, linking the two campuses with new transit routes, and improving headway times of the transit system.

The transit recommendations focused on campus connectivity between the Health Sciences (downtown) and Summerville/Forest Hills/University Village (uptown) locations. GRU recognized from the outset that the service had to be both functional and appealing. Any option that required passengers to plan their days in multiple-hour segments would never be used by a large number of people. The service had to be timely and responsive and had to provide a terrific alternative to driving on congested roads and hunting for elusive parking spots. For the Health Sciences (downtown) campus, employee and patient movement were the primary considerations. The workforce locations were evaluated in conjunction with the currently available and projected parking locations.

Recommendations to influence parking decisions, such as assigned permitting, installing gate controlled access, and clearly separating patient, employee, and student parking in an enforceable manner, were made. These recommendations were of primary importance to the transit system as they allowed the planning to be based on predictable and enforceable behavior. GRU was extremely concerned with the possibility of implementing a transportation system that would be underutilized, or worse, completely ignored. By planning transit around parking, the convenience and value of the bus system increased significantly. Employee movement was considered both when arriving and departing the workplace, student class periods and demand for services were evaluated, and when patients were affected, their convenience level was made a priority. Choice was a key factor in offering

both parking options and transit connectivity. When people were provided with choice regarding costs, time, and location, they felt more in-control and could base their behavior and decisions on personal preferences rather than simply being assigned a solution.

Passengers consistently demand their transit system be convenient and offer frequent service. This can often exceed budget limitations and result in unsustainable costs. To meet these seemingly opposing requirements, GPS vehicle tracking software was implemented on all vehicles. This solution provided real-time passenger information regarding bus locations. Passengers can download apps directly to their Apple or Android phones and track the bus and stop information and select individual and multiple routes. Additionally, display options of single routes and the full transit system can be published to the GRU parking and transit website and shown on kiosk displays at key passenger gathering points.

Operationally, technology plays a crucial role. The GRU transit manager and supervisors can track speed, location, idling time, hours of operation, route and schedule performance, and vehicle history at the touch of a button. GRU also elected to implement passenger-counting technology to track peak usage, gather data to evaluate route costs per passenger, and have information available to determine whether stops should be removed or given additional service. The data gathered on every bus during all routes will enable GRU to make operational decisions quickly, save money, improve service levels, and enhance operations on a continual basis. In an environment in which there are many competing interests and those interests are often independently justified, having solid data encourages understanding and cooperation when difficult decisions regarding resource allocation have to be made.

### Looking Ahead

GRU is in the midst of hiring a parking director to take on the many opportunities that still exist for improved parking enforcement, such as using license plate recognition and digital permitting, eliminating an abundance of reserved parking, changing the pricing structure, improving existing parking assets, and establishing reserves for extending the useful life of the university's parking assets. It was clear throughout this project that new parking technology was key to improving the effectiveness and efficiency of the new parking management initiatives. For GRU, this means the addition of new software and hardware, but the value of this update is absolutely worth the investment long term.

Everyone involved in the process is confident that once these recommendations are implemented, parking and transit behavior will change and a new and improved experience will be created for all who work, live, learn, teach, and visit the newly formed Georgia Regents University at Augusta.



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