

METRO-MOBILITY TALKS

Transportation Coordination Network

NEW DIRECTOR MOBILIZING UPDATE TO REGIONAL TRANSPORTATION COORDINATION PLAN

While working on her Master's degree at Harvard University's John F. Kennedy's School of Government, it never occurred to Sara Salvide that one day she would be traveling throughout the scenic rural roads and highways of the Coastal Bend, seeking input on how to better coordinate access to public transportation in rural areas. Sara, selected in May as the Inter-County Mobility Director for the Transportation Coordination Network (TCN), was concentrating on the interplay between public policy and business development at the time while using the subway and bus systems to get to class.

"I have depended on public transportation most of my life. Growing up beyond the city limits of Brownsville, Texas in what today would be considered a colonia, my family did not have a car. There was a city bus that would run between Brownsville and South Padre Island several times a day. However, we never knew what time it would pass by our neighborhood, so we had a "lookout", a neighbor who lived right next to the highway. She would sit by the window and when she saw the bus coming about half a mile away, she would yell out the window to alert anyone who needed to go into town that day." Sara reminisced.

Unfortunately even that type of limited public transportation isn't available in many of the rural areas in this region and especially among the almost 200 colonias in the Coastal Bend region. Every public official and human services provider knows that public transportation is the lifeline for rural communities throughout the country.

According to Lisa Pantoja, a community health worker with the Catholic Charities of Corpus Christi, "Rural families cannot survive without the ability to travel to a grocery store to buy fresh fruit, water and food. Doctors' appointments are missed, medicine is not purchased, and educational and employment opportunities are lost." • Catholic Charities, together with University of Texas Community Outreach, provides a diabetes intervention and prevention program for Nueces County. However, it is often difficult for potential consumers to utilize their services.

Diana Alvear, a community health worker based in Banquete, says their program has made a tremendous difference for those individuals lucky enough to be able to attend the diabetes educational classes as well as the nutrition and exercise classes. "We have several success stories in Banquete of diabetic participants who have joined our Walking Club and have learned how to cook food in a more nutritious way. Several of them have lost more than 50lbs and the entire family is healthier. Sadly there are so many more who simply do not have the means of getting to our center."

Situations such as these are indicative of the need to update the 2006 Coastal Bend Public Transportation Coordination Plan. TCN and its stakeholders have been meeting monthly to prepare for the new plan and are now moving forward rapidly with Sara providing the essential staff leadership. Martin Ornelas, Chair of TCN and the director of the Coastal Bend Rural Health Partnership is pleased to note the progress made in the past three months.

"We have a great group of stakeholders committed to developing a plan that will create a system of providing public transportation services to the remote rural areas of the Coastal Bend. However, we were in need of someone to carry out the multitude of daily tasks and responsibilities that develop ideas into reality. That person is Sara Salvide", stated Ornelas.

The focus of the 2011 public transportation coordination plan is improved coordination between human services organizations and rural transit providers to enhance and expand services to those in need throughout the Coastal Bend. It is imperative that all public resources be maximized by being used efficiently and effectively especially during these challenging economic times.

Key components of the plan updated are to conduct a comprehensive transportation needs assessment and to identify the transportation resources currently available in the twelve counties. Sara is working with Linda Cherrington of the Texas Transportation Institute (TTI) to gather this vital information. Two out of three scheduled community strategic planning sessions have been held to gather input. The first was held on June 21st in Robstown and the second was held in Refugio on Monday, July 26th.

The next meeting will be held on Monday, August 16th at the Ed Rachel Memorial Library in Falfurrias from 9:30 to 12:00 noon. "We are trying to get the word out about this meeting to Brooks, Duval, Kenedy and Kleberg Counties in particular because of their proximity to Falfurrias. We hope health and human services organizations, churches, veterans groups and any entity that needs public transportation in order to provide its services will attend. We need to also hear from the many nonprofit agencies, private companies and individuals that provide transportation services. Everyone is invited!" added Sara.

A survey has also been developed to gather information and is found below. The response has been very good from San Patricio and Nueces Counties but we still need to hear from Bee, Jim Wells, Live Oak, McMullan, Refugio counties as well as Brooks, Duval, Kenedy and Kleberg Counties.

"The more comprehensive the data we gather, the better able we will be to develop a regional transportation plan that addresses the gaps in service. Your completion of the survey and your participation in TCN will improve the lives of many of residents in the Coastal Bend," stressed Sara.

By August 31, 2011, TCN will submit a comprehensive Regional Public Transportation Coordination Plan that will map how to provide better transportation for individuals traveling for employment purposes, senior and child day care, training, non-emergency medical visits and will identify how to meet the daily transportation needs of older citizens, individuals with disabilities, low income families and transit dependent consumers.

"When I arrived in Corpus Christi nine years ago, I knew that I wanted a job that would capitalize on my 25 years of experience in the public sector. I also want to spend some of my work time traveling. I am blessed to have found that position with TCN and to know that by working together with our stakeholders, we will make rural public transportation a reality in the Coastal Bend."

If you have any questions regarding this or other Metro-Mobility Talks articles please contact us at ccmpo@cctxmpo.us or visit our website at www.corpuschristi-mpo.org.