

# Affordable housing and public transportation access

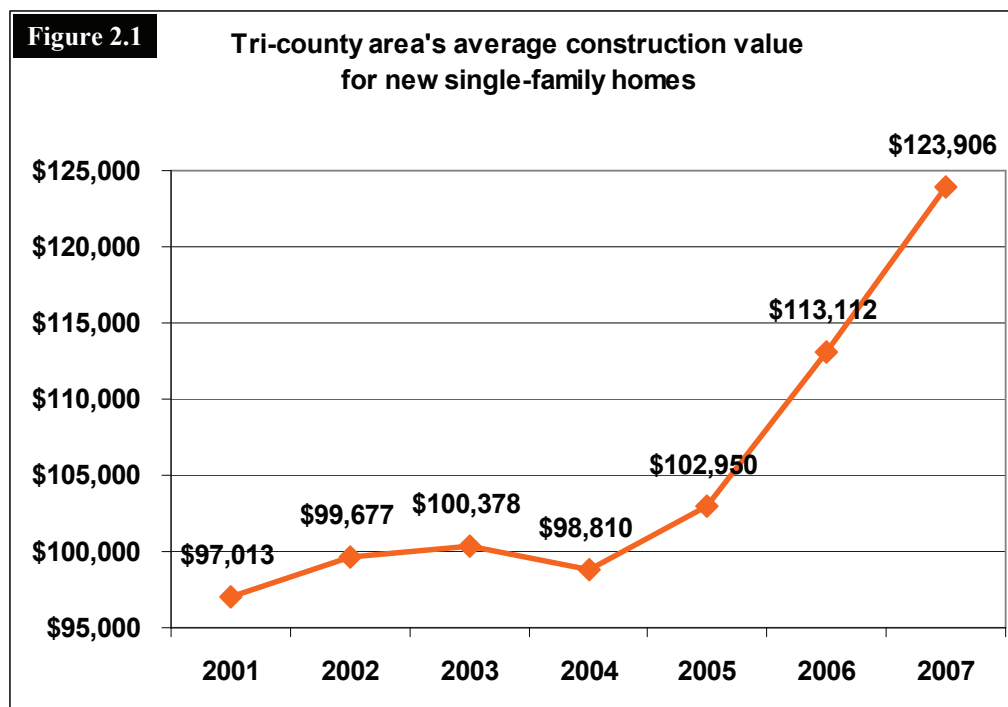
Goal: To provide opportunities for low-to-moderate income families and individuals to participate in home ownership or suitable alternatives; and to develop inexpensive and reliable public transportation to assist residents daily.

Prioritized issues that can be affected by community actions:

- A. *Increase access to affordable home ownership*
- B. *Provide affordable housing alternatives to home ownership*
- C. *Address homelessness issues*
- D. *Develop reliable, affordable and accessible public transportation systems to increase ridership*

## New home values

In recent years the new home market has grown extensively across the U.S. This trend has also held true in Sumter and Clarendon counties. Not only has the quantity of new single-family homes – also known as “stick-built homes” – grown considerably, but the construction value of these homes has soared dramatically as shown in Figure 2.1. The construction value of a home is the contractor-determined cost for building the home and is a low-side indicator of the new home’s selling price.



*Source: Clarendon, Lee and Sumter planning commission, 2001-'07 data*

From 2004 to 2007 the construction value of new homes in the tri-county area increased by over \$25,000, or 25.4 percent. Even after removing a high-priced, 84-unit, condo development in Clarendon County from year 2007 totals, the average new home construction value for that year is still \$120,676. The cost hikes are due mostly to increased building material costs and construction of larger and nicer homes. As stated, this value is only a low-side indicator of a new home’s selling price. Considering the average selling price markup, new homes in the three counties are currently only affordable for the area’s middle- and upper-class population.

While there is some funding available for affordable housing new home construction, the bulk of the new homes in the tri-county area are priced well above the financial means of a significant portion of the area’s population. This is especially the case for residents in Clarendon and Lee counties, where per capita personal income levels rank significantly below the South Carolina average and among the 10 lowest counties in the state as shown in Table 2.1.

**Table 2.1**      **Per capita personal income – 2006**

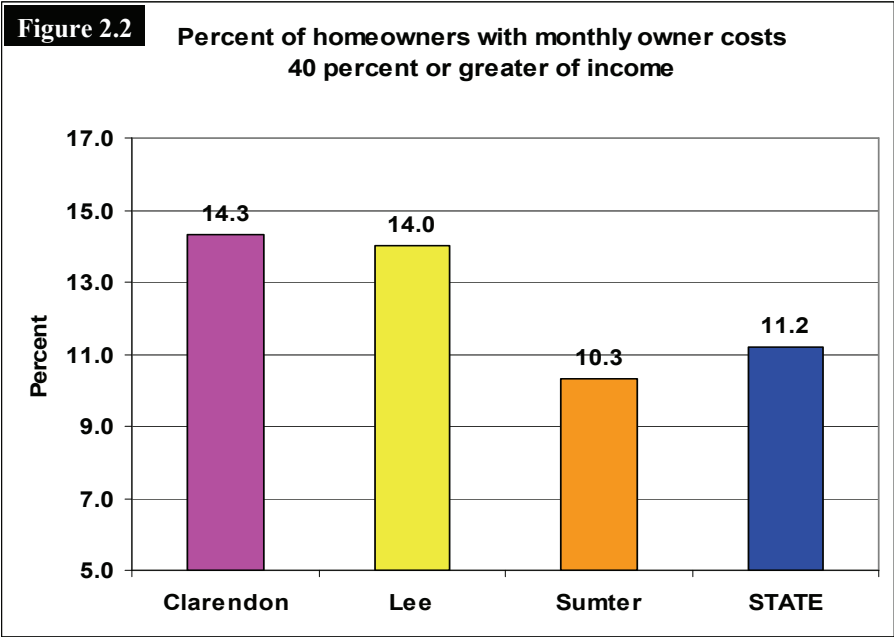
County	Total	Rank in state
Clarendon	\$22,350	37 <sup>th</sup> of 46
Lee	\$21,601	43 <sup>rd</sup> of 46
Sumter	\$26,242	23 <sup>rd</sup> of 46
<b>STATE</b>	<b>\$29,767</b>	<b>45<sup>th</sup> of 50 U.S. states</b>

*Source: Bureau of Economic Analysis*

As with many other economic and community variables, soaring new housing construction values reflect a growing divide between the rich and the poor. The value of home ownership for these county residents in the lower-income category is still critical. The most effective means of home ownership for these people in the counties is via rehabilitation of existing substandard housing stock, given the cost of new construction. The Sumter County Regional HOME Consortium, which serves all four counties in the Santee-Lynches Region, has determined there is ample supply of existing housing stock in the region. More funding is always a concern to service the low-income population. Continuous efforts should include aggressive pursuit of government grants, new initiatives by local non-profit agencies, and the establishment of public/private partnerships to develop financing options to fund affordable housing projects.

**Worker monthly housing costs**

A homeowner’s income significantly impacts housing affordability. When housing costs -- including mortgage, taxes, insurance and utilities -- exceed more than 40 percent of a family’s income, the family is economically burdened and disadvantaged. As of Census 2000, about 14 percent of homeowners in Clarendon and Lee counties had monthly household costs of 40 percent or more of income as represented in Figure 2.2. Sumter County’s percentage of burdened homeowners was actually below the state average of 11.2 percent at Census 2000. Given the “housing boom” and consumer credit crisis in recent years in the U.S. and region, percentage totals have likely increased in all areas.

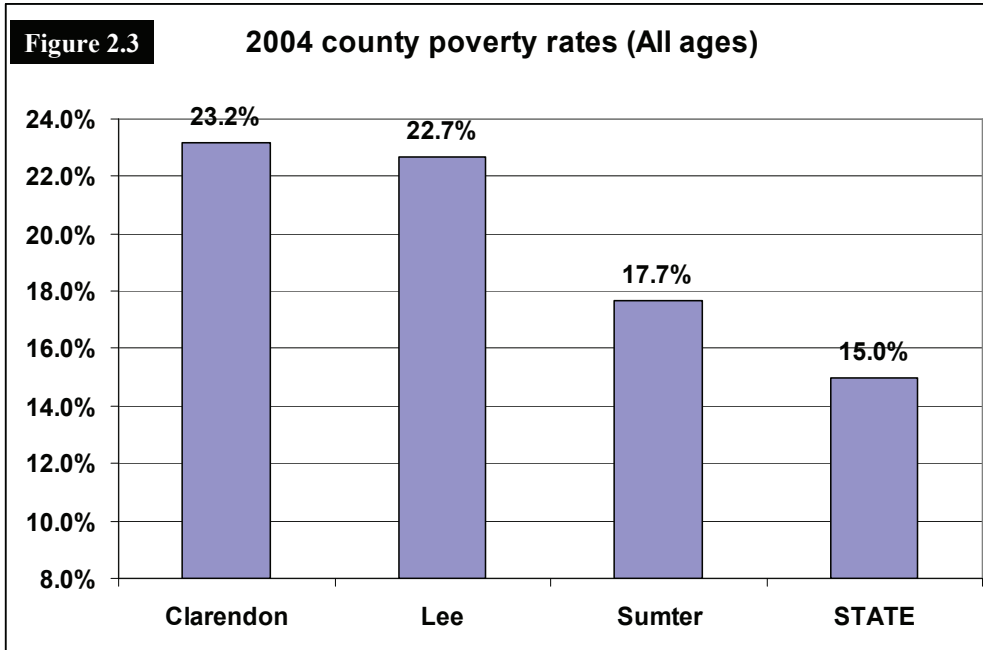


Source: U.S. Census 2000

**Worker monthly rental costs**

The tri-county area has a greater percentage of households in poverty than the state average. Measuring by eligible population, Clarendon and Lee counties’ 2004 poverty rates are significantly above the South Carolina average of 15.0 percent and Sumter County is also above the state mark as shown in Figure 2.3. County and state poverty rates have increased slightly since Census 2000 according to the Bureau’s modeling data. (Year 2004 poverty statistics are currently the latest reliable information available.)

The poverty level is below an income cutoff or threshold, where a person or family needs public money and service to subsist. The threshold varies based on family size and number of children under 18 years old. If an individual or family’s total income is less than the threshold, the person or family is considered below the poverty level.



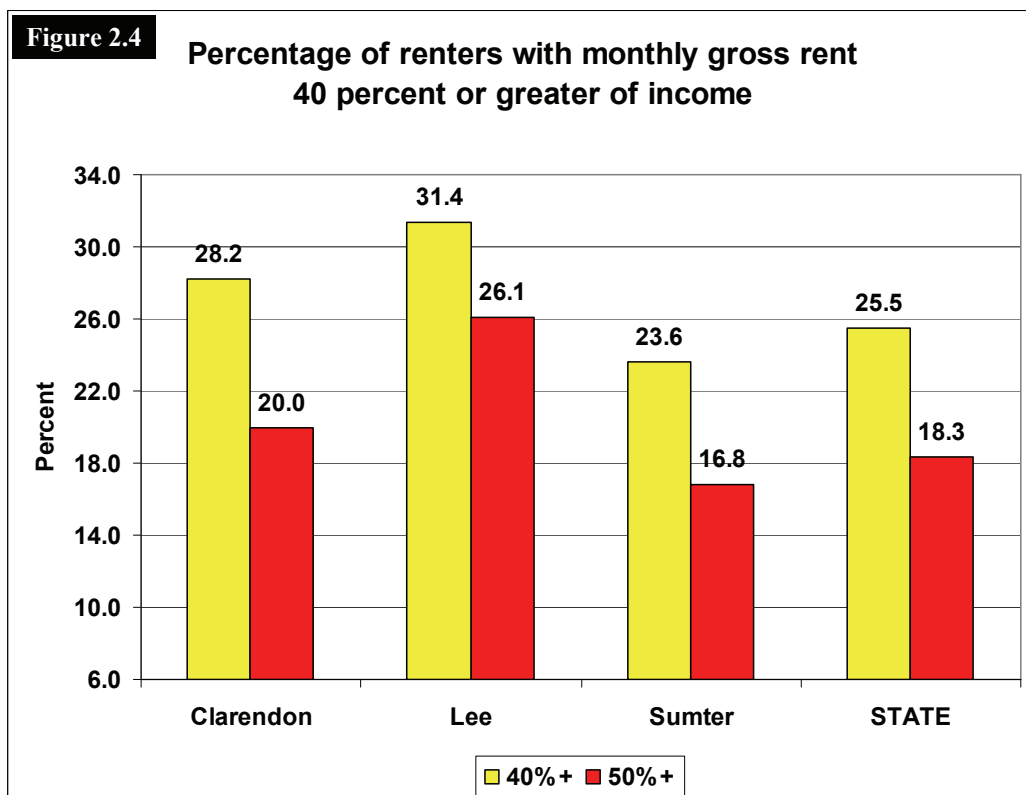
Source: U.S. Census Bureau Small Area Income & Poverty Estimates, 2004.

Many in the low-income category don't qualify for home ownership but instead rent apartments or duplexes, which are often subsidized. Much of the rental property in the three county seats (Manning, Bishopville and the city of Sumter) has been built for the lower-income population.

In the rural portions of each county, many people in poverty rent single-family homes. While these rentals are also primarily subsidized, the units are often in worse physical condition than subsidized housing in the county seats.

Below-standard housing affects all segments of people in poverty and single mothers compose a significant portion of this group. These single-female head of households often rent homes that are substandard.

Figure 2.4 analyzes renters in the three counties and the state. Gross rental costs – including rent and utilities – are measured as a percent of household income. Clarendon and Lee have more renters who are economically burdened by rental costs, as measured by monthly gross rent at 40 percent or more of household income. Sumter's rate of cost-burdened renters of 23.6 percent at Census 2000 was below the state average of 25.5 percent.



Source: U.S. Census 2000

Figure 2.4 also details in red the percentage of renters spending 50 percent or more on gross rent at the time of Census 2000. The Census Bureau defines a renter who spends 50 percent or more on gross rent as "severely burdened." **A total of 26.1 percent of Lee rent-**

**ers spent 50 percent or more on gross rent and 20.0 percent of Clarendon renters spent likewise.** The state average in 2000 was 18.3 percent. Higher rates of cost-burdened renters threaten growth of home ownership in a county.

Since the state Housing Finance and Development Authority began its tax-credit program in 1988 Clarendon County has put in place 432 affordable rental units (through year 2007), a total similar to Sumter County's 487 even though the county's population is roughly only one-third of Sumter's.

The tax credit program brought on line only 232 affordable rental units in Lee County from 1988-2007. Part of the difficulty here is per capita personal income is so low in Lee – 59 percent of the U.S. average – any potential investor will find it difficult to earn a return on investment for a project in the county. This reinforces the need for Lee County residents to enhance educational attainment levels to improve employment rates and earnings potential.

An April 2008 market study of Sumter County prepared for the state Housing Finance and Development Authority found sufficient evidence for more affordable rental housing for low-income households in the county based on overall low vacancy rates and other factors. According to Lloyd Flores, president of the Total Care for the Homeless Coalition that serves the tri-county area, there is a need for more affordable housing in each county.

### **ACCRA cost of living survey of housing**

A review of housing costs from 2005-'08 for both stick-built homes and apartments conducted by the quarterly ACCRA survey for Metropolitan Statistical Areas (MSAs) shows Sumter County with less expensive housing costs dating back to 2005 compared to Anderson County and Camden. However, some larger metropolitan areas in the state – Columbia, Greenville and Myrtle Beach – rank lower than Sumter on average housing costs according to the data. This likely reflects initiatives in these cities to build lower-income housing in recent years. (Florence and Spartanburg counties didn't participate in the ACCRA survey enough to generate reliable average totals.) In the survey, monthly principal and interest payment for a new house and monthly rent for renters are considered "housing costs." To be included in the survey, homes and apartment complexes must meet selected criteria.

#### **Housing index costs (2<sup>nd</sup> quarter 2005 - 1<sup>st</sup> quarter '08)**

Greenville	78.38
Myrtle Beach/Conway	80.47
Columbia	81.11
<b>Sumter</b>	<b>81.65</b>
Camden	84.24
Anderson	84.56

*Source: ACCRA cost of living index survey*

## **Homelessness**

Homelessness is an ongoing problem throughout the U.S. Homeless individuals lack a fixed, adequate residence. People become homeless due to various reasons that may include unemployment, divorce, domestic violence, illness, and release from a mental health institution or a correctional facility. The homeless require numerous services to reverse their current situation. The needs of the homeless consist of two main categories:

- 1) **Shelter** – This consists of **emergency housing**, which is a temporary shelter option for 30 to 90 days, and **transitional housing** – the next step after emergency shelter and providing full supportive services for three months to 24 months.
- 2) **Supportive services** – This consists of a range of services to address the physical, psychological, economic and social needs of the homeless person.

Determining the scope of homelessness in a county or state is difficult due to inherent difficulties in capturing the population group. Many homeless live with relatives and will neither show up in a shelter count nor a count of homeless living on the street. Also, according to providers in the field, there is a negative stigma with homelessness and many homeless consider themselves only “in transition” or “without a house” and not homeless. These factors make extrapolating the total number of homeless difficult.

Research by the Urban Institute and others shows analyzing county poverty rates of total population allows for relatively realistic estimates of the chronic homeless, who are always in a shelter; and the transient homeless, those who are in and out of shelters during a year. Given gradually increasing poverty rates through the years, homeless counts would also logically be rising. The state Office of Research & Statistics considers these measurements to be relatively accurate.

The best estimates of the transient homeless – also called “annualized homeless” since they experience a spell of homelessness at least once a year – is 6.3 percent of the people considered below poverty in a county. Using the 2004 Census Bureau Small Area Income and Poverty Estimates by county (latest available), annualized homeless estimates are first derived by multiplying 6.3 percent to the Bureau’s poverty estimate. Totals are listed in Table 2.2.

**Table 2.2** Annualized (or transient) homeless estimates – 2004

County	People in poverty	Annualized homeless	Pct. of population
Clarendon	7,421	468	1.4%
Lee	4,308	271	1.3%
Sumter	18,301	1,153	1.1%
STATE	622,083	39,191	0.9%

Source: County homeless estimates based on 2004 poverty estimates

The estimates show Clarendon and Lee with higher percentages of the population that might seek a shelter during a year. All three counties had higher rates of annualized homelessness than the state average in 2004.

**Table 2.3** Annualized (or transient) homeless estimates – 2004

County	Annualized homeless	PIT homeless	Pct. of population
Clarendon	468	78 to 156	0.2% to 0.5%
Lee	271	45 to 90	0.2% to 0.4%
Sumter	1,153	192 to 384	0.2% to 0.4%
STATE	39,191	6,532 to 13,064	0.2% to 0.3%

Source: County homeless estimates based on 2004 poverty estimates

Next, another calculation is performed to determine the counties’ “point-in-time homeless,” who are generally considered the chronic homeless. Typically, the annualized homeless total is 3 to 6 times larger than the chronic homeless. The totals in Table 2.3 give ranges for PIT estimates in the counties for 2004. Again, the totals here are above the state norm.

**It’s necessary to mention county poverty rates have most likely increased since 2004 so current homeless totals would be somewhat higher than totals listed here.**

### Homeless children – School district data

Another set of homeless estimates is produced by the public school districts on homeless children in the counties and – at least for Sumter County – may paint the most accurate picture of homelessness. The state Department of Education’s definition of “homeless” is broader than other definitions, including schoolchildren who are in shelters, lacking shelter, in substandard housing, or sharing the housing of other people (sometimes called “doubled-up”) due to loss of housing, economic hardship or a similar reason. All other homeless calculations have difficulty in measuring to this level of detail. The DOE sur-

veys each of the state's school districts for homeless youth from the pre-school level through Adult Education. However, the key concern with the district counts is school districts with grant money for dealing with homeless children generally have much more accurate counts than the other districts. In recent years the two Sumter County districts have had grant money and conducted more rigorous counts of homeless schoolchildren; while the other area districts have not. A listing of homeless schoolchildren and youth by school district for the 2007-'08 academic year is provided next.

Homeless children and youth by school district for 2007-'08

District	Homeless
Clarendon 1	15
Clarendon 2	3
Clarendon 3	14
Lee	43
<b>Sumter 2</b>	<b>515</b>
<b>Sumter 17</b>	<b>226</b>

Source: S.C. Department of Education, 2007-'08 homeless data.

**Bold** indicates district had grant money to work with homeless schoolchildren.

Likely, the Sumter County school districts' homeless counts come close to best describing the homeless problem in the county, given the broad definition of "homeless" used by DOE and rigorous efforts in counting the population. The total of 741 homeless schoolchildren for the two districts seems to be somewhat in line with the annualized county homeless estimate based on poverty rates of 1,153. Annual homeless children data for the Sumter districts show increases through the years, and state totals also show an increase in recent years. The higher totals for Sumter District 2 over District 17 are expected, given the more rural nature of the school district. Without grant money, the Clarendon and Lee totals can't be considered an accurate measurement.

**Point-in-time totals for 2007 – S.C. Council on Homelessness**

The U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) requires that each state conduct a point-in-time count of the homeless population on a single day in January every two years. The last PIT count for counties in the state was Jan. 25, 2007. *The totals were supposed to estimate 1) the number of HUD-defined homeless -- individuals who are currently in emergency or transitional shelter or literally unsheltered and living on the streets – and 2) people who are precariously and inadequately housed, paying too much for housing or otherwise at risk of losing their housing.* **Due to numerous data quality issues, such as low levels of effort in county counts, the homeless measurements couldn't measure the second part of the homeless calculation and likely had difficulty in calculating the HUD-defined homeless. Therefore, the totals don't provide an accurate picture of the homeless population in the counties or the state.** Nevertheless, the following are the official 2007 county homeless tallies as recorded by the state Council on Homelessness along with the level of effort in each county.

County point-in-time homeless totals

County	PIT homeless	Level of effort
Clarendon	214	None/very low
Lee	2	None/very low
Sumter	108	Low/moderate
STATE	6,759	Not applicable

Source: S.C. Council on Homelessness, 2007

Obviously, there are major differences in Sumter and Lee totals here compared to the point-in-time estimates based on county poverty rates discussed previously. Lee County's PIT homeless count here of two people is most assuredly a dramatic undercount due to a very low level of effort in this count. Sumter County's PIT count here is likely an undercount as well. The Sumter PIT count in the 190 to 380 range is likely more realistic, especially when considering a two-week count in 2007 for Sumter conducted by the area's homeless coalition revealed about 688 homeless individuals.

### **Shelter and service needs to the homeless**

The Total Care for the Homeless Coalition consists of about 60 housing and supportive service providers that provide assistance to homeless individuals and homeless families with children in six counties, which include Clarendon, Lee, Sumter, Horry, Williamsburg and Georgetown. According to the coalition, the tri-county area has numerous shelter bed needs.

Many needs exist in Lee and Clarendon counties. In Lee there are currently no shelter beds, and in Clarendon about 23 beds are available in one transitional homeless shelter for family burnouts and others who can pay for at least some of their living expenses. The coalition estimates about 100 beds are needed in Lee and 150 more are necessary for the homeless in Clarendon. (These bed needs are comparable to the PIT homeless estimates based on poverty rates presented previously.)

Road blocks often occur when attempting to open a county shelter, such as lack of neighborhood support, according to the coalition. Low bed counts are common in small, rural counties, and the homeless in these areas are often referred to shelters in bigger cities (Sumter or Columbia) where shelter accommodations might be available. According to the coalition, bed needs are greater in Clarendon than Lee because of its location on Interstate 95, which attracts more transient homeless.

In Sumter County there are also very limited emergency and transitional shelter beds available for the homeless. Samaritan House and Lighthouse of Hope offer a combined total of about 40 emergency shelter beds. Wateree Community Actions (about 12 beds) and the YWCA (12-15 beds) also have a limited number of emergency beds, but the YWCA **only** accepts abused women and their children. As far as transitional housing, Sumter County has about 18 beds with the homeless generally having to pre-qualify as former inmates or substance abusers. According to the United Way of Sumter, Clarendon and Lee Counties, one of the biggest needs in the tri-county area is safe shelter for women with children.

According to the homeless coalition, total bed needs for Sumter could approach 750 to 1,000.

As far as supportive services for area homeless individuals, the coalition says the biggest unmet need is available transportation to take the homeless to receive services, such as to a doctor or even transporting the homeless to a shelter. Many have to walk miles to the nearest shelter. For homeless families with children, the biggest unmet need is affordable housing, according to the coalition. This need coincides with a need for more permanent housing shelters in the area. One permanent shelter with about 90 beds is located in Sumter and none exist in Lee or Clarendon.

### **Funding and education as solutions to homeless dilemma**

According to the coalition, a more comprehensive funding approach to solving homelessness is required on the part of the federal government and county and municipal government as homeless totals continue to rise. Supportive services offered to the homeless need to be more multi-faceted to effectively aid different subpopulations, such as homeless alcoholics and homeless women with children. These two subpopulations require different supportive services, and many existing shelters aren't equipped to effectively help the various subpopulations.

The coalition said most current approaches to helping the homeless are merely "Band-Aid" or patchwork fixes that provide short-term services but don't address helping the homeless individual become more self-sufficient. In the long run, not having a comprehensive approach to curtail homelessness results in more costs, such as chronic alcoholism, juvenile detention, vandalism and foster care for children. All these are hidden, long-term costs to the community for not effectively addressing the core issues faced by the homeless. Government on all levels must have a more proactive funding approach to address the root causes of homelessness. The coalition said these initiatives are lacking at this time.

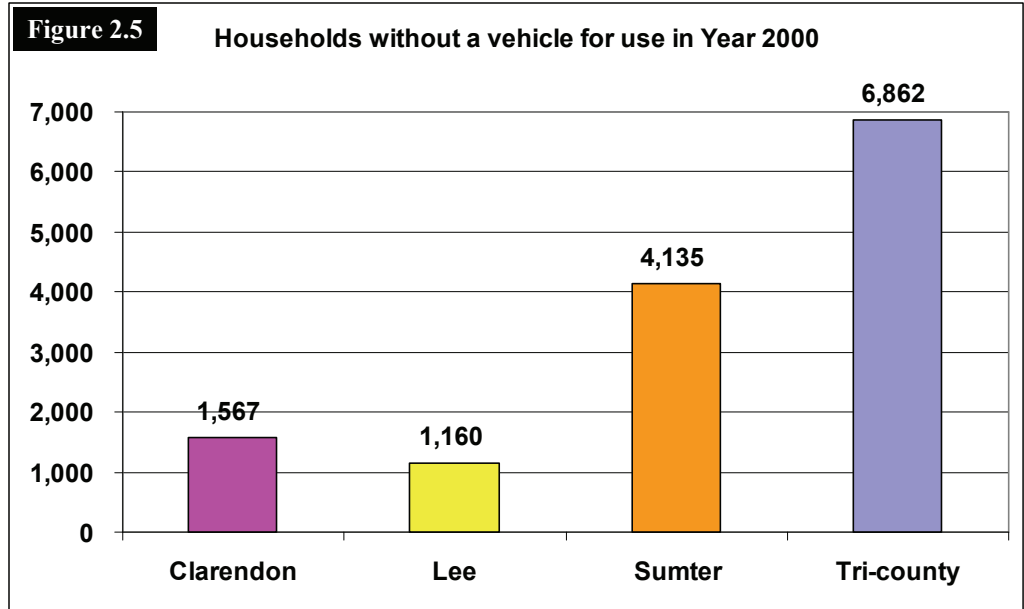
With apparent finite available funding, collective efforts to improve communities and public school graduation rates are necessary to somewhat curtail homelessness and poverty in the long-term.

## Public Transportation

Public transportation ridership statistics contained in this section include the four primary counties served by Santee Wateree Regional Transportation Authority (Clarendon, Kershaw, Lee and Sumter) and most of the statistics are not specifically broken out for the tri-county area. In some public transit statistics other counties are included as well. When that occurs it is appropriately cited.

The majority of the people in the three counties rely on a personal vehicle for all their transportation needs. However, there is a significant segment of the population that doesn't have access to a vehicle at their household. These individuals are considered "transportation dependent" and rely on public or private transportation to meet needs. According to Census 2000 sample estimates, all three counties have a higher percentage of households without a vehicle available for use in comparison to the state average of 9.02 percent.

Sumter had 10.96 percent of households without an available car (4,135 households); Clarendon registered 13.27 percent of households (1,567 households) and Lee had 16.85 percent of households (1,160) without a vehicle, a percentage nearly double the state average. In total, there were an estimated 6,862 households without a vehicle for use in the tri-county area as shown in Figure 2.5.



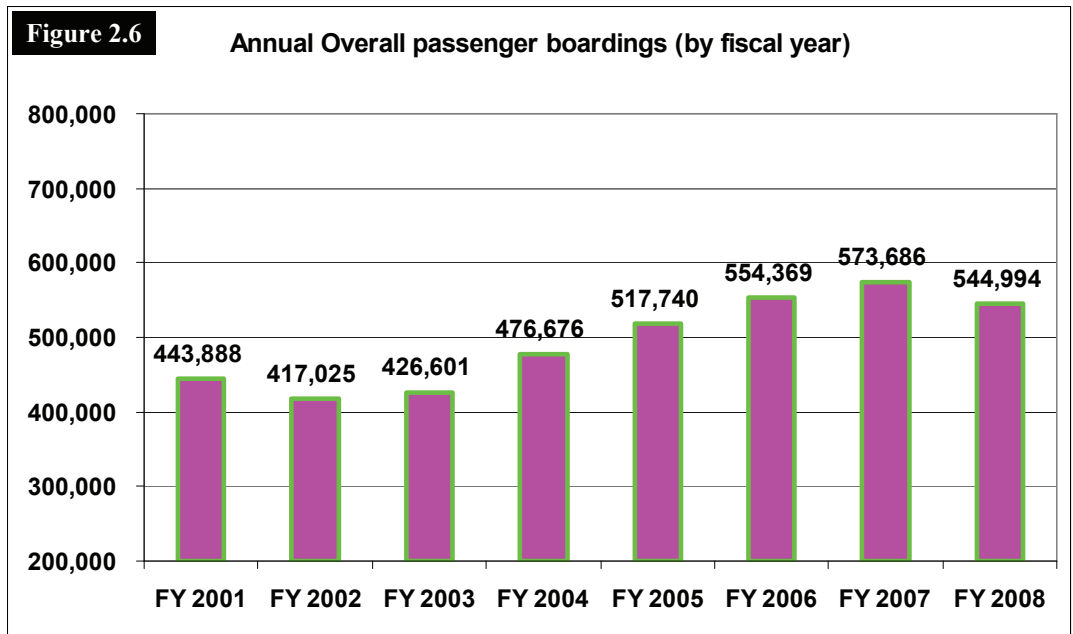
Source: U.S. Census Bureau, 2000

Even if accounting for a very low estimated people-per-household total of 1.7 for these households (1.0 people less than the average household size), the total population without access to a vehicle in the three counties was over 11,000 at Census 2000. The transportation-dependent population would be significantly increased if analysis included even a small fraction of the people living in one-vehicle households who are limited in vehicle access.

Still, likely the vast majority of transportation dependent don't rely on public transportation for their needs; instead utilizing family, friends, neighbors or co-workers for private transportation. These scenarios cloud a measurement of true demand for public transportation in an area. In the American culture, the overwhelming majority of people prefer private transportation because it's quicker and more desirable. Given people's tight schedules and the predominant city structure based around the car, bus ridership has been waning in most areas of the U.S. for decades. During recent years with ever-escalating gas costs, most areas have seen modest gains in bus ridership. In fiscal 2008, a 12-month period that featured significant gas price increases, overall U.S. bus ridership rose by 2.2 percent from fiscal 2007 according to the American Public Transportation Association.

In several U.S. cities, especially in the Northeast, public transportation is used with regularity by the majority of people. In cities such as New York, Washington, D.C., Philadelphia and Boston rail-based public transport is often more timely, practical and thus more desirable than private alternatives.

In South Carolina, largely a rural state, buses and vans are currently the only means of public transportation. Santee Wateree Regional Transportation Authority (SWRTA), the public transportation authority serving Sumter, Lee, Clarendon and Kershaw counties, has taken steps in recent years to increase ridership totals measured by passenger boardings. Figure 2.6 shows the RTA's



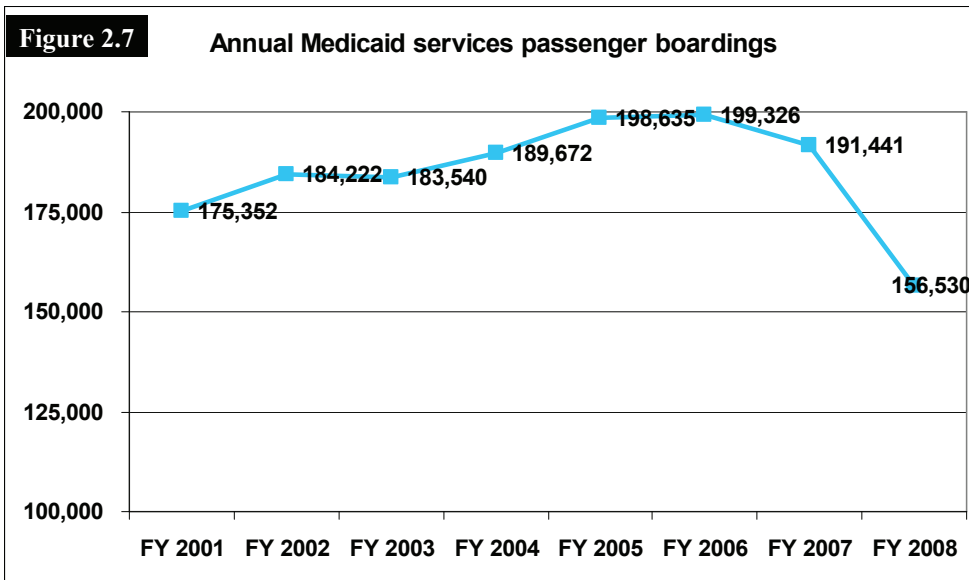
Source: Santee Wateree RTA

overall passenger boardings this decade. A passenger boarding – also known in the public transit industry as an “unlinked passenger trip” – is a measurement of every instance when a passenger boards a public transit vehicle.

As the chart details, overall RTA ridership has increased. The trend of higher annual passenger boardings in recent years is the result of increased contract services other than Medicaid and the expansion of commuter routes for employment transportation. Increases in contract services and commuter routes have offset boarding losses in Medicaid services and fixed route ridership. The 5 percent decrease in fiscal 2008 may be an issue of concern, given overall bus ridership in the U.S. among RTA’s of similar size (servicing urbanized areas of less than 100,000 people) grew by 7.6 percent during the year due largely to increased gas prices according to the American Public Transportation Association. As mentioned previously, overall bus ridership in the U.S. among all sized agencies grew by 2.2 percent in fiscal 2008. A key concern for all public transit agencies, both large and small, is maintaining bus ridership levels when gas prices fluctuate downward. Another current critical concern for all agencies is maintaining vehicle, personnel and service levels in a tight-budget environment, given reduced capital funding and higher gasoline operating costs. Generally in the industry, when services decrease ridership also decreases.

**Ridership for Medicaid and other contract services**

Medicaid and other contract services have traditionally accounted for a significant percentage of Santee Wateree RTA’s overall ridership totals. Since the beginning of this decade this percentage has fluctuated between 48 percent and 55 percent of overall passenger boardings according to RTA data. RTA’s significant percentages of contract ridership have been previously identified by public transit consultants as an issue of concern. Figure 2.7 shows year-by-year Medicaid passenger boardings this decade. There were increases in Medicaid boardings from fiscal 2001-2006 with a small decline in 2007 and a 35,000 trip decline in 2008. According to RTA, the majority of the 2008 decline was due to the agency being unable to renew services in Berkeley County. More losses in Medicaid ridership are anticipated in the future due to the state entering a brokerage model concept for Medicaid transportation in 2007. In fiscal 2008, Medicaid boardings were 28.7 percent of overall boardings.



Source: Santee Wateree RTA

Figure 2.8 tracks the growth in annual passenger boardings for other contract services. RTA has seen large increases in ridership for these contract services in the last two fiscal years. Historically, RTA provided contract services primarily only in Sumter County and selected portions of Kershaw County; however, in the last few years the authority has expanded contract services to Clarendon, Lee, other parts of Kershaw and even Orangeburg and Calhoun counties. This expansion accounts for the significant increases in passenger boardings.

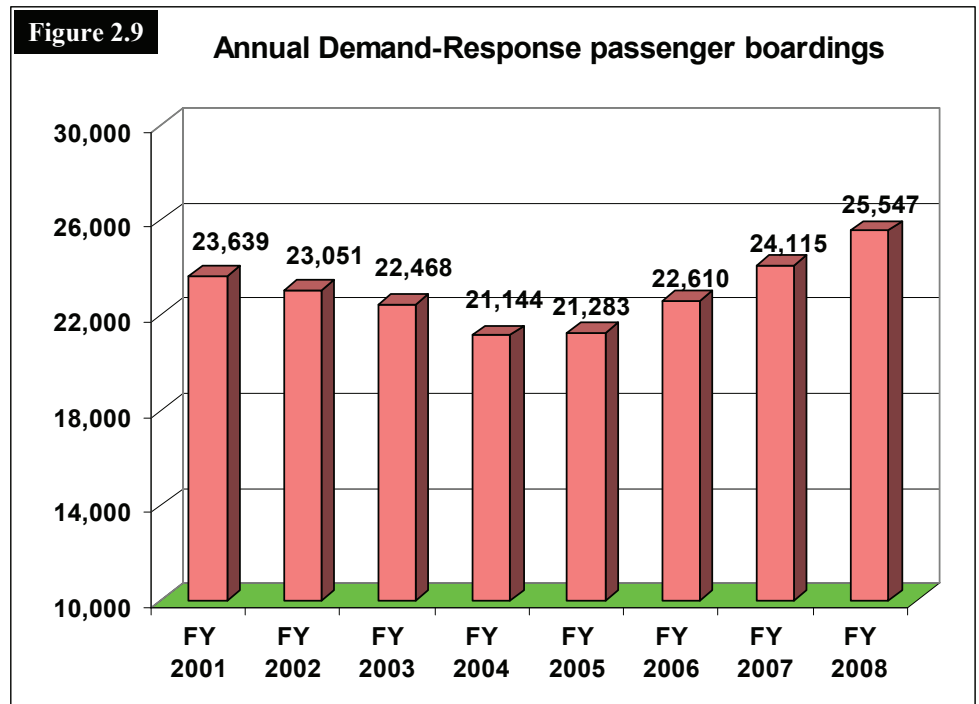


Source: Santee Wateree RTA

### Ridership in rural Sumter County, Clarendon, Kershaw and Lee

In conjunction with Medicaid and other contract services, RTA offers a demand-response option for residents who live in the rural areas of Sumter County not serviced by a fixed route and all residents of Clarendon, Kershaw and Lee counties since no fixed routes are available in those areas. Without fixed-route availability, there is an obvious major gap in the demand for public transit and provided services in these areas. Even though Clarendon and Lee counties are relatively small in population, high percentages of households don't have an available vehicle according to Census 2000 sample estimates. The service gap in rural areas was identified in interviews conducted by consultants URS Corp. and TranSystems for the 2008 Santee-Lynches Regional Transit Plan and also by the Santee-Wateree Mental Health Center and the Total Care for the Homeless Coalition in servicing clients' needs.

The demand-response option in the four counties' rural areas requires a 48-hour advance request to RTA. RTA then determines if a vehicle is available and, if so, fills the request on a space-available basis. The service is available six days per week. The service meets the needs of some rural residents as shown in Figure 2.9, but the majority of those needing transportation rely on other means including private carriers ZIMCO and BNT which require less advance requests. As the chart details, demand-response passenger boardings have shown increases in recent years.



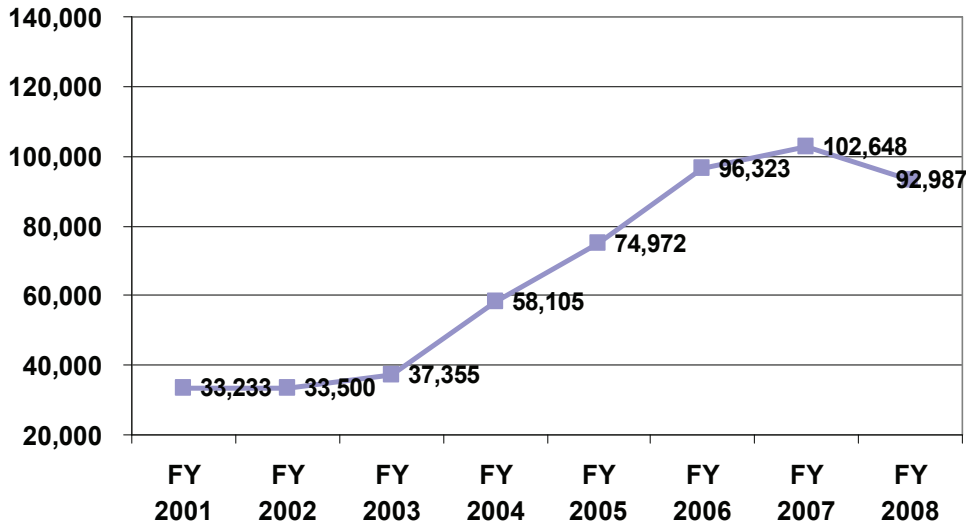
Source: Santee Wateree RTA

A possibility to gain additional ridership in Clarendon, Kershaw, Lee and rural Sumter County and reduce the service gap is for RTA to consider other methods such as "flex routes." One possibility is utilizing contract-service buses in the counties when they're idle to shuttle people to shopping centers or downtown. Census Bureau sample estimates from 2000 showed a combined 2,700 households or about 4,600 people in Clarendon and Lee counties lived without access to a personal vehicle. In Kershaw County, the estimate totals were 1,600 households or about 2,700 people without access to a personal vehicle.

Similar to Sumter County, Clarendon has an aging population though smaller in scale. In 2007, there were an estimated 551 more seniors 75-and-older in Clarendon than in 2000 as is discussed further later in this section. The senior population might be a market for RTA to target in the county.

### Commuter route ridership

A bright spot for RTA this decade has been increases in commuter route ridership, which is largely employment transportation, as shown in Figure 2.10. The current commuter routes include the Myrtle Beach shuttle, which transports Sumter, Lee and Clarendon residents to the beach for work seven days a week; shuttles from Sumter and Camden to Columbia; a Sumter/Eastover to Columbia shuttle; and shuttles from Sumter and Lee counties to INVISTA Corp. in Lugoff.

**Figure 2.10****Annual Commuter route passenger boardings**

Source: Santee Wateree RTA

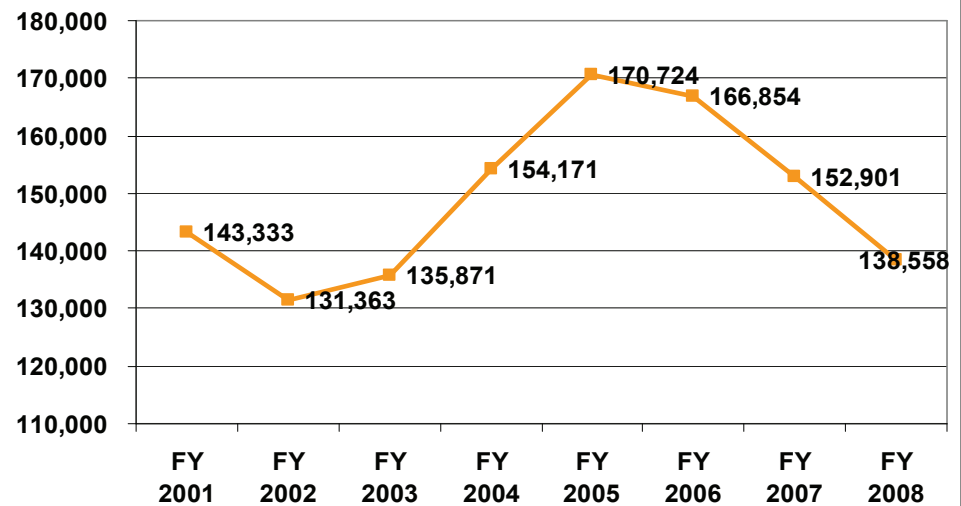
According to RTA, decreases in fiscal 2008 were primarily the result of discontinuing a commuter route to the federal prison in Williamsburg County and also a workforce reduction at INVISTA in Lugoff.

As a result of soaring gas prices since January 2007, RTA's across the U.S. are making increased efforts to provide employment transportation. In recent months Santee Wateree RTA and Santee-Lynches Regional COG have tried to reach more people for employ-

ment transportation via an Internet-based Rideshare program. Many participants in the program are people who haven't traditionally used public transportation. The program offers various options such as car pool, van pool or public transportation for work commuters. Ideally the program will result in increased commuter route ridership since gas prices are prone to escalate significantly, given volatile world markets.

### Ridership in Sumter's urban area

Santee Wateree RTA features seven fixed routes – a scheduled route with identified stops – all of which are in Sumter County's urban area consisting of approximately 64,320 people. According to RTA, some specialized services – special trips for seniors and youth and free public shuttles during special events – have also historically been lumped into the fixed route ridership category since these services occurred in Sumter's urban area. Figure 2.11 shows RTA's fixed route passenger boardings in Sumter this decade.

**Figure 2.11****Annual fixed route passenger boardings in Sumter**

Source: Santee Wateree RTA

After increases earlier in the decade, fixed route ridership has decreased – especially in the last two years. According to RTA, the decreases are mostly due to a reduction in the aforementioned specialized services, which could be perceived as charter services. RTA has been forced to trim these services due to Federal Transportation Administration guidelines.

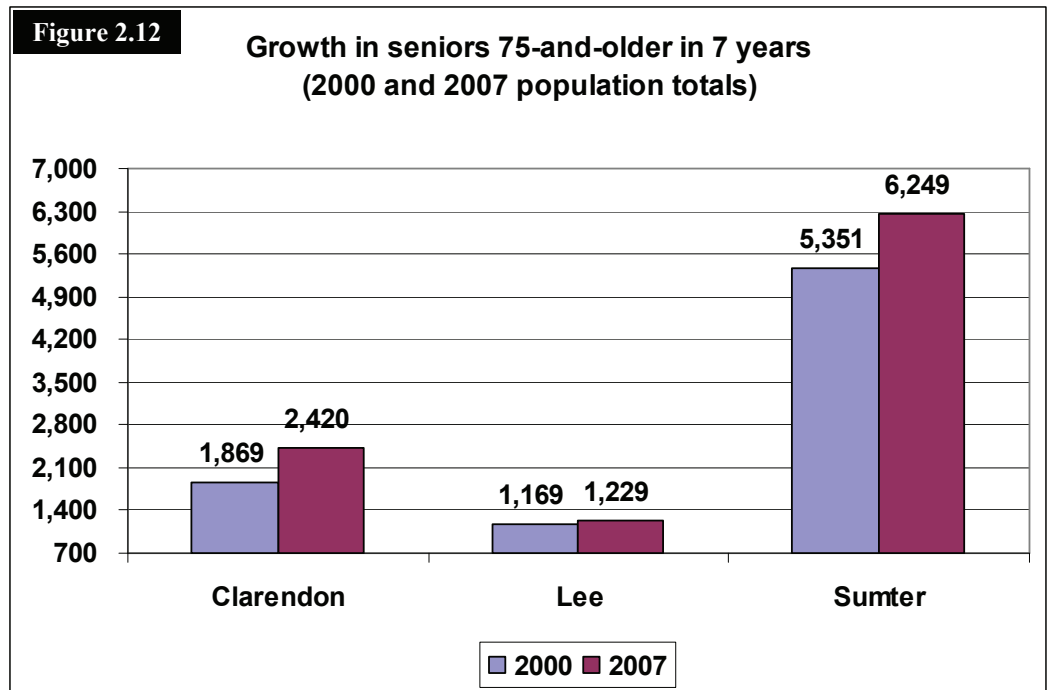
As far as the seven specific fixed routes, some routes have shown increases while others have decreased. The overall trend decrease since fiscal 2006 may be an issue of concern for RTA, since servicing the general public through fixed routes is one of its primary goals.

When analyzing annual fixed route ridership down to a daily per route average, the totals suggest roughly 38 people boarded each fixed route per day of service in fiscal '08. The ridership total is much less than presumed demand for public transportation is when Census 2000 data reveals there are at least an estimated 1,846 households and 3,138 people in Sumter County's urban area without regular access to a vehicle. This transportation-dependent total doesn't even include the likely 4,600-plus households in Sumter's urban area with access to just one vehicle but with possibly multiple family members. Gradually increasing poverty rates in Sumter since 2000 and a rapidly aging population in the county suggest even more people are currently transportation dependent and more ridership potential exists.

Gaps between ridership levels and presumed demand are prevalent in most U.S. cities however, given the aforementioned culture that hasn't emphasized public transportation for decades. The cultural effects have translated to low funding levels that have curtailed ridership growth, according to RTA.

**Possible initiatives to sustain and grow ridership**

Even though our society isn't "public transportation-friendly," various data suggests there is potential for increased fixed route ridership in Sumter. For one, Sumter is an aging community with a growing number of seniors 75-and-older. According to population estimates published by the Census Bureau, there were likely an estimated 500 more seniors 75-and-older in the urban area of Sumter in 2007 as opposed to 2000. For Sumter County overall, there were 898 more seniors in the age category over the seven-year period. Figure 2.12 shows the expansion of the age cohort in all three counties.



Source: U.S. Census Bureau, 2000 and 2007 data

Many of these seniors might be unable to drive and could be transportation dependent. Future trends show Sumter County's 75-and-older senior population will continue to expand at a high rate as Baby Boomers age into the cohort. Census Bureau data shows the 70-74 age cohort in Sumter County grew by 597 people from 2,825 to 3,422 during the seven years from 2000-'07.

Growth in Sumter County's senior population 65-and-older due to aging has been one of the fastest-growing cohorts in the county. The cohort grew by an estimated 4,017 people to 13,608 from 1990 to 2007. Given that seniors don't necessarily have the time constraints faced by the working-age population, this population segment might be one focus area RTA targets for increased ridership in the future.

Also contributing to greater potential for future RTA ridership in Sumter is gradually increasing poverty rates and homeless totals through the years. With more poverty, some logic would suggest more people would be dependent on public transportation. Increased gasoline costs could also further enhance RTA ridership since income levels in Sumter are below the state average.

To capture current and future population segments in need of public transportation in Sumter, several possible strategies could be explored by RTA. First, there may be a need to re-evaluate the seven Sumter fixed routes that were established in 1999 and 2000. Since these routes were established, Sumter has seen significant commercial and single-family/multi-family housing development. Transit agencies must keep pace with changes in the community to possibly realign services with community needs.

Next, a re-evaluation of services may also be necessary on the part of RTA. Currently the RTA operates the fixed routes from 6 a.m. to 6 p.m. Monday through Friday. Expanding service hours into the evening and implementing weekend service may be necessary to capture industrial shift workers and the growing senior population. Similarly, RTA may want to expand their pre-Christmas holiday shopper shuttle of about four weeks to include weekends throughout the year with the possibility of a Sumter Mall/Wal-Mart shopper shuttle. Other possibilities include extension of the current Shaw Air Force Base shuttle given future planned growth at the base, a downtown trolley service, senior center and community center shuttles, and a hospital patient discharge shuttle.

Third, enhanced public transportation marketing efforts could also be considered by RTA and South Carolina DOT to capture more fixed route ridership potential. According to RTA, effective marketing at the state level could enable the authority to expand ridership and improve upon its perception in the community as merely a social service. Negative perception of public transit was identified as a major challenge/barrier by community leaders in interviews conducted by consultants URS Corp. and Trans-Systems for the 2008 Santee-Lynches Regional Transit Plan.

In regards to increasing ridership, RTA could also attempt to match experience levels with private transportation to reach new customer bases and maintain current ridership.

Next, a comprehensive review of performance measures to ensure they are customer-focused measurements could allow for improved performance and ridership levels.

Finally, given increased fuel costs for RTA, Sumter City and the various county governments should re-evaluate their funding levels to RTA for servicing public transportation in general and specifically the transportation-dependent residents in the counties. Given the likelihood of the growing need for public transportation and the possibility of decreased federal and state funding in the future, a more dedicated funding base will become necessary for the authority to stay in business and enhance service levels, according to RTA.

A combination of all these initiatives could help improve the attractiveness and use of public transit in the urban and rural areas.