

**Southwest Region University Transportation Center**

**Transportation for Humanity:  
Meeting the Needs in the *Colonias***

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Texas Transportation Institute  
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16. Abstract An estimated over 400,000 Texas residents, most of whom are legal citizens of the United States, currently live under poor conditions in <i>colonias</i> along the Texas-Mexico border. These communities have numerous problems, but one that transcends most other issues is the lack of reliable, safe and affordable transportation, both public and private. The 1996 <i>Texas Colonias Van Project</i> was an innovative initial effort to satisfy the public transportation needs of these unique communities; however, the van project is completed and the vehicles used during its course are depleted and not slated for replacement.  The goal of the research was to assess the current transportation challenges facing residents of the <i>colonias</i> and determine the feasibility of vehicle procurement through donations or at-cost purchases from a variety of entities and/or individuals to support the program, and recommendations for alternative funding mechanisms to support the local community centers in their efforts to provide transportation to the <i>colonias</i> populations.					
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# **Transportation for Humanity: Meeting the Needs in the *Colonias***

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## Executive Summary

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An estimated over 400,000 Texas residents, most of whom are legal citizens of the United States, currently live under poor conditions in *colonias* along the Texas-Mexico border. They are challenged daily with the simple tasks of seeing their children off to school, going to work, obtaining water for daily use, buying groceries, obtaining quality health care, and having their trash removed. The *colonia* communities have numerous problems, but one that transcends most other issues is the lack of reliable, safe and affordable transportation, both public and private. The *Texas Colonias Van Project* was an innovative initial effort to satisfy the public transportation needs of the *colonia* communities; however, this project is completed and the vehicles used during its course are depleted and not slated for replacement.

This research focused on an assessment of the current transportation needs within the various *colonias* to determine whether the lack of personal/private vehicles is the foremost issue. The key component of the initial research effort was a feasibility study for vehicle procurement through donations or at-cost purchases from a variety of entities and/or individuals to support the *colonias* programs. After numerous site visits, discussions with the Texas A&M University Center for Housing and Urban Development (CHUD), and Community Resource Center directors that serve the various *colonias*, it became apparent that the original hypothesis for the project, lack of personal/private vehicles, was not accurate. Public transportation for the growing population of elderly and/or non-driving residents remains the prevailing need in the *colonias*.

Recommendations for alternative funding mechanisms were provided. These include mechanisms such as the creation of a non-profit entity or foundation to support the *colonias* Community Resource Centers that is eligible to receive tax-deductible contributions. These alternative sources offer an approach to provide support of the local centers in their efforts to provide transportation to the *colonias* populations, to supplement maintenance and fuel costs for the existing van fleet, and for future vehicle procurement.



## Chapter 1. Introduction

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A dream of nearly every American, whether native-born or immigrant, is that one day they will own land, a place to call their own. It is an integral part of the American dream of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. A recent status report prepared by the Community Transportation Association of America, Institute for Economic and Social Measurement, for the Rural Transit Assistance Program, Federal Highway Administration, reported that more than one-third of America's population lives outside of urbanized areas. Based on the 1990 Census, this figure is nearly 91 million people. Of these rural Americans, 32 percent are considered transit dependent, mostly senior citizens, persons with disabilities, and low-income residents. They have no personal means of transportation and must rely on public transit to meet their daily transportation needs. In these prosperous times of the early 21st century, it is difficult for some to fathom that such situations exist (1).

Texas is no exception to this rule, especially in the *colonias* along the Texas-Mexico border. What complicates the matter in these impoverished areas is the lack of basic infrastructure to adequately support transit service if it were available, which includes a stormwater conveyance system for drainage and paved streets. Rural counties are diligently working to resolve the infrastructure problem, but they are still faced with providing basic transportation services for these citizens. Innovative, affordable, and cost effective methods of providing transportation for these citizens are critical to their basic survival and necessary for the future prosperity of the people of Texas.

Those individuals living in the *colonias* along the Texas-Mexico border are no exception. In Spanish the term *colonia* actually refers to a neighborhood or community. The term is used in the United States to refer to an unincorporated settlement along the US-Mexico border. These settlements are often characterized by lack of water and sewer systems as well as poor a transportation infrastructure and unsafe or unsanitary living conditions. *Colonias* began to appear along the Texas-Mexico border in the 1950's and have continually grown despite attempts at restricting their creation by the state government. However, because of the general living conditions, residents must struggle to pursue their dreams often without the basic needs of

adequate potable water, sewer, electricity, natural gas, storm drainage, paved roads, and safe sanitary housing. Originally established during the latter half of the 20th century, these unincorporated areas outside city limits or in isolated areas of Texas counties were established by developers who sold land with little or no infrastructure under contract for deed agreements at high interest rates. The appeal to the new owners was minimal up-front costs and affordable monthly payments.

Since many of the residents are of either low or very low income, property improvements are implemented slowly as funds are available. The result is an estimate of well over 400,000 Texas residents, most of whom are legal citizens of the United States, who live under poor conditions and are challenged daily with the simple tasks such as:

- ensuring children can get to school (school bus, public transportation or other means),
- going to work,
- obtaining water for daily use,
- buying groceries,
- meeting health care needs (service and travel) , and
- having adequate waste management services.

A major link in all of these basic needs is sufficient and affordable transportation. While many areas are gradually working to provide desperately needed infrastructure to these communities, the process is slow and expensive. Innovative and cost-effective solutions are needed to solve the immediate transportation needs to help support these Texans in daily life.

The research team used this study to assess and document innovative, affordable, and cost-effective methods for meeting some of the unique transportation challenges facing residents of the *colonias*. By identifying innovative and perhaps lesser known funding opportunities, it is hoped that local officials and advocates can tap into resources to help solve both near-and long-term transportation problems for residents in the *colonias* and improve their quality of life, thereby securing their place in the future of Texas.

## Study Objectives

The primary goal of the research team was to assess and document innovative, affordable, and cost-effective methods for meeting some of the unique transportation challenges facing residents of the *colonias*. Originally there were three key components of this research effort; a fourth component was added during the study.

- The first was a feasibility study for vehicle needs and possible procurement through donations or at-cost purchases from a variety of entities and/or individuals to support the program.
- The second component involved the development of a qualification and selection criteria structure and implementation process for distribution of vehicles to residents if the first component found that this type of program was feasible.
- The third part was determine equitable payment for the vehicle if the program was implemented, whether this consists of donated time, low or no interest loans, or other valued systems such as vehicle maintenance and repair.
- The fourth component incorporated after the original study began was to evaluate alternative programs, if the vehicle procurement program was found not feasible or cost prohibitive.





## Chapter 2. Methodology and Initial Assessment

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### Background

*Colonias* are found in Texas, New Mexico, Arizona, and California, but Texas has both the largest number of and the largest population of *colonias*. Twenty nine border counties report having *colonias* and the Texas Attorney General has documented over 2,294 *colonias*. The map in Figure 1 from the Texas Attorney General's Office (2) depicts counties in Texas with *colonias*. The counties with very dense populations include: El Paso County, Hidalgo County, Cameron County and Webb County. Of these areas, Hidalgo County has the largest concentration of *colonias* and *colonia* residents in Texas. This tendency of *colonias* continues along the U.S.-Mexico border and into New Mexico, Arizona, and California as well. One of the underlying transportation issues is that few urban areas are in close proximity.

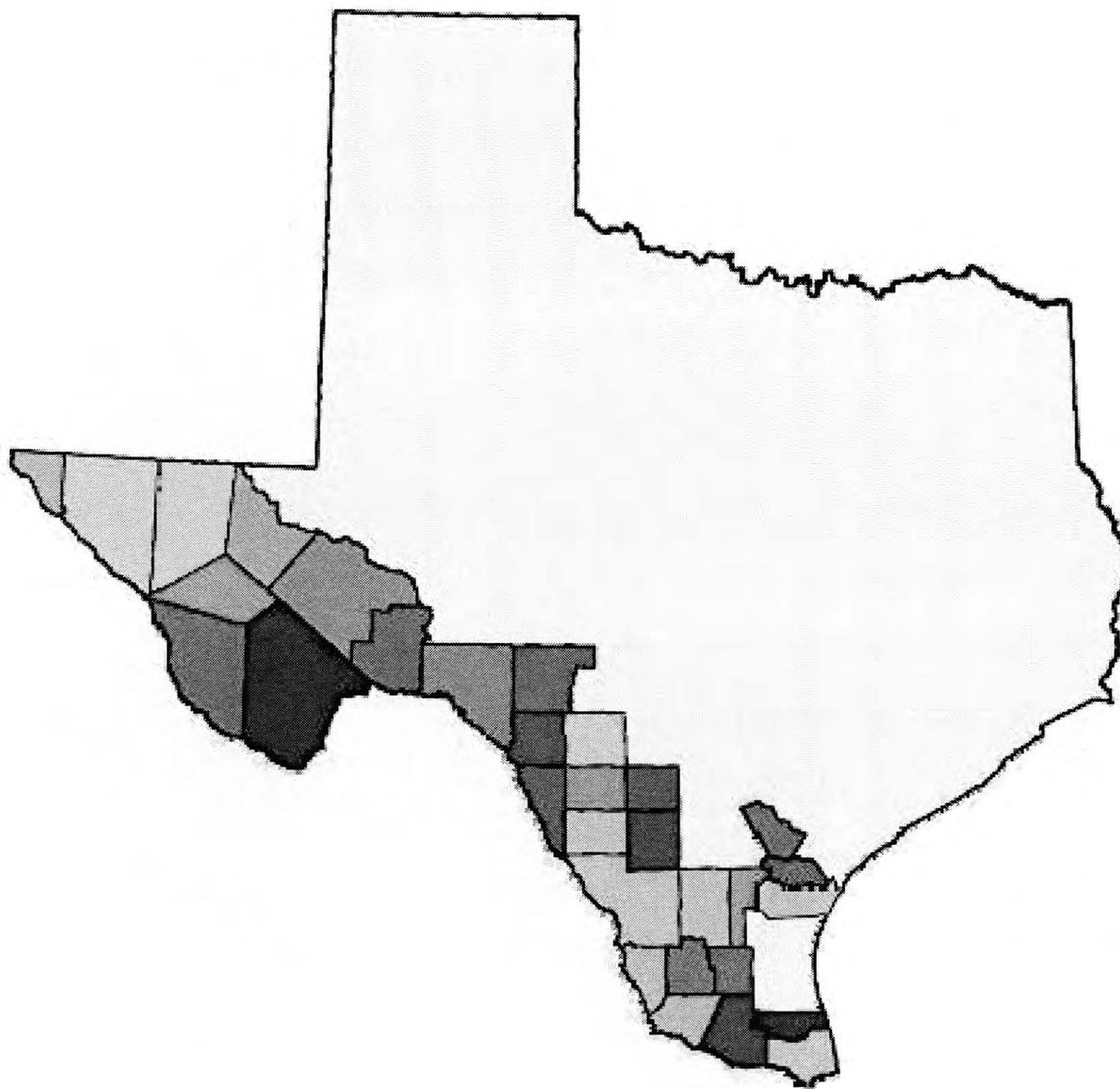


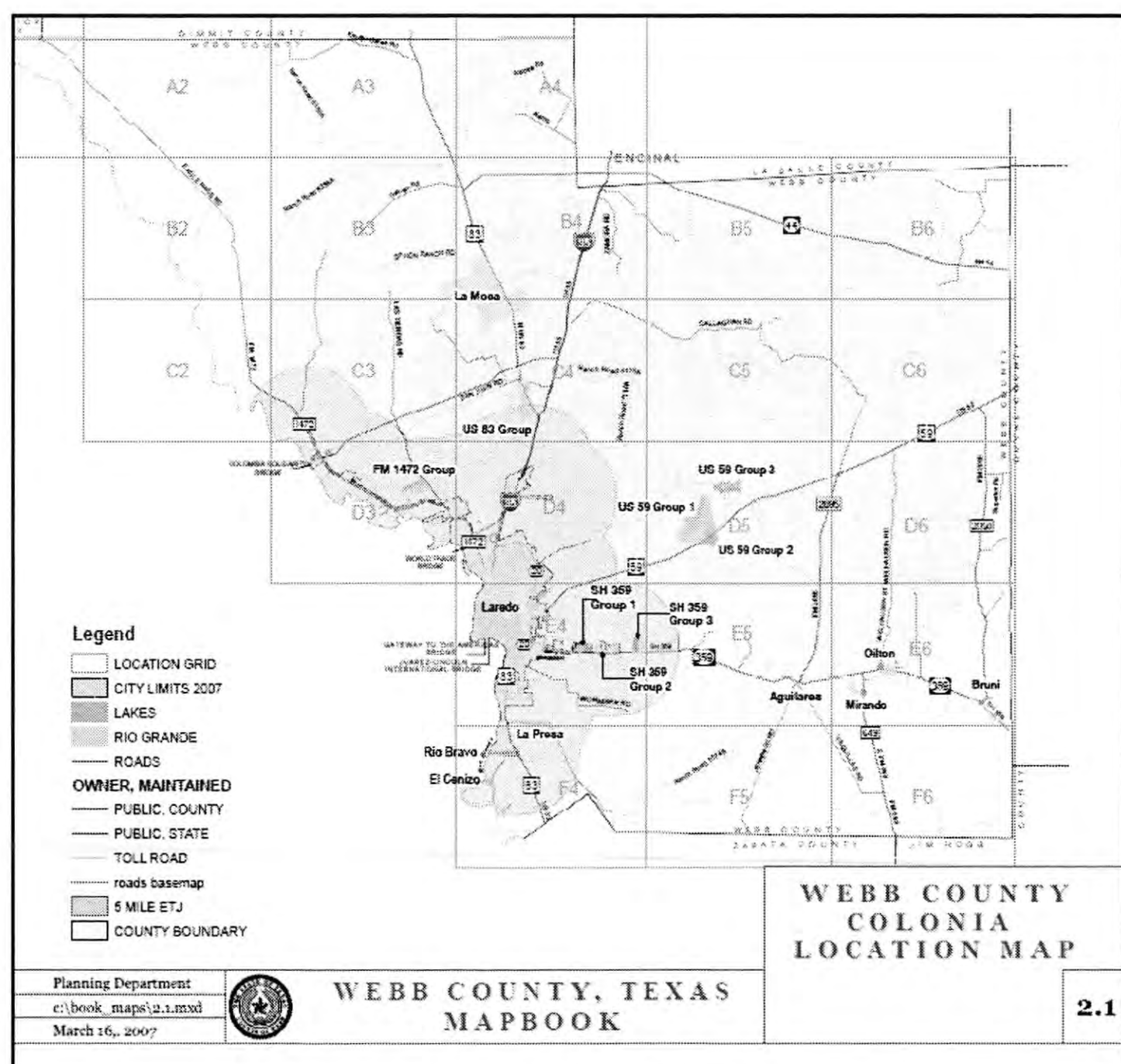
Figure 1 Texas Counties with *Colonias*.

The effect of transportation on various issues highlights its importance on day to day life. *Colonias* are often located in remote areas of a county and may be as much as 60 miles from the closest city. Although some *colonias* are served by rural bus service, the routes and times are often limited and do not adequately serve a population with limited means of private transportation. In some *colonias* a lack of paved roads and the tendency for *colonias* to flood often cuts off residents from their Community Resource Centers (Center), their mail delivery, bus service, and in some cases school and work.

## Methodology

As previously stated the goal of the research team was to assess and document innovative, affordable and cost effective methods for meeting the unique transportation challenges facing *colonias* residents. The team reviewed all relevant information regarding *colonias* published in the past 10 years, placing a specific emphasis on documentation regarding transportation issues. The team also met with the individuals from the Texas A&M University Center for Housing and Urban Development (CHUD), regarding *colonias* issues and the prevailing transportation needs in the border area.

As a result of these meetings it was decided that the focus of the research would be *colonias* located Mid-Rio Grande area of the Texas border. This area is generally between Laredo and Del Rio and includes the *colonias* in Webb, Dimmit, Maverick, Kinney, and Val Verde counties (Figure 2). This area was chosen due to the relative location of the existing *colonias* to the cities and other area urban developments. Many of the *colonias* located in the Lower Rio Grande

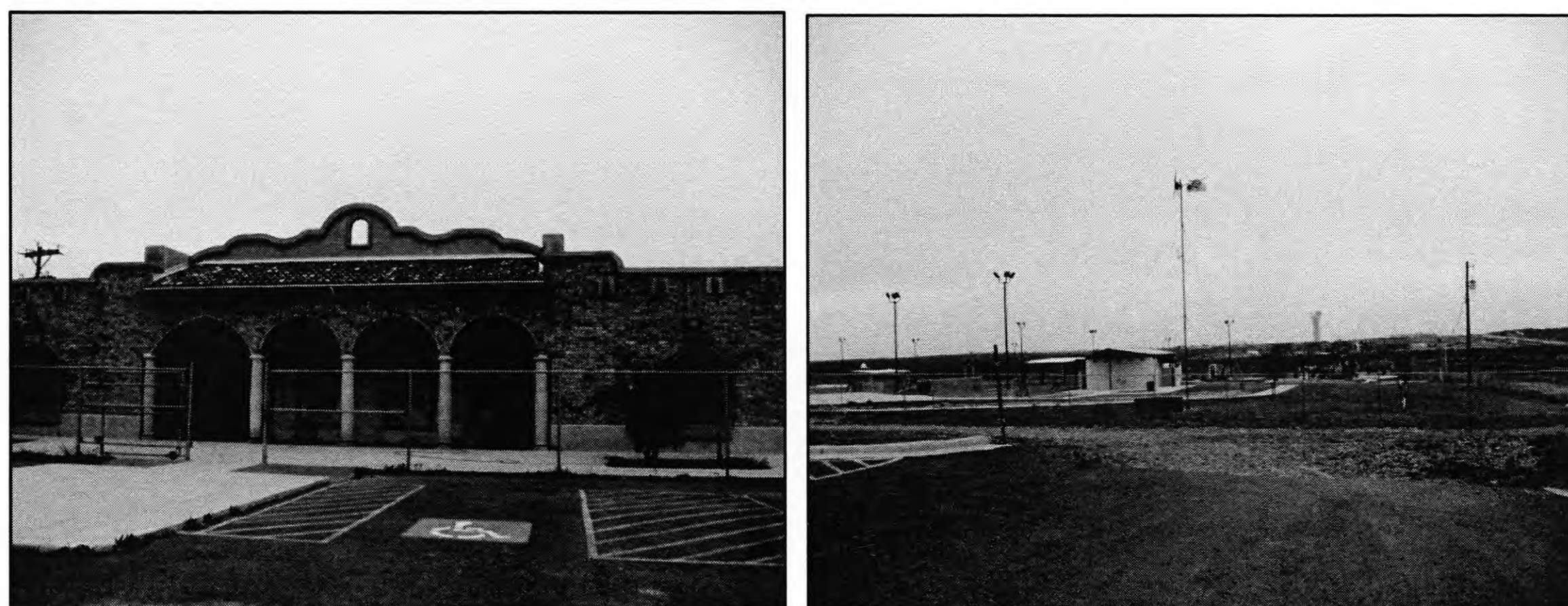


**Figure 2 Texas Border Colonias for Webb County.**

sector, consisting of Cameron, Hidalgo, and Starr counties, are located relatively close to populated areas and have greater access to public transportation. *Colonias* located in the Upper Rio Grande sector, which includes El Paso, Hudspeth, Presidio, Brewster, and Terrell counties, were visited by team members but were not considered for the study due to the distance constraints.

## Site Visits

The first site visit, January 2008, was to Laredo to access the current transportation issues in the area. The new facility located at La Presa is shown in Figure 3.



**Figure 3 Community Resource Center at La Presa.**

Numerous areas were visited as shown below. On many of these tours, staff from the respective Centers accompanies the researchers to assist in the accurate assessment of the area and the local concerns related to the *colonias* visited. Researcher evaluated the presence of personal vehicles associated with the areas and individual residences and found the “two cars in every driveway” scenario for the majority of the locations visited.

### Webb County - Laredo Area

- Larga Vista
- El Cenizo
- Bruni
- La Presa
- Rio Bravo
- One River Place
- Los Altos
- Ranchitos 359 East
- Bruni

### **Eagle Pass in Maverick County**

- Cedar Ridge
- Chula Vista
- Eagle Heights
- El Pueblo Nuevo
- Jardines Verde
- Kickapoo Indian Village
- Las Brisas
- Las Quintas
- Loma Linda
- Riverside Acres
- Rosita Gardens

### **North of Eagle Pass**

- Fabrica
- Seco Mines
- Deer Run
- Elm Creek

### **Val Verde County**

- Los Campos
- Cienegas Terrace
- Lake View
- Val Verde Park

On subsequent visits in 2008, team members visited *colonias* in Hudspeth and El Paso Counties in the northern part of the Texas/Mexico border area and in Cameron and Hidalgo Counties in the lower Rio Grande Valley in southern Texas.

### **El Paso County**

- The Spark Editions
- El Paso Hills
- Panorama Hills
- El Gran Valle
- Colonia De Las Azaleas
- Clint Townsite

### **Cameron and Hidalgo Counties**

- Olinito
- San Pedro
- Expressway 83/77
- Solis
- La Feria Gardens
- Los Ebanos
- Cuevitas
- St. Claire Acres
- La Aurora
- Benevides

## **Meetings with CHUD Director and Staff**

In addition to onsite visits members of the research team met several times with a number CHUD associate directors, staff members and Center directors for Community Resource Centers located in various *Colonias*. The participants of the different meetings included: the Deputy Director *Colonias* Program for TAMU CHUD, the Associate Director for the Central Rio Grande Region TAMU CHUD office, Center Directors for Larga Vista and Bruni in Laredo, the Associate Director for the Western Rio Grande Region TAMU CHUD office, and the Associate Director for the Lower Rio Grande Region TAMU CHUD office. During these meetings topic discussed included:

- the state of transportation, both public and private, in various *colonias*,
- the needs of *colonias* residents and the effects of transportation both public and private on meeting those needs, and
- ideas and possible alternative approaches for meeting those needs.

## **Initial Assessment**

Initial objectives expressed in the proposal were to assess the feasibility of vehicle procurement through donations or at-cost purchases from a variety of entities and/or individuals to support the program. This included providing vehicle repair and maintenance services. This objective was based on the assumption of the lack of vehicles owned by *colonias* residents as well as the lack of opportunity for purchasing those vehicles. The initial assessment of by team members found that the lack of private vehicles is not the issue. The lack of public transportation for *colonias* residents, especially the elderly and non-drivers, is the major transportation issue facing *colonias* residents. Most households have access to a vehicle; however those vehicles are used to travel to work and are not available for daily use or to provide transportation for non-drivers and elderly that comprise the rest of the household. A study in 1996 by the Southwest University Transportation Center (SWUTC) found similar results (3).

The need for low cost and timely public transportation is desperately needed to serve a growing elderly and non-driving population of the *colonias*. Many of the roads and streets of *colonias* that were previously unpaved are now paved. This includes a growing number of streets in

outlying *colonias*. This allows greater public transportation access for *colonias* residents, however, public transportation remains limited, often only morning and afternoon service is available.

The Center vans are used to shuttle elderly and non-drivers during day for doctor visits, grocery shopping, etc. These vans were acquired through the *Texas Colonias Van Project*. This was SWUTC demonstration project funded through the in 1996. The vans, owned and operated by Webb County, are limited to service for the *colonias* with Centers. The vans provide transportation to the Centers and limited additional service to nearby grocery stores. Additionally the vans were available to provide transportation to special meetings and events held at the Centers and for individual medical emergencies. The initial results of the van implementation were extremely positive and led to an expansion to the passenger van program. By 2005, 35 vans were operating in *colonias* neighborhoods and transporting over 75,000 residents monthly. The monthly van usage indicates trips are made for food and household essentials, medical trips, educational trips including attending GED classes and job training, community trips and business related trips such as bill paying. However, these vans some of which have been used since 1996 are in dire need of replacement.

## Chapter 3. Alternative Solutions

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After assessments of all of the input from meetings with *colonias* staff it became quickly evident that the solution to meeting the immediate needs for transportation for *colonias* residents lay within the purview of the van project that was so successful in 1996. This demonstration project, although limited, met the needs and to an extent possible with rapidly deteriorating vehicles, still meets the needs for transportation in *colonias* where the vans are present. The three primary areas needed for a continuation of this program are:

- replacement vehicles/additional vehicles,
- operational costs, and
- maintenance costs.

### Funding Opportunities and Alternatives

The researchers began examining grant and funding opportunities that would augment this problem. After a search of existing funding sources, the funding solutions were prioritized. The following needs were identified and possible solutions were examined:

#### Replacement vans for aging fleet through private and public sources

The current fleet of vans is rapidly aging and no longer adequate for transportation requirements of *colonias* Centers. Additional vans are needed to serve as replacements and to augment the current fleet to meet growing needs.

- New vehicle acquired through donations and/or purchases. Possible sources include: car dealerships and local and regional foundations.
  - Pros – new vehicles provide a longer term solution to problems, less maintenance requirements, and less operational costs.
  - Cons – this type of acquisition would be harder to achieve due to pressure of current economy. Competition for this amount of funding through grants is more competitive. Donations for this amount of money would be more attractive if donation was tax deductible.

- Used vehicles acquired through donations and/or purchase. Possible sources include rental car agencies, state agency property disposal auctions, private donations.
  - Pros – vehicles could be acquired at a much lower price; preventive maintenance is good on most fleet vehicles. Lower upfront cost. Donations may be possible.
  - Cons – vehicles are used and often high mileage so the life of vehicle acquired is substantially shortened. Possibly higher operating cost as well as possible increased maintenance costs.

### **Operating funds for current and future van fleets**

The price of fuel and other consumables required to keep the existing van fleet in operation has increase dramatically since 1996.

- Gas cards donated by businesses and through private donations may be a source of augmenting the operating funds provided through Webb County budget. This type of funding campaign could be easily implemented through a funding drive.
  - Pros – this is a relatively small item donation and may be more readily obtained from businesses or from personal private donations. Especially if this form of donation was tax deductible.
  - Cons – the amount of funds obtained through this type of funding source could be sporadic and uncertain during economic downturns.
- Monetary Grants specifically requested to pay for operating costs. Although grant funding for areas such as operating costs is sparse, there are a few opportunities for funding in this area. However, almost all of these types of grants require that the recipient be a non-profit organization.

### **Maintenance funds for current and future van fleets**

Maintenance fund requirements have also increased considerably since the implementation of the original van program began. As the age of the current van fleet increases the amount of money required to maintain the fleet will continue to dramatically increase.

- Free parts and/or gift cards for services donated by businesses and through private donations may be a source of augmenting the operating funds provided through Webb



County budget. This type of funding campaign could be easily implemented through a funding drive.

- Pros – this is a relatively small item donation and may be more readily obtained from businesses or from personal private donations. Especially if this form of donation was tax deductible.
- Cons – the amount of funds obtained through this type of funding source could be sporadic and uncertain during economic downturns.
- Monetary Grants specifically requested to pay for operating costs. Although grant funding for areas such as maintenance costs is sparse, there are a few opportunities for funding in this area. However, almost all of these types of grants require that the recipient be a non-profit organization.



## Chapter 4. Findings and Recommendations

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Throughout the course of this project it became apparent that the initial objectives differed from the actual transportation needs of the residents of the Texas border *colonias*. Discussion with the CHUD staff and some *colonias* residents at the Centers revealed a situation of funding issues that relate more to public transportation rather than personal vehicle use as discussed in Chapter 2. The van program implemented almost five years ago was what worked and met the needs of the population which consists of aging, non-driving residents.

The problems faced by the Centers using the vans include the vehicles' age, maintenance, and ever increasing fuel costs. The recommendation of the research team is to find an alternative funding mechanism to maintain the existing fleet and/or provide new vehicles. One such source is through community grants. These are implemented through numerous sources such as The Walmart Foundation, Home Depot, Target Stores, and many more. Some of these grants are what is referred to as loyalty grants, whereby a percentage of each purchase is set aside for a designated charity or other business donation. The key to doing this type of funding is that it requires the entity to have a non-profit designation such as the tax-exempt status under section 501(c)(3) of the Internal Revenue Code for a charitable organization. Under this designation, the organization is eligible to receive tax-deductible contributions.

It is the recommendation of the research team that the CHUD explore the necessary avenues to create a non-profit entity or foundation to support their Centers, i.e. Friends of the Bruni Community Resource Center. This is similar in concept and relationship as the A&M Foundation is to Texas A&M University. The A&M Foundation is affiliated with Texas A&M University but is not part of the system. However, the A&M Foundation receives tax deductible donations that are used to support the University. This type of entity could be managed by CHUD on a local, regional or statewide level. Another aspect of the non-profit entity is the ability to promote the organization as the non-profit arm of the CHUD. This would enable and may encourage local businesses and individuals to make tax deductible charitable contributions to help support the transportation provided by the Centers.

The establishment of a non-profit entity would also allow the pursuit of grants that are now inaccessible. If donations become a tax deductible item, the likelihood of reaching a greater number of donors goes up considerably. A brief search of the Texas OnLine Grants website <https://www.texasonline.state.tx.us/tolapp/egrants/search.htm> showed that at least 50 percent of grants require non-profit status for application. The grants that are available to all are often limited funding opportunities such as government funds, and do not include corporate and private funds. These are usually competitive grants that are currently being sought and are very limited, sometimes political, and cannot be counted on as a continuous, reliable funding source. The funding mechanism whereby individuals can contribute via purchase percentages or loyalty grants through local stores, businesses and restaurants may provide a limited but sustainable source to meet the transportation needs in the *colonias*.

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