



Texas WIB Invests Time, Energy & Expertise in Job Shuttle Project

***In Brief:** Workforce Solutions for the Heart of Texas became the catalyst and organizing force behind a job shuttle that gave rural residents access to major employers and two community colleges in Waco for the first time. The new “Highway 6 to Success” service, operated by partner Waco Transit, received a federal grant as well as local funding from diverse partners: McLennan Community College, Texas State Technical College, Sanderson Farms poultry processing plant, Falls Community Hospital, banks, and the cities of Marlin, Waco, Rosebud, and Riesel.*

Workforce Investment Boards (WIBs) and their One-Stop Career Centers serve two types of customers: local businesses and job seekers. Every day they do what it takes to connect workers seeking jobs to employers seeking workers. However, as happened in the Waco, Texas area, there is often a missing ingredient to a successful match: the mobility of potential employees to get to employment and training sites.

Workforce Solutions for the Heart of Texas (Workforce Solutions) embarked on a project to connect a rural county to an urban transit system. The rural county identified was Falls County, which has the lowest household income, highest unemployment rate and lowest educational attainment rates in the six-county Heart of Texas Workforce Board region.

A possible solution came into focus when a new employer, Sanderson Farms, made plans to move onto a site about eight miles from the center of Waco with a plan to employ 1,200 new employees. Sanderson had done its research and knew that the workforce was available. However, Workforce Solutions knew that much of that workforce was not mobile, within Waco and particularly to a site outside of the Waco Transit urbanized system.

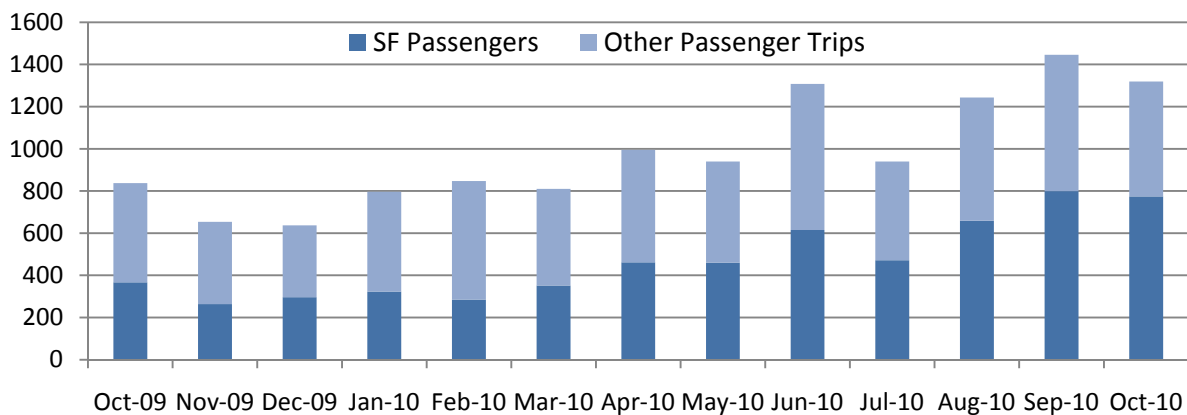
Thus began a series of conversations led by Workforce Solutions with Waco Transit, Sanderson Farms and many other partners from the region that resulted in a new service—Highway 6 to Success—that has brought solutions, opportunities, and new ideas to the region.

[About the Service](#)

The Highway 6 to Success Service began in November 2007 after securing an Federal Transit Administration Job Access and Reverse Commute (JARC) grant through the Texas Department of Transportation. The required local match contribution came from 12 partners including: Workforce Solutions, McLennan Community College, Texas State Technical College, Sanderson Farms, Falls Community Hospital, banks, and the cities of Marlin, Waco, Rosebud, and Riesel. Workforce Solutions contributes staff time to project administration, case management, marketing, and outreach as in-kind match as well as funds from the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families program. The colleges contribute staff time to sell passes at the bookstores and for time spent advising and recruiting, student outreach, as well as by purchasing advertising from Waco Transit. Sanderson Farms and other private businesses contribute cash to support the project.

Highway 6 to Success currently runs a circular route south from Waco along Highway 6 into five rural communities (Riesel, Marlin, Chilton, Golinda, and Robinson) located in Falls and McLennan Counties. The service brings residents into Waco where they can make free transfers to Waco Transit’s fixed-route system to access employment, college and job training opportunities, quality of life services as well as Greyhound. Waco residents can also board 6 to Success at the terminal for access to Sanderson Farms located on the northeastern outskirts of Waco. 6 to Success provides more than 500 passenger trips to Sanderson Farms each month. An equal number of passenger trips are made to other employment or training destinations.

Comparison of Passenger Trips to Sanderson Farms vs All Other



Partnership

The 6 to Success project fit in with the priorities of the region’s transportation coordination plan, whose developers, including Workforce Solutions, saw the value of a pilot public transportation project that connected rural residents to urban services and served those most in need. Falls County was a natural fit, with more than 12% of households having no access to any form of transportation to travel to jobs and training. Residents and business leaders readily expressed their concerns about the lack of opportunity, rising drop-out rates, and increasing juvenile crime. Connecting residents to employment, educational, and job-training services was considered vital to the economic development of Falls County and to the economic growth of the region.

To make a service connecting those counties with Waco a reality, it took a vibrant partnership with the Workforce Solutions, Sanderson Farms, Waco Transit, Falls Community Hospital, area businesses and banks, elected officials, two local colleges, and the regional transportation coordination council.

For Julie Talbert, the Workforce Solutions project manager for the 6 to Success service, these broad-based partnerships, and especially the private sector partners, were essential for the start-up and continuation of the service. “I don’t know how a JARC project like this happens without the involvement of the workforce development board. I think it is absolutely critical to access the business relationships that are available through the workforce board. Our board members are influential, and because of their strong business representation, they can talk to other businesses in their own language.”

“Every project needs a champion. Our Board Chair understood the needs, knew the potential value, and saw an opportunity to make a difference, he was the champion for getting this project started,” Ms. Talbert continued.

One of the largest sustaining partners has been Sanderson Farms. The company initially provided a small level of funding for the service based on its merits and its value to the region. The turning point for Sanderson’s involvement in the project came once it saw that 50–55% of all passengers were using the new service to access employment at Sanderson Farms. Plus, as the company became more aware of the connection between employees’ having reliable, affordable transportation to work and their retention on the job, it was more willing to increase its level of funding in the shuttle project.

Enrollment and retention—not of workers, but of students—was also the motivation for the local technical and community college to become involved in the 6 to Success project. They were aware that transportation was a barrier to some students getting to the main campus, particularly from the same rural communities in McLennan and Falls Counties that would supply employees to Sanderson Farms. The community colleges tried to address this by providing courses at satellite locations, but were not able to attract or retain the numbers they had hoped. Both colleges were represented on the board, and came on as partners during the development of the project, providing cash and in-kind support to recruit students. Further, in their discussions with prospective high school graduates, the colleges not only told the students about their programs but also how transportation no longer needed to be a barrier to their accessing further educational opportunities.

Outreach and travel training is provided to youth through the Boys and Girls Clubs, all four high schools along the route, and other organizations, so they are able to use the service for summer jobs, summer classes, and recreational opportunities.

Workforce Solutions also knew that the support—financial and otherwise—of private businesses and elected officials would be necessary to sustain the project beyond its original 3-year start-up period. As a result, Workforce Solutions staff conducted conversations with local banks, insurance companies, and hospitals, telling them about the value of a transportation service that would bring people into their communities. The “bottom line” benefit for banks and insurance companies was access to a wider catchment of potential customers, customers who were moving from lower-wage situations to steady incomes by working at companies such as Sanderson Farms. The banks and insurance companies also were able to see a real return-on-investment with regard to their customer base and the economic development of their community. They also perceived supporting the shuttle as part of their civic duty to enhance the growth of their communities.

[Next Steps for the Shuttle](#)

In 2010, a second JARC grant was received that allows the service to continue and expand to provide the region’s first evening service providing reverse commute for workers on the second shift. In September 2010, a record 1,800 passenger trips were made for employment and educational opportunities.

On-board surveys after the first year of shuttle service indicated that the greatest need was for a way for Sanderson Farms’ second-shift workers to travel home at 12:30 a.m. The shuttle’s initial schedule between Waco and Sanderson accommodated the daytime shift’s round trip and the outbound trip of the second-shift only. Extending the schedule to the midnight hour was more difficult than daytime operations, because the operator, Waco Transit, and its scheduling/dispatching staff ceased operations for the day well before that time. To meet the second-shift needs, the shuttle needed an additional financial commitment from Sanderson to cover the extra anticipated costs of running a system outside

of Waco Transit's hours, which the company was willing to make. Again, the selling point for Sanderson to do so was the amount of money it would save by reducing the turnover rate (a high of 350%) for the second-shift workers. The nighttime shuttle began service on June 1, 2010. Expanding evening service to the other two poultry processing plants and other second shift worker sites are longer-term goals for the region.

Most recently, Sanderson has begun to allow workers to purchase the monthly transit passes through the company with pre-tax payroll dollars, thus saving workers even more money. In August 2010, Sanderson Farms became the first business in the region to implement the IRS pre-tax transportation benefit through weekly payroll deduction. One employee expressed her feelings about her employer's support for the new evening service saying, "I feel like they did this for *me* because they know it helps *me*-and it really does."

Sanderson has also been willing to take an active leadership role in the project, encouraging other businesses to consider transportation options for their employees, citing the benefit of the shuttle service to companies like Sanderson's bottom line. Julie Talbert acknowledged that this was not always an easy message to convey: "This is a very important conversation to have with businesses who don't understand the value of public transportation and why they would contribute to this. If they are looking simply at the line item and the cost, you are not going to get very far with them. You need to turn that around and talk to them about the value of that service to their bottom line. In our situation, this conversation took several years to get to the point we are at now."

Ms. Talbert says that Workforce Solutions has learned much from being involved in the project. "Workforce Solutions has become very involved in projects with urban transit and four rural transit systems in our region. We've changed a lot about how we approach public transportation in our region. We are much more involved in regional transportation coordination and are partnering on projects."

Workforce Solutions was honored for its work on transportation in 2009 when it received the Service to Workers award from the Texas Workforce Commission.

[For more Information about Working with Business](#)



The *Transportation-To-Work: A Toolkit for the Business Community* offers companies information on how to build simple, cost-effective transportation programs that are good for their employees, their businesses, and the environment. The Toolkit provides on-line resources on a variety of topics such as tax incentives, support for a diverse workforce, green transportation, shared ride and vanpool options, among others.

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