



# Lowcountry Go Vanpool Program

Prepared By: Karalyn Clouser and Natalie Villwock-Witte, Western Transportation Institute at Montana State University

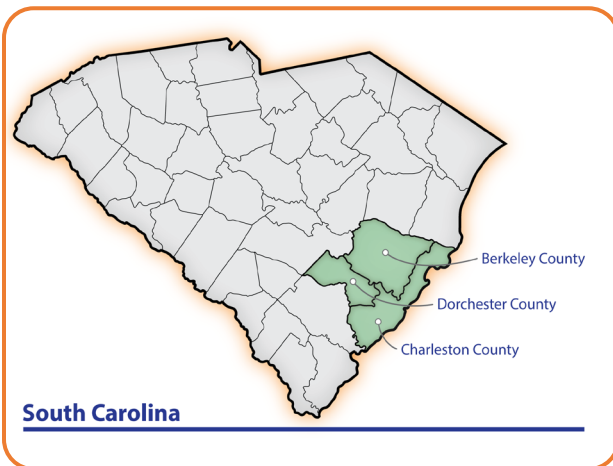
Prepared For: National Association of Development Organizations and the Southern Georgia Regional Commission

## Program Overview

The Lowcountry Go Vanpool Program was implemented as a five-year, grant-run vanpool program serving the Berkeley-Charleston-Dorchester Council of Governments (BCDCOG) region in South Carolina. The South Carolina Department of Transportation (SCDOT) and the Federal Highway Administration (FHWA) also serve as partners with BCDCOG. The objective of the vanpool program is to provide a high-quality, affordable service which can complement two local bus services in the region: Charleston Area Regional Transportation Authority (CARTA) which serves the metropolitan area of Charleston, South Carolina; and TriCounty Link which provides public transit service to the rural residents of three BCDCOG counties: Berkeley, Charleston, and Dorchester.



The Lowcountry Go Vanpool Program aims to fill in the gaps where the area's current public transit systems (CARTA and TriCounty Link) are unable to go, decrease congestion in the region, and for some, reduce parking in employment areas. The Lowcountry Go Vanpool Program follows this mission statement:



*“The mission of the Lowcountry Go Vanpool Program is to deliver a high quality, affordable vanpooling service that will serve as a complement to CARTA and TriCounty Link’s [TCL] transit services by linking people, jobs and communities in the most efficient manner possible.”*

## Program Operations

The Lowcountry Go Vanpool Program provides groups of four or more commuters with a 7- or 15- passenger van which can only be used to commute to and from work. Vanpool participants generally live in and commute to the same area and have similar work schedules. The program is open to any commuter over the age of eighteen but those who are under eighteen years old may participate with a guardian signature. A vanpool can be started by an individual or a

company by reaching out to a mobility staff member at BCDCOG and by registering with the program website (<https://ridelowgo.com/#/>). Potential riders can also sign-up using Ride Amigos, which allows them to see if a current vanpool exists that may fit their commuting needs.

When starting a vanpool, BCDCOG requires designation of at least two drivers for each vanpool. Identifying two drivers allows for a back-up in case of emergencies. A driver must complete an application, be at least 25 years old, and have had their license for at least three years. A driver is responsible for operation of the van, basic maintenance (which is paid for by BCDCOG), collecting monthly fares for submission to BCDCOG, and completing a monthly mileage and expense report.

Once the vanpool has been initiated, the route, schedule, and van storage location is dependent on the needs of the vanpool group. The van can be housed at the driver's residence or at one of the region's nineteen park-n-ride lots.

The Lowcountry Go Vanpool program offers an introductory rate of \$30 per month per person for the first six months of vanpool membership. After the introductory rate, the vanpool fare is based on average daily round-trip miles, the number of days traveled each week, and the number of riders in the van. If a rider leaves the vanpool during the first six months, it will not affect the cost to other members. However, after that introductory rate ends, if a rider leaves a vanpool, the cost for everyone else will go up. When a rider leaves the program, they must provide BCDCOG and vanpool members with a fifteen-day notice so that the vanpool can attempt to acquire another rider to help balance costs. Riders currently pay fares using Lowcountry Go's website or by mail.



*Photo Credit: Berkeley-Charleston-Dorchester Council of Governments*

The program currently has four 7-passenger vans and seven 15-passenger vans which were purchased in 2019 from Piedmont Authority for Regional Transportation (PART). BCDCOG holds an account with a local auto-shop who completes regular maintenance check-ups. If an emergency occurs while the vans are in operation, there is an emergency contact and tow company information available in each van that the driver can contact for service and a back-up van is provided at no cost to vanpool members.

The program does offer an emergency ride home (ERH) program which vanpool members can utilize in case of emergencies (e.g. sick leave, family emergency) up to three times per year. The ERH program will reimburse up to \$55 per use for the cost of the ride home via public transit, taxi, or other transportation service (Uber or Lyft).

## Current Ridership

Currently, the program has one vanpool in operation, with another beginning in early 2023. Implementing the program has been slower than expected as the program originated during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Lowcountry Go's first vanpool was implemented to provide access to a local restaurant, Taco Boy, in Folly Beach, South Carolina which does not have access to public transportation and has limited parking during the peak tourist season. The restaurant hires international students during the peak tourist season who stay in one apartment building, which allowed for easy implementation of a vanpool. The restaurant general manager and a server drove for the vanpool, as a U.S. driver's license is required. The restaurant subsidized the vanpool. This vanpool is expected to be revived again during the peak tourist season.

Lowcountry Go also has a vanpool going to a local big box retailer for the night shift as the local bus service (CARTA) ends at 9 pm. They are also in talks with the Coast Guard to provide vanpool for service members. The Coast Guard has a program which helps service members pay for transportation, including vanpool services which help to defer costs for vanpool members. The Coast Guard had investigated other options, but by far, the Lowcountry Go Vanpool Program was the most affordable.

Lowcountry Go continues to work to expand the program through outreach to major employers in the region and places like malls or manufacturing districts where numerous employers are located in a single location.

## Program Funding

The Lowcountry Go Vanpool Program is funded using Federal Transit Administration Section 5307 – Urbanized Area Formula Grants. The program was implemented in partnership with BCDCOG, SCDOT, and FHWA. The program is currently funded for five years using these grant program funds which allowed BCDCOG to purchase the vans and put away money for van maintenance and salaries. Operation costs, with only one vanpool currently in operation, are \$4,000. BCDCOG applies for grant funding throughout the year to help pay for advertising.

## Marketing

Lowcountry Go has done extensive marketing of the program by creating local connections at meetings and events, promoting the program to local businesses, and posting to social media. Vans are wrapped with the program logo which serves as "free advertising," and provides authenticity to the program.

The current mobility manager has focused on meeting with local chambers of commerce to create connections and present information about the program at local meetings. She has also worked with the local transit department to assist potential passengers who are not currently able to access the bus system to determine if vanpool is a viable option. In addition, Lowcountry Go attends local events to help promote the program and answer questions.



*Photo Credit: Berkeley-Charleston-Dorchester Council of Governments*

In addition to creating local connections, Lowcountry Go uses a Facebook page (<https://www.facebook.com/LowcountryGo/>) to advertise the program, share upcoming events, and highlight program successes.

Lowcountry Go has met with local employers to encourage involvement, including promoting vanpool options for hiring new employees. They look for ways to participate in employer-focused events to increase awareness of the program. They have also worked with a local resume builder (e.g., Indeed) to add information about the vanpool program to job listings in the area so that potential applicants understand that they can apply for a job that they may otherwise have been unable to travel to.

## Challenges and Lessons Learned

### *Obtaining Insurance:*

Obtaining vanpool program insurance was one of the largest hurdles when implementing the program. Obtaining insurance to operate a vanpool is difficult to find because many companies believe vanpools operate similar to Uber or Lyft. Professional fleet insurance covers employees only, and since passengers are not considered employees of a vanpool, they would not be covered. In addition, Lowcountry Go faced challenges obtaining insurance due to their inability to conduct a loss assessment as the program was new and no data was available. Lowcountry Go found coverage through Lancer Insurance in New York which provides vanpool specific insurance. After three years, Lancer Insurance will reevaluate their risks and losses to better calibrate the insurance coverage costs.

### *Organizing Program Information:*

Administering the vanpool program requires a lot of paperwork (maintenance schedules, number of riders, mileage, expenditures, etc.). When implementing the program, Lowcountry Go faced challenges with determining the best way to organize the required information. Lowcountry Go found success in utilizing documents and information shared from other vanpool programs, even urban-focused ones (Seattle, WA, Washington, D.C.), and taking small steps to modify these forms to best fit their needs.

### *Find the Right Language:*

Lowcountry Go found that many in their service region were not familiar with how vanpool programs operate. The program reframed the conversation around vanpool and described it as a public rideshare program for commuters. They have developed marketing materials such as flyers and fact sheets to explain what the program is and how it can be utilized. In addition, they attend local events to promote the program and answer any questions.

### *Consider the Benefits to Your Users:*

When implementing Lowcountry Go, the program did consider options like contracting operations through a third-party company. While a third-party option could provide years of experience and flexibility in vehicle availability, Lowcountry Go found that they could provide a more cost-effective service if they administered and operated the program in-house. They ultimately decided to keep the program in-house in order to keep costs to users down.

## Next Steps

The program is operating using funding from a five-year grant and plans to reapply for additional funding when the grant term ends. In the meantime, Lowcountry Go aims to continue to grow the program through marketing efforts and continued outreach to major employers in the region with the goal of seeing each van in use.

## Learn More

To learn more about the Lowcountry Go Vanpool Program, please visit the program website at: <https://bcdcog.com/vanpool/>

## Contact Information

Program Contact: Courtney Cherry, BCDCOG Vanpool Coordinator, [vanpool@bcdcog.com](mailto:vanpool@bcdcog.com)

This work is supported by the U.S. Department of Agriculture under a cooperative agreement. USDA is an equal opportunity provider. Any opinions, findings and conclusions, or recommendations expressed in this publication are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of the funders.