



# Valdosta-Lowndes Metropolitan Planning Organization Freight Movement Study Report Series

Report #2, Prepared by the Southern Georgia Regional Commission - March 2012

## Impact of Freight Rail in Valdosta and Lowndes County

In 2009, the Valdosta-Lowndes Metropolitan Planning Organization completed a Freight Movement Study, looking at the general movement of freight in the region. Although this study was a good look at the general freight movements, it raised many more questions than it answered. This report series is meant to address some of those questions. The first report discussed the exporting nature of businesses: "Location Quotient and Shift-Share Analysis for Lowndes County." This report examines the past and future impact of freight rail on economic development and transportation in Lowndes County.

Valdosta was founded in 1860 when efforts to bring a railroad to Troupville, the previous county seat, failed. The residents of Troupville picked-up and moved their town four miles southeast to the current site of Valdosta to be on the new Atlantic and Gulf Railroad (CSX line today). Ever since this time the railroad, and transportation in general, has been a defining and driving force for economic prosperity in Lowndes County and South Georgia. In 1889 the Georgia Southern & Florida Railway arrived (current NS line) bringing access to Lowndes County from points to the north, and eventually south to Orlando. In 1899 the Atlantic, Valdosta and Western Railroad (now the NS line running to Jacksonville) was the third rail line to connect to Valdosta. The fourth and final line to come to Valdosta was the Georgia and Florida Railway, today known as both the Valdosta Railway and the Georgia and Florida Railway.

As these railroads developed, new towns developed along them as well. In Lowndes County the communities of Hahira, Remerton, Dasher, Lake Park, Naylor, Kinderlou, Mineola, Clyattville, Bemiss, Barretts, and Blanton were all stops along the various railroads. Many of these settlements are long gone or have been absorbed by their larger neighbors, but this is a testament as to how railroad development in Lowndes County impacted the past and current success of this community.

### Current Status of Freight Railroads in Lowndes County

As of January 2012 there are currently four operating railroads in Lowndes County. Norfolk Southern and CSX, both Class 1 railroads have lines that travel through Lowndes County. The Georgia & Florida Railway and the Valdosta Railway are two shortline railroads that also serve Lowndes County businesses.

Norfolk Southern (NS) owns and operates about 65 miles of track in Lowndes county and about 1,900 miles of track in Georgia.



A major NS corridor in the state is from Tennessee through Atlanta, Macon and Valdosta to Jacksonville, FL.<sup>1</sup>

NS operates one of the busiest train lines in Lowndes County carrying as many as 24 trains per day according to the Federal Railroad Administration. The NS line that goes north through Hahira, towards Atlanta carries about 23 trains per day. The southern line that goes south through Lake Park carries about six trains per day. The line that runs east from downtown Valdosta towards Jacksonville, FL, carries as many as 24 trains per day.

The primary (north/south) NS line through Lowndes County has more crossings than any other railroad, most of them private, providing access to agricultural fields, houses and businesses. 37 of 62 crossings are unsignalized, the remaining 25 have lights and cross bars present for safety of vehicles on the crossing roadway. There is one bridge over the NS railroad in Lowndes County on North Valdosta Road.

A secondary (east/west) NS line through the eastern portion of Lowndes county has 15 crossing, 9 of which are fully signalized, the remaining 7 of which are not signalized. This line also has

two highway bridge crossings at Clay Road and Inner Perimeter Road.

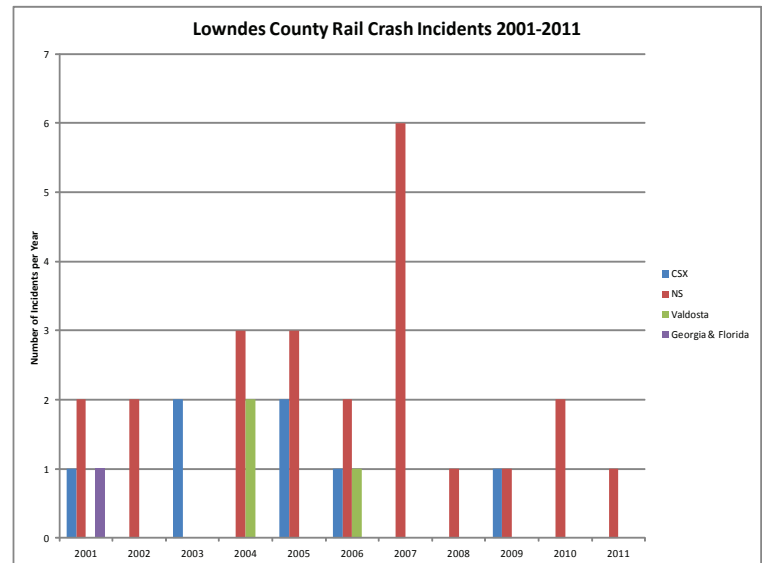
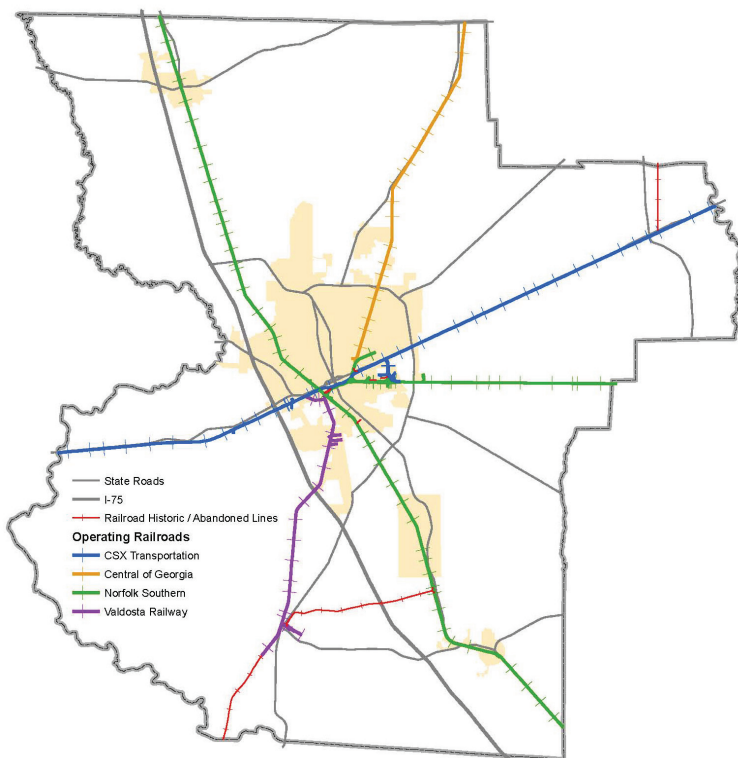
NS has had the most rail crash incidents of the four railroads in Lowndes County with 23 total since 2001<sup>3</sup>. This includes three fatalities, two of which were at highway-rail crossings. This also includes ten non-fatal injuries, four of which were at highway-rail crossings. Thirteen of the 23 incidents occurred at public crossings.

On January 12, 2012, representatives from local police departments and Norfolk Southern participated in a community outreach effort in Valdosta to inform citizens about the dangers of trying to beat a train at railroad crossings.

CSX Transportation (CSX) owns or operates more than 1,600 miles of track in Georgia, and 42 miles in Lowndes County. CSX maintains a small, but busy switching yard in Valdosta, along Savannah Avenue.

The information on CSX train traffic in Valdosta is limited at best. The Federal Railroad Administration notes that CSX operates only two trains per day in Lowndes County. A quick visual survey will note that there are many more CSX trains passing through Lowndes County each day, but an accurate count has not been completed. The switching yards in Valdosta attribute to more train traffic along Savannah Ave. and at St. Augustine Road, this traffic which blocks roadways and impacts highway traffic is a significant part of the train traffic in Valdosta.

The CSX line in Lowndes County has 33 crossings, and three highway bridges on I-75, Old Quitman Road, and in downtown



Valdosta on Patterson St. At 18 of the crossings there lights and gates present to stop vehicles for an oncoming train. The remaining 15 crossings have no safety controls present to stop vehicles on the roadway. Most of the unsignalized crossings are in the rural portions of Lowndes County.

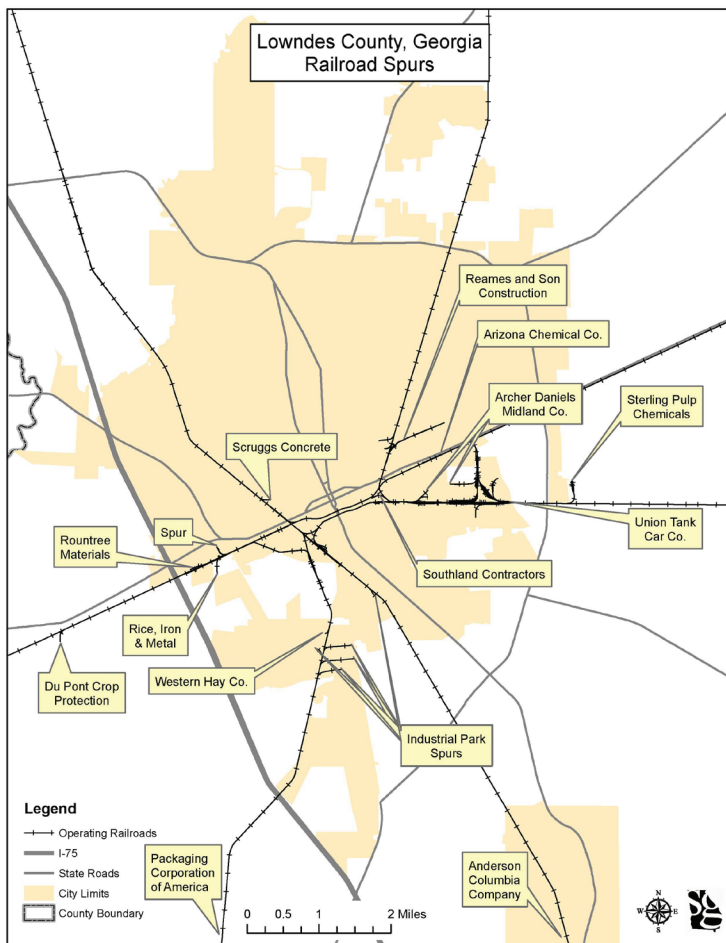
Using data from the Federal Railroad Administration highway-rail crash incidents were examined for the years 2001-2011<sup>3</sup>. On CSX tracks there have been a total of 7 highway-rail incidents, six of them occurring at public crossings. There have been no fatalities and three injuries reported in these seven incidents at highway-rail crossings.

The Georgia Department of Transportation owns a shortline that extends northeast from Valdosta to Nashville and Willacoochee, Georgia. In Lowndes County the Georgia Florida Railway (GFR) has about 16 miles of track. This line is currently operated by the Georgia & Florida Railway and is not being heavily utilized due to the poor condition of the railroad in various locations, however efforts are underway to locate funding sources that would improve this corridor and provide economic development opportunities for the communities along the line.

At this time there is little to no active traffic on this rail line as significant repairs needs to be made to make it safe and economical to use. Even if this track were to become active again the number of trains is likely to remain relatively low based on the current surrounding land uses.

The GFR has 25 crossings, most of which are unsignalized crossings without safety measures such as lights and gates. The seven crossings that do have lights and gates are all primarily at major road crossings and at the entrance to Moody Air Force Base.

Since 2001<sup>3</sup>, the GFR has had only one rail crash incident at a public crossing. The incident involved no fatalities or injuries. The Valdosta Railway (VR) is another shortline that operates in



Lowndes County, connecting industries to the Class I rail network in Valdosta and Clyattville along its 18 mile length.

This small railroad has only a few customers and does not have a large amount of traffic on it. Regular customers along this rail line include the Packaging Corporation of America and Langdale Forrest Products.

The VR has 22 crossings, most of which are unsignalized without any safety measures such as lights and gates. The two crossings that do have lights and gates are at major road crossings between Clyattville and Valdosta. There is one bridge that goes over the railroad on I-75.

Three rail crash incidents have occurred on track owned by the VR since 2001<sup>3</sup>. One injury resulted from one of these rail crash incidents, and one was located at a public highway-rail crossing.

The Federal Railroad Administration (FRA) railroad crash statistics presented in this report show crash incidents for highway-rail crossings as well as other incidents along the track. It should be noted that over the past ten years, two fatalities and seven injuries have occurred at a highway-rail crossing, the remaining rail crash incidents occurred at another location along the track

and not at a road crossing. The data in Figure 1 illustrates the number total incidents in Lowndes County since 2011<sup>3</sup>.

### What Commodities are Shipped by Rail in this Region?

In Lowndes County there are about 30 rail sidings that are utilized by at least as many companies use to transport raw for finished products. These rail sidings provide easy access for companies to markets outside of Lowndes County. In 2006, the Class I railroads in Lowndes County transported more than 31 million gross ton miles per mile of track benefitting the local businesses and economy.

The commodities that are transported in Lowndes County are farm and food products, paper, coal and other aggregates, forest and wood products, and chemicals and hazardous materials.

These commodities support businesses like Archer Daniels Midland, Arizona Chemical, Packaging Corporation of America, Langdale Forest Products, Scruggs Concrete, Reams Concrete, DuPont and many others.

### Impact of Rail Investment in Lowndes County

In order to examine the impact of jobs on our local economy from companies that utilize railroads a brief analysis was completed to determine the number of jobs and potential economic impact these businesses have on our community.

First an analysis was completed using GIS tools to analyze the businesses that have direct access to rail sidings and their current employment and annual sales figures.<sup>2</sup>

More than 10 companies were identified as having active rail spurs that carry raw materials or finished goods to and from these companies in Lowndes County. Together these companies employ more than 840 people and have annual sales of more than \$701 million. This equates to about 1.8% of the employment and about 7.6% of the annual corporate sales in Lowndes County, a significant piece of the pie. A similar approach was taken with freight related businesses who have direct access to rail, but currently do not utilize rail transportation in Lowndes County accounts for more than 130 companies with more than 2,300 employees and \$950 million in annual sales.

Looking at the total local impact of employment and sales of these freight related companies that may or may not utilize rail access equals 7% of all employment and 18% of the annual sales of all companies in Lowndes County. This highlights the significant impact freight rail has on our local economy.

Since beginning as a railroad town in 1861 Valdosta has continued to make investments in rail infrastructure through the years. Today is no different, as early as 2013, the Georgia Department of Transportation (GDOT) will break ground on an overpass at West Hill Avenue (US 84, over the NS line) that will no longer divide the community when a train is on these busy tracks.

The Southern Georgia Regional Transportation Roundtable recently approved two railroad projects: an overpass on St. Augustine Road (over CSX line and switch yard); and significant upgrades and improvements to the GDOT owned Georgia and Florida Railway from Valdosta to Willacoochee, GA. These projects will be funded by a proposed 1% regional sales tax if it is approved by voters in July 2012.

All of these projects will have a tremendous impact on Valdosta and the region. Access to businesses will be improved and will be more reliable, as highway overpasses are built over busy rail corridors. Improvements to the GFRR will allow for economic development and expansion, not only in Lowndes County, but Berrien, Lanier, and Atkinson Counties as well.

### **What does it mean for Transportation?**

Railroads are an important part of the local economy in Valdosta and Lowndes County. When it comes to the impact that railroads have on the overall transportation system, it can seem negligible until you look at railroads locally, and think what the local transportation system would be like if we did not have this mode of transportation.

Many times we do not think about the impact of railroads on our daily lives until we cross a track or have to sit at a crossing waiting on a train that seems to never end. This small inconvenience actually in many cases is a train transporting goods to and from a local business that employs hundreds of people. This report identified several of these companies that utilize rail freight in their daily business. If the railroads were not in place in Valdosta and Lowndes County imagine the number of trucks that would be present on our roadways delivering raw goods and shipping out finished products from our community. If you think traffic

is bad now imagine adding 23 mile long trains to the local roadways, that could mean as many as 2,300 more trucks on the local roads. This kind of impact would be tremendous, and would likely overwhelm the local roadway network.

The VLMPO works with local and state transportation partners to ease the amount of interference railroads have on highway traffic, but it is not easy or cheap to avoid interactions between these two modes of transportation. As noted previously, the VLMPO has programmed in its 2035 Long Range Transportation Plan to build two overpasses at W. Hill Ave. and at St. Augustine Road. These are two projects that will enhance the travel conditions in this community by relieving congestion caused by trains crossing to the industrial and business centers of the community.

To develop projects and transportation plans the VLMPO continues to analyze data related to railroads and other modes of transportation to improve the transportation infrastructure, economic development and quality of life in this community.

*Sources:*<sup>1</sup>GA State Rail Plan, 2009; <sup>2</sup>InfoUSA, via VL Chamber of Commerce 11/21/11; <sup>3</sup>FRA data from January 2001 - October 31, 2011; maps provided by VALORGIS

### **The VLMPO Freight Movement Study Overview**

Transportation is not just about the movement of people from one point to another, it is also about the movement of goods and services from one point to another. Increasing imports and the shipment of goods across the nation are impacting freight movements on a massive scale, requiring more transport of imports and exports to their final markets. The weight of total freight movement is expected to nearly double in the next 30 years according to the Georgia Statewide Freight Plan.

In South Georgia, freight movement is a big concern. Valdosta, originally founded as a railroad town, has been a hub for freight transportation since 1860. Today, South Georgia is quickly becoming a regional warehousing and logistics hub for the Southeast United States. Manufacturers and warehouse owners continue to locate in South Georgia because of the easy access to major transportation corridors located in the region. Key transportation corridors in the region include: I-75, I-10, both Norfolk Southern and CSX Railroads, US 84, the Ports of Georgia in Savannah and Brunswick, and ports in Florida.

The VLMPO Freight Movement Study assesses freight movement in all of Lowndes County and its surrounding region to determine how the movement of goods impacts the local transportation network.

In order to provide public input on the perception of freight movement in Lowndes County, a survey of businesses was conducted as part of the Freight Movement Study. The VLMPO partnered with the Valdosta-Lowndes Chamber of Commerce to distribute the survey to the Chambers' 1,500 members.

The report goes on to examine the existing freight movement in South Georgia and consider future economic development and land use plans to build a profile of goods movement in the region. Although some areas of concern are highlighted in the Freight Movement Study, it has been primarily used to supplement an updated 2035 Transportation Plan for Lowndes County.

The full 2009 Freight Movement Study can be found online at [www.sgrc.us/transportation](http://www.sgrc.us/transportation), click on Data and Resources.