

Core Service Improvements Highlighted in WRTA's new Five-Year Service Plan - *More frequent service from UMass Medical Center to Union Station*

WORCESTER, MA. Wednesday, June 1, 2005 — Increasing fixed route core service is an integral part of WRTA's new growth and development five-year service plan scheduled to begin August 27, 2005. In 2003, an \$80,000 federal grant was procured to fund a study to evaluate the needs of WRTA riders. The goal of the study was to provide the most productive service and serve the greatest number of people, all with limited resources.

"We wanted national transit planning professionals, experienced with the current transit industry service delivery practices, to take a fresh look at our services," said Mary MacInnes, administrator of the WRTA. "The WRTA was willing to hear any recommendations, including a complete re-design of the system and changing the types of services offered, if the study recommended it."

"The whole exercise was very much needed to make the routes more effective and efficient to users, especially people in the city," said Advisory Board Chairman Steve O'Neil. "It (The WRTA system) had not been looked at from a fresh perspective in a number of years."

Urbitran, a national transit-consulting firm in New Haven, Ct. was one of three companies that responded and was ultimately selected to do the study. The company was chosen based on its value and the highest level of public outreach it could give the WRTA study, according to MacInnes.

Urbitran analyzed system data, demographics, and land use data, completed field research, conducted stakeholder meetings, created and distributed passenger surveys, held public meetings before and after recommendations were developed, and made themselves available to RTA drivers.

The WRTA Advisory Board has endorsed the first year recommendations with some modifications to Urbitran's recommendations for the Brookfields and Millbury services.

Phase one of the new plan will be implemented beginning August 27 and will eliminate duplicate routes, along with making service more direct to key locations. Highlights planned include more frequent service from UMass Medical Center to Union Station and Worcester's Belmont Street area to create 15-minute peak service. According to O'Neil, the more frequent service from UMass Medical Center to Union Station is a start toward linking local bus service to the commuter rail.

Other changes such as extending the final point of service on Route 4 to the Mass Pike Exit 10A Park and Ride are planned.

"I think it's a very good plan and better meets the demographic of today. The current system is based on a plan designed 26 years ago. Overall I think it's going to be a more effective service that citizens can rely on," O'Neil said.

The changes will include more service to Union Station, more through travel opportunities to the Worcester Senior Center and the creation of a 90-minute service to Spencer.

"This plan will increase trips to Spencer from six trips to eight trips and increase ridership," said Spencer Advisory Board Member Bill Lehtola. "Hopefully in the near future we'll have hourly service to and from Spencer. We're looking for better service everywhere there is a need. In Spencer there is a higher population concentration, along Route 9."

Under the first year phase of the plan, Urbitran had recommended eliminating two under-utilized, fixed-route services to Clinton and the Brookfields. The WRTA will still provide four

round trips to the Brookfields, and is working with the town of Clinton on alternatives.

"Our biggest hope when we found out the route would be eliminated, was to maintain some sort of service. There isn't a huge ridership in Clinton but we felt that having the service added to the quality of life here and we still wanted to get people to Worcester and other places," said Clinton Town Administrator Michael Ward.

After initial ideas were discussed, it was decided that a shuttle service to the West Boylston end route, located at the Wal-Mart Plaza on Route 12 in West Boylston was the best solution to the elimination of the fixed-route.

"This gets them (riders) into the system. A lot of riders called to support this change and we're happy they could go to Wal-Mart and do their shopping," Ward said. "The timing (of the shuttle service) is so that the Worcester bus will be there."

"We still need to work out how many times per day the shuttle service will run," he said, adding, "they (the WRTA) are working with us."

"The WRTA will be introducing a lot of changes at the end of August, so we will be implementing an extensive communications plan for our existing riders and a marketing plan for our potential new riders," MacInnes added.

"This first year involves a reallocation of funds," MacInnes said. "Over the following years we are hopeful that we will be able to secure additional state funding for new services."

Next month MARTA, the statewide RTA Association will submit a statewide needs study done by Urbitran to the State Legislature.

"The statewide plan will demonstrate the hours of service that are needed by each Regional Transit Authority to bring them to a reasonable service threshold based on a formula devised by Urbitran," MacInnes said. "The WRTA is in an excellent position if the legislature provides the funding for new service because we have a five-year service plan in place."

These changes are the first step of the five-year plan designed to grow the WRTA and provide for the transit needs of the 37 communities it serves.

Features of the Five-Year Service Plan recommendations include:

Year Two: Adding service to 10 p.m. for eight of the current routes, as well as examining the needs for Marlborough.

Year Three: Adding 10 p.m. service to more than a dozen additional routes, recommend service until 1 a.m. to eight routes, as well as adding demand response zones for the four areas of Worcester from 10 p.m. to 1 a.m. This will allow riders to transfer downtown to either a later operating route, or another zone service and will provide Worcester with service after midnight.

Year Four: This year will be targeted toward peak service to specific routes and ways to improve the service levels.

Year Five: This year will be concentrated on the weekend service and community service. The goal will be to provide more service hours to weekend routes.