



Worcester Regional Transit Authority Advisory Board Meeting Minutes September 17, 2020

Chairperson Lehtola called the meeting to order at 8:31a.m.

AB MEMBERS ATTENDANCE VIA TELECONFERENCE

Present by teleconference: Barbara Connelly-Grafton, Kristen Las – Shrewsbury, Mark Binnall- Auburn, Gary Rosen-Worcester, Douglas Belanger-Leicester, Roseann Carrier-Brookfield, and William Lehtola - Spencer. Judith O’Connor – Millbury Alt, Brian Pigeon-Worcester Alt, Adam Menard – Auburn Alt. Arrived 8:35am Robert Spain- Millbury. Left 9:30am Kristen Las, Douglas Belanger 9:35am.

ACCEPTANCE OF MINUTES

Motion: To accept the minutes for June 18, 2020

By: Doug Belanger. 2nd: Barbara Connelly.

Vote by roll call: (8 in favor 0 opposed) vote passed.

Barbara Connelly	yes
Kristen Las	yes
Gary Rosen	yes
Douglas Belanger	yes
Judith O’Connor	yes
Mark Binnall	yes
Roseann Carrier	yes
William Lehtola	yes

BUSINESS FROM THE PUBLIC -Zero Fare Advocate verbal presentations

Speakers: Senator Harriette Chandler, Tom Quinn, WRB, Brenna Robeson, Co-Founder of Zero Fare WRTA, Dr. Jan Yost, President of the Health Foundation, Dr. Matilde Castiel, Worcester’s Commissioner of Health and Human Services, Alex Guardiola, Dir. Government Affairs & Public Policy, WRCC. Ms. Robeson spoke about the need for the WRTA to include in its long term planning a Zero Fare policy. Ms. Robeson requested that the administrator speak with FTA to define specifically if CARES ACT monies could be used for a pilot Zero fare program. Ms. Robeson asked that the fares continue to be suspended until the end of the Covid pandemic. Mr. Quinn spoke about the Worcester Regional Research Bureau’s report (available www.wrrb.org). The report focused on fare elimination using both national studies and local data provided by the WRTA and CMRPC. Mr. Quinn commented on how the WRTA is a great candidate for both a pilot program and a no fare policy. At this time no viable amount of replacement revenue was discussed.

Ms. Yost spoke in support of the WRRB report. Ms. Yost listed numerous reasons how and why no fares would support those most in need. Ms. Yost asked for an extension of fare suspension during the Covid pandemic. Ms. Yost encouraged the board members to consider a zero-fare pilot as well as adding it to the WRTA’s five-year planning.

Communities Served:

Auburn	Brimfield	Douglas	Grafton	Millbury	North	Paxton	Southbridge	Wales	West Boylston
Barre	Brookfield	Dudley	Holden	New Braintree	Brookfield	Princeton	Spencer	Warren	West
Berlin	Charlton	East	Holland	Northborough	Oakham	Rutland	Sturbridge	Webster	Brookfield
Boylston	Clinton	Brookfield	Leicester	Northbridge	Oxford	Shrewsbury	Sutton	Westborough	Worcester



Ms. Castiel was in support of Zero fares and spoke about the importance of equities. Ms. Castiel explained how public transportation improves the overall health and wellbeing of all people. Mr. Guardioli spoke about the WRCC position paper which supports fare free and the benefits it brings to the community. Mr. Guardioli stated that the chamber continues to work with the State to fund a three-year zero fare pilot. At this time the progress has been altered due to the Covid-19 pandemic.

Senator Harriette Chandler spoke about the importance of maintaining and supporting viable public transportation. Senator Chandler explained how she continually works with MassDOT on transportation issues. Commenting on how getting people back on public transit is vital for all of Massachusetts. Senator Chandler spoke about fare free as a pilot and the need for outreach to businesses and colleges for contributions. Senator Chandler stated she will also continue to work with MARTA on these issues.

BUSINESS FROM THE BOARD

Doug Belanger thanked the WRTA administration for all their efforts regarding the Town of Leicester’s meeting location. Chairperson Lehtola congratulated CMTM on their new management team and PBSTM’s new manager. Chairperson Lehtola congratulated two employees for recently becoming parents. Kristen Las thanked the administrator for his recent report to the board. Chairperson Lehtola requested more communication from the administrator to the board members. Brian Pigeon asked when the VIA data would be available for review. Mr. Lipka stated that VIA will be reporting the first 30 days by the end of October 2020. Adam Menard gave a positive comment on the RFP for the WRTA website upgrades. Mark Binnall asked if the overhead announcements could be reviewed as some overlap. Mr. Lipka stated CMTM would look into this issue.

Gary Rosen inquired into how the public can access the board members via email. Chairperson Lehtola stated that WRTA administration acts as the point of contact. The email admin@therta.com is used for communication with the board members. Issues submitted not related to the board as determined by management will be forwarded to the feedback system for processing.

GENERAL REPORT ON RIDERSHIP

Mr. Lipka reported (as of August 29, 2020) 100% of the pre-Covid service is now running. There is no Elder shopper special but PBSTM is working to assist those requests. Ridership is at 50% of the pre-pandemic level. The PBSTM service is running at 65%. Some saving has occurred due to less use of yellow cab services (down 91%). The WRTA Administration is analyzing various strategies with the goal of protecting the existing services. Mr. Lipka acknowledged a reduction in ridership this fall due to the reduced school schedule. Generally, 35% of fall ridership are students from schools and colleges. The WRTA administration believes the present levels will be the general trend until the end of the year.

The WRTA has expanded service via shuttle in Southbridge, Webster and Dudley. This new shuttle is growing and more reports will be forthcoming. The WRTA & VIA will be launching a Westborough Shuttle service on September 22, 2020. This project supports a designated area and runs from 7am to 7pm Monday through Friday. There are four vehicles used for service and one is handicap accessible. Marketing efforts will begin within the first week of service.

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The WRTA FY`20 budget is estimated to use about \$380,000 of the CARES ACT money. The WRTA is presently in the middle of an audit and more information will be forthcoming. The WRTA has been authorized to use \$5 million of the CARES ACT money leaving a remainder of \$4.5 million for the FY`21 budget. The FY`21 budget is level funded and only 25% of the state contact assistance has been released. Mr. Lipka stated that the absence of fare collections plays a part in the lack of needed revenue. Mr. Lipka stated he has made it his priority to not eliminate services but is concerned for the long-term viability of the system should fares continue to be suspended. Mr. Lipka commented that the lifting of suspension of the fares is a separate issue from adopting a fare free policy.

Mr. Lipka explained that the CARES ACT is not specifically designed to fund pilot programs for free/zero fares. Any establishing of a new policy would need to be done via the board with all appropriate public notices. Mr. Lipka stressed the importance of having a viable revenue source should any fare policy change be approved by the board.

RFP FOR WEBSITE

Mr. Lipka announced that an RFP for the WRTA website is expected by the end of September. The board has asked for the website to be more user friendly. Updates on the progress will be forthcoming.

RFP FOR FARE COLLECTION SYSTEM

Mr. Lipka announced that an RFP for a new fare collection system will be ready by October 2020. A new system will allow for better ridership data, more flexibility in fare offerings and allow for e-commerce options.

RESTORATION OF FARE COLLECTIONS

Mr. Lipka reviewed the present suspension of fare collection. Mr. Lipka commented on the backdoor boarding policy which prohibited fare collection. Fare suspension was done for practical (backdoor boarding) and under extraordinary circumstances. The WRTA is looking at a \$3 million loss in revenue and if the suspension were lifted in November the project of revenue gain would be \$1.5 million. Mr. Lipka reported that the WRTA has had little Covid related exposure and continues to work towards safety for all. Mr. Lipka informed the board members that a cleaning video was produced and the link can be found on the website. <https://player.vimeo.com/video/442744694> Mr. Lipka thanked all the staff, drivers, and public for their outstanding efforts. The WRTA has placed appropriate instructional signage for the safety of the ridership. Mr. Lipka acknowledged the use of a 30-day notice to the public if the present fare suspension is lifted. The Administration chose November 7th as the target date.

Mr. Lipka asked for board guidance on the fare issues, timelines, and budgeting. Many members voiced concern over the lack of specific guidelines on how the CARES ACT monies could be used. Barbara Connelly and others were concerned about starting and then stopping fares due to any upcoming increases in Covid activities. Kristen Las commented on the need to get specific information pertaining to the CARES ACT money. Board members questioned how exactly the budget would be affected if reinstating fare were to happen in January 2021 vs. November 2020. Mr. Lipka explained that most RTA's have

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returned to fare collections while others never stopped. The MBTA bus line experienced a 10% loss in ridership when fare was reinstated. Mr. Lipka commented that the FTA’s CARES ACT money supplements the difference between Net Cost and Net Revenue due to Covid related expenses. Mr. Lipka stated that changing the existing fare policy to a Zero fare policy would be a different relationship to the present FTA’s CASES ACT. The WRTA suspended (non-enforcement) fare collection due to its backdoor boarding because of health and safety pertaining to Covid-19.

Robert Spain thanked the administration for the work being done. Robert Spain stated that historically the board has been in favor of zero fare. Robert Spain spoke about cost of collection vs. cost of cash operations in the fare system. Robert Spain acknowledged the administration’s efforts to replace revenue by reaching out to businesses and colleges. Robert Spain encouraged everyone to approach Zero Fare as a system wide pilot in Massachusetts as opposed to one RTA. Robert Spain stated that money would likely have to come from State and Federal resources to make Zero fares sustainable and service expansion viable. Robert Spain commented that the board is not against fare free but that revenues need to be determinable for the running of service. Robert Spain made a motion to table discussion of resuming fares until December’s advisory board meeting.

Motion: The Worcester Regional Transit Authority Advisory Board moves to table discussion of resuming fares until the December Advisory Board meeting.

By: Robert Spain. 2nd: Barbara Connelly.

Vote by roll call: (5 in favor 1 abstained) vote passed.

Barbara Connelly	yes
Robert Spain	yes
Mark Binnall	yes
Roseann Carrier	yes
Gary Rosen	yes
William Lehtola	abstained

ADJOURNMENT

Motion: To Adjourn at 9:56 a.m.

By: Gary Rosen, 2nd: Barbara Connelly

Vote: All in favor (6 in favor 0 opposed)

NEXT MEETING DATE

The next WRTA Advisory Board Meeting will be on October 15, 2020 at 8:30 a.m., via teleconference due to the Governor’s State of Emergency provisions for public meetings.

Minutes prepared by: Elizabeth R Pokoly

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