



Worcester Regional Transit Authority Advisory Board Meeting Minutes January 21, 2021

Chairperson Lehtola called the meeting to order at 8:32a.m.

AB MEMBERS ATTENDANCE VIA TELECONFERENCE

Present by teleconference: Barbara Connelly-Grafton, Kristen Las – Shrewsbury, Adam Menard - Auburn, Gary Rosen-Worcester, Douglas Belanger-Leicester, Robert Spain-Millbury, Brian Bullock – Holden, Michael Kennedy – Millbury DP, Nancy Garr-Colzie-Worcester RCP, Brian Pigeon-Worcester Alt. and William Lehtola - Spencer.

ACCEPTANCE OF MINUTES

Motion: To accept the minutes for November 19, 2020

By: Robert Spain. 2nd: Adam Menard.

Vote by roll call: (8 in favor 1 abstained 0 opposed) vote passed.

Kristen Las	yes
Adam Menard	yes
Gary Rosen	yes
Douglas Belanger	yes
Robert Spain	yes
Brian Bullock	yes
Michael Kennedy	abstained
Nancy Garr-Colzie	yes
William Lehtola	yes

BUSINESS FROM THE PUBLIC – Tom Quinn, Research Associate, Worcester Municipal Research Bureau. Dr. Mattie Castiel, Commissioner of Health and Human Services, City of Worcester, David Sullivan from Worcester Regional Chamber of Commerce. Phineas Baxandall, Senior Analyst at the Mass Budget and Policy Center, and others. Collectively, they spoke on the social and economic benefits of free public transit. Using CARES ACT money for both maintaining suspension of fare collection and to pay for a permanent fare free system. Brenna Robeson spoke in favor of extending the no fare policy and being fare free.

Chairperson Lehtola thanked the speakers and stated how it was rewarding to see so many who care about the people in all the communities and the city.

BUSINESS FROM THE BOARD

Request from Gary Rosen – Update Worcester Research Bureau Report.

Gary Rosen thanked the speakers and asked the board members to consider continuing the suspension of fare until at least the end of April 2021 and then seeing how it goes during Covid, at least. Gary Rosen spoke about the need to support well-being and health of the ridership. Some board members requested more information pertaining to expenditures regarding the CARES ACT money before consideration of

Communities Served:

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



changes. Kristen Las and Douglas Belanger spoke for resuming fare collection the lack of a permanent revenue stream and further allocations necessary for the CARES ACT monies. Both expressed compassion for the social and economic factors pertain to fare collection. Douglas Belanger recommended a committee meeting to review the matter of expenditures pertaining to the CARES ACT money. Chairperson Lehtola asked for an Audit & Finance committee meeting to be scheduled before the next WRTA Board Meeting.

Chairperson Lehtola stated he would love to have free fares all time but the WRTA reports to MassDOT and the FTA. Chairperson Lehtola introduced Mr. Lipka and his administrative reports.

Mr. Lipka explained some FY'21 budgeting items. The 15 RTA's received \$3.3 million more for FY'21 which is a 2% bump from state revenue and we have the opportunity to apply for grants. We need to make sure we are in position to meet all of our revenue projections (including fare revenue) as required by our funding sources. We budgeted for FY'21 at about \$2.9 million in fare revenue and we will not meet that goal. If we are required to remove \$2 million dollars from the budget without a replacement means eventually it will come to a reduction in service. This administration has never been in favor of service cuts.

Mr. Lipka informed the board of the background concerning the suspension of fares. Suspension of fares was prompted by rear door boarding and to provide an incentive for the continuing use of our services. The riders responded by participating in social distancing, wearing a mask and using the buses. The WRTA was the last to cut service and first in restoring service. We were the most aggressive in cleaning and maintaining the buses. This employee and ridership effort worked to getting the system safe and as accommodating as possible. The fare policy was suspended in March 2020 and remained suspended when the WRTA returned to front door boarding of the buses. Mr. Lipka informed the board that front door boarding resumed in July 2020. The WRTA has used the CARES ACT money to make us whole.

Mr. Lipka gave some background on the CARES ACT money. The money is a one-time grant issued and reimbursed assistance. The WRTA is not eligible for further money under the 2nd round of the CARES ACT. The money cannot be used for zero/free fare pilot or as a revenue source for a policy change to free fares. The WRTA's goal for the money is to assure safe, healthy and reliable service in the "new normal" which requires long-term procurements expenses, staffing, as well as facility/bus changes. To meet these goals the administration has budgeted the CARES ACT money over 5 years. Mr. Lipka stated how the effects of the pandemic in a post Covid period is unknown and without a reliable timeline.

Mr. Lipka stated his recommendation to resume fare collection as of March 1, 2021 was based on being fiscally responsible for the long-term needs to provide safe, healthy and reliable service in and post pandemic. Mr. Lipka confirmed providing the Audit & Finance committee a report on the WRTA's expenditures for the CARES ACT money.

Mr. Lipka explained that a viable and sustainable revenue replacement would need to be established should the board opt to make a new policy (fare free). Board members generally agreed that full replacement funding would be necessary if fares were not collected as a policy.

Gary Rosen asked to hold his recommendation to suspend fare collection until the February 2021 Board meeting.

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Chairperson Lehtola held the discussion and Gary’s recommendation of fare suspension until April 2021 until the February 2021 board meeting.

SNOWSTORM 12/05/2020 REPORT

Mr. Lipka detailed the outstanding efforts of operations pertaining to the recent snow storm. There were no direct complaints regarding the storm service.

UPDATE ON DEBT SERVICES

Mr. Lipka informed the board that the last remaining payment of \$3.3 million was paid to retire the debt for the construction of the M&O.

UPDATE ON NEW BUSES

Mr. Lipka informed the board that by 2022 the WRTA will have replaced 25% (13 buses) of their aging bus fleet. Going forward they will continue with replacing the fleet from the capital budget. The WRTA is phasing out its all-electric buses as they have been becoming costlier and more unreliable.

FORMAL UPDATE ON SDW SHUTTLE SERVICE

The WRTA expanded service in the Webster, Dudley, Southbridge area. This shuttle continues to increase in ridership.

VIA UPDATE

The WRTA is seeking to expand the present range of the VIA service (shuttle) in Westborough. Talks are ongoing for this expansion.

Mr. Lipka announced that no new services changes will occur in January 2021. The WRTA is in the process of outlining small changes for their June change schedule.

Mr. Lipka spoke about the SDW and VIA projects as two examples of it continued emphasis on expansion of ridership and service in Central Massachusetts. These services like the other WRTA services are running despite the pandemic.

No motions were seconded and no votes were taken on matters discussed before the board.

ADJOURNMENT

Motion: To Adjourn at 10:04 a.m.

By: Douglas Belanger, 2nd: Barbara Connelly

Vote: All in favor (10 in favor 0 opposed)

NEXT MEETING DATE

The next WRTA Advisory Board Meeting will be on February 18, 2021 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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