



## Worcester Regional Transit Authority Advisory Board Meeting Minutes January 19, 2023

Chairperson Rosen called the meeting to order at 8:30a.m.

### AB MEMBERS ATTENDANCE VIA TELECONFERENCE

Present by teleconference: Mark Binnall – Auburn, Hollie Lucht – Shrewsbury, Laura Wilson – Oxford, Heather-Lyn Haley – RCP, Douglas Belanger – Leicester, Brian Bullock - Holden, Adam Menard – Auburn Alt Brian Pigeon – Worcester Alt, Gary Rosen - Worcester, Members entering meeting after call to order: Kristen Las – Shrewsbury, Robin Grimm – Sturbridge, Michael McCall – Southbridge.

### ACCEPTANCE OF MINUTES

**Motion: To accept the minutes for December 15, 2022**

**By: Doug Belanger. 2<sup>nd</sup>: Mark Binnall.**

**Vote: All in Favor (6 in favor 1 abstention 0 opposed) vote passed.**

### BUSINESS FROM THE PUBLIC – Out of Order

Chairperson Rosen introduced the following persons requesting to address the board via Zoom participation. Senator Robyn Kennedy made an introduction and expressed support for Zero Fare. Senator Kennedy spoke highly of former Senator Chandler’s record on supporting the Worcester RTA and that support would continue.

Sydney Ocran, PhD, Director of Talent Acquisition from FedEx made an introduction and spoke briefly about the importance of free fares. Sydney Ocran expressed the benefits to the employees as well as from a retention prospective. Sydney Ocran asked that the WRTA consider expanding the fix route service to include their facility in the area of West Boylston/Boylston. Gary Rosen deferred the request to the Administrator.

Gary requested that the Administrator’s report on Service Changes due to Shortages be taken out of order.

Mr. Lipka have a brief overview of the service adjustments. The WRTA Administration has prepared a series of adjustments to alleviate missed trips, and reduce overtime and driver fatigue. Effective Friday, January 27, 2023 and only applicable to FRIDAYS. Monday through Thursday services will remain on the same schedules. The WRTA would be publishing the changed Friday schedules on social media, [therta.com](http://therta.com) as well as on the buses and shelters. This publication would be after the board meeting. Mr. Lipka stated that changing other routes to cover for Route 825 which is the only route to be eliminated, on Fridays only would not be feasible. This is due to the reprogramming, union renegotiations, costs and general timeline. Given the winter season, driver fatigue from continued OT and rider frustration from missed trips; it is advisable to start changes at this time. The WRTA will monitor the changes throughout the Spring and hopes to reinstate regular Friday services in June 2023. The WRTA is also seeking to hire about six (6) drivers. With the needed licenses and training that process typically takes 8-12 weeks. Mr. Lipka stated that by adjusting the service on Friday’s and onboarding of new drivers, they hope to alleviate any inconveniences and problems the riders endure when we have a significant number of missed trips. Time and Routes were carefully selected for lower ridership numbers. Nick Burnham gave a presentation on the specifics of the changes with requested ridership numbers.

SUMMARY: WRTA employs about 89 drivers with CDL’s and Federal regulations do not allow for more the 60 hours per work week. WRTA drivers are eligible for PFMLA. Under PFMLA call out time can be as little as 2 hours before a shift. When call out numbers (for various reasons) are continually high the pool of available and able drivers reaches or exceeds restrictions. These factors lead to missed trips.

### **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
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<b>Route:</b>	<b>Total Friday # of passengers</b>
Route 825 will not operate on Fridays Most of the current route is adjacent to existing WRTA routes which can be ½ a mile from other routes.	58 outbound and 42 inbound
Route 11 select trips between 9am-5pm will not operate	572 outbound and 472 inbound
Route 24 select trips between 9am-5pm will not operate	319 outbound and 307 inbound
Loss of 7 outbound & 7 inbound each Friday, Loss of approx. 190 passengers' trips (11%)	
Route 14 select trips between 8am-3pm will not operate	224 outbound and 187 inbound
Loss of 8 outbound & 8 inbound each Friday, Loss of approx. 150 passenger trips (36%)	
Route 19 select trips between 8:45am-4:45pm will not operate	714 outbound and 642 inbound
Loss of 8 outbound & 8 inbound each Friday, Loss of approx. 280 passenger trips (21%)	
Route 26 select trips between 9am-5pm will not operate	583 outbound and 592 inbound
Loss of 8 outbound & 8 inbound each Friday, Loss of approx. 235 passengers' trips (20%)	
Route 27 select trips between 11:20am-7:20pm will not operate	624 outbound and 531 inbound
Loss of 6 outbound & 6 inbound each Friday, Loss of approx. 280 passenger trips (21%)	
Route 30 select trips between 8:45am-4:45pm will not operate	373 outbound and 350 inbound
Loss of 8 outbound & 8 inbound each Friday, Loss of approx. 140 passenger trips (19%)	

**Overall impact to WRTA**

A reduction of 112 one-way tips. 10% of all scheduled weekday trips (1,062 total). Loss of approx. 1,337 passenger trips and 11% of all scheduled weekday trips (12,158 total) End of Summary

Board members expressed disappointment in the amount of time they had to review the materials emailed to them. Robin Grimm and Brian Pigeon had specific concerns about the timetable for publishing the adjustments. Robin Grimm was concerned about mix messages. Free rides on the bus yet eliminations are occurring. Therefore, people could be saying, if I pay a fare then no eliminations? The WRTA has to be aware of how the public may view things. Mr. Lipka apologized and explained the reasons regarding the timing of the notice to the board. Gary Rosen asked if the changes require a board vote. Mr. Lipka stated that no board vote was required for the changes and that notices would go out after the board meeting. Gary Rosen asked if the change could be delayed. Mr. Lipka stated that was not advisable or likely due to the Union negotiations necessary to make changes and the trending higher missed trips. Gary Rosen commented that the changes maybe painful for some riders. Robin Grimm asked if the early work arrival and work to home shifts would remain intact. It was confirmed that those hours would be the same. Gary Rosen asked if drivers could announce the upcoming changes on those routes. Heather-Lyn Haley commented on having the automated bus announcements used for that purpose. There was no further discussion on this suggestion. Heather-Lyn Haley was concerned about possible driver fatigue and asked about wellness programs for the drivers. Brian Bullock questioned whether retired drivers were approached to fill in. Mr. Lipka stated that CMTM management has used all it's employee resources during this time including retired persons. Brian Bullock commented on possible bonuses for people. Mr. Lipka stated the issue is not enough driver's due to restrictions and general health and safety. Operations has pulled in from management and other positions but this is leaving gaps in their regular work areas. Mark Binnall asked if Paratransit would be affected by the changes. Mr. Lipka stated it would not be affected. Gary Rosen stated that the City of Worcester has offered to assist with hiring efforts for drivers.

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**BUSINESS FROM THE PERSONNEL COMMITTEE – CHAIRPERSON BELANGER**

Doug Belanger gave the board members a brief overview of the meeting on January 6, 2023. The committee agreed to start a search for consulting firms. The goal is to have candidates as close to or before the one-year extension which ends June 30, 2024. The committee acknowledges the challenges in hiring for the position of Administrator. Further reports will be given to the board in a timely manner.

**BUSINESS FROM THE ADVISORY BOARD VICE-CHAIRPERSON**

Vice Chairperson Doug Belanger addressed the board with a brief report from his attendance at the City of Worcester’s Public Service and Transportation Committee meeting. This meeting took place on January 5, 2023 at 5p.m. in the Levi Lincoln (North) Chamber. Doug Belanger expressed his disappointment in the “unprofessional” manner of the meeting by the committee. Doug Belanger commented on the lack of professionalism at the meeting by participants and committee members. In general, there was much finger pointing and heckling from some members of the audience. Doug Belanger stated that the board is not obligated to meet with the committee. Should the committee be earnest in assisting the WRTA this should be reflected by having real dialog. Doug Belanger asked through the chair about the CARES ACT monies and the WRTA’s priority for that money. Tom Coyne, CFO and Assistant Administrator addressed the board. The WRTA is projected to have \$22m-\$23m of CARES Act operating dollars remaining at the end of fiscal year 2023. We are currently using CARES Act funds to offset the loss of fare revenue and to fund increased operating expenses. Specifically, wages, fringe benefits, fuel, insurance and RAN borrowing have all increased substantially and are expected to continue to do so. Historically, our other sources of revenue, State Contract Assistance, and Member Assessments, have increased in the 2.5% to 3.3% range, not nearly enough to keep up with the increases in operating expenses. This necessitates more of our federal dollars being used to balance the budget in order to maintain the current level of service. From my point of view, the best course of action is to use the remaining \$22m - \$24m of CARES Act grant as a stabilization fund (est. 2028-2030) for those times when assistance from the State and Members do not meet the increased operating expenses of the Authority. The Union Contract is estimated at \$3,009,531.

Mr. Lipka stated that this year’s budget will need adjustments due to the OT demand which has greatly increased. The WRTA has to budget for long term viability of the company, its employees and for operational service and ridership demands. Doug Belanger stated that board members may be painted as against free fare however the board is in favor of a regular revenue stream to off set free fares. Doug asked Mr. Lipka if the city council received a detailed plan pertaining to the WRTA. Mr. Lipka stated that the City Manager received documents yesterday and a presentation was ready at the January 5, 2023 committee meeting. The presentation was not shown at the committee meeting. It is the committee’s decision to review materials at their meetings. Doug Belanger asked for a yes or no answers to put to rest gossip about whether the new tracker/collections system was a conspiracy to kill “Fare Free”? Mr. Lipka stated No.

**BUSINESS FROM THE BOARD CHAIRPERSON**

Gary Rosen asked about expanding board meeting to hybrid in-person for February. Mr. Lipka stated that meetings are held in the Hub conference room. Meeting would have a minimum of in person board members and public due to the space, board members preferences, large viewing screen and necessary computer use. Gary Rosen stated he would continue to speak with Mr. Lipka on this topic. Gary Rosen asked about damaged and missing bus stop requests. Mr. Lipka stated that an audit on signage is underway and signs from the public meeting have been addressed. Gary Rosen asked what was being done about Bus Tracker complaints. Operations personnel is auditing the system. The improvements are scheduled to conclude January 21, 2023. WIFI which is used has dead spots within some places in Worcester therefore errors from this may still exist but we will continue to monitor. Priority signalization was discussed. Mr. Lipka advised the board that the WRTA buses have been equipped with it for over 10 years. The installation of equipment to correspond with it is managed and installed by the City of Worcester. There appears to be a lag in the installation. Grafton Street 240/190 needs to be added.

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Worcester Regional Transit Authority

Moving Our Region Forward

**Union Station Hub** 60 Foster Street Worcester, MA 01608

508.453.3403 Fax: 508.752.1676 [therta.com](http://therta.com)

ADJOURNMENT

Motion: To Adjourn at 9:59 a.m.

By: Doug Belanger, 2<sup>nd</sup>: Mark Binnall

Vote: All in favor (9 in favor 0 opposed)

NEXT MEETING DATE

The next WRTA Advisory Board Meeting will be on February 16, 2023 at 8:30 a.m., via teleconference due to the Governor’s State of Emergency provisions for public meetings extended until 3.31.2023.

Minutes prepared by: Elizabeth R Pokoly

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