



Worcester Regional Transit Authority Advisory Board Meeting Minutes November 17, 2022

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

AB MEMBERS ATTENDANCE VIA TELECONFERENCE

Present by teleconference: Mark Binnall – Auburn, Hollie Lucht – Shrewsbury, Laura Wilson – Oxford, Robert Spain – Millbury, Heather-Lyn Haley - RCP. Douglas Belanger – Leicester, Robin Grimm – Sturbridge, Brian Bullock – Holden, Adam Menard – Auburn Alt Brian Pigeon – Worcester Alt, Gary Rosen - Worcester, Members entering meeting after call to order: Jeffrey Bridges – Spencer, Michael Ward – Clinton.

ACCEPTANCE OF MINUTES

Motion: To accept the minutes for September 22, 2022

By: Doug Belanger. 2nd: Mark Binnall.

Vote: All in Favor (8 in favor 1 abstention 0 opposed) vote passed.

BUSINESS FROM THE PUBLIC – Out of Order

Chairperson Rosen introduced the following person requesting to address the board via Zoom participation. Etel Haxhiaj, Worcester City Councilor District 5 and member of Zero Fare Coalition. Etel Haxhiaj thanked the board for their support and spoke in favor of Zero Fare. Etel Haxhiaj explained the coalitions mission and gave highlights of their recently held celebration event. In attendance were several local, state, and federal politicians who supported zero fares. Etel Haxhiaj also spoke about the need for major changes in transit, more frequency of service and interconnectivity. Etel Haxhiaj explained that local, state and federal officials need to work together to supply funding for these goals. No details or plans were addressed regarding allocations from officials mentioned or how to achieve these goals. Etel Haxhiaj stated how it would be a mistake and missed opportunity should the WRTA not apply for grants pertaining to zero fare. Chairperson Rosen thanked the speaker.

Mr. Lipka informed the board that grants are generally written by the WRTA and funding comes from State and Federal monies. Private grants often are not sustainable for the needs of the WRTA. The WRTA will contact Congressman McGovern to review anything further. Mr. Lipka explained that present federal grant monies are intended for electrifying and for electric buses. Money pertaining to the new Governor’s budget are not known nor is the allocation for that money. The Governor’s budget is due to be submitted at the end of January 2023 and historically been level funded. The WRTA uses the CARES Act money to assist with the ongoing increased expenses and to keep with compliances for health and safety.

Chairperson Rosen introduced Mr. Lipka and Tom Coyne for a presentation on the Amended Budget for FY’23. Mr. Lipka informed the board members that the amended budget is being presented to the board for a vote. Mr. Lipka noted that the Union Labor Contract is included but was not in April’s approved budget. Mr. Lipka informed the board that during his term three contracts have been successfully negotiated. Mr. Lipka thanked CMTM for the team effort.

PRESENTATION OVERVIEW AMENDED FY’23 BUDGET

Mr. Lipka introduced Tom Coyne who gave a presentation listing the 2023 budget revisions. Negotiated Labor Agreement: 5% wage increase and 3% pension increase is reflected in this budget. Within the Contract term the rates will be 3% a year for both wages and pension. Increase in PERAC Appropriation; Professional Services. Debt Service came in at \$11.3m @2.29% Interest which is an increase. Passenger fares were subtracted due to board vote to continue with suspension \$1.4m. CARES Act increase use due to Labor Contract and Fare Suspension.

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



Operating Assistance Special Rule: Net of remaining revisions. State Contract Assistance: The FY'23 budget was level funded by the state's final budget at \$417k and \$405k state funds for RTA's from original funding. The WRTA applied for and received \$405k for "Try Transit." This incentive came from the RTA's working together to use the appointed \$2.5m originally from the State's RTA budget. The purpose was to get people to "Try Transit" and to help environmentally. The amended budget has increased by 4.6% which is \$843,291. The WRTA has an RFP out for a Management Company. The present management company's contract is up December 31, 2022 and the WRTA is evaluating the submissions. The FY'23 Budget used \$5.4 million of the CARES Act money thereby leaving about \$22.2 million at the end of 2023. American Rescue Plan money is used for the bus expansion now in service.

Chairperson Rosen opened the floor for any discussion from board members pertaining to the amended budget.

Robin Grimm commented on the need to be financially sustainable in the long term. Many members who spoke echoed the importance of sustainable funding sources (outside of CARES Act monies) if zero fares were to be permanent. Mr. Lipka stated that the WRTA has been lobbying for more money given the increases in labor costs.

Mr. Lipka spoke about the legislator's willingness to support initiatives but without any sustainable allocations being presented. Mr. Lipka stated that the WRTA success is due to remaining fiscally conservative. Spending money when funding sources amounts and usages is not known is not good policy. Chairperson Rosen confirmed that considerations in funding sources will be addressed this Spring for the FY'24 budget. Mr. Lipka stated how the WRTA board has voted to continue with fare suspension until June 30, 2023. The WRTA board has suspended its fares for 3 years considering the last extension to 2023.

Doug Belanger thanked the Chairperson for his savvy under the political and public pressures to not turn the board meetings into zero fare meetings. Doug Belanger's concern has been that by continually discussing something the board already voted to do "suspend fares" other issues of priority are limited. Issues regarding overtime expenses, expanding routes, bathrooms, etc. Doug Belanger reminded the board that Mr. Lipka's contract is phased for a one-year extension. Chairperson Rosen stated that those requesting to speak within appropriate time limits are welcome. Chairperson Rosen stated that much has been about zero fare lately but welcomes and encourages other rider issues.

Doug spoke with concern about the yearly increases and rising fuel costs. Existing federal money will run out but costs will continue to increase year after year. If the state legislators say they support zero fare but continue to level fund the RTA's it is not a sustainable support. They need make a statement and commitment to add it to the budget.

Robert Spain agreed with Robin and Doug and spoke about the costs getting higher and higher. If the legislator is supporting zero fare or other options presented by Zero Fare Coalition they will need to fund it - consistently. Lobbying effects should be focused on the statehouse as opposed to the advisory board. Mr. Lipka also informed the board that Federal money primary goes toward Capital projects and cannot be used for fares. While local businesses/other private grants and foundations are not viable long-term financial resources.

Mr. Lipka informed the board members about the State and Federal policy regarding collecting fare revenue. The RTA's collection of revenue from fares is stated as between 15 to 18 percent. While not collecting fare revenue the RTA's have not been fined by the FTA but any permanent change would need to be addressed through the FTA.

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Chairperson Rosen asked for a motion to approve the FY'23 amended budget as presented.

Motion: I move that the WRTA Advisory Board votes to approve the FY'23 amended budget as presented.

By: Robert Spain, 2nd: Doug Belanger.
Vote by roll call: (11 in favor 0 opposed) vote passed.

- Gary Rosen yes
- Douglas Belanger yes
- Mark Binnall yes
- Brian Bullock yes
- Robert Spain yes
- Hollie Lucht yes
- Heather-Lyn Haley yes
- Robin Grimm yes
- Laura Wilson yes
- Michael Ward yes
- Jeffrey Bridges yes

BUSINESS FROM THE BOARD

Heather-Lyn Haley commented on late and missed buses. Mr. Lipka explained how the majority of these complaints are between 3:00pm to 7:00pm. Many delays are due to traffic flow, traffic patterns, and school buses. When it is a driver’s availability issue there is a lag time to find replacements. Worcester buses run on busiest of streets like Lincoln, Belmont and West Boylston. Traffic patterns during these times are unpredictable. The WRTA can schedule for traffic but this produces longer scheduling times which is not rider friendly. The WRTA continues to look for solutions. Brian Bullock requested a timeline be presented that shows the process of making policy changes and votes pertaining to zero fare. Mr. Lipka addressed the board regarding having more Audit and Finance committee meetings. The Administration will have a timeline in December for the board. Mr. Lipka informed the board of 10 new diesel buses being ordered and 10 electric buses on order in January 2023. Mr. Lipka stated there was a 20-month lead time on deliver of the electric buses. The Administration will continue to work on charging issues for the newer electric buses. Mark Binnall asked about hiring an assistant administrator. Mr. Lipka responded that Tom Coyne (CFO) is also his deputy administrator and his knowledge and experience is invaluable to the WRTA. Tom Coyne has 20 years of experience and manages an outstanding team. Mr. Lipka spoke about the possibility of an additional member to the accounts team but not specifically, a grant writer. Mr. Lipka gave details regarding the “Try Transit” incentive. It will run from November 25 through New Year’s Eve and will pay for all the RTA’s to be free of fares. As the WRTA has suspended fares through this period, the money allotted will be used in place of filling in with the CARES Act money. Mr. Lipka stated how the WRTA ridership numbers are at about the FY’19 level. Brian Pigeon commented on the cost of diesel fuel. Brian Pigeon requested a report or agenda item to discuss any transition to a greener fleet. Mr. Lipka stated there will be a report to the board.

ADJOURNMENT

Motion: To Adjourn at 9:32 a.m.
By: Doug Belanger, 2nd: Robert Spain
Vote: All in favor (11 in favor 0 opposed)

NEXT MEETING DATE

The next WRTA Advisory Board Meeting will be on December 15, 2022 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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