



Worcester Regional Transit Authority Advisory Board Meeting Minutes September 23, 2021

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

AB MEMBERS ATTENDANCE VIA TELECONFERENCE

Present by teleconference: Mark Binnall – Auburn, Kristen Las – Shrewsbury, Douglas Belanger – Leicester, Jacquelyn Ryan- Southbridge Alt, Michael Kennedy - Millbury DP, Robert Spain – Millbury, Michael Ward – Clinton, Nancy Garr-Colzie-Worcester RCP, Adam Menard – Auburn Alt, Brian Pigeon – Worcester Alt, Sean Hendricks – Millbury, Gary Rosen - Worcester. Laura Wilson – Oxford by attendee due to technical issues.

ACCEPTANCE OF MINUTES

Motion: To accept the minutes for August 19, 2021

By: Robert Spain. 2nd: Doug Belanger.

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

BUSINESS FROM THE PUBLIC

Michael Baker the new coordinator for the Worcester Zero Fare WRTA Coalition spoke about his background and how fare free is necessary for economic growth and equity. Mr. Baker asked for reports from the administration on financial details pertaining to the present fare suspension and ridership data. Mr. Baker also requested that no fare/fare free be advertised on the digital signage on the buses. Chairperson Rosen suggested that Mr. Baker email his inquiries and that his request would be answered.

Chairperson Rosen took “Business from the Board” out of order. Chairperson Rosen introduced Mr. Lipka for the Administrator’s Reports.

UPDATE ON FARE COLLECTION SYSTEM

Mr. Lipka explained the benefits of having flexible fare options which can be done with a new fare collection system. Mr. Lipka summarized some ideas as well as some incentives when transitioning from fare collection to the new fare system. One suggestion was one ride paid one ride free and/or prior monthly pass trade for one free month pass. Board members did not discuss incentives or any transitional period at this meeting. Chairperson Rosen commented that October’s meeting should begin discussion on whether to have further continuation of suspension, fare policies, and further funding allocations related to fares.

Mr. Lipka announced that the WRTA has the best rate of recovery on ridership out of all the Massachusetts RTA’s. The WRTA is at 80% to 85% of the pre-pandemic ridership numbers. In October CMRPC’s study on the pandemic will be reported to the board.

OTHER

Mr. Lipka gave a presentation regarding the extra funding received by the WRTA pertaining to the COVID pandemic. CARES ACT funding (total: \$37,504,437) and the American Recovery Act (total: \$5,992,829). Presented were the amounts allocated (by grants written) for the maintaining of service in FY’19, FY’20, FY’21. Also included was the breakdown by year of the service expansion voted by the board (using the American Recover Act monies). The service expansion cost for the first nine months is \$652,671. Further yearly allocations ranged from \$813,873 to projected \$966,626 in the last year of 2028. Mr. Lipka stated how budgeting for this duration allows for job security and better access. Mr. Lipka announced an 18% uptake in day time ridership on the new routes. The midnight service numbers are not up as of yet because it takes longer to grow that type of service.

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



Mr. Lipka highlighted the CARES ACT funds in the operating budget by year.
 \$5,000,000 for operating expenses for FY2020(\$373,647) and FY 2021 (\$4,626,353)
 \$5,832,086 FY2022 PROJECTED BUDGET (based on ½ year fare free)
 \$4,944,000 FY2023 Budget
 \$5,092,230 FY2024 Budget
 \$5,245,080 FY2025 Budget
 \$5,402,400 FY2026 Budget
 \$4,532,404 FY2027 Budget

Mr. Lipka highlighted the Capital items filed as grants using the CARES ACT Funds. With an addition of bus stop signage project estimated at about \$2 million dollars.
 \$100,000 develop and install a new WRTA web site
 \$250,000 replacement of cloth seating on existing buses
 \$265,946 design and renovate hub lobby
 \$300,000 complete paving at maintenance and operations facility
 \$40,000 install fencing to enclosed NGRID equipment and back-up power generator
 \$500,000 programable electronic signage at hub and maintenance facility

Under the present administration plan 100% of the WRTA allocation of CARES ACT money has been committed to grants. Public bathrooms renovations would require the use of the entire lobby area and additional operational expenses. Doug Belanger suggested taking additional first floor office space with the renovations. Administration will review all design and renovation options during this process. There was not further discussion by the board on the capital projects list.

Mr. Lipka outlined specifically how the WRTA is allocated funding. Robert Spain questioned the reliability of government funding 5 years out. Mr. Lipka stated that the formula for grants applied and approved has not been subject to take backs. Mr. Lipka stated their ongoing commitment to being as fiscally responsible as possible. Mr. Lipka informed the board that unlike other agencies or companies the WRTA must have a balanced budget. All expenses must meet their revenues. Fare revenue is the only funding source that is unrestricted in its use. Fare collections amount to about \$3.5 million per year. Any continuation of suspension or change to the fare policy would have to meet the board’s vote of being a sustainable funding source.

Mr. Lipka closed his presentation coining the phase “the new normal”. Operating revenue will be critical to continue service at existing levels. State contract assistance continues to be smaller portion of the revenue plan. Since FY 15 it has been level or declined as a percentage of WRTA revenue. This is why administration is using the extended monies with great fiscal responsibility. The original CARES ACT funds provided to the WRTA substantially exceed the limits established in the second round of grants; therefore, more CARES Act funding is unlikely.

Chairperson Rosen spoke about other funding resources in legislation. Mr. Lipka acknowledged that there is talk in the media and from pending (unapproved) legislation but cautioned that making changes based upon “hope” alone would not be sound financial policy. Mr. Rosen stated how the CARES ACT money is a viable source and would benefit the rider by being applied to free fare. The issue was debated briefly by Chairperson Rosen and Mr. Lipka. Chairperson Rosen stated that October’s meeting would be the start of fare discussions and considerations.

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Moving Our Region Forward

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BUSINESS FROM THE BOARD – Out of Order

Nancy Garr-Colzie asked if the buses digital signage could state no fares. Nancy Garr-Colzie stated that she is on other outside committees. A compliant was relayed about a driver for not wearing a mask. Mr. Lipka informed the board that the issue was brought to their attention and corrected. Mr. Lipka stated how fill in drivers may have been used. Mark Binnall asked about the phones being unavailable. Mr. Lipka stated that Charter was having line issues for almost up to 8 hours. The WRTA placed notice on its website about the communication problems. Mike Kennedy asked for a copy of the meetings presentation. Chairperson Rosen asked for a copy of the town's contributions (cherry sheet) to be emailed to the board members. Board members will receive a package with the materials along with the administration's report in early October.

NEW BUSINESS

There was no new business at this time.

ADJOURNMENT

Motion: To Adjourn at 9:36 a.m.

By Mark Binnall: 2nd: Robert Spain:

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

NEXT MEETING DATE

The next meeting will be October 21, 2021 at 8:30 a.m., via teleconference due to the Governor's continuation of remote participation of public bodies until April 20, 2022.

Minutes prepared by: Elizabeth R Pokoly

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