

# Memorandum for the Record

## Boston Region Metropolitan Planning Organization

### Transit Working Group Coffee Chat Summary

#### December 9, 2021, Meeting

1:00 PM–2:00 PM, Zoom Video Conferencing Platform, link:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Q4DIEUMoPgc>

Representatives of regional transit authorities (RTAs), transportation management associations, municipalities, state agencies, other transit providers, researchers, and members of advisory groups met for one hour to discuss COVID-19 recovery planning. Boston Region Metropolitan Planning Organization (MPO) staff suggested the following discussion questions for this meeting:

1. What changes in ridership patterns have you observed over the course of the pandemic? How have you modified your services (existing or planned) in response?
2. What actions have you taken or are you planning to take to promote your service and regain ridership? Have you had success with any of these?
3. Have you identified or engaged in any public-private partnerships to support services, ridership, or facilities?

## Summary of Discussion

### Uncertainty about Transit Ridership

- The Massachusetts Bay Transportation Authority (MBTA) has undergone a lot of changes in ridership patterns. In order to keep the budget neutral, the agency cut service during the pandemic while increasing frequency on some routes that maintained ridership. Most of the routes that were cut were commuter-focused with very low ridership. Right now, the agency is facing a shortage of bus drivers and an uncertain future as the Omicron variant is spreading. The agency is trying to remain flexible; however, assuming that some amount of commuting is coming back, the agency is trying to retain service planned in the Bus Network Redesign.
- The City of Watertown started a shuttle service in September after postponing the launch twice. The City has experienced difficulty launching the service and planning for the future. Ridership is low, giving the impression that the City is not making a good use of money.
- The Massachusetts Port Authority (Massport) saw a drastic reduction in activity at Logan airport in 2020 and 2021. Most of Massport-run transit service—Logan Express specifically—stopped completely in 2020. As the agency resumed the

service, fares were reduced to attract riders. A strong partnership with the Massachusetts Department of Transportation (MassDOT) has allowed the agency to start a new bus-on-shoulder service, which is scheduled to launch in a few weeks. Massport also made improvements to a shuttle service, serving passengers coming from the Blue Line, that was previously experiencing long delays. With recent improvements, the agency has seen more and more people using their service, but beyond Logan, it seems that a lot of people are still not using transit and concerned about crowding. It will take time to get back to where things once stood.

- Lexington has a fixed-route service, called Lexpress, which primarily operates in Lexington and goes into Burlington and Arlington. Even before the start of the pandemic, Lexpress saw a decrease in ridership among the elderly, and once schools shut, only people working in grocery stores were riding it. Lexpress changed to an on-demand service and reopened in August with new routes. Lexington also saw a large decline in demand for a demand-response service that the Town operates using taxis. Most of the users were seniors, and most of the trips were medical or recreational in nature. The users, as well as volunteer drivers who provide medical trips, have started to come back.
- Prior to the pandemic, youths and seniors made up the majority of Lexpress ridership. Once service resumed, adults—mostly hourly wage workers—were primary riders. By fall, seniors were back, but Lexpress lost a lot of youth riders who previously used the service to go to and from school or to attend after-school activities. One route that goes into Burlington is doing well and tends to be fairly crowded. It was rerouted to accommodate a new transit hub and in response to a popular request for service to Lahey Hospital in Burlington. The route now connects MBTA bus Route 350 and Lowell Regional Transit Authority bus Route 14; so, during the pandemic, Lexpress actually gained new riders who are living in Lowell and working in Lexington. Because the service is offered hourly, coming up with a schedule that connects to other services was challenging.
- The MBTA lost long-distance commuter rail riders, or super commuters, who switched to driving during the pandemic. These riders use monthly passes, which make up a large share of revenue. At the moment, the MBTA is not too concerned about the loss of super commuters because federal funding from the pandemic relief bills has helped with farebox revenue loss.

### **Recovery Efforts**

- Lexington received a mobility management grant to create the regionalization plan and marketing and education materials related to Lexpress. As part of the

deliverable, the Town recently started the #PeopleOfLexpress series to showcase everyday riders and is working on instructional videos on how to use the service and how the service works. There are also long-term planning efforts related to youth ridership recovery. Lexpress started losing youth riders, many of whom grew up watching their siblings use the service, in 2011 when the culture of taking public transit started to fade, with schools encouraging students to take school buses for commutes and Lexpress for after-school activities.

- The MetroWest Regional Transit Authority (MWRTA) works closely with local corporate businesses in the MetroWest region. The agency operated a number of successful commuter shuttle bus services before the pandemic. Although MWRTA has not been running services, the organization has been maintaining partnerships with the senior management and running surveys with their employees to gauge future demand for the shuttle services.
- The Worcester Regional Transit Authority (WRTA) suspended fares in March 2020, and the advisory board voted to continue fare-free service through 2022. Ridership has resumed better than most of the RTAs, although it is difficult to say whether it is because of the fare-free policies because ridership varies by route and time of day. It is also not certain whether an increase in the number of rides is attributed to new riders or regular riders making more trips. Furthermore, there seems to be a disparity in ridership gain among different modes. Fares for para-transit service have also been suspended but its ridership has not recovered.

### **Fare Transformation and Reform**

- The Boston City Council recently approved funding for two fare-free MBTA routes in addition to the existing fare-free pilot on MBTA bus Route 28. The City has long pursued the program, and therefore it should not be put in the context of COVID-19.
- The WRTA will have a contract set with a mobile fare payment system when fares are restored in 2023.
- Lexington has a ticket booklet, but it has not had much impact, since Lexpress does not cater to white collar workers.
- The Rhode Island Public Transportation Authority (RIPTA) was in the process of transferring its fare collection system to a smart card-based system and is going to remove all of the paper tickets in the coming months. Once the policy is implemented, the system will allow an exact change only or a smart card. Another policy decision that the agency made was to implement an earn-as-you-go—or fare capping—system, which allows riders to work towards earning a weekly or monthly pass. The agency has heard a lot of positive response from

riders and is expecting to have a better projection of transit usage in the long term.

### **Uncertainty in Service Planning**

- The MBTA updates its schedule roughly every quarter. The MBTA makes changes to the schedule based on the assumption that congestion exacerbates over time. Right now, it is not certain when congestion will return to pre-pandemic levels. This, in turn, makes it difficult for the MBTA to determine the level of service that the agency can adequately provide.

### **Hygiene Practices and Building Confidence in Transit**

- The mask policy is a big concern for MBTA. It is not and should not be an operator's responsibility to enforce the mask policy on riders. Operators are not trained to deal with unruly customers. But there is no one who can enforce the mask policy within the MBTA. The mask policy is a major source of complaints, and the agency does not have an enforcement solution.
- Shuttle bus drivers at the City of Watertown enforce face covering. However, the ridership is so low that it is hardly a problem.
- The Town of Lexington asks bus drivers to leave the back windows open. The drivers carry cleaning and disinfecting supplies with them and use them between runs. The Town already has a standard practice of daily cleaning and has pulled back the amount of deep cleaning each night.

### **Setting the Baseline for Future Goals**

- RIPTA is using 2019 data to meet the reporting requirements for the Federal Transit Administration. The agency is looking more in the context of the state's 20-year transit plan to not only shape recovery in the near term but also to build up for development over the long term. Certain variables should be accounted for, and certain prioritizations may have to be switched around, but overall, the agency would like to stay on track toward its long-term goals.
- Transit providers must look more holistically at the constituents and their needs. Right now, different types of transportation are prescribed for different population groups—seniors, people with disabilities, white collar commuters, youths, etc. Segregating people into categories makes it more challenging to create a robust transportation system. Looking at the population more holistically allows the providers to build a better network and provide auxiliary services, and to prevent their patrons from being subject to service gaps.
- Jacobs Engineering took away the monthly parking passes for the executives once their flexible work schedule took effect. Some of the employees said recently that they are going to revisit taking commuter rail because the cost of

parking in the garages is cheaper than taking commuter rail. Commuting and related expenses would affect people in the private sector.

## Attendance

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<b>Attendees</b>	<b>Affiliation</b>
Zachary Agush	Rhode Island Public Transit Authority
Susan Barrett	Town of Lexington
Kelly Forrester	Brockton Area Transit
Kristine Gorman	Jacobs Engineering
Perry Grossman	
Amy Ingles	City of Medford
Marisa Janeczek	Commonwealth of Massachusetts
Sarah Lee	Massport
Constance Mellis	Central Massachusetts Regional Planning Commission
Jon Seward	Regional Transportation Advisory Council
Emily Van Dewoestine	MetroWest Regional Transportation Authority
Josh Weiland	MBTA
Laura Wiener	City of Watertown

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### **MPO Staff/Central Transportation Planning Staff**

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Jonathan Church  
Paul Christner  
Annette Demchur  
Róisín Foley  
Sandy Johnston  
Heyne Kim

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