

Memorandum for the Record

Boston Region Metropolitan Planning Organization

Transit Working Group (TWG) Coffee Chat on Regional Rail

Local Transit Station Access Summary

November 5, 2021, Meeting

10:00 AM–11:00 AM, Zoom Video Conferencing Platform

Rail-Bus Integration: Station Improvements—*Alistair Sawers, Director for Rail Transformation, Massachusetts Bay Transportation Authority (MBTA)*

Alistair Sawers stated that this presentation is a follow-up to his March 19, 2021, presentation to the TWG. Topics discussed during the March 19 presentation included potential improvements to Commuter Rail stations which would better facilitate transfers. This includes improvements to the stations themselves and improvements to locations in the immediate vicinity of stations.

Physical improvements to facilitate transfers include drop-off or bus layover areas at stations, as well as road access to rail stations, the latter of which would require municipal partnerships. Additional improvements within the station area could include improved signage and schedule displays. Informational integration between modes could further facilitate transfers. This concept is based on the MBTA's attempts to make the system more approachable for first-time users, as regional rail will include an increased number of casual riders who are not familiar with the normal operations of the Commuter Rail and other MBTA services.

He stated that he is soliciting ideas for practical ideas for improving bus and rail connections, as well as assistance in identifying key issues identified by stakeholders.

- Susan Barrett, Lexpress
 - Many Lexington residents wish to connect to rail outside of Alewife Station.
 - She suggested that the MBTA attempt to streamline approvals for getting access to stations. She stated that it took over one year for Lexpress to work through the approval process to gain access to Arlington Heights.
 - Sandy Johnston, MPO staff, asked who owns facilities such as busways. Alistair Sawers stated that this varies depending on the location, and offered to discuss specific locations with operators.

- Jeff Bennett, 128 Business Council
 - He stated that ascertaining the appropriate MBTA staff to contact regarding access issues can be difficult for smaller operators with limited staff.
 - The 128 Business Council currently has one rail connection at Waltham Station. The shuttle connecting to the station has seen relatively low ridership during the COVID-19 pandemic. However, the connection has existed for over twenty years, and he expressed confidence that ridership will return. The 128 Business Council works with the City of Waltham to ensure that on-street parking is available for shuttles.
 - Alewife Station demonstrates the challenges of coordinating connections between regional transit authorities (RTAs) and the MBTA, in that smaller operators are in a “no man’s land” amid rapid transit operations, MBTA bus operations, garage operations, and real estate. Small operators can spend months to years to determine solutions for improving connections.
 - Alistair Sawers acknowledged that interfacing between the various departments of the MBTA can be difficult. He stated that the MBTA takes smaller operators into consideration while designing station improvements. As an example, he stated that South Attleboro Station include multiple drop-off areas to accommodate MBTA and local RTA vehicles.
- Felicia Webb, Cape Ann Transportation Authority (CATA)
 - She expressed that CATA would like to better integrate MBTA service information with CATA service information to better apprise transit users of their options.
 - Alistair Sawers stated that the MBTA is working to improve on-train information for riders, as well as provide relevant service information directly at stations.
 - The MBTA is modernizing their onboard announcement system, with a planned rollout of Spring 2022. This system would potentially be able to provide significantly more information than what is currently announced.

- Franny Osman, Lowell Regional Transit Authority (LRTA) Board
 - She stated that riders arriving at South Acton Station are not aware of shuttle service from the station, nor are they aware that a dispatcher can inform them if a shuttle will be available. She suggested that the LRTA, CrossTown Connect, and MBTA staff meet to discuss the best means of communicating transportation options to riders.

- Susan Barrett, Lexpress
 - She asked about the timeline for implementing regional rail and increasing frequency.
 - Alistair Sawers stated that the MBTA has implemented clockface scheduling, which has allowed for a more effective use of equipment. The MBTA is targeting service improvements toward locations where ridership is recovering. However, ridership is returning to line in varying capacities. The Worcester line currently sees approximately 30 percent of its ridership prior to the pandemic, while the Newburyport/Rockport line sees 60 to 70 percent of its pre-pandemic passenger counts. Estimating ridership remains difficult, though the MBTA continues to work on this issue. He noted that it is difficult to justify increasing service to locations with low ridership. The MBTA is attempting to set hourly headways on most lines, but the issues of demand and funding remain.
 - She asked if overall aesthetic enhancements are a possibility for stations.
 - Alistair Sawers stated that the MBTA implemented a “station brightening” program, which included repainting stations and efforts to make them more inviting. These improvements were funded for stations in downtown Boston, and as such have not reached all stations. This program has received some additional funds, though these funds will not accommodate improvements to all stations in the system.

- Judy Shanley, Easterseals
 - She shared a link to an [accessibility study conducted by the Chicago Transit Authority](#) (CTA). She noted that while the CTA believed they were fully compliant with the American with Disabilities Act, the study found that

they were a number of gaps in their compliance. She emphasized the importance of including persons with disabilities through early design and pilot testing of station improvements and service enhancements.

- She noted that while a transit station can be fully accessible, the paths of travel to the station may not be accessible. She encouraged working with municipalities to holistically approach accessibility.
 - Alistair Sawers stated that prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, the MBTA conducted an accessibility review of its stations. He estimated that fifteen to nineteen stations have no accessibility accommodations. The MBTA studied phased approaches to addressing issues at these stations. An aspect of this would include inviting users to demonstrate their journey to a given station to illustrate impediments to station access.
- Jeff Bennet, 128 Business Council
 - He suggested that the MBTA website should better integrate transit service options into its station pages. As an example, he stated that the 128 Business Council's Waltham shuttle is not directly included on the Waltham Station page. To find this information, users need to access the PDF version of the paper schedule.
 - Alistair Sawers expressed that any provider offering first-mile/last-mile connections should be included on the MBTA website and be included in on-board announcements. He stated that the MBTA will consider ways to improve this.
 - Sandy Johnston asked about the 128 Business Council's mapping exercise display transit options in its service area. Jeff Bennett stated that he is not directly involved with this effort, and suggested that Susan Barrett may have more information.
 - Susan Barrett expressed enthusiasm for the mapping exercise. The 128 Business Council created a map which allows users to click on each transit line within the service area. She compared this to the MBTA "spider map," which displays most transit lines in the Boston area. However, as "spider map" is a PDF file, users cannot immediately access information about a line without further searching within the

MBTA website. She suggested a more digitized version of the map which would allow users to click on each line to access information. Alistair Sawers stated that this would be beneficial for transit users, adding that he would inquire within the MBTA about potential ongoing efforts toward achieving this.

- Alistair Sawers asked about the positive aspects of the relationship between the City of Waltham and the 128 Business Council. Jeff Bennett stated that their Waltham shuttle has access to the same areas as MBTA buses, and there are no issues securing curb space. Both the City and the MBTA are accustomed to the shuttle's presence, as it has operated for over twenty years. The 128 Business Council's website includes a schematic and a video regarding access to the Waltham shuttle, as access may not be immediately straightforward to first-time users.
- Layovers are increasingly an issue at all the stations where the 128 Business Council operates. Due to traffic conditions, schedules include significant buffer time, and some stations do not have spaces for smaller operators to idle.
 - Alistair Sawers asked if space for layovers would be primarily used for gathering passengers, or if it would primarily be used for the operational purpose of timing trips. Jeff Bennett stated that this depends on the station. Needs vary between regional rail and rapid transit stations. Prior to the pandemic, Alewife shuttles could spend five to eight minutes traveling to and from layover areas around the station. This made timing trips difficult when shuttles needed to idle prior their scheduled departure time, as other buses also needed access to layover area.

Attendance

Attendee	Affiliation
Susan Barrett	Lexpress
Jeff Bennett	128 Business Council
Franny Osman	Lowell Regional Transit Authority Board
Alistair Sawyers	Massachusetts Bay Transportation Authority (MBTA)
Judy Shanley	Easterseals/National Center for Mobility Management
Caroline Vanasse	MBTA
Felicia Webb	Cape Ann Transportation Authority

MPO Staff/Central Transportation Planning Staff

Matt Archer
Jonathan Belcher
Paul Christner
Jonathan Church
Sandy Johnston

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