



Thursday February 3, 2022

**MERRIMACK VALLEY REGIONAL TRANSIT AUTHORITY**  
**85 RAILROAD AVENUE**  
**HAVERHILL, MASSACHUSETTS 01835**

**Board Members Attending:**

Lawrence: Frank Bonet	Methuen: Kathleen Colwell
Haverhill: Allison Heartquist	Andover: Jacki Byerley
Amesbury: Angela Cleveland (via Zoom)	North Andover: Andrew Shapiro
Salisbury: James Ryan	West Newbury: James Blatchford
Newburyport: Andrew Levine	Rowley: Robert Snow
Groveland: Rebecca Oldham	
Disabled Representative: Gerard Boucher (via telephone)	

Ms. Heartquist, Acting Chair of the Advisory Board, with a quorum being present, called the meeting to order at 9:03 a.m. Ms. Heartquist then asked for a moment of silence in memory of Gleason Nicholls, a beloved MVRTA driver who passed away suddenly due to complications from COVID-19.

1. **Approval of Minutes of the December 1, 2021 Meeting:** Ms. Heartquist requested a vote to approve the minutes of the December 1, 2021 meeting. Vote to approve: Unanimous.
2. **Administrator's Report:** Mr. Berger paid tribute to Gleason Nicholls, noting how he and all of our drivers make such a difference in so many lives and that they are on the front lines every day. Mr. Berger then briefed the members on the following items:
  - a. *State of Administration:*
    - i. **Staffing:** We are inching our way toward our goal of 76 drivers with 69. We are hoping to restore Sunday service soon. Now that the union contract is signed we have been able to install banners on the bus that advertise the pay rate of up to \$27 per hour for drivers. Mr. Berger encouraged the members to spread the word that there are good jobs available at good wages.



- ii. SNOW: Mr. Berger advised the members of actions taken on snow days so far this winter. A storm in early January did not cancel service but the buses did run on designated snow routes. A blizzard that occurred at the end of January did cause service to be interrupted for one day., along with all RTA's from Worcester west.
  - iii. COVID-19: Mr. Berger announced that the roll-out of MVRTA's vaccine mandate is a success story. He commended Jaymi Swarbrick, H.R. Director for her communication of the policy, her follow-up to make sure every employee is either vaccinated or tested weekly. As a result we have achieved 100% compliance. We are at an 88.2% vaccination rate. Because the omicron variant is so contagious, drivers have missed a much higher number of days of work than usual, either because they tested positive or from a related factor, such as a driver's child's day care center being closed. This resulted in a substantial increase in the number of missed trips in December and January. Mr. Berger believes this situation has peaked and the number of missed trips will diminish going forward.
- b. *State of Operations:*
- i. Ridership: Mr. Berger advised the members that bus ridership is up only 1%, or 62% of pre-pandemic ridership. Paratransit ridership is a little better at 66% of pre-pandemic ridership. We will be taking a look at the feasibility of Boston Commuter Bus service as its ridership is less than 6% of pre-pandemic levels.
- c. *State of Finance:*
- i. FY22 Budget to Actuals: We are currently tracking according to budget but that is not going to last because of the wage increases negotiated in the bus drivers, van drivers and mechanics contracts. The Finance and Audit Committee will be presented with revisions to the FY 2022 Budget in advance of our next Advisory Board Meeting, at which time they will make their recommendations.
  - ii. SFY 23 Governor's Budget: Mr. Berger indicated that, although the Governor's budget calls for "level funding" of the RTAs at \$94M, that is actually a funding cut, as \$3.5M of that is carved out and applied to discretionary grants, thus reducing the net amount allocated for State Contract Assistance for base costs. We will continue working with our legislative delegation and our municipalities to make sure that we are appropriately appreciated and funded.
  - iii. MVRTA Local Assessments as offsets to MBTA Assessments: Mr. Berger assured the members that MVRTA is not interested in getting more money from the communities with one exception. About half of our member communities are leaving money on the table that could be going to local



transit. RTA Assessment is subtracted from MBTA Assessment so it is in the best interests of every one of our communities to max out their full MBTA Assessment, as the cost to the communities will be the same, but the result will be more local funding for MVRTA.

- iv. Open Grants: We have about \$30M that we have yet to draw down, much of which is in COVID relief money that goes towards operations. That has allowed us to cover expenses that otherwise would have been slower in seeking reimbursement for, and allows us to stay whole for the next few years.

d. *State of Planning & Implementation:*

- i. Free Fares!: Mr. Berger related MVRTA's excitement to implement the free fare program on March 1<sup>st</sup>. He invited the members to an event to be held at the Buckley Transportation Center in Lawrence on February 28<sup>th</sup> to kick off the program. He thanked the members for unanimously supporting the bold move to go fare free.
- ii. Downtown Amesbury Routing: Mr. Berger also invited the members to a media and community event with the City of Amesbury to celebrate the launching of an improved routing service through the City's Central Business District. The event will be held at the Heritage Towers on Main Street at 1:00 p.m. on February 14<sup>th</sup>. The new route, which was basically drawn by Mayor Gove, reduces travel time and serves previously unserved destinations. The City has added no parking areas and pruned trees along the route enabling the buses to travel unimpeded.
- iii. New BRT-Style Gillig Buses: Mr. Berger drew attention to a new bus parked outside. He described it as more stylish, slicker and more modern looking than our current buses. He gave credit to Assistant GM of Maintenance Dan Flaherty for getting Gillig to change our bus order at the last minute in order to get the newer model. Mr. Berger explained that the buses are pure white while the re-branding campaign of MVRTA is in progress, and will have decals applied that say "Watch this space for the new look
- iv. Boston Commuter Bus: Mr. Berger stated that this will be an item for a future agenda but he wanted to inform the members that we need a solution for the disappointing performance of the Boston Commuter Bus. He pointed out that we're lucky if we carry 5 riders each way on this 45-foot bus. It takes a driver out of commission for the entire day who could be providing local service here in our communities. We also have six MCI coaches that are not getting used. Mr. Berger said he proposed a plan to the State to give them the vehicles and they provided to a private operator but they are not interested. He asked the members for any ideas or suggestions and that nothing is off the table or on the table; that we are



in the exploratory mode. Unfortunately, the Bus-on-Shoulder project has not worked out because of its restrictions, therefore providing no help to the situation.

- v. *Amazon Consultation*: Mr. Berger stated that he had some consultation with Amazon, who's building a new facility on Osgood Street in North Andover. Also, the consultant doing the roadway planning reached out to MVRTA about introducing service along the Route 125 corridor to provide transportation to the facility. He also brought up that funding will be an element of the discussion. Ideally, he said, we would provide service from downtown Haverhill to downtown Lawrence, through North Andover along Route 125, serving, not only Amazon, but several key destinations along the route.
- vi. *AmbuBus Decommissioning*: The four Ambubuses and vans that are NERAC assets are not functional at this time and have not been used since 2015. We have relocated them to the parking lot across the street to free up needed space in our yard while we work with NERAC councilors to decommission the vehicles. I inherited the position of chair of NERAC's evacuation and sheltering subcommittee from Joe (Costanzo) and, in that position, I plan to encourage future expenditures on projects that would be useful during non-emergency situations as well as emergency situations. That would insure the viability of the vehicles when needed.
- vii. *Shared Streets*: Mr. Berger addressed MassDOT's Shared Streets grant program which was opened up to RTAs this year. Additionally, city and town applications will get extra points for incorporating transit provisions and including RTAs as partners. He offered to be the lead on grants particularly for bus shelters. He introduced the Smart Shelter offered by a newly opened company in the Ward Hill section of Haverhill. These could be used where a sidewalk width may not allow for a full shelter.
- viii. *Spare Dynamic Scheduling*: Mr. Berger related that the Spare Dynamic Scheduling Software, which would have allowed limited same-day reservations, did not live up to our needs. It was decided that it was in the best interest of Spare and MVRTA to terminate that project. We often have to make on-the-fly changes for our customers, especially dialysis patients. The Spare software was unable to allow us to do the manual real-time fixes that our customers expect us to do. Looking at the numbers, we have an over 90% on-time performance but during the testing it was about 50%, which is obviously not acceptable.
- ix. *Riverbank Stabilization Project*: This project, which is what will keep this facility from falling into the Merrimack River. We did complete the procurement and selected Sum Co, who is very qualified to do the in-water



work. We have a limited window (after July 15<sup>th</sup>) when we can perform the in-water work because of the sturgeon fish spawning period. In order to expend State funds by the end of the fiscal year (required), we are identifying advance work and procurements to conduct now.

e. *State of Outreach:*

- i. *We Will Leave No Town Behind:* Mr. Berger related that when he first began as Administrator he reached out to the more urban communities because that's the core of our service area but, in no way does that mean he does not have love for his rural communities. He pointed out that we have West Newbury in attendance for the second time, Groveland in attendance for the first time ever and that Rowley is also here. We want to connect the urban and rural services so they are not deemed as separate. You might take a van to connect to the fixed route, for example. We talked about going across the river into Groveland. If analysis proves that demand warrants it, that makes a lot of sense.
- ii. *Rebranding:* Mr. Berger stated that we have pooled a group of local artists and we are looking at identifying a name that people can say "I'm catching the \_\_\_." We're looking for something that's easy to say, reflects our multi-cultural communities, is hip, and appeals to youth and to seniors.

**3. Governance:**

a. *Election of Advisory Board Officers:*

- i. *Presentation of Candidate Slate by Andrew Shapiro, North Andover:* Mr. Shapiro stated that he would like to see Allison Heartquist, representing Haverhill, as the Chair, Frank Bernet, representing Lawrence, as Vice-chair, Kathleen Colwell, representing Methuen, as Secretary, and James Ryan, representing Salisbury, as Treasurer. Mr. Shapiro asked for a motion to make these appointments. Mr. Benet so moved, seconded by Mr. Levine; Motion Passed, Vote Unanimous.
- ii. *Appointment of Finance/Audit Committee Members:* Mr. Berger asked for volunteers to serve on the committee. Having heard from the members, Ms. Colwell nominated James Ryan as the Chair, Jacki Byerley, Angela Cleveland and Frank Bonet to form the committee. Ms. Heartquist called for a vote. Nominations accepted, Vote unanimous.
- iii. *Appointment of Fixed Route Service Committee:* Mr. Berger noted that we did not have to form this committee today but some members volunteered. Mr. Shapiro offered to serve as did Ms. Heartquist, Mr. Levine and Ms. Cleveland. Mr. Bonet moved to nominate those volunteers. Ms. Heartquist called for a vote. Nominations accepted, Vote unanimous.



- iv. Appointment of Paratransit Service Committee: Mr. Bonet, Mr. Blatchford and Mr. Boucher volunteered to form this committee. Ms. Colwell nominated the volunteers. Ms. Heartquist called for a vote. Nominations accepted, Vote unanimous.
4. **Update from MVPC:** Tony Komornick updated the members on where we stand on the FY 2023-2027 Transportation Improvement Program, as well as the FY 2023 Unified Planning Work Program and outline what transportation studies and analysis will be conducted in the region in the coming Federal fiscal year.
5. **Old Business:** There was no Old Business to discuss.
6. **New Business:** There was no New Business to discuss.
7. **Set Next Meeting Date:** The next meeting will be held on Thursday March 3, 2022 at 9:00 a.m.
8. **Adjournment:** Ms. Heartquist asked for a motion to adjourn, so moved by Mr. Bonet, seconded by Mr. Ryan, Motion passed, Vote: Unanimous.