



Thursday March 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
North Andover: Andrew Shapiro	Salisbury: James Ryan
West Newbury: James Blatchford	Newburyport: Andrew Levine
Boxford: Matt Coogan	Georgetown: Orlando Pacheco
Disabled Representative: Gerard Boucher (via telephone)	

In the absence of Ms. Heartquist, who is delayed in traffic, Vice-chair Mr. Bonet called the meeting to order at 9:05 a.m.

1. **Approval of Minutes of the February 3, 2022 Meeting:** Mr. Bonet requested a vote to approve the minutes of the February 3, 2022 meeting. Mr. Blatchford pointed out a mistake in the spelling of Mr. Bonet's name in Section 3, paragraph a.i. With this correction, the Vote to approve: Unanimous.
2. **Administrator's Report:** Mr. Berger briefed the members on the following items:
  - a. *State of Administration:*
    - i. *Staffing:* Mr. Berger indicated that we are still several drivers short of our goal to be able to restore Sunday service on the highest volume routes. Mr. Berger encouraged the members to continue to spread around what a great place the MVRTA is to work. Also, that MVRTA is willing to piggy-back with cities and towns for job fairs and the like to increase exposure to the work opportunities at MVRTA. Mr. Shapiro asked if MVRTA has been working with MassHire. Mr. Berger said, yes, on two fronts: one, the fact that we have busses to get workers to and from jobs and two, that we have good jobs to fill.



- ii. Great Ideas Group (GIG): Mr. Berger described the new Great Ideas Group, formed to allow operators and mechanics who are on the front lines to share their insights and develop ways to improve morale, recognize employees who go above and beyond, better accommodate the flexibility in operators' lives and many other issues directly affecting them and their peers. First up was the implementation of an Employee of the Month promotion, giving the selected employee a special parking place, gift card and recognition.
  - iii. Snow/Sleet/Freezing Rain: Mr. Berger updated the members on snow/ice conditions that occurred since the last Board meeting. February 4<sup>th</sup> brought a mix of snow, sleet and freezing rain. Buses operated on snow detour in Haverhill and Lawrence and there were no accidents or incidents. On February 25<sup>th</sup>, substantial snow fell, and buses operated on snow detour all day. Despite a few temporarily stuck buses, no trips were missed except for the one Boston Commuter Bus trip, which had one passenger and was stuck in Andover. Once freed, the bus brought the passenger to the McGovern Transportation Center, where the passenger took the train to North Station.
  - iv. COVID-19: We are in a much better place since the last meeting. No employees have had COVID since the end of January. We are planning to lift the mask mandate next Monday March 7 and we will discuss and vote on lifting the vaccine mandate later in this meeting.
  - v. Operating Contract: Mr. Berger explained that First Transit will no longer be renewing its contractual relationship with MVRTA when the current contract ends on 6/30/22. This gives MVRTA an opportunity to realign its organizational structure to play to its strengths and minimize disruptions while staying within the limitations of MGL 161B. Mr. Berger has reached out to several operating companies for ideas and methods being used locally and nationwide. Working with outside counsel we will be issuing an RFP in the next month or so.
  - vi. Latinos in Transit: Mr. Berger informed the board that MVRTA has joined a trade organization called Latinos in Transit., which supports and builds on a global network of transportation professionals and introduces opportunities for members to connect through many venues. MVRTA can utilize its membership to maximize our workforce and best serve our member and neighboring communities.
- b. *State of Operations*:
- i. Ridership: Mr. Berger noted that we are still lagging behind where we'd like to be in terms of pre-pandemic ridership overall, however, it is interesting to look at it by route because you will see different stories. Some routes have bounced back more quickly than others. The fixed route



ridership percentage of 57.6% of pre-pandemic levels is disproportionately low, being pulled down by routes that are not running in FY22, including the North Andover Commuter Bus, Haverhill Employment runs and Sunday service.

c. *State of Finance:*

- i. *FY22 Budget to Actuals:* Mr. Berger is pleased that the budget to actual numbers are better than expected considering we just completed union negotiations that gave workers a 15.78% increase. That was offset by other savings we realized even with other unique increases this year.
- ii. *FY2022 Federal Appropriations:* Mr. Berger informed the members that a third Continuing Resolution to extend funding for FFY 22 through 3/11/22 has been passed and signed by the President. As a result, FTA's full FFY22 appropriations have not been made available and we have yet to realize the authorization levels agreed to in the Bipartisan Infrastructure Bill. Fortunately, we have carryover FTA funding available as well as recovery funds with which to cover our budgeted federal funding levels.
- iii. *FHWA Transfer Funds:* We did also receive \$1.2 million from the Federal Highway Administration, which will allow us to repower ten 2015 and 2016 buses and upgrade our Intelligent Transportation System.

d. *State of Planning & Implementation:*

- i. *We are Now Fare Free!* Mr. Berger related the significance of the event held on Monday February 28<sup>th</sup> to kick off system wide free fares. He thanked the members who attended and mentioned Congressional and Local officials who were in attendance as well as small business owners, MVPC and the Merrimack Valley Chamber of Commerce.
- ii. *Downtown Amesbury Routing:* Mr. Berger pointed to the Amesbury Route 51 Main Street routing change, which was celebrated by an event held with Mayor Gove, her team and local residents on Valentine's Day. He stated that this is the type of improved customer service we will strive to make on all our routes.
- iii. *Potential Peter Pan Partnership:* Mr. Berger related that our Boston Commuter Bus ridership is not where we would like it to be, we have 6 coaches on site that we do not have room for, and we are taking a driver that could be providing service elsewhere. Discussions are being held with Peter Pan Bus Lines where we could loan the vehicles to them, they would run the service, retain the fares and we would use funds already budgeted for the service to execute a contract with them. Updates will be made as things progress.



- iv. *Shared Streets*: Mr. Berger said that we submitted a Shared Streets grant application for shelters in two communities. We have reached out to other communities, some of which are not ready with where to locate shelters, but by next year we should be able to include other communities in our grant application.
  - v. *Route Optimization & Streamlining*: Mr. Berger brought to the attention of the members some route optimization that we've been toying with. He cited Route #36 Bus in Lawrence and Methuen as an example. The route is difficult for drivers to maneuver and inconvenient for passengers because the inbound and outbound routes are not closely aligned. Adjusting the routes will benefit both drivers and passengers. This same theory will be discussed for other routes with similar problems. We are also working on simplifying the Ring & Ride services so that all towns outside of the fixed route service area have the same service parameters.
  - vi. *Fleet Electrification Assessment*: Mr. Berger noted that many people ask, "When are you going electric?" We are participating in an analysis being conducted by National Grid and ICF of the feasibility of converting to electric vehicles. There are many challenges, such as charging infrastructure, for which we do not currently have the space to accommodate, the cost of that infrastructure, and the additional cost of buses, about 50% more than traditional diesel buses. In addition, the promised range of electric buses is not being met, particularly in the climate and hilly terrain we operate in. Eventual benefits are intriguing, as the study shows we would save \$19 million over the next 22 years if we converted 59 buses to all electric.
- e. *State of Outreach*:
- i. *MARTA Legislative Luncheon*: Mr. Berger made the members aware that the Annual Massachusetts Association of Regional Transit Authority's (MARTA) Legislative Luncheon will be held this year on Tuesday March 29 at the Boston Omni Parker House from 11:30 a.m. – 1:00 p.m. and all of the members are invited.
  - ii. *Cool Science Initiative*: Eight of MVRTA buses now proudly display the winning entries of educational artwork highlighting the impacts of climate change drawn by children from around the Commonwealth. This program is in conjunction with UMass-Lowell's Cool Science initiative.
  - iii. *MAP/§5310*: MVRTA is planning to seek funding on behalf of town COAs to acquire vans for use by their communities. Let us know if your community would be interested in obtaining a vehicle through this program. In the interim, we can transfer our surplus vehicles over as we have just done for the Amesbury COA.



- iv. **Meetings and Events:** The Lawrence Partnership for Transition to Employment just received a significant grant to help kids with disabilities transition to either college or the work force; so, we obviously have an important role to play in that. They had their kickoff meeting just before our Fare Free event, and there were some kids that were participating in that program's kickoff event until we invited them to speak at our fare free event. There is nothing more satisfying than hearing directly from people how much the MVRTA has helped improve their lives.
3. **FY 2022 Budget Revision:** Mr. Ryan related the discussions held at the Finance and Audit Committee meeting prior to this Board meeting. He stated that there was nothing controversial in the revisions. They consisted of additional costs attributed to the severance pay of the retiring administrator, new labor contracts with drivers and mechanics, revenue adjustments due to EZ-Trans and Ring and Ride. There is also an increased use of CARES funds to balance out the budget. All the changes were common sense and non-controversial according to Mr. Ryan. Ms. Heartquist called for a motion to accept the Budget Revision as presented. Mr. Shapiro so moved, seconded by Mr. Blatchford, Vote: passed unanimously.
4. **Review of Vaccine Mandate Policy:** Jesus Guillermo, GM of Operations, advised the members of the increase in vaccinated employees since the inception of the mandate. Currently 88% of employees are vaccinated. The remaining 12% will likely remain unvaccinated. They continue to test weekly as required by the mandate. The question is, do we want to continue the mandate, or should we suspend it? Ms. Heartquist asked how the drivers feel? Mr. Guillermo said the bus drivers would like to see it go away. Discussions between the members ensued. Ms. Heartquist asked for a motion to table the decision for ten days, allowing Deputy Administrator Kathleen Lambert time to come up with the metrics for the members so they can decide whether to suspend the mandate and under what circumstances to reinstate it if suspended. Mr. Bonet so moved, seconded by Mr. Levine, Vote: passed unanimously.
5. **Update from MVPC:** Mr. Komornick updated the members on where we stand on the Transportation Improvement Program.
6. **Old Business:** There was no old business.
7. **New Business:** Mr. Coogan spoke about the MBTA Communities Program and how he feels it tends to be unfair to smaller communities like Boxford. He invited other interested members to contact him if they would like to be a part of that discussion.
8. **Confirm Next Meeting Date:** The next meeting is March 10<sup>th</sup> at 10:00 am via Zoom. The next regular meeting will be May 5, 2022 at 9:00 a.m.
9. **Adjournment:** Mr. Heartquist asked for a motion to adjourn, Mr. Coogan so moved, seconded by Mr. Bonet, Vote: passed unanimously at 10:30 a.m.