

Approved 5/18/23

Pursuant to written notice sent to Board Members and pursuant to notice posted at least forty-eight hours prior to the meeting, copies of said notice having been sent to the Secretary of the Commonwealth, William F. Galvin and the Secretary of the Executive Office of Administration and Finance, Michael Heffernan, the meeting of the Advisory Board of the Franklin Regional Transit Authority was held on March 16, 2023 virtually on the Zoom.us platform by computer and by phone.

1. INTRODUCTIONS:

Present were the following Advisory Board Members and/or Member Designees:

<u>Name</u>	<u>Town</u>	<u>Weighted Vote</u>
Jennifer Reynolds	Bernardston	2.28
Peter Otten	Buckland	1.43
Joe Kurland	Colrain	1.16
Veronique Blanchard	Conway	1.04
Robert J. Decker III	Deerfield	5.28
Randy Crochier	Gill	1.16
Eric Twarog	Greenfield	30.93
Jeff Singleton	Montague	11.89
Mary Bowen	Northfield	1.30
Carol Smith	Southwick	2.32
Susan Bronstein	Westhampton	1.03
	<u>Total</u>	<u>59.82</u>

Also present were:

Tina M. Cote; FRTA Administrator, Michael Perreault; FRTA Assistant Administrator, Wayne Waldron, FTM General Manager, Steven Pardoe, FTM Assistant General Manager, Catherine Connolly, FTM Safety and Training Manager, Elizabeth Quirk, FRTA Transit Advisory Committee Chair, Megan Rhodes, FRCOG Senior Transportation Planner and FRTA Transit Advisory Committee Vice-Chair, and George Touloumtzis, FRTA Transit Advisory Committee.

Chairman Eric Twarog called the meeting to order at 4:00pm and it was noted that a quorum **was** present to hold a meeting.

2. REVIEW AND VOTE TO ACCEPT MINUTES FROM NOVEMBER 17, 2022 MEETING:

Randy Crochier made a **motion** to accept the meeting minutes from November 17, 2022. Jeff Singleton seconded, and the vote was as follows:

<u>Name</u>	<u>Town</u>	<u>Weighted Vote</u>	<u>Vote</u>
Jennifer Reynolds	Bernardston	2.28	Yes
Peter Otten	Buckland	1.43	Abstain
Joe Kurland	Colrain	1.16	Yes
Veronique Blanchard	Conway	1.04	Abstain
Robert J. Decker III	Deerfield	5.28	Abstain
Randy Crochier	Gill	1.16	Yes
Eric Twarog	Greenfield	30.93	Yes
Jeff Singleton	Montague	11.89	Yes
Mary Bowen	Northfield	1.30	Yes
Carol Smith	Southwick	2.32	Abstain
Susan Bronstein	Westhampton	<u>1.03</u>	Not Present
		Total 59.82	

Yes – 48.72
 No – 0.00
 Abstain – 10.07
 Not Present – 1.03

The vote passed and the **motion** carried.

OLD BUSINESS:

3. REVIEW/DISCUSSION ON HST AND LEGISLATIVE TASK FORCE FINAL REPORT:

Information and meeting minutes on the HST Legislative Task Force and final report was provided in the meeting packet. Tina M. Cote stated that, from the report, it sounds like there’s more work to improve HST transportation, but that she can continue to update the Advisory Board with any other information that comes out since the final report has been issued. Jeff Singleton asked if the Task Force was created without any processes on who would make any final decisions based on the outcomes from the report. Tina M. Cote stated that as far as she is aware, the Task Force was to send the final report to the MA Legislators, but unaware of who the ultimate decision makers with regard to moving forward.

4. MAINTENANCE FACILITY PROJECT UPDATE:

Michael Perreault provided a brief update on construction activities related to the new maintenance facility project. The punch list for the building is expected to start during the last week of March. Exterior work, including final site work, exterior lighting, fence installation, landscaping, and paving, will continue over the next couple of months. Paving is scheduled for the week of May 15th, so we are anticipating moving into the facility at the beginning of June. Tina M. Cote added that she has been in communication with the GMATA to continue renting the current facility to accommodate our project schedule and move to the new facility.

Jeff Singleton asked if the location of the new facility would impact the fixed routes. Tina M. Cote stated that there's no indication that the new location would have any impact on our current fixed route schedules. Jeff Singleton also stated that there's been discussions at the Town level about the potential for a new bio-composting facility being built in the new industrial park and hopes that there continues to be good communications to keep FRTA informed.

Robert J. Decker III expressed his concern to ensure that FRTA does its due diligence before accepting and moving into the new facility. Tina M. Cote explained that FRTA has an Owner's Project Manager to ensure the building is complete prior to accepting. Eric Twarog added that the punch list is part of the due diligence process.

5. DISCUSSION/UPDATE ON ACCESS PROGRAM AND WORKFORCE TRANSIT PROGRAM:

Tina M. Cote updated that the Access program remains strong, but limitations with resources including the number of vehicles available continue to create challenges with the number of trips we're able to provide. Recently FRTA had a conference call with the FRCOG and Senator Comerford about our Access program. Senator Comerford wants to highlight the work we're doing with the Access program in our rural area of the State to the new Governor and Lt. Governor.

Tina M. Cote announced that since our last Advisory Board meeting FRTA received a grant contract to continue our 2nd and 3rd shift workforce transportation program. This project remains popular, and riders are grateful that this service exists.

Eric Twarog asked if FRTA spoke with Senator Comerford about the need for additional vehicles and if the legislative delegation has any plans to help fund additional vehicles. Tina M. Cote explained that she did discuss the need for additional vehicles and FRTA will be sending some additional information about the project to the Senator. In addition, FRTA is looking to bring on additional towns currently operated by the COAs to expand the Access program.

Jeff Singleton asked where the Workforce Development grant funds came from. Michael Perreault stated that the grant was from MassDevelopment.

6. DISCUSSION/UPDATE ON COMPREHENSIVE REGIONAL TRANSIT PLAN AND WEEKEND FIXED ROUTE SERVICE:

Tina M. Cote explained that as part of the new MA Fair Share Amendment, there looks to be additional funds which could be used to put all RTAs on the same level.

Joe Kurland asked if the current drivers have been approached to see if they'd be willing to be flexible with shift schedules and working on the weekends. Wayne Waldron stated that he has had conversations with a few current employees and that they may be willing to work Saturday or Sunday for overtime.

Jeff Singleton stated that FRTA is the only Regional Transit Authority in MA without any weekend fixed route service and that FRTA needs to figure out a way to find additional drivers needed to accomplish that. Wayne Waldron stated that the availability of drivers willing to work weekend shifts is a challenge.

Eric Twarog asked how other Regional Transit Authorities (RTAs) handle operating services on the weekends. Tina M. Cote stated that other RTAs have been struggling to meet current service schedules and some such as Worcester and Berkshire have needed to cut services due to staffing shortages. Wayne Waldron added that in some instances managers will cover driver shifts.

Michael Perreault added that while solving the challenge of creating job bids and finding employees willing to work on the weekends, FRTA will need additional funding to operate weekend fixed route services. Hopefully, funding coming out of the MA Fair Share Amendment can help solve the funding issue.

Megan Rhodes stated that in addition to the MA Fair Share Amendment there are other opportunities for funding for RTAs, including the RTA Advancement Bill. The hope would be for the additional funds to be shared less through competitive grants and more through flat funding without any strings attached. Tina M. Cote added that Representative Natalie Blais is leading the charge for additional funding for RTAs.

Jeff Singleton concluded the discussion that, in terms of planning for cost figures for partial Saturday fixed route service, the costs should be roughly 20% of current fixed route costs.

7. REVIEW/DISCUSSION ON ADVISORY BOARD BY-LAWS:

Michael Perreault explained that this agenda item carried forward from the previous meeting. Robert J. Decker III asked if there is anything specific in the By-laws that need to be addressed. Jeff Singleton stated that the current By-laws don't clearly define the role of the Advisory Board and it's not clear why. FRTA Legal Counsel couldn't attend today's meeting to help explain Advisory Board roles as defined in M.G.L. Ch. 161B. Eric Twarog suggested that this agenda item be tabled until the next meeting to finish the discussion.

NEW BUSINESS:

8. REVIEW/DISCUSSION ON FARE POLICY:

Tina M. Cote stated that the current FRTA policy dictates the review of fares and fare policy every three years. This policy covers all transit fares including fixed routes and demand response services. Currently, fixed route fares have been suspended through June 30th and will be discussed again at the next Advisory Board meeting in May. Demand response fares vary widely depending on many factors and it may make sense to look at updating and streamlining those fares for more consistency. FRTA would need to also hold public hearings when discussing any changes anticipated to be brought forward to the Advisory Board.

Michael Perreault added that this is just to start putting this discussion on the Advisory Board's radar as the review of the Fare Policy is running concurrently with the need to discuss fixed route fares again at the next meeting in May. The Fare Policy needs to be reviewed by the board every three years to determine if any changes are warranted and this year is year 3.

Robert J. Decker III suggested that FRTA reinstate fixed route fares on July 1st, then review and hold public hearings over the next several months, and report back any proposed changes for consideration to the board in the fall.

Joe Kurland stated that it appears that fare revenues make up a very small percentage of the budget and asked what the cost of collecting fares is and does fare-free result in more ridership. Tina M. Cote stated that federal CARES Act funds continue to be used to cover fare losses. FRTA has seen ridership increasing post-COVID. There are costs associated with fare collections, such as time it takes to count fares, recording and reporting fare collections, and farebox parts and maintenance. FRTA has seen an increase in advertising revenue, which could be attributed to local organizations putting money into advertising versus purchasing bus fares.

Megan Rhodes suggested that FRTA internally discuss fares and asked if the CARES Act funds had been spent down. Discussion of resuming fixed route fare collections at the same time as discussing fare changes/increases for demand response could be confusing for the public. Tina M. Cote stated that FRTA has enough CARES Act funds to get through 2026 or 2027. Megan Rhodes suggested that FRTA make the case to maintain fare free for the fixed routes and to look study ridership impacts.

Michael Perreault suggested that the Advisory Board could convene a working group for discussion on fares and fare policy review.

Robert J. Decker III clarified that at the next meeting, the Advisory Board will need to discuss and vote on fixed route fares again, otherwise the suspension of fares will sunset after June 30th and fare collections must resume.

Jeff Singleton suggested that there should be some middle ground on fares and that data on fares and fare impacts should be analyzed and brought forward before going to public hearings. FRTA's fare system/structure needs to be equitable.

9. TRANSIT ADVISORY COMMITTEE UPDATES:

Elizabeth Quirk gave the following updates:

- FRCOG and FRTA continue to work on marketing and advertising of FRTA services, including creation of a YouTube page and geofencing at UMass to inform drivers about using public transit.
- MassDOT is working to re-start their mobility newsletter.
- Next TAC meeting is scheduled for May 11th and will be hybrid over Zoom and in-person at the transit center.

10. FRTA UPDATES:

Tina M. Cote gave the following updates:

- Long-time FRTA Bookkeeper, Ed Sanborn, will be retiring after March 31st. A replacement has been hired with the new position being full-time and will include other tasks such as overseeing social media and advertising.
- As part of the marketing and advertising with the FRCOG, FRTA is changing its color scheme to green and blue and working on re-stripping the newest buses.
- Supply chain issues continue to impact vehicle deliveries.
- Exciting to be at the home stretch of the maintenance facility construction and looking forward to moving into the new building.

The next Advisory Board meeting will be on May 18, 2023.

Mary Bowen asked if future board meetings would remain virtual or move back to in-person. The current state law regarding virtual meetings is set to expire at the end of March 2023, but the MA legislature is under way with discussions on potentially extending that law beyond that date. Tina M. Cote stated that future meetings could be held in a hybrid fashion to give some board members the flexibility to remotely join in for greater overall participation.

Robert J. Decker III made a **motion** to adjourn. Peter Otten seconded, and the meeting concluded at 5:15pm.