

TPAG Meeting Minutes
January 22, 2025

Attendees: Mark Binnall, Nona Haroyan, Mary Haroyan, Pamela Alvin; Kathy Kulesza; Sharon Strzalkowski; Nancy Garr-Colzie; Sue Moriarty; Mike Kennedy; Anna Kosterski, Worcester Public Schools; Josh Rickman, WRTA; Karen Anderson-Walsh, WRTA; Nick Burnham, WRTA; Jamie Winters, WRTA; Carolyn Foley, PBSTM; Maria Nieves, PBSTM; Connie Mellis, CMRPC; Dave Trabucco, CMTM; Joe Campbell, CMTM

Meeting minutes of Oct 22 were accepted as presented.

WRTA Administration - Updates including facilities and technology

Josh Rickman, WRTA Administrator along with other WRTA staff, CMTM staff and PBSTM staff presented updates and answered questions. Discussion items have been grouped by topic for ease of reading.

Fares: WRTA will continue to be fare-free through June 2025. The decision about fares is made by the WRTA Advisory Board. It is expected that the Board will begin to discuss this for FY26 at upcoming meetings.

Drivers: In addition to the proposed service changes, the operating company is working to hire more drivers which will add to service reliability. Additionally, the operating company has increasing the number of paratransit drivers and has changed its hiring model to include more full-time drivers in an effort to retain drivers. We will continue to hire drivers as needed to meet our goals. We are increasing recruiting efforts attend job fairs, working with companies and private non-profits who find jobs for people.

Service Expansion: We also hear about the need for increased service during nights and weekends and are working toward that.

Technology: A bid for new technology (including audio announcements) was released earlier this month. The current technology is ten or more years old and is now outdated. The new technology will use a cloud based system. One of the challenges about announcements at the Hub is that the eight bus slips are very close to one another and special care has to be taken to properly identify each bus and each slip. This is more difficult to do than at the actual bus stops since individual bus stops are more spaced out. We hope the new vendor and new technology will be able to improve this. We anticipate award in March. Technology regarding paratransit service will also be upgraded and updated. This will include all WRTA owned vans. WRTA is committed to having these improvements completed.

Carry-on Items: The policy for carry-on items on both fixed route and paratransit is that the items should be under the control of the rider and cannot take up a seat.

On-Time Performance: Late pickups and on-time performance on fixed route and paratransit is being tracked (along with other performance metrics) on a monthly basis.

Emergency Response: WRTAs role during an emergency event like fire, snow, hurricane involves communication and coordination with MEMA, and local first responders including police and fire departments. On an annual basis we review the

severe weather plan including phone call trees and known detours. In fact, today we received a call to help people in Worcester displaced by a fire to bring them to a warm location. Specifically to people with disabilities and other vulnerable populations we work with on-the-ground emergency personnel. Each scenario is handled with care. Additionally there is an Ambu-Bus which can help medical personnel in the case of a large emergency.

Hub Renovation: The Hub lobby is expected to go through a redesign and reconstruction. This includes public bathrooms which will be redesigned for a public space, similar to a design often seen at airports. The designs should be done soon with construction to begin in the Spring and completed in Dec 2025. The seating area will have designated spaces for wheelchair users. This will also involve more frequent cleaning.

Hybrid Meeting: We are working with our IT vendor to have equipment installed at the Hub conference room and the conference room at the maintenance and operations facility. We expect to be able to conduct hybrid meetings before the March deadline.

Paratransit Scheduling: The process for scheduling ADA paratransit rides for the next day is an all-day process. We use a reoptimization process that is a great help but it will not schedule all trips. This still requires human intervention in an ongoing manual process. Once the schedules are finalized, they are then sent to Yellow Cab, the van division and the 7 councils on aging under the control of the paratransit office. It is a combination of using software and human intervention. Since the software does not account for traffic, road construction or detours, the human element is necessary and important. The new IT procurement will include a new paratransit scheduling system. Drivers are discouraged from using their discretion regarding the order of pickups and drop offs without clearing it with dispatch. In order to serve as many riders as possible, riders may find that they may arrive for their appointments very early. Dispatchers occasionally spend some time on the van to see how well the service is being provided. It helps dispatch to see how efficiencies can be improved. We will likely do this again sometime soon. The paratransit on-time performance is currently about 90% systemwide. We are aware of the technologies that other transit authorities are using and trying to benefit from their lessons learned. A technical advisor has been able to help us to better inform our decisions.

On-Demand Service: On-demand service is being discussed right now including same-day service in Worcester. The current Via-WRTA service in the Westborough area which provides on-demand service to the general public is operating successfully but is very expensive. We are looking at the results of the survey for the service, industry practices and benefits and tradeoffs.

Rebranding Survey: A rider commented and thanked WRTA for their work in making the WRTA rebranding survey accessible to people with visual impairments.

WRTA Administration - Proposed Service Changes

Josh Rickman, WRTA Administrator discussed the WRTAs proposed service changes. WRTA is engaging in public meetings and tabling sessions right now to hear from the

public about the proposed service changes that are intended to improve fixed-route on-time performance levels. These meetings were approved by the Board. Currently the fixed route on-time performance is at 61% but industry average is about 80%. In the fixed-route survey conducted last year, bus reliability was noted as the biggest problem at WRTA and we hope the proposed changes will address that. The proposed changes make adjustments to the schedules only. The routes themselves are unchanged. WRTA worked with CSched, a company who works on this type of change. They used a year's worth of data to make recommendations for scheduling changes. They made recommendations to all the routes for weekdays, Saturdays and Sundays. The proposed changes would change service times for ADA paratransit service by less than 10 minutes in the early morning and less than 10 minutes in the late night. The comments will be brought back to the Board in Feb for their decision and next steps.

Paratransit Report was presented for December 2024. There were no questions.

Customer Service Report for Dec 2024 was presented. In Dec there were 101 complaint cases closed. Of those complaints, 94 were for fixed route and 6 were for paratransit. Of the 6 paratransit cases, 2 referenced driver behavior, 3 were related to safety and 1 was classified as other.

Transportation Advocacy Coalition met last week. They discussed items noted at the WRTA Advisory Board meeting.

WRTA Advisory Board discussed the use of Narcan, the budget preparation for FY26 and the upcoming evaluation of Josh Rickman as Administrator at their Jan meeting.

During **WRTA Rider Rep and Disability Rep** discussion, Mike Kennedy noted that he is in the process of becoming the Disability Rep on the WRTA Advisory Board and is waiting for his approval at the town level.

Next meeting is March 26, 2025, 1:00-2:30pm. Meeting will be held virtually.