



## **BOSTON REGION METROPOLITAN PLANNING ORGANIZATION**

Stephanie Pollack, MassDOT Secretary and CEO and MPO Chair  
Karl H. Quackenbush, Executive Director, MPO Staff

### ***TECHNICAL MEMORANDUM***

**DATE:** November 8, 2018  
**TO:** Boston Region Metropolitan Planning Organization (MPO)  
**FROM:** Karl Quackenbush, Executive Director, Boston Region MPO Staff  
**RE:** Regional Transit Authorities on the Boston Region MPO Board

This memorandum documents activity to date relating to the 2015 federal certification recommendation that the Boston Region Metropolitan Planning Organization (MPO) represent the MetroWest Regional Transit Authority (MWRTA) and Cape Ann Transit Authority (CATA) on the MPO board.

#### **1 FEDERAL RECERTIFICATION FINDING AND RECOMMENDATION**

The Boston Region MPO last underwent its quadrennial transportation planning certification review in 2014. One recommendation made by the US Department of Transportation (USDOT) in its final report on that review, issued in May 2015, pertained to the MPO's organizational structure. The reviewers noted that the Moving Ahead for Progress in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century Act (MAP-21) requires representatives of public transit providers to be represented on MPO boards, but that two small providers in the Boston region, MWRTA and CATA, are not directly represented. Those RTAs are distinguished from others in the region in that they operate entirely within this region and are not represented on any MPO board.

This fact led USDOT to express concern that the MPO might not be fully meeting the needs of those two RTAs with its current structure. USDOT recommended that the MPO work with the two RTAs to find a mutually satisfactory way of representing the RTAs on the MPO board that also satisfies MAP-21 requirements. (Subsequent federal legislation, the Fixing America's Surface Transportation Act, continues this requirement and stipulates that a representative of a transit provider may also represent a local community on the MPO board.)

#### **2 STATUS OF RECOMMENDATION AND ACTIVITY TO DATE**

The Boston Region MPO has substantively discussed the issue of RTA representation on the board twice, but no decisions have been made, and the matter remains unresolved.

## 2.1 January 19, 2017, MPO Discussion

On January 19, 2017, MPO staff reported to the MPO board on the results of research into how other MPOs nationwide handle RTA representation. Based on this research, staff presented five possible options for the Boston Region MPO board to consider:

1. Provide seats for MWRTA and CATA on the MPO board.
2. Empower the two subregional representatives – MetroWest Regional Collaborative and North Shore Task Force (NSTF) – whose subregions roughly correspond to the RTA service areas to represent the RTAs.
3. Form a transit committee composed of the two RTAs and other members, and provide a seat on the board for a representative of the committee.
4. Charge the MBTA with representing the interests of the two RTAs.
5. Rededicate one of MassDOT's seats to the MassDOT Rail and Transit Division and have that entity represent the interests of the two RTAs.

Ensuing discussion resulted in no consensus, but most members who spoke expressed interest in the first and third options.

The discussion generated the following observations about Option 1:

- A variant of the option that gives MWRTA and CATA their own seats could be the addition of a single seat that rotates between the two RTAs.
- This option might essentially and unfairly provide extra votes for the MetroWest and NSTF subregions.
- Neither the MBTA nor subregional representatives could match this option in doing justice to serving the RTAs' interests.

The discussion also generated the following observations about Option 3:

- A transit committee could potentially include other RTAs operating in the region, as well as transportation management associations (TMAs) and other transit providers.
- Such a committee could be unwieldy.
- The Regional Transportation Advisory Council is not a substitute for a transit committee as only a few transit providers are members and the Advisory Council's meeting discussions are not always about transit issues.
- This committee's charge could include advising the MPO on its new Community Transportation Program.
- Staff resources would be required to support a transit committee.

- The level of interest among possible transit committee members would have to be gauged prior to selecting that option.

No decisions were made. Staff was asked to report back to the MPO with information about entities that might sit on a transit committee, what such a committee's functions would be, and statistics about those providers that operate transit in the region.

## 2.2 June 15, 2017, MPO Discussion

As requested at the January meeting, staff presented information pertaining to a possible transit committee to the MPO board during its June 15, 2017, meeting. The presentation was informed by research into such committees that exist in Portland (Maine), Pittsburgh, Cleveland, Kansas City, and Atlanta.

Possible members of a transit committee, in addition to MWRTA and CATA, could include the following:

- Four other RTAs that provide service in this region
- TMAs
- Municipal transit providers, such as those in Beverly and Dedham
- Intercity private bus operators
- MPO local representatives
- MassDOT and the MBTA
- Advocates and other interested parties, including the Massachusetts Bus Association, MassCommute, Councils on Aging, Regional Coordination Councils, Amtrak, and the Northern New England Passenger Rail Authority

The following are some of the possible functions of a transit committee:

- Integrate transit planning into the planning process
- Discuss transit policy generally
- Improve coordination among providers
- Prioritize transit projects for programming
- Weigh in on transit investments
- Help to develop metrics for transit performance measures
- Advocate for certain roadway projects that support transit
- Provide input for the Community Transportation Program

A table profiling the region's transit operators was distributed. The table showed six RTAs, six TMAs, six municipally-operated transit systems, and ten private

express-bus companies. For each operator, numbers of communities served and level-of-service indicators were shown.

One MPO member and one visitor (an MWRTA representative) spoke in favor of furnishing MWRTA and CATA seats on the board, and two other members expressed concern that adding those seats would alter voting strength as a result. Two members spoke in favor of having a representative of the transit committee sitting on the board. Another member suggested the option of electing transit operators to a seat on the board. The Federal Highway Administration suggested that MWRTA, CATA, and a transit committee could all be provided with seats.

No decisions were made. Staff was asked to speak with potential members of a transit committee to gauge overall interest in the idea.

### **2.3 Activity since June 2017**

As requested, during the summer of 2017, staff canvassed potential members of a transit committee to gauge interest. RTAs that have partial operations in the Boston region, TMAs, and municipally-operated transit providers were included in this outreach effort. Not all who were asked responded to our inquiries, but of those who did, all expressed an interest in serving on a committee were one to be formed. Staff prepared to report back to the MPO board on these findings but has not been asked to do so.

There have been no more substantive discussions of this issue by the MPO board since the discussion in June 2017, so the matter remains unresolved. In the meantime, the MPO has just undergone another transportation planning certification review.

## **3 CONCLUDING REMARKS**

The two most-discussed ways of responding to USDOT's recommendation to represent MWRTA and CATA on the MPO board are to provide the two RTAs a shared seat or individual seats, and to provide a seat for a transit committee that would be composed of the two RTAs and some number of other entities.

The former option is clearly the most direct way of responding in the affirmative to the USDOT's recommendation, but it also has implications for the board's balance of voting power. Development of a transit committee garnered the most support in MPO discussions. Such a committee could be beneficial for the MPO, but having one goes beyond the recommendation at hand and poses certain practical issues relating to membership and function. Staff resources would be required to support the committee. The options of having the MBTA or the

MassDOT Rail and Transit Division represent the interests of the two RTAs attracted no support.

The option of having MetroWest and NSTF subregional representatives doing so also received no support and little attention, but that is essentially the current arrangement. Implicit in the board's discussion, as well as in the USDOT's recommendation, is the assumption that this arrangement does not adequately serve the RTAs' interests. Perhaps it does not, but the board has not really examined this assumption and could elect to do so before making a decision.