

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, Matthew Gorzkowicz, the meeting of the Advisory Board of the Franklin Regional Transit Authority was held on November 21, 2024 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	1.47
Peter Otten	Buckland	1.55
Kim Blakeslee	Charlemont	2.07
Emily Thurber	Colrain	1.19
Diana Parsons	Colrain	0.00
Robert J. Decker III	Deerfield	4.43
Eric Twarog	Greenfield	33.81
Greg Gagnon	Hatfield	2.05
Will Cosby	Hawley	1.06
Michele Giarusso	Leyden	1.01
Jeff Singleton	Montague	12.06
Rick LaPierre	Shelburne	2.62
Scott Szczebak	Southampton	1.71
Nicole Parker	Southwick	2.16
Susan Bronstein	Westhampton	1.04
S. Peter Cane	Whately	1.97
Total		70.20

Also present were:

Tina M. Cote; FRTA Administrator, Michael Perreault; FRTA Deputy Administrator, Elizabeth Quirk, FRTA Travel Ambassador, Wayne Waldron, FTM General Manager, Catherine Connolly, FTM Safety and Training Manager, Elizabeth Sallee, FTM Transportation Supervisor, and Megan Rhodes, FRTA Transit Advisory Committee Chair.

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

2. REVIEW AND VOTE TO ACCEPT MINUTES FROM MAY 23, 2024 MEETING:

Susan Bronstein made a **motion** to accept the meeting minutes from May 23, 2024. Peter Otten seconded, and the vote was as follows:

<u>Name</u>	<u>Town</u>	<u>Weighted Vote</u>	<u>Vote</u>
Jennifer Reynolds	Bernardston	1.47	Yes
Peter Otten	Buckland	1.55	Yes
Kim Blakeslee	Charlemont	2.07	Yes
Emily Thurber	Colrain	1.19	Yes
Diana Parsons	Colrain	0.00	
Robert J. Decker III	Deerfield	4.43	Yes
Eric Twarog	Greenfield	33.81	Yes
Greg Gagnon	Hatfield	2.05	Yes
Will Cosby	Hawley	1.06	Yes
Michele Giarusso	Leyden	1.01	Yes
Jeff Singleton	Montague	12.06	Yes
Rick LaPierre	Shelburne	2.62	Yes
Scott Szczebak	Southampton	1.71	Yes
Nicole Parker	Southwick	2.16	Abstain
Susan Bronstein	Westhampton	1.04	Yes
S. Peter Cane	Whately	1.97	Yes
Total		70.20	

Yes – 68.04

No – 0.00

Abstain – 2.16

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

OLD BUSINESS:

3. DISCUSSION/UPDATE ON WEEKEND FIXED ROUTE SERVICE:

Tina M. Cote recaps that we did implement weekend service, and that Saturdays and Sundays have a reduced version of what we are running Monday through Friday. We'd had difficulties getting enough drivers, so we were only running Saturdays, and even that was an abbreviated version. We have been slowly able to increase staffing levels so that we are operating full Saturdays and for the past two weekends we had full staffing, so we are able to operate Sundays for the fixed bus routes as well.

It has been hard for us to get a gauge as to how much traction we will have with the ridership in terms of what it will look like for full weekend service. We do know that we were doing really well with Saturday service, and that everybody was complaining that we weren't operating on Sundays.

We are aware that it isn't the schedules that we had ideally wanted to put together. Once we have had a chance to operate full weekend service, we can arrange for public engagement and hold

meetings to get input from the public to develop a plan that the Advisory Board can vote on. We are still operating our ACCESS program on the weekends to fill in gaps. GM, Wayne Waldron indicated that last Saturday the fixed route had 155 passengers, and Sunday was 55 passengers (Sunday's schedule was put out to the public on Thursday so 55 was a decent number considering the short notice).

Jeff Singleton asked if we still have an issue with the driver bids being bottled by seniority and if new hires have to agree to work one or two weekend days.

Catherine Connolly states that we have been pretty lucky in that anyone coming in for an interview has it made known to them (especially for fixed-route), that we are looking for Saturday, Sunday, or both – some have been willing to do both days, some like one over the other, and we also have drivers that have been picking up shifts so that we can continue to run full service.

Jeff Singleton also asks about the Fair Share money and wants to know if any changes on that would affect us. Will we continue to integrate weekend service into our budget if we aren't going to have the Fair Share money anymore.

Tina M. Cote responded that we hope to get the funds again but if we don't, we are going to be okay because we have enough to operate this year and can rely on our CARES funding. If next fiscal year the Fare Share funding goes away, we can continue to operate on the weekends with a combination of fair share funds and CARES. We did get more Fair Share money this year for Try Transit.

Eric Twarog asks if there are any further questions on this topic for Tina M. Cote, and seeing none from others, Eric Twarog asks how much longer before getting public input to get an idea of how it's working.

Tina M. Cote indicated that usually we can do a pilot program for about six months (which we have been doing) but since we have not had six months of Saturday and Sunday service, we will probably let it go until the early winter to see what happens. We would like to have at least a couple of months of Sunday service to see how that looks and to see if the current schedules are working. This will allow the public some more insight into what changes they might like to see, or if everything is working the way they would want it to.

4. DISCUSSION/UPDATE ON FAIR SHARE AMENDMENT:

Tina M. Cote notes that as Jeff Singleton touched on, we got maybe a 4-5 day notice that on October 24th the Governor would be coming to Greenfield. She chose to announce the Statewide \$30M fare free/ try transit to the RTA's at our facility. Of the 15 RTAs there are only 13 participating in this, so for those 13 RTAs, it has kind of been at their discretion as to how they are using it. Some are using it for summertime fare free, some are using it for fixed routes, some are using it for a combination of both. Given that we already had the free fixed bus routes, we decided to do the free Demand Response transportation because there really wasn't anything more for us to offer as a discount or incentive. Last year we got about \$15,000 and that paid for

free Demand Response transportation from Thanksgiving through December. We are not doing the Access because that is a specialized program, and we are using that to fill in the gaps where the fixed routes don't work. We do not want that to be over-crowded with people who just want the door-to-door transportation without giving a thought to trying the fixed-route. This year, we received about \$218,000. We are using this money to cover the fares we would have collected for the fixed routes, ADA, and Demand Response from now through the end of June 2025. This will free up some of the CARES funding and allow us to put it aside in case there are other projects that come up. We have approximately \$200K left.

Passengers have been really appreciative of the fares being suspended. The bus drivers are not having to deal with change, issues that arise with people not having fares or the exact change and long periods of time entering the vehicle waiting on persons to find fares or get their ticket to work.

Realistically, the State needs to increase this to \$50M so all the RTAs can suspend fares. It is unknown as to how much we will be awarded for FY26 but we should know going in to the next budget season..

Jeff Singleton approves of keeping the funds out of the Access program.

Tina M. Cote reiterates that some people use the Access program just as a way to get from point A to point B when in reality, they really could be using the fixed route. The fixed route is free to the public so we would like to see that being used when possible.

NEW BUSINESS:

5. REVIEW AND VOTE TO ACCEPT FY24 AUDIT AND UPDATED WEIGHTED VOTE:

Eric Twarog notes that the Finance and Audit Committee recently met to discuss the year end Audit.

Peter Otten, Chairman of the Finance and Audit Committee reports that the FRTA is doing really well. They met with our auditor, and they have no concerns regarding FY24 or the audit. This auditor has worked with us for years; he is well aware of what FRTA is and what it stands for, what it does, and how it operates. Peter Otten offers that he believes the administrators here deserve a pat on the back for a job well done.

Eric Twarog asks if Robert J. Decker III (other F & A Committee member) has anything to add, and Robert J. Decker III replies that Peter Otten covered it fine.

Jeff Singleton asked for a quick summary of how the weighted vote is calculated and acknowledges that people present have gone over this with him before. He is requesting a refresher to be able to explain it to the Selectboard he represents.

Tina M. Cote notes that there isn't really a quick "refresher".

Michael Perreault states that we take our completed audited financial statements and work with our auditors to create a spreadsheet with different formulas to distribute costs and revenues to each of our towns with each of our programs Fixed-route, Demand Response, etc.), so essentially, we take the total costs, and we subtract out all of our sole-source revenues (fares, advertising revenue, space rental from the FRCOG, those types of revenues), we then get our net cost of service and based on the amount of federal, state, and local funds we get, we calculate a percentage. For example, if we have 50% as federal, 25% as state, and 25% as local, we apply all of those funds in those percentages to each of the towns. Over the years, the local assessment has been anywhere from 17% to 19% of the total cost of operations.

Michael Perreault further clarifies that every town is allotted one vote each, so at the base, we have 42 towns, so we have a base of 42 votes, and then the remaining is a percentage of the costs. So, everyone gets at least one vote, and then, if you have more than one, it's because you receive some level of service. There are some towns that, for example, will only have Demand Response, and if they don't have any transportation activity, they won't get charged, so they only get one vote. Costs are assigned on a fixed-route revenue hour; so the amount of time we spend delivering fixed-route service in your particular town, we assign costs that way, for all of our paratransit programs, so that's our Demand Response, ADA, our Med-Ride program, our Access program, all of those are per trip, allocations, so you take the total cost, divide by the total trips, and then we assign costs that way.

Michael Perreault offers that if anybody is ever interested, he is more than happy to walk through the process, whether in person or virtually. The towns local assessment comes off of the cherry sheet. The FRTA does not receive funds directly from the town and the cherry sheet process is a little bit more convoluted.

With the completion of our 2024 audit information – we submitted our audit and our local assessment calculations to the State sometime in October. They then send that information to the Department of Revenue some time in December or January. The local assessments for FY24 for each member community will not come off of the cherry sheet until FY26.

Eric Twarog confirms that he went through that process with Michael Perreault and it was excellent to see how the assessments are done, he would recommend that anybody interested in doing that to take advantage of that.

Eric Twarog calls for a motion.

Peter Otten makes a **motion** to accept the audit report as printed in the packages. Jeff Singleton seconds the motion, and the vote was as follows:

<u>Name</u>	<u>Town</u>	<u>Weighted Vote</u>	<u>Vote</u>
Jennifer Reynolds	Bernardston	1.47	Yes
Peter Otten	Buckland	1.55	Yes
Kim Blakeslee	Charlemont	2.07	Yes
Emily Thurber	Colrain	1.19	Yes

Diana Parsons	Colrain	0.00	
Robert J. Decker III	Deerfield	4.43	Yes
Eric Twarog	Greenfield	33.81	Yes
Greg Gagnon	Hatfield	2.05	Yes
Will Cosby	Hawley	1.06	Yes
Michele Giarusso	Leyden	1.01	Yes
Jeff Singleton	Montague	12.06	Yes
Rick LaPierre	Shelburne	2.62	Yes
Scott Szczebak	Southampton	1.71	Yes
Nicole Parker	Southwick	2.16	Not Present
Susan Bronstein	Westhampton	1.04	Yes
S. Peter Cane	Whately	1.97	Yes
		Total	70.20

Yes – 68.04

No – 0.00

Abstain – 0.00

Not Present – 2.16

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

Eric Twarog asks if there is any discussion on the updated, weighted vote, or any questions on that.

Jeff Singleton makes a **motion** to accept the updated, weighted vote, seconded by Robert J. Decker III and the vote was as follows:

<u>Name</u>	<u>Town</u>	<u>Weighted Vote</u>	<u>Vote</u>
Jennifer Reynolds	Bernardston	1.47	Yes
Peter Otten	Buckland	1.55	Yes
Kim Blakeslee	Charlemont	2.07	Yes
Emily Thurber	Colrain	1.19	Yes
Diana Parsons	Colrain	0.00	
Robert J. Decker III	Deerfield	4.43	Yes
Eric Twarog	Greenfield	33.81	Yes
Greg Gagnon	Hatfield	2.05	Yes
Will Cosby	Hawley	1.06	Yes
Michele Giarusso	Leyden	1.01	Yes
Jeff Singleton	Montague	12.06	Yes
Rick LaPierre	Shelburne	2.62	Yes
Scott Szczebak	Southampton	1.71	Yes
Nicole Parker	Southwick	2.16	Not Present
Susan Bronstein	Westhampton	1.04	Yes
S. Peter Cane	Whately	1.97	Yes
		Total	70.20

Yes – 68.04
No – 0.00
Abstain – 0.00
Not Present – 2.16

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

6. TRANSIT ADVISORY COMMITTEE UPDATES:

Megan Rhodes gave the following updates from the November 14, 2024, meeting:

TAC discussed that FRCOG has received a grant from The National Aging and Disability Transportation Center to explore the expansion of the Access program to those areas of the county that do not yet have it. This is just a feasibility planning study to better understand who wants to be served, what barriers may exist and what the needs are in those areas of the county. This is just starting now, and they will be surveying various towns, groups, senior centers, and Councils on Aging over the next year.

TAC members were very happy to hear about the Sunday fixed-route service being re-established with enough drivers. This a great asset that we have not had in close to 20 years and we would like to keep it going. Discussions were had on how to get the word out to the public.

FRTA received funding through RTACAP to find ways on improving signage and making it easier for passengers to navigate throughout our bus system. We recognize its importance and understand that these are some of the first things that people see around our region when contemplating using public transit and having accurate signage is really important.

We talked about how to recruit more people to become members of the Transit Advisory Committee. We came up with some ideas, and hopefully over the next couple of months we can implement those and find new members.

7. FRTA UPDATES:

Tina M. Cote gave the following updates:

Stephanie Yarmesky, was hired as our new bookkeeper and joined us in August. Stephanie comes to us with a lot of knowledge and expertise. She was hired just as our year end audit was taking place, so she is now familiar with that process and she worked really well with our auditors. We are very excited to have her onboard after Ed's departure.

We are moving forward with the solar panel project at the new maintenance facility. The architect is working on the final design plans. We are hopeful that we can go out to bid over the winter, with construction beginning in the spring of 2025. Since we are a sub-recipient of the funds being used, MassDOT has to get involved to review and conduct their own checks and balances on the project so it has added a little more to the timeframe.

We are working on another Shared Streets and Spaces project. This one is to make pedestrian improvements at the current bus stops on Millers Falls Rd. near the Industrial Blvd. in Turners Falls. This is going to construct new bus stop areas with shelters, bike racks and crosswalks across Millers Falls Rd. and Industrial Blvd. We're hoping to install an overhead rectangular rapid flashing traffic control beacon and hopefully construct new sections of sidewalk that are ADA accessible. A project engineer is working to complete the final design plans and specifications for mid-December, and hopefully we will go out to bid over the winter and have another construction project starting in the spring or summer of 2025.

The Massachusetts Clean Energy and Technology Center awarded us \$932,850 which was a complete surprise, but a good one. This is to create, implement and prioritize a plan to electrify our fleet of buses and to purchase and deploy 2-3 electric transit vehicles into our fixed route service. They will help us monitor and report those findings as well with the results. The grant also includes funds to purchase and install vehicle chargers and other required utility and/or infrastructure upgrades. Training for our drivers and maintenance personnel will be provided as well. The Council of Governments is going to assist us on outreach and surveys to solicit feedback and input regarding the design and implementation of our fleet transition. We expect to start this in December of 2024 with hopes of having the final report and projects done in August of 2027. We were working with MassDOT on a very similar project, but these grant funds are definitely going to fast track us on that and make things a little bit easier for us.

MassDOT awarded us another Innovation Grant of about \$404K for the Shutesbury, Sunderland service. This will allow us to purchase two additional minivans so that we can expand our Demand Response program to include Shutesbury. We will also create another zone in our ACCESS program to include the South County Senior Center and Sugarloaf Estates. We launched the Demand Response portion on November 1st, and once we add two additional drivers, we'll add the ACCESS expansion into Shutesbury. The FRCOG is going to help us with outreach and marketing.

Shutesbury is one of those areas that borders a PVRTA service area and our service area. We're hoping that with this innovation grant, we can at least get to Shutesbury residents and help them travel into Sunderland and other nearby towns.

We were awarded another MassDOT Joint Innovation Grant; this one was for about \$1.3M. They haven't done an official press release on this, but it includes the FRTA, PVRTA, and BRTA (Berkshire RTA). It's going to help us refurbish seven MassDOT-owned motorcoaches that had previously been taken out of service. We will be able to use the funding to operate new commuter routes between Greenfield and North Adams, along Routes 2, 116, and between Northampton and Pittsfield along Rt. 9. Our portion of it is going to operate two over-the-road buses between Greenfield and North Adams and it's also going to allow us to increase our fixed bus routes in and out of Northampton (providing hourly service). We're hoping that we can refurbish all of the buses by March or maybe April. Our best guess is that we can start launching service by April 1st, but it could look more toward July 1st. (it is going to depend on how long it takes to refurbish these buses, and a few other things that MassDOT is helping us with). This will be the first project that the State has three RTA's collaborating on.

The Shelburne COA received a new vehicle that will be put into service in June of 2024. It is a 14-passenger high-floor paratransit van. Three more passenger high-floor battery-electric paratransit vans went into service in July of 2024 with FTM. Two more 14-passenger vans went into service with Hilltown CDC in October of 2024.

We are expecting five additional 14-passenger low floor passenger vans to be delivered in December 2024, they are going to Bernardston, Erving, two to FTM, and one to Shelburne COA. Lastly, we are expecting two 23-passenger 30-ft transit buses in July of 2025 to be added to our fleet at FTM. During COVID, there was a shortage of supplies, vehicles, and a whole host of other things that happened across the nation to delay these vehicles. We should hopefully be getting caught up.

We continue to work with MassDOT and we are trying to reach out to all of the senior centers and COAs just to make sure that we are helping them and assisting them with everything that they need, making sure they have enough volunteer drivers, and that their vehicles are in check etc. .

We have started the process of re-branding all the buses. You are no longer going to see buses that have the red and blue striping, it is going to be the green and blue striping. We should be in line to finish the last one sometime in the next few weeks (if you see some of the ones that are red and blue, those probably are the older vehicles that the senior centers are still operating).

Kim Blakeslee, Charlemont compliments the work on getting all that grant money. Kim Blakeslee also asks about the \$1.3M grant to refurbish seven coach buses and maybe establish a route all the way to North Adams, and asks if that exists already, or if that would be new.

Tina M. Cote responds that it's something that's brand new and is going to be a first for the State. Obviously, there are a lot of miles in between all of that, so it's going to take three RTAs to collaborate and work together to get that done. We're going to re-brand the buses, they are going to be wrapped in scenes from the areas that we are travelling through, we have to work on the ticketing aspect of it and what the costs are going to be, and a whole host of things with it.

Kim Blakeslee asks if we have a timeline and if additional stops will be added in Charlemont, stating that Charlemont needs more stops. Tina M. Cote stated that we'd love to add more stops but it is challenging because there are no places for our buses to turn around. Kim Blakeslee wonders about the Shunpike rest area if you're going to do the route all the way to North Adams, because that would be a good turn-around place. Michael Perreault clarifies that we have not finalized everything yet, but we did do some test runs on what we believe the route is going to look like. At this point what we are trying to do is leave from Greenfield heading up Rt. 2, the Mohawk Trail, we're going to be going as far as Charlemont Park and Ride, then we will be going south on Rt. 112, and then over Rt. 116 to get towards North Adams. That is the current proposed route as of right now. Kim Blakeslee states that she does not like that, so Michael Perreault supplements that we did spend some time working with BRTA and their team as well, and we did contemplate taking an over-the-road coach all the way on Rt 2 over to North Adams. A lot of people have concerns about Rt 2 in the winter, particularly in the winter at the hairpin

turn, so as of right now, we're looking to go to the Charlemont Park and Ride, which is essentially the border of Charlemont, so it's not very helpful to the Charlemont residents, and then south on 112, and continue west on 116.

Tina M. Cote adds that we can potentially look at that as another stop on our fixed bus route if that ever is something that comes up.

Jeff Singleton states that he thinks that we should have more public discussion when we put new routes on the system, which the FRTA Advisory Board usually discusses and votes on. He mentions the new PVTA route that runs three buses on weekdays from downtown Amherst up to the Transit Center and then to Baystate Franklin Medical Center. Jeff feels there should have been a little bit of a public process on that, and since there is already access to Baystate, so the PVTA duplication could undermine ridership on Rt 23. Jeff does approve that the new PVTA route does give Leverett some access, but does not feel that we should make these changes without public process and the Advisory Board, that it's a governor's issue. He thinks that the Advisory Board should at least discuss the pros and cons of these things, it seems like there should be a little bit of a public process and he states that he is a little bit upset about the route that goes from Amherst, because we already have a bus that goes to Sugarloaf Estates. Tina M. Cote doesn't think it's going to take anything away from Rt 23. We are feeding into the PVTA system, and they are feeding back into ours.

It was explained that this new service is grant-funded, so it may not be permanent. These are services/routes that we are being tried to see if there is a need for them. As for Leverett, this was the way to get residents from Leverett into Greenfield. As of right now there isn't any service and it gets direct access to Amherst. We aren't voting on anything because these are per se "pilot programs" being funded by grants, this was a PVTA grant. We work within a very short timeframe to write and submit these grants, not knowing if they will be awarded. To get input or an Advisory Board vote would likely delay the process or have us miss the deadline to apply all together.

Tina M. Cote reiterates that we look at the recommendations that were in the Comprehensive Regional Transit Plan, things we have learned from the Council of Governments, community input and what we have available for drivers and vehicles etc. We then develop a plan to operate service based on our capabilities. If it becomes successful and we can continue to fund it, we will then involve the public in the decision making and bring it to the Board for a final vote. Some of the pilot programs might be here to stay, or they might be very temporary.

Jeff acknowledged that he understands the rationale for it.

Michael Perreault adds for context for the Advisory Board, that these new Innovation Grants from MassDOT had an extremely tight turnaround time, probably under six weeks. Basically, they released it, said people had 6 weeks to turn something around, and these were competitive grants, so it would definitely be some logistical challenges trying to come up with an idea, pitch it to the Advisory Board, get by that and turn in a good grant.

Michael clarifies that what Tina M. Cote wants to reiterate to people is that these funds that we are getting and these services that we are operating off of grants are not going to impact your local assessment. If we find that these things are working and worthwhile, we definitely have to go back to the public commenting and public feedback and look to the Advisory Board to see if that's something you want to adopt in a permanent sense. A lot of these grants MassDOT has been releasing as of late have been extremely tight turnarounds, so we have been looking at partnering with agencies like the FRCOG. They really helped out with the idea of trying to get more service for Shutesbury and access for our towns to connect with PVTa and Sunderland.

Eric Twarog asks if there are any more questions or concerns, and topic that they want to discuss at this time. There were none, so Peter Otten made a **motion** to adjourn. 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	1.47	Yes
Peter Otten	Buckland	1.55	Yes
Kim Blakeslee	Charlemont	2.07	Yes
Emily Thurber	Colrain	1.19	Yes
Diana Parsons	Colrain	0.00	
Robert J. Decker III	Deerfield	4.43	Yes
Eric Twarog	Greenfield	33.81	Yes
Greg Gagnon	Hatfield	2.05	Yes
Will Cosby	Hawley	1.06	Yes
Michele Giarusso	Leyden	1.01	Yes
Jeff Singleton	Montague	12.06	Yes
Rick LaPierre	Shelburne	2.62	Yes
Scott Szczebak	Southampton	1.71	Not Present
Nicole Parker	Southwick	2.16	Not Present
Susan Bronstein	Westhampton	1.04	Yes
S. Peter Cane	Whately	1.97	Yes
Total		70.20	

Yes – 66.33

No – 0.00

Abstain – 0.00

Not Present – 3.87

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

The next Advisory Board meeting will be on March 20, 2025.

The meeting concluded at 5:02pm.