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INCREASING REGIONAL TRANSIT ACROSS THE COMMONWEALTH: ADVANCING REGIONAL TRANSIT AUTHORITIES TO CREATE A 21ST-CENTURY TRANSPORTATION SYSTEM IN MASSACHUSETTS

March 2021



MASSPIRG



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Executive Summary

Massachusetts needs strong, statewide public transportation. Regional public transit is essential for mobility and economic opportunity; to reduce congestion and protect our climate, air quality and health; and to encourage strong and vibrant communities. This was true before the novel coronavirus (COVID-19) crisis hit the state in March of 2020, and it will still be true after the crisis is over.

Operating primarily outside of the Greater Boston region, 15 Regional Transit Authorities (RTAs) provide public transportation service to millions of Bay Staters.¹ RTAs are a lifeline for many in Massachusetts who do not own cars; for frontline workers; for employers whose workforce needs transit; for students and educational institutions; and for health and wellness.

But they can be so much more.

The RTAs can be mobility managers for their regions. They can provide fast, frequent and reliable transportation options that people get out of their cars. They can help us alleviate traffic congestion, close opportunity gaps, and reduce air pollution and greenhouse gas emissions. But to get there, we need to adopt a vision for the future of the RTAs and provide them with the resources necessary to achieve that vision.

The Task Force on Regional Transit Authority Performance and Funding began that legwork by producing a visionary report with 24 recommendations for improving the RTAs. The recommendations addressed funding, governance, service and sustainability and laid out the beginnings of a roadmap towards a better transportation future for Massachusetts.²

But how well are we adopting and implementing those recommendations? And are we doing enough to achieve the vision of a better, more connected Commonwealth?

A full accounting of the RTA Task Force recommendations, and whether there has been subsequent action taken, is provided in the appendix of this report. While there has been progress on a number of the recommendations, several others have yet to be acted on in any substantive way.

For example, the first recommendation of the Task Force was: “The legislature should fund the RTAs in fiscal year 2020 with a base of \$90.5 million in state contract assistance. Each subsequent year increase the state contract assistance by an automatic inflator.”³ The legislature allocated a total of \$90.5 million to the RTAs for fiscal year 2020, but it was not all base funding. Base funding was set at \$87 million, with the last \$3.5 to be distributed by MassDOT for performance-based grants.⁴ The legislature has not applied an automatic annual inflator.

¹ MassDOT, “Regional Transit Authorities: New Metrics and Funding Provisions in FY19 Budget,” September 2018, accessed at https://www.mass.gov/files/documents/2018/09/18/RTA_Taskforce_091718.pdf.

² “Task Force on RTA Performance and Funding,” MassDOT, accessed Feb. 25, 2021, <https://www.mass.gov/orgs/task-force-on-rta-performance-and-funding-massdot>.

³ “A Vision for the Future of Massachusetts’ Regional Transit Authorities,” MassDOT, accessed Feb. 25, 2021 <https://www.mass.gov/doc/a-vision-for-the-future-of-massachusetts-regional-transit-authorities/download>.

⁴ FY 2020 Final Budget, Commonwealth of Massachusetts, accessed on Feb. 25, 2021 <https://malegislature.gov/Budget/FY2020/FinalBudget>.

Among the recommendations that have not yet been fully adopted, this report recommends the following be prioritized:

- Adopt an **automatic annual Consumer Price Index (CPI)** increase in the base RTA operating budget, setting a baseline **benchmark of \$94 million in FY22**.
- Continue to develop and **improve the “reinvigorated RTA Council,”** using it as a forum to tackle the big picture issues identified in the RTA Task Force report.
- Begin to pilot and **implement more cross-RTA services and better coordination and connection between authorities**, including with the MBTA.

There are also a number of additional – or interim – recommendations to add, including:

- **Reform the distribution of operating funds** so that they are based on a more relevant and realistic picture of each RTAs budget and needs, and so that they are designed to help RTAs achieve the service and performance goals set out in the RTA Task Force report.
- The Commonwealth should **develop a statewide transit plan with a vision for the future of public transportation in Massachusetts**, including setting baseline expectations for service in different types of geographic areas.
- **Farebox recovery ratio should no longer be used as a performance metric** for the RTAs.
- MassDOT and the RTAs should work together, with the Central Transportation Planning Staff, to **complete an electric bus feasibility study**, and all RTAs should begin wider scale pilots of electric bus implementation as soon as possible.

Introduction

Massachusetts is facing a transportation crisis. The poster child has often been the traffic in and around the Greater Boston area, and while that is undoubtedly a large part of the crisis, it doesn't tell the full story.

Although geographically small, Massachusetts is a diverse state with stark differences between east and west, especially around issues of mobility and economic prosperity. Eastern Massachusetts and the Greater Boston region have their own particular transportation challenges, as do the Berkshires, Worcester, Pioneer and Merrimack Valleys, as well as the Cape and Islands.

Massachusetts is also facing a climate and public health crisis. Sea levels across the coastline continue to rise. Extreme weather and flooding continue to become more frequent. Springfield and Boston both fell within the top ten of the most recent national "asthma capitals."⁵ We now know that air pollution also makes us more vulnerable to the devastating effects of COVID-19.⁶

To meet these challenges, the entire Commonwealth needs a robust, well-funded and modern public transportation network. That means improving the Massachusetts Bay Transportation Authority (MBTA), but no less important is improving and expanding the Regional Transit Authorities (RTAs).

Outside of the Greater Boston region, 15 RTAs provide public transportation service to millions of Bay Staters. For those who ride the RTAs, they provide a lifeline. They are their connections to work, school, healthcare, grocery stores, social activities, substance use treatment, and family support networks. They help people get where they need to go. RTAs provide an essential service for the communities they serve and for the businesses and institutions that rely on them for commuting employees, students, customers and visitors.

In large part, however, the service is either not far reaching enough, not frequent enough or not convenient enough to provide the level and quality of transit we need in Massachusetts. This is a result

“Investing in and expanding public transit service is critical. Transit is not only the backbone of the Commonwealth’s economic center, it is a lifeline for those who depend on it. It is essential that the Commonwealth builds upon what it has in order to develop a transit network that is as robust, reliable, and convenient to remain a viable option and choice for a greater number of people.”

–Choices for Stewardship, the report of the Governor’s Commission on the Future of Transportation, December 2018.

⁵ Asthma Capitals: Top 100 National Ranking,” Asthma and Allergy Foundation of America, 2019, <https://www.aafa.org/asthma-capitals-top-100-cities-ranking/>.

⁶ COVID-19 PM2.5: A national study on long-term exposure to air pollution and COVID-19 mortality in the United States,” Harvard University, April 24, 2020, <https://web.archive.org/web/20200909100940/https://projects.iq.harvard.edu/covid-pm>.

of a number of factors, including the unique needs of the RTA service areas and a history of chronic underinvestment in the agencies.

It is time to turn a corner on the RTAs. With a renewed focus and greater, predictable investment, the RTAs can improve rider experience by modernizing their service, routes and bus fleets. The RTAs can move more people, reduce more air pollution and help grow local economies.

In the fall of 2018 and winter of 2019, a Task Force on Regional Transit Authority Performance and Funding, given its charge by the state legislature, convened for a series of meetings and produced a report and recommendations.⁷ Progress has been made toward adopting some of those recommendations, but others have seen no action. As the RTAs work to modernize and adapt to our 21st-Century needs and challenges, we should continue to update the document and work to find new solutions to improve RTA service and operation. To that end, as of a year after the Task Force's report was published, there are several short-term and long-term recommendations that should now be added.

As of February 2021, COVID-19 continues to impact every part of the lives and livelihoods of people across Massachusetts. The full impact of COVID-19 on the RTAs remains unclear. But what is clear is that, prior to the crisis, the Massachusetts transportation system needed a transformation. That will remain true once the crisis is over. The RTAs must be a part of that transformation.

The Current State of the RTAs

Regional transit authorities in Massachusetts have provided critical public transportation services since their inception, but have not always been updated to utilize the most current technologies and to meet the shifting trends and needs of Massachusetts communities.

There are currently 15 RTAs in Massachusetts serving diverse communities from the Berkshires and Franklin County, to the cities of Worcester and Springfield, to the Cape and Islands.⁸ Each RTA is locally controlled by an Administrator and a board consisting of representatives from the towns served.⁹

Collectively, there were about 100,000 daily bus trips taken on the RTAs, making up a little over seven percent of total public transportation trips in the Commonwealth, prior to the COVID-19 pandemic.¹⁰ While the MBTA makes up the vast majority of public transportation trips, about 55 percent of the population lives in RTA service areas.¹¹ Some of these areas are served by the MBTA Commuter Rail,

⁷ "Task Force on RTA Performance and Funding," MassDOT, accessed Feb. 25, 2021, <https://www.mass.gov/orgs/task-force-on-rt-a-performance-and-funding-massdot>.

⁸ "Public Transportation in Massachusetts," Commonwealth of Massachusetts, accessed January 3, 2019, <https://www.mass.gov/info-details/public-transportation-in-massachusetts>.

⁹ Massachusetts General Laws, Chapter 161B, Section 4 & 5.

¹⁰ MassDOT, "Transportation Facts," accessed January 3, 2019, https://www.mass.gov/files/documents/2017/12/06/MassDOT_TransportationFacts2015.pdf.

¹¹ "2018 Annual MassDOT Report on Regional Transit Authority," MassDOT, December 31, 2018, <https://malegislature.gov/Reports/7539/MassDOT%20RTA%202018%20Year%20End%20Report.pdf>

"Quick Facts Massachusetts," U.S. Census, accessed Mar. 4, 2021, <https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/fact/table/MA#>
This percentage was calculated by dividing the "Total RTA Population" figure on slide 7 by the total population of Massachusetts in 2018 according to the U.S. Census Bureau and multiplying by one hundred. (3.77 million/6.88 million)100 = 54.79%

but their local transit options are limited to the RTAs. Because of their limited reaches, the RTAs are not currently providing service for everyone within that 55 percent.

Each RTA either operates its own transit service, or contracts out operations. Each is in control of planning routes and setting schedules. Some RTAs provide night and weekend services, but others do not.¹²

THE IMPACT OF COVID-19 ON THE RTAs

The novel coronavirus (COVID-19) has impacted the lives and livelihoods of everyone in Massachusetts in countless ways. The RTAs are no exception. Ridership (and fare revenue) has been depressed during the lockdown and subsequent months.¹³ As of February 2021, it remains unclear how long the effects of COVID-19 will last, but it is clear that public transportation agencies across the country, including the RTAs, will feel long-term impacts.

But, in many ways, COVID-19 has shined a spotlight on how important public transportation is to 21st-Century society. While overall ridership is down, public transportation across Massachusetts has been critical to essential travel—getting many of our doctors, nurses, pharmacists, grocery store

clerks, and others to the front lines of the crisis. The pandemic has also given us an unprecedented view of what a future with less car travel might look like: less congestion, cleaner air, and a more livable climate.

As we emerge from the COVID-19 crisis, it is important that we continue to work to maximize the reach of the RTAs. Moving forward, they will play an all-important role in moving people around our state and in building a healthier more sustainable future. But the impacts of COVID-19 will make that all the more difficult. RTA budgets will feel the effects of the lost fare revenue for at least the next two years,¹⁴ and at the same time, cleaning, maintenance, and personal protective equipment (PPE) costs will be higher than ever before.¹⁵

¹² Transportation for Massachusetts, “Fact Sheet: Regional Transit Authorities,” available at https://d3n8a8pro7vhmx.cloudfront.net/t4ma/pages/205/attachments/original/1530825685/RTAs_Final_7-5_with_hyperlinks.pdf?1530825685.

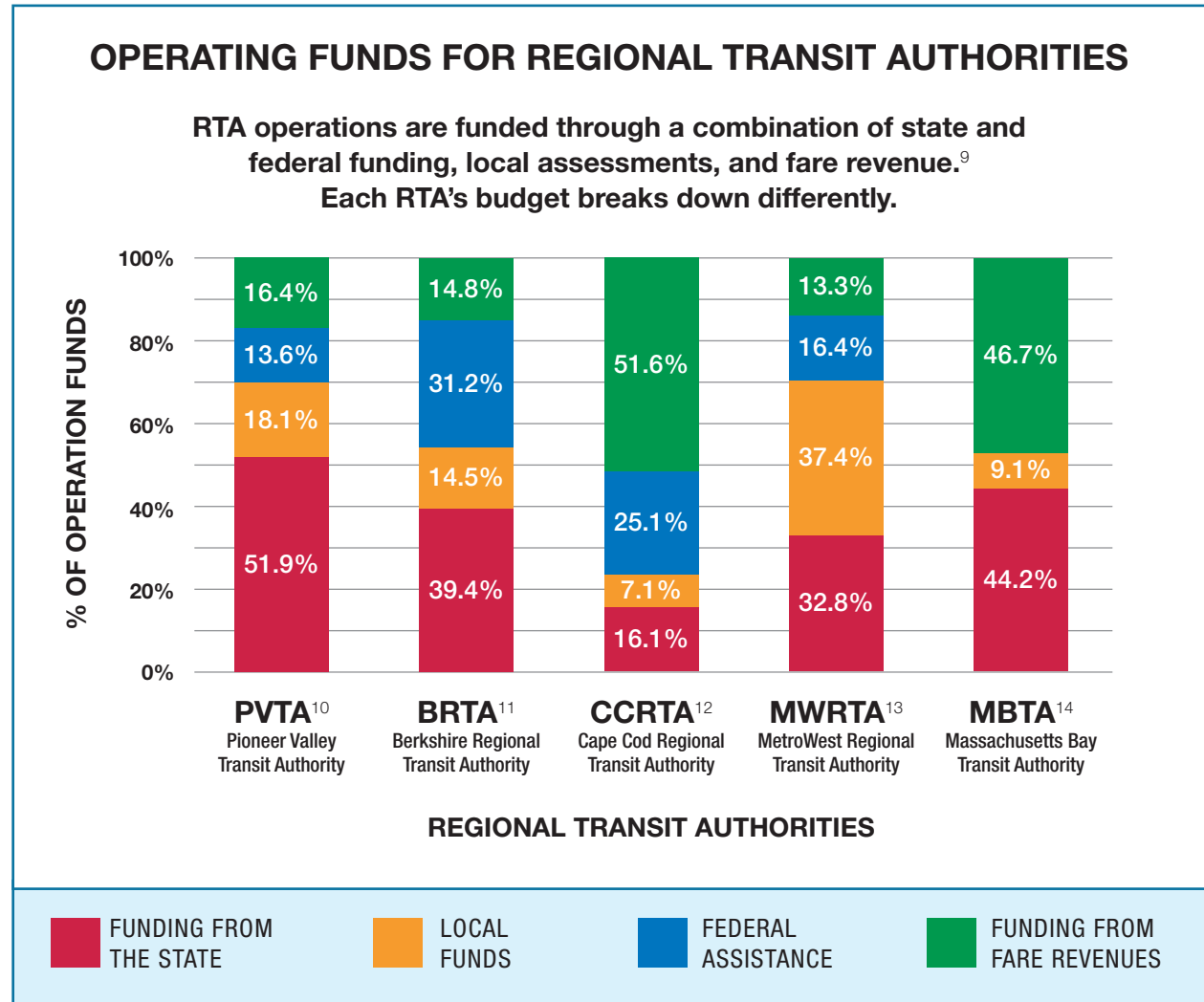
¹³ “Report from the Rail and Transit Administrator, presented to the MassDOT Board on April 13, 2020”, https://www.mass.gov/files/documents/2020/04/14/dot-brd_05_CARES_Act_041320.pdf.

¹⁴ Abby Vessoulis, “The Future of American Public Transit Depends on Congress,” Time Magazine, December 17, 2020, <https://time.com/5921917/mass-transit-covid-congress/>.

¹⁵ “The Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Public Transit Funding Needs in the U.S.,” January 27, 2021, <https://www.apta.com/wp-content/uploads/APTA-COVID-19-Funding-Impact-2021-01-27.pdf>.

OPERATING FUNDING

Operating funding is money used to actually run public transportation service. The vast majority of public transit operating funding goes to pay employee salaries and benefits. Other operating funding goes to pay for such things as fuel, insurance, maintenance, and utilities.



¹⁶ Federal Transit Administration, "Transit Agency Profiles," accessed January 29, 2020, <https://www.transit.dot.gov/ntd/transit-agency-profiles>.

¹⁷ Federal Transit Administration, "Transit Agency Profiles," accessed January 29, 2020, https://cms7.fta.dot.gov/sites/fta.dot.gov/files/transit_agency_profile_doc/2019/10008.pdf

¹⁸ Federal Transit Administration, "Transit Agency Profiles," accessed January 29, 2020, https://cms7.fta.dot.gov/sites/fta.dot.gov/files/transit_agency_profile_doc/2019/10007.pdf

¹⁹ Federal Transit Administration, "Transit Agency Profiles," accessed January 29, 2020, https://cms7.fta.dot.gov/sites/fta.dot.gov/files/transit_agency_profile_doc/2019/10105.pdf

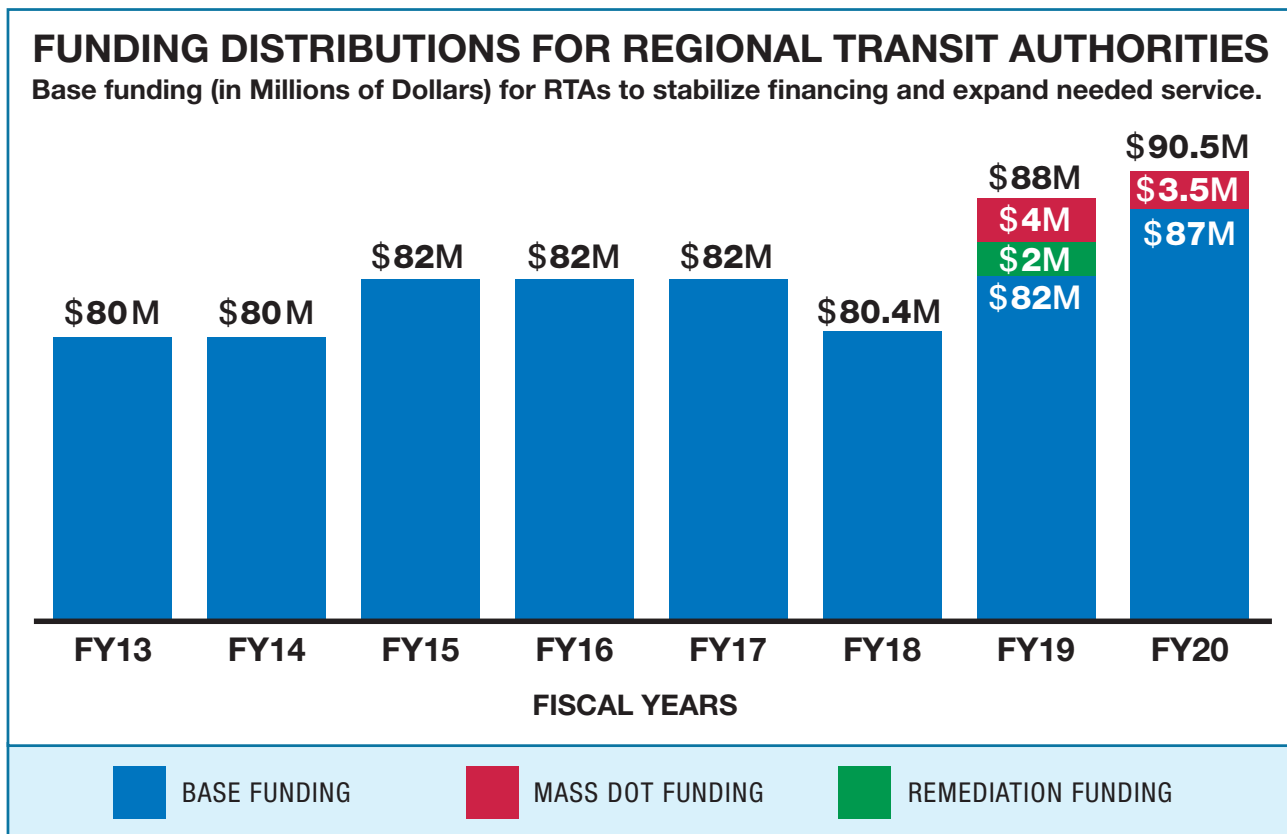
²⁰ Federal Transit Administration, "Transit Agency Profiles," accessed January 29, 2020, https://cms7.fta.dot.gov/sites/fta.dot.gov/files/transit_agency_profile_doc/2019/10118.pdf

²¹ Federal Transit Administration, "Transit Agency Profiles," accessed January 29, 2020, https://cms7.fta.dot.gov/sites/fta.dot.gov/files/transit_agency_profile_doc/2019/10003.pdf

Increasing Regional Transit Across the Commonwealth

Prior to fiscal year 2014, the RTAs received state funding in the form of reimbursements for expenses incurred in the previous year.²² Beginning in fiscal year 2014, after the passage of the 2013 Transportation Finance Act, the RTAs were “forward funded,” meaning state funding is allocated for the following fiscal year in the state budget, and distributed among them through a set formula.²³

When the law was passed in 2013 base funding, or “state contract assistance,”²⁴ for the RTAs was increased from just under \$67 million to \$80 million to stabilize financing and expand needed service.²⁵ Also envisioned was an approximately 2.5 percent annual increase in funding to meet rising expenses such as wages, health benefits and fuel increases.²⁶ RTAs were further required to submit Comprehensive Service Plans, which were finalized in 2015 and 2016.²⁷



²² “An Examination of the Commonwealth’s Funding Structure for Regional Transit Authorities,” MassDOT, Dec. 3, 2014, <https://www.mass.gov/doc/an-examination-of-the-commonwealths-funding-structure-for-regional-transit-authorities/download>.

²³ MassDOT, “Regional Transit Authorities: New Metrics and Funding Provisions in FY19 Budget,” September 2018, accessed at https://www.mass.gov/files/documents/2018/09/18/RTA_Taskforce_091718.pdf.

²⁴ Massachusetts General Laws, Chapter 161B, Section 23.

²⁵ MassDOT, “Regional Transit Authorities: New Metrics and Funding Provisions in FY19 Budget,” September 2018, accessed at https://www.mass.gov/files/documents/2018/09/18/RTA_Taskforce_091718.pdf.

²⁶ MassDOT, “Regional Transit Authorities: New Metrics and Funding Provisions in FY19 Budget,” September 2018, accessed at https://www.mass.gov/files/documents/2018/09/18/RTA_Taskforce_091718.pdf.

²⁷ The 2013 Transportation Finance Act required all RTAs to provide a Comprehensive Services Assessment with a plan to better serve the needs of their regions. These plans were completed between 2014 and 2016. This Act also proposed regular funding increases to RTAs from the Commonwealth Transportation Fund of 2.5% per year. An Act financing improvements to the Commonwealth’s transportation system, Massachusetts Sessions Law, Chapter 79 accessed on Feb. 25, 2021, <https://malegislature.gov/Laws/SessionLaws/Acts/2014/Chapter79>.

The RTAs received a 2.5 percent increase in state funding between fiscal years 2015 and 2016,²⁸ but in fiscal year 2017 state funding remained level at \$82 million.²⁹ Then, in fiscal year 2018, state funding was reduced to \$80.4 million.³⁰

In fiscal year 2019, if regular annual increases as envisioned by the 2013 law had been followed, the RTAs would have received state contract assistance of \$88 million. The state allocated a total of \$88 million for the RTAs, but it was not all in base funding. Instead, the RTAs received base state contract assistance of \$82 million, with an additional \$2 million in remediation funding for RTAs facing budget deficits, and an additional \$4 million to be distributed by the Massachusetts Department of Transportation (MassDOT) on a discretionary basis.³¹

Similarly, for fiscal year 2020, state contract assistance for the RTAs was again increased, but with some of the money held back as discretionary funding. For fiscal year 2020, the RTAs are receiving \$87 million in base contract assistance, with an additional \$3.5 million to be distributed by MassDOT on a discretionary basis.³²

Between fiscal years 2015 and 2019, several RTAs were forced to reduce service because funding did not keep up with regular increases in fuel costs, wages and healthcare, and other costs.³³ In fiscal year 2020, no RTAs further reduced service, but several RTAs, most notably the PVRTA, needed to "flex" or re-allocate some capital and state of good repair funds to make that possible, as the base funding of \$87 million on its own was not enough for all RTAs to maintain level service.³⁴

In fiscal year 2021, some discretionary grants from fiscal year 2020 were used for "service adaptations" in the form of demand-responsive service models, which displaced some fixed-route service.³⁵ For example, the Worcester Regional Transit Authority (WRTA) replaced the Westborough Commuter Shuttle with on-demand service,³⁶ in order to provide riders with a more flexible, affordable and convenient transit option. However, the Greater Attleboro and Taunton Regional Authority (GATRA) eliminated fixed-route service in four municipalities on the outer periphery of its service area and replaced it with requested curbside pickup.³⁷

²⁸ Mia Ping-Chieh Chen, "Regional transit authorities often lack funds for late-night, Sunday service," *The Sun Chronicle*, November 3, 2019, https://www.thesunchronicle.com/news/local_news/regional-transit-authorities-often-lack-funds-for-late-night-sunday-service/article_834a5e3c-db99-5698-9f03-8b9c28005b36.html.

²⁹ MassDOT, "Regional Transit Authorities: New Metrics and Funding Provisions in FY19 Budget," September 2018, accessed at https://www.mass.gov/files/documents/2018/09/18/RTA_Taskforce_091718.pdf.

³⁰ MassDOT, "Regional Transit Authorities: New Metrics and Funding Provisions in FY19 Budget," September 2018, accessed at https://www.mass.gov/files/documents/2018/09/18/RTA_Taskforce_091718.pdf.

³¹ MassDOT, "Regional Transit Authorities: New Metrics and Funding Provisions in FY19 Budget," September 2018, accessed at https://www.mass.gov/files/documents/2018/09/18/RTA_Taskforce_091718.pdf.

³² FY 2020 Final Budget, Commonwealth of Massachusetts, accessed on Feb. 25, 2021 <https://malegislature.gov/Budget/FY2020/FinalBudget>

³³ "Massachusetts Regional Transit Authorities need more money and need to improve service, report says," *MassLive*, Mar. 18, 2019, <https://www.masslive.com/news/2019/03/massachusetts-regional-transit-authorities-need-more-money-and-better-service-report-says.html>.

³⁴ "Pioneer Valley Transit Authority Financial Statements FY20," June 30, 2019 <http://www.pvta.com/documents/finStmnts/PVTA%202019%20Financial%20Statements.pdf>.

³⁵ "MassDOT Announces \$3.5 Million in Regional Transit Authority Grant Awards," *MassDOT*, Jan. 3, 2020 <https://blog.mass.gov/transportation/massdot-rail-transit/massdot-announces-3-5-million-in-regional-transit-authority-grant-awards/>.

³⁶ Cyrus Moulton, "WRTA to receive grant toward shuttle service in Westborough", *The Wicked Local Westborough*, Jan. 4, 2020 <https://westborough.wickedlocal.com/news/20200104/wrta-to-receive-grant-toward-shuttle-service-in-westborough>.

³⁷ Stephen Peterson, "GATRA bus service changing in Attleboro area towns," *The Sun Chronicle*, Dec. 10, 2020, https://www.thesunchronicle.com/news/local_news/gatra-bus-service-changing-in-attleboro-area-towns/article_c07e4573-2d62-58e0-91e9-2dd4ab4ca61c.html.

Most recently for fiscal year 2021, the historic funding pattern persisted, as state contract assistance was increased, but with a portion of the funding withheld as discretionary. Specifically, the RTAs are scheduled to receive an increased amount of \$90.5 million in base contract assistance, with an additional \$3.5 million in funds to be distributed by MassDOT on a discretionary basis for fiscal year 2021.³⁸

While this base funding increase is a heartening sign, there is still no mechanism in place to ensure annual increases that would protect RTAs from inflation.

FEDERAL STIMULUS FUNDING FOR THE RTAs

In response to the COVID-19 crisis, the federal government has so far passed several stimulus bills, including the CARES Act, which was signed into law on March 27, 2020,³⁹ and the Coronavirus Response and Relief Supplemental Appropriations Act of 2021 (CRRSAA), signed into law on December 27, 2020.⁴⁰

The CARES Act included an allocation of \$25 billion for public transit agencies nationwide.⁴¹ Eligible uses included all operating and capital expenses incurred on or after January 20, 2020, and in response to economic or other conditions caused by COVID-19. This included additional cleaning, maintenance and PPE expenses, as well as lost fare revenue.⁴²

In total, Massachusetts received around \$1 billion in transit funding from the CARES Act, a little over \$800 million of which went to the MBTA.⁴³ The rest was split among other transit providers in the state, including the RTAs, based on federal formulas. This funding has been invaluable for the RTAs as they continued to provide service during the pandemic and will attempt to stabilize service once it ends. Using this funding, the RTAs acquired PPE and other protective equipment, increased

cleaning and maintenance. The funding also helped RTAs make up for lost fare revenue and balance the budgets for the current and future fiscal years.⁴⁴

More recently, the Coronavirus Response and Relief Supplemental Appropriations Act of 2021 included an allocation of \$14 billion for public transit agencies across the country.⁴⁵ Of these funds, Massachusetts received \$342.4 million, \$301.3 million of which will go to the MBTA.⁴⁶ The remaining funds will be allocated as follows: \$27.1 million to the CCRTA, \$2.2 for the Montachusett Regional Transit Authority (MART), \$2.7 million to the Brockton Area Transit Authority (BAT), \$1.3 million for the MetroWest Regional Transit Authority (MWRTA), and just under \$1 million for the MVRTA, LRTA, GATRA, CATA and MART, while a final \$7.2 million will be allotted for rural areas.⁴⁷

While these influxes of federal funds have been necessary to stave off severe service cuts due to massive budget shortfalls caused by COVID-19, this funding is not a long-term strategy and will not be as successful if other sources of funding, like state contract assistance, are also reduced.

³⁸ FY 2021 Final Budget, Commonwealth of Massachusetts, accessed on Feb. 25, 2021, <https://malegislature.gov/Budget/FY2021/FinalBudget>.

³⁹ CARES Act, HR 748, accessed on Feb. 25, 2021 <https://www.congress.gov/bill/116th-congress/house-bill/748/text>

⁴⁰ Consolidated Appropriations Act, 2021, HR 133, accessed on Feb. 25, 2021, <https://www.congress.gov/bill/116th-congress/house-bill/133/text/enr>

⁴¹ CARES Act, HR 748, accessed on Feb. 25, 2021, <https://www.congress.gov/bill/116th-congress/house-bill/748/text>.

⁴² "Report from the Rail and Transit Administrator," MassDOT, April 13, 2020, <https://www.mass.gov/doc/rail-and-transit-report-written-presented-to-the-board-on-04132020/download>.

⁴³ "FY 2020 Cares Act Section 5307 Urbanized Area Apportionments," U.S. DOT, April 2, 2020, <https://www.transit.dot.gov/funding/apportionments/table-2-fy-2020-cares-act-section-5307-urbanized-area-apportionments>

⁴⁴ "Report from the Rail and Transit Administrator," MassDOT, April 13, 2020, <https://www.mass.gov/doc/rail-and-transit-report-written-presented-to-the-board-on-04132020/download>.

⁴⁵ "Coronavirus Response and Relief Supplemental Appropriations Act of 2021," Federal Transit Administration, Jan. 26, 2021, <https://www.transit.dot.gov/funding/grants/coronavirus-response-and-relief-supplemental-appropriations-act-2021#:~:text=On%20December%2027%2C%202020%2C%20the,health%20emergency%2C%20was%20signed%20into>.

⁴⁶ "CRRSAA Urbanized Area Apportionments (Section 5307), Federal Transit Administration, Jan. 11, 2021, <https://www.transit.dot.gov/funding/grants/table-2-crrsaa-urbanized-area-apportionments-section-5307>

⁴⁷ "CRRSAA Urbanized Area Apportionments (Section 5307), Federal Transit Administration, Jan. 11, 2021, <https://www.transit.dot.gov/funding/grants/table-2-crrsaa-urbanized-area-apportionments-section-5307> FY21 CRRSAA Boston UZA Split Letter.

CAPITAL FUNDING

Capital funding is money to build and maintain things. Capital funding for public transit is most often used to buy new buses, but it can also be used to build new garages, subway lines, and bus shelters. The RTAs receive capital funding from state and federal sources.

The RTA fleets are generally in a good state of repair, but in order to maintain this state of good repair and to allow the RTAs to adopt new technology, like electric buses, they need steady and adequate sources of capital funding. The recently enacted transportation bond bill provides for \$330 million in capital funding for RTAs.⁴⁸ Unfortunately, this new allocation does not even level fund the RTAs as compared with the 2014 bond bill, which provided for \$350 million.⁴⁹ The reduced capital funding will make it more challenging for RTAs to continue moving forward with electric bus procurements, other facility upgrades, and to maintain a state of good repair.

The RTAs also need to receive separate funding to upgrade, implement and maintain new fare collection systems that allow them to adopt off board and account-based fare collection technologies and infrastructure as well as to ensure continued interoperability with the MBTA fare collection system technology. With increased funding, the RTAs should also explore a fare-free pilot program designed to increase ridership among low-income populations.

⁴⁸ An Act authorizing and accelerating transportation investment, H5248, accessed on Feb. 25, 2021, <https://malegislature.gov/Bills/191/H5248>

⁴⁹ An Act financing improvements to the Commonwealth's transportation system, Massachusetts Sessions Law, Chapter 79 accessed on Feb. 25, 2021, <https://malegislature.gov/Laws/SessionLaws/Acts/2014/Chapter79>

The RTA Task Force Report

The report produced by the RTA Task Force was forward thinking and visionary. The Task Force made 24 recommendations in five categories. The recommendations and the subsequent actions taken, if any, are detailed in the chart below. Subsequent actions in green mean that the recommendation has been adopted and completed, yellow means that implementation is in progress, and red means that no action has been taken on the recommendation, or if any action has been taken, it has not been publicly reported.

Investment and Performance

TASK FORCE RECOMMENDATION	SUBSEQUENT ACTION
<p>1. The legislature should fund the RTAs in fiscal year 2020 with a base of \$90.5 million in state contract assistance. Each subsequent year increase the state contract assistance by an automatic inflator.</p>	<p>The legislature allocated a total of \$90.5 million to the RTAs for fiscal year 2020, but it was not all base funding. Base funding was set at \$87 million, with the last \$3.5 to be distributed by MassDOT for performance-based grants. The legislature has not applied an automatic annual inflator.⁵⁰</p>
<p>2. All state contract assistance will be connected to performance targets via a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU). MOUs will be bilaterally negotiated between MassDOT and each RTA and will identify performance targets in the following categories: ridership; customer service and satisfaction; asset management; and financial performance (incorporating a number of factors including farebox recovery ratio).</p>	<p>The legislature required that RTAs and MassDOT sign MOUs that identify these categories of performance targets as part of the budget allocation process. All RTAs have signed these MOUs with MassDOT for fiscal year 2020.⁵¹</p>
<p>3. Provide communities with the tools they need to increase local contributions to RTA funding, including through regional ballot initiatives.</p>	<p>No action as of the writing of this report.</p>
<p>4. Establish a Human Services Transportation working group to explore ways to better collaborate, improve service and save money through the brokerage system.</p>	<p>No action as of the writing of this report.</p>

⁵⁰ FY 2020 Final Budget, Commonwealth of Massachusetts, accessed on Feb. 25, 2021 <https://malegislature.gov/Budget/FY2020/FinalBudget>.

⁵¹ FY 2020 Final Budget, Commonwealth of Massachusetts, accessed on Feb. 25, 2021 <https://malegislature.gov/Budget/FY2020/FinalBudget>.

Accountability

TASK FORCE RECOMMENDATION	SUBSEQUENT ACTION
<p>5. Maintain local control of day-to-day operations and management of the RTAs, while standardizing performance metrics for level and quality of service and increasing regional collaboration to present a statewide vision for public transportation in the Commonwealth. MassDOT should include the RTAs as partners in statewide planning and decision making.</p>	<p>In progress. Standardized performance measurements were included in the MOUs signed by the RTAs and MassDOT as part of the fiscal year 2020 budget process.⁵²</p>
<p>6. There should be a reinvigorated RTA Council that fosters greater collaboration, promotes best practices, and provides a statewide vision for RTAs.</p>	<p>In progress. The “reinvigorated” RTA Council from recommendation six has met six times, in April, September and December 2019 and May and September 2020 as well as January 2021. The council is currently scheduled to meet in March, June and September of 2021.⁵³ Although MassDOT is now a much more active participant, the reinvigorated RTA Council meetings have yet to take on the bigger challenges identified by the RTA Task Force – including statewide service and performance standardization, cross-RTA service and technical assistance.</p>

Service Decisions

TASK FORCE RECOMMENDATION	SUBSEQUENT ACTION
<p>7. RTAs will continue to succeed by understanding their markets and by aiming to have their service networks meet the current and future mobility needs of their region as well as support connectivity to other regions where possible. This effort will be guided by (1) the completion or updating of Comprehensive Regional Transit Plans (CRTPs) every five years; (2) the evaluation of current service based on RTA service policies and standards; and (3) participation in local and regional planning processes.</p>	<p>In progress. RTAs are currently in the process of conducting new comprehensive service analyses.</p>

⁵² FY 2020 Final Budget, Commonwealth of Massachusetts, accessed on Feb. 25,2021 <https://malegislature.gov/Budget/FY2020/FinalBudget>.

⁵³ “Upcoming events for Regional Transit Authority (RTA) Council,” MassDOT, accessed on Feb. 25, 2021, https://www.mass.gov/regional-transit-authority-rta-council/events?_page=1

Service Decisions (continued)

TASK FORCE RECOMMENDATION	SUBSEQUENT ACTION
<p>8. RTAs should identify routes in their service areas where there is a demonstrated community need for seven-day-a-week and evening and night service.</p>	<p>In progress. RTAs continue to measure route performance regularly and several grants announced in January 2020 are helping RTAs pilot or study extended service hours and frequency.⁵⁴ <i>(Note: COVID-19 has severely impacted ridership on certain routes in 2020 as well as 2021 thus far.)</i></p>
<p>9. In high-density areas, 0.25 miles, or 5 minutes' walk time, is the limit of a fixed-bus route's typical "service area." In lower-density, rural areas and to supplement fixed route service, RTAs should seek to provide on-demand service, microtransit service, or partner with Transportation Management Associations, municipal shuttles, Councils on Aging, Transportation Network Companies (TNCs), bikeshare companies and other mobility services to meet demonstrated community needs.</p>	<p>In progress. Several grants announced in January 2020 are helping RTAs to pilot microtransit and other creative service delivery models.⁵⁵</p>
<p>10. RTAs should develop pilot programs that include innovative transit delivery models. By piloting different transit models, the RTAs will be able to determine what will improve transit delivery in their service area.</p>	<p>In progress. Several grants announced in January 2020 are helping RTAs to pilot microtransit and other creative service delivery models.⁵⁶</p>
<p>11. In communities that sit on the border of two RTAs, RTAs should work together to increase access to cross RTA services in order to better unify the Commonwealth's public transportation and increase access to more robust services.</p>	<p>No action as of the writing of this report.</p>
<p>12. RTAs should work with cities and towns to provide a safe, accessible, and comfortable walking and biking environment around all bus stops, as well as safe, accessible, and comfortable bus stops.</p>	<p>No action as of the writing of this report.</p>

⁵⁴ "MassDOT Announces \$3.5 Million in Regional Transit Authority Grant Awards," MassDOT, Jan. 3, 2020 <https://blog.mass.gov/transportation/massdot-rail-transit/massdot-announces-3-5-million-in-regional-transit-authority-grant-awards/>.

⁵⁵ "MassDOT Announces \$3.5 Million in Regional Transit Authority Grant Awards," MassDOT, Jan. 3, 2020 <https://blog.mass.gov/transportation/massdot-rail-transit/massdot-announces-3-5-million-in-regional-transit-authority-grant-awards/>.

⁵⁶ "MassDOT Announces \$3.5 Million in Regional Transit Authority Grant Awards," MassDOT, Jan. 3, 2020 <https://blog.mass.gov/transportation/massdot-rail-transit/massdot-announces-3-5-million-in-regional-transit-authority-grant-awards/>.

Service Decisions (continued)

TASK FORCE RECOMMENDATION	SUBSEQUENT ACTION
<p>13. RTAs should provide reliable paratransit service in compliance with the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) requirements and consider the feasibility of offering additional services beyond ADA that meet the needs of their communities. RTAs should also implement an easy-to-use scheduling system using technology that improves the customer experience.</p>	<p>No action as of the writing of this report.</p>
<p>14. MassDOT and the RTAs should carefully utilize farebox recovery ratio as a performance metric, considering the ratio in context with other factors and balancing the need to maintain the affordability of service.</p>	<p>Farebox recovery ratio was included among the performance measurements required of the RTAs in the fiscal year 2020 MOUs signed with MassDOT. Further discussion is required to determine the farebox recovery ratio's role as a long-term performance measurement.</p>
<p>15. Every three years, each RTA should conduct a fare equity and market analysis and present the findings to their Advisory Boards and MassDOT. This process should inform any fare increases or changes in fare policy.</p>	<p>In progress. RTAs will be conducting analyses on fare policy in 2022.</p>
<p>16. RTAs should modernize and standardize fare collection by partnering with the MBTA and adopting the new Automated Fare Collection, or AFC 2.0 system, on a statewide basis, while still maintaining an accessible system for cash customers as appropriate.</p>	<p>In progress. The MBTA's timeline for AFC 2.0 has been delayed due to the impacts of COVID-19, but the RTAs plan to move forward with modernizing fare collection in close collaboration with MassDOT and the MBTA.⁵⁷</p>
<p>17. RTAs will perform regular analysis, community outreach, and actively participate in the Massachusetts Environmental Policy Act (MEPA) process to: (a) understand employment patterns, (b) identify opportunities to establish partnerships, and (c) explore potential service adjustments and potential new service to meet demand.</p>	<p>No action as of the writing of this report.</p>

⁵⁷ "Massachusetts Bay Transportation Authority, Fare Transformation," accessed, Mar. 3, 2021 <https://www.mbta.com/fares/fare-transformation>.

Quality of Service

TASK FORCE RECOMMENDATION	SUBSEQUENT ACTION
<p>18. RTAs should determine which routes are prone to bus crowding and address the issues that cause bus crowding.</p>	<p>No action as of the writing of this report.</p>
<p>19. RTAs should ensure fixed routes, or on-demand services where appropriate, maximize multimodal connectivity. To this same end, new infrastructure which addresses first-last mile problems, especially sidewalks, bike lanes, racks, bikeshares, and/or lockers, should be prioritized. RTAs should work in-tandem with their planning partners to participate in transit-oriented development and engage with new developments to provide transportation solutions to new developments and housing as it comes online.</p>	<p>No action as of the writing of this report.</p>
<p>20. All RTAs should have an easily accessible website and a robust social media presence to allow for direct communication with their riders or potential riders.</p>	<p>In progress. All RTAs have accessible websites and more than half of all RTAs have some presence on social media to keep riders informed of service.</p>
<p>21. MassDOT should collaborate with the RTAs and the MBTA to adopt consistent use of statewide tables, maps and abbreviations and work towards greater integration between RTA and MBTA information services where appropriate.</p>	<p>No action as of the writing of this report.</p>
<p>22. RTAs should formally include the public in decision-making on matters related to new projects, fare changes and service planning. In doing so, RTAs should strive to include potential or would-be riders as well as current riders through intentional outreach to large employers, schools and other venues.</p>	<p>In progress. RTAs continue to include the public in decision-making on matters related to new projects, fare changes and service planning. Improvements on the reach of the public process is on-going.</p>

Environmental Sustainability

TASK FORCE RECOMMENDATION	SUBSEQUENT ACTION
<p>23. In order to reduce greenhouse gas emissions from the transportation sector by at least 40 percent by 2040, the RTAs and MassDOT should determine the mode shift that will be required to meet that goal, as well as work with local partners to create a long term environmental sustainability plan.</p>	<p>No action as of the writing of this report.</p>
<p>24. In keeping with the state's environmental goals related to transportation, all public transit bus purchases should be zero-emissions by 2035.</p>	<p>In progress. A number of RTAs have been pioneering electric bus technology. WRTA was one of the first transit agencies in the nation, and the first cold-weather agency, to purchase and run electric buses in regular service.⁵⁸ VTA has boldly set a goal of electrifying its entire fleet over the next several years.⁵⁹ PVRTA has three electric buses in service⁶⁰ and has received recent state and federal grants to purchase more – as has GATRA.⁶¹</p>

⁵⁸ “Worcester Regional Transit Authority Battery Electric Bus Deployment Project,” Moving Together 2017 Conference, Sept. 28, 2017, <http://www.umasstransportationcenter.org/Document.asp?DocID=319>.

⁵⁹ Sarah Shemkus, “Martha’s Vineyard transit plan goes beyond electrification” Energy News Network, Dec. 10, 2018, <https://energynews.us/2018/12/10/northeast/marthas-vineyard-transit-plan-goes-beyond-electrification/>.

⁶⁰ Mary Serreze, “Volkswagen settlement cash to buy electric buses for transit authorities in Pioneer Valley, Martha’s Vineyard,” Masslive, Jan. 30, 2019, https://www.masslive.com/politics/2018/07/vw_emissions_settlement_to_buy.html.

⁶¹ “MassDEP VW Settlement Semiannual Report,” Department of Environmental Protection, Dec. 31, 2020, <https://www.mass.gov/doc/massdep-vw-settlement-semiannual-report-2nd-half-of-2020/download>.

Service and Modernization Needs

This report breaks down the Task Force's recommendations into three broader categories: Service and Modernization Needs, Investment and Funding Needs, and Accountability and Good Governance. This category, Service and Modernization Needs, encompasses the Task Force's recommendations under the labels of "Service Decisions," "Quality of Service," and "Environmental Sustainability."

There is little dispute that the RTAs have significant service and modernization needs. Although the ability to meet these needs is intricately tied to investment and funding, the needs themselves should first be discussed without already placing monetary limitations on what we might be able to achieve.

SETTING A STANDARD OF SEVEN-DAY-A-WEEK SERVICE WITH EVENING AND NIGHT OPTIONS

If transit service is not available when a potential rider needs it, transit use is not an option. We are increasingly living in a society where we need transportation options outside of the traditional nine-to-five commuter schedule. This is especially true for riders of public transportation, who are more likely to work in healthcare or lower wage jobs, including in the hospitality, bar and food service industries, which require working a second or third shift and working on weekends.⁶² It is also especially true for riders with continuing healthcare needs, for example, treatment of substance use disorder (SUD). Many people in recovery from SUD need reliable daily and weekly transportation to methadone clinics and support group meetings, and may also have suspended drivers' licenses or are unable to afford cars.

Likewise, for public transit to be an option for recreation or errands, such as evening events, grocery shopping or weekend activities, there needs to be convenient, affordable options available during those times.

The traditional "commuter schedule," of a nine-to-five, Monday-through-Friday work week, no longer makes sense as the baseline for public transit service emerging from the COVID-19 pandemic. To best serve riders, the standard for public transportation service in the Commonwealth should be that it is available seven days a week, with robust evening and nighttime options.

That is not to say that every route must operate seven days a week, twenty-four hours a day. But in every RTA's service area, there are routes that could serve riders better with extended hours of service. The decisions whether to provide weekend or night service should not be based on funding but should instead be based on identified need. That is not how it currently works for most RTAs. Of the completed Comprehensive Service Assessments,⁶³ several have identified needs for extended hours of service but have not had the funding to provide it.

In fact, prior to the pandemic, six RTAs did not have routes that ran past 8:00 PM on weekdays and seven RTAs had no Sunday service at all.

⁶² "Who's left riding public transit? A COVID data deep dive," Medium, April 27, 2020, <https://medium.com/transit-app/whos-left-riding-public-transit-hint-it-s-not-white-people-d43695b3974a>.

⁶³ The 2013 Transportation Finance Act required all RTAs to provide a Comprehensive Services Assessment with a plan to better serve the needs of their regions. These plans were completed between 2014 and 2016. This Act also proposed regular funding increases to RTAs from the Commonwealth Transportation Fund of 2.5% per year. An Act financing improvements to the Commonwealth's transportation system, Massachusetts Sessions Law, Chapter 79 accessed on Feb. 25, 2021, <https://malegislature.gov/Laws/SessionLaws/Acts/2014/Chapter79>.

Pre-COVID Service Hours by Transit Authority in Massachusetts⁶⁴

TRANSIT AUTHORITY	WEEKDAY HOURS ⁶⁵	SATURDAY HOURS ⁶⁶	SUNDAY HOURS ⁶⁷
Berkshire Regional Transit Authority (BRTA)	5:45 AM – 7:20 PM	7:15 AM – 7:00 PM	None
Brockton Area Transit Authority (BAT)	5:00 AM – 11:30 PM	5:20 AM – 11:00 PM	10:00 AM – 6:25 PM
Cape Ann Transit Authority (CATA)	6:00 AM – 7:00 PM	9:00 AM – 5:50 PM	None
Cape Cod Regional Transit Authority (CCRTA) ⁶⁸	5:30 AM – 11:15 PM	5:30 AM – 11:15 PM	5:30 AM – 11:15 PM
Franklin Regional Transit Authority (FRTA)	5:00 AM – 7:30 PM	None	None
Greater Attleboro Taunton Regional Transit Authority (GATRA)	5:30 AM – 7:20 PM ⁶⁹	7:45 AM – 6:00 PM ⁷⁰	9:00 AM - 5:15 PM ⁷¹
Lowell Regional Transit Authority (LRTA)	5:55 AM – 9:45 PM	8:00 AM – 7:00 PM	9:30 AM – 5:45 PM ⁷²
Massachusetts Bay Transportation Authority (MBTA)	5:00 AM – 1:00 AM (some routes run between 1:00 AM and 5:00 AM)	5:00 AM – 1:00 AM (some routes run between 1:00 AM and 5:00 AM)	5:00 AM – 1:00 AM (some routes run between 1:00 AM and 5:00 AM)
Merrimack Valley Regional Transit Authority (MVRTA)	5:00 AM – 7:45 PM	7:00 AM – 6:40 PM	9:00 AM – 5:45 PM
MetroWest Regional Transit Authority (MWRTA)	5:30 AM – 8:50 PM	8:00 AM – 5:40 PM	None

⁶⁴ All information contained in this table comes from schedules available on each transit authority's website. *Note: These are pre-COVID-19 schedules and do not reflect any temporary schedule changes put into effect due to the lockdown.*

⁶⁵ These hours represent the earliest and latest any route starts or ends. Not all routes operate these hours.

⁶⁶ These hours represent the earliest and latest any route starts or ends. Not all routes operate these hours.

⁶⁷ These hours represent the earliest and latest any route starts or ends. Not all routes operate these hours.

⁶⁸ These hours only represent summer season service. Off-season hours and frequency are reduced.

⁶⁹ When Wheaton College is in session, GATRA operates a Wheaton T Shuttle that runs until midnight on weekdays.

⁷⁰ When Wheaton College is in session, GATRA operates a Wheaton T Shuttle that runs until 12:15 AM on Saturdays.

⁷¹ Only one route, the Scituate Loop, currently operates on Sundays.

⁷² LRTA is piloting Sunday service on ten routes.

Pre-COVID Service Hours by Transit Authority in Massachusetts (continued)

TRANSIT AUTHORITY	WEEKDAY HOURS	SATURDAY HOURS	SUNDAY HOURS
Montachusett Regional Transit Authority (MART)	5:15 AM – 7:40 PM	7:30 AM – 6:50 PM	None
Nantucket Regional Transit Authority (NRTA) ⁷³	7:00 AM – 12:00 AM	7:00 AM – 12:00 AM	7:00 AM – 12:00 AM
Pioneer Valley Transit Authority (PVTA) ⁷⁴	5:00 AM – 1:40 AM	5:30 AM – 1:40 AM	7:00 AM – 12:40 AM
Southeastern Regional Transit Authority (SRTA)	5:30 AM – 8:30 PM	6:00 AM – 6:00 PM	None
Vineyard Transit Authority (VTA) ⁷⁵	5:30 AM – 2:00 AM	5:30 AM – 2:00 AM	5:30 AM – 2:00 AM
Worcester Regional Transit Authority (WRTA)	6:00 AM – 10:00 PM	10:00 AM – 6:00 PM	10:00 AM – 6:00 PM

The Task Force addressed this issue in recommendation eight, which reads: “RTAs should identify routes in their service areas where there is a demonstrated community need for seven-day-a-week and evening and night service.”⁷⁶ The RTAs did this a number of years ago, when they were all required to submit comprehensive service analyses following the Transportation Finance Act of 2013.⁷⁷ Through that process, several RTAs identified routes on which there was a demonstrated need for evening and weekend service. However, in large part, they never received the funding necessary to implement that service. The Task Force’s recommendation should have kicked off a renewed process of identifying these routes and funding the service, but little actual action has been taken as of yet. In general, the RTAs know where these needs lie, but the FY20 and FY21 budgets are insufficient to allow them to expand service.

⁷³ These hours only represent summer season service. Off-season hours and frequency are reduced.

⁷⁴ The latest running routes serve the University of Massachusetts Amherst and run reduced schedules during breaks in the school year.

⁷⁵ These hours only represent pre-COVID summer season service. Off-season hours and frequency are reduced.

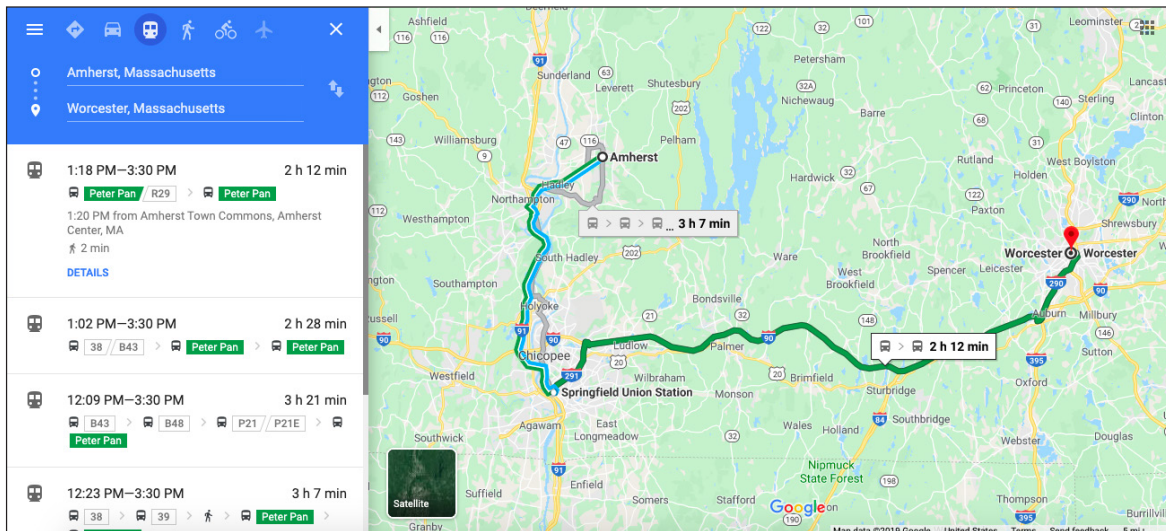
⁷⁶ “A Vision for the Future of Massachusetts’ Regional Transit Authorities,” Report of the Task Force on Regional Transit Authority Performance and Funding, April 5, 2019. <https://www.mass.gov/doc/a-vision-for-the-future-of-massachusetts-regional-transit-authorities/download>.

⁷⁷ The 2013 Transportation Finance Act required all RTAs to provide a Comprehensive Services Assessment with a plan to better serve the needs of their regions. These plans were completed between 2014 and 2016. This Act also proposed regular funding increases to RTAs from the Commonwealth Transportation Fund of 2.5% per year. An Act financing improvements to the Commonwealth’s transportation system, Massachusetts Sessions Law, Chapter 79 accessed on Feb. 25, 2021, <https://malegislature.gov/Laws/SessionLaws/Acts/2014/Chapter79>.

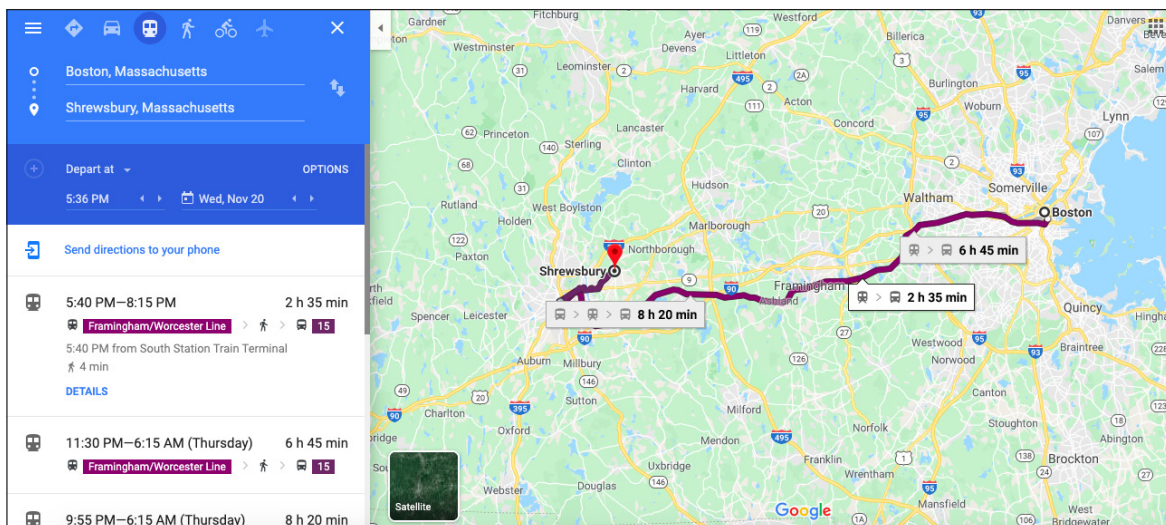
CROSS-RTA SERVICE AND MULTIMODAL CONNECTIONS

One of the limitations of the RTAs is that they do not currently do a very good job of providing convenient and frequent cross-RTA service or connections to other mobility services, including the MBTA Commuter Rail.

For example, according to pre-COVID schedules, to travel between Amherst and Worcester without a car, you would need to spend between two and three hours on several different buses, traveling first to Springfield on a PVTA bus and then getting on multiple Peter Pan buses, because neither the PVTA nor Worcester Regional Transit Authority (WRTA) provide reliable cross-RTA service between the cities.



Or, if you worked in Boston, and lived in Shrewsbury and wanted to take public transportation, it would take you over two hours to get home if you made the 5:40 PM commuter rail train. If you had to or wanted to stay in Boston late, you had to make sure you got a commuter rail train that got you home before the RTA buses stopped running.



In order to support a regional public transportation system where people look at public transit as a real option, the services need to be better coordinated and reach the places where people would want to go. Expanding service to better reflect the regional economy and the way people actually travel is important if we are going to increase ridership coming out of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Coordinating multimodal connections is important to solving first-mile and last-mile issues that have a large impact on public transportation ridership. The state is currently piloting increased rail service on the Knowledge Corridor, connecting Greenfield, Northampton, Holyoke and Springfield.⁷⁸ The “Valley Flyer” runs seven days a week and provides residents of Western Massachusetts with new options for getting to higher education and employment centers in the region, as well as improved regional connections to Connecticut and New York.⁷⁹ There is a lot of demand for rail service in Western Massachusetts and the new Valley Flyer was performing well prior to the pandemic.⁸⁰ To help ensure the continued success of rail, RTA service should be coordinated with the Valley Flyer in order to provide people with good first-mile and last-mile options, and to connect them with where they need to go after getting off the train.

SOLUTIONS FOR RURAL AND LOW-DENSITY AREAS

Access to public transportation in rural areas in Massachusetts is limited by travel times and distances, frequency of service, cost, and limitations in funding to address these challenges. The RTA Task Force report addressed some of these issues by recommending more on-demand service in rural areas and partnerships with local businesses and institutions in order to help fund and streamline service. However, the report does not address rural concerns in two areas: (1) it still requires rural RTAs to meet performance metrics based on ridership and farebox recovery, and (2) it did not address the system for disbursement of state funds.⁸¹

Using farebox recovery as a prevailing performance metric for rural and low-density areas is problematic, because by definition their costs are going to be higher and their ridership lower than denser urban areas. They have to have longer routes and have fewer people to serve. But low ridership routes in rural areas still serve an important purpose and have value. Farebox recovery is discussed in more detail on page 28, but rural RTAs especially should be measured against performance metrics that recognize and reflect the challenges and purpose of their service.

The system for disbursing state funds is discussed in more detail on page 27, but disbursement is currently based on outdated ridership statistics that don't reflect each RTA's current funding needs and put rural RTAs at a disadvantage. The system should be reformed to be based on a more regionally equitable formula that better reflects current funding needs.

⁷⁸ “Greenfield Pilot Update,” MassDOT, July 22, 2019, https://www.mass.gov/files/documents/2019/07/23/dot_GreenfieldPilotUpdate_072219.pdf

⁷⁹ Elizabeth Roman, “Valley Flyer train pilot program makes first trip,” Masslive, Aug. 30, 2019, <https://www.masslive.com/news/2019/08/valley-flyer-train-pilot-program-makes-first-trip.html>

⁸⁰ Miasha Lee, “Valley Flyer looks to increase ridership,” February 15, 2019, <https://www.thereporter.com/localnews/greaterspringfield/valley-flyer-looks-to-increase-ridership/>.

⁸¹ “A Vision for the Future of Massachusetts’ Regional Transit Authorities,” Report of the Task Force on Regional Transit Authority Performance and Funding, April 5, 2019, <https://www.mass.gov/doc/a-vision-for-the-future-of-massachusetts-regional-transit-authorities/download>.

IMPROVING PARATRANSIT SERVICES

Paratransit service is one of the most essential functions of the RTAs. For many with physical disabilities, especially those of lower incomes, public transportation is the only viable option to get around. All the RTAs in Massachusetts offer some level of paratransit service, usually taking the form of on-demand, dial-a-ride service.⁸² Many of the problems related to level of service in the RTA service areas also affect the quality of paratransit service across the state. While there are unique considerations for paratransit services, the standard of service should be the same as that of fixed route service: if someone needs a ride, they can get a ride.

Typically, paratransit services are only available during the hours of fixed route bus service. When service is cut, paratransit riders are among the most affected. While able-bodied riders may have other transit options, most disabled riders who cannot drive, bike, or walk far distances are rendered totally immobile. If RTAs wish to link the availability of paratransit service to their fixed route service hours, then late-night and weekend service must be standard. If these fixed route service hours are unreasonable for an RTA, then paratransit service hours must be extended to include times outside of fixed route service hours.

The RTA Task Force report recommended that RTAs meeting all Americans with Disabilities Act requirements,⁸³ but current limitations in RTA capacity has resulted in inconvenient and sometimes impersonal paratransit services. Paratransit riders must reserve a ride twenty-four hours in advance,⁸⁴ and often have a large time window in which they could be picked up.⁸⁵ This system severely limits the mobility of disabled riders. With the current scheduling system, it is difficult for a paratransit rider to know if a ride from an RTA will get them to a medical appointment on time, or if they can count on an RTA to get them back home after their appointment. Ensuring that paratransit riders can schedule a ride with no more than six hours' notice (within established service hours) will drastically increase their mobility while still allowing the RTA to run its paratransit services efficiently. Scheduling should also always include a precise pick-up and drop-off time.

ELECTRIFYING RTA FLEETS

A number of RTAs have been pioneering electric bus technology. The WRTA was one of the first transit agencies in the nation, and the first cold-weather transit agency, to purchase and run electric buses in regular service.⁸⁶ The Vineyard Transit Authority (VTA) has boldly set a goal of electrifying its entire fleet

⁸² "Massachusetts Regional Transit Authorities," DisabilityInfo.org, Accessed March 4, 2021, <https://disabilityinfo.org/fact-sheet-library/transportation/transportation-resources/>.

⁸³ "A Vision for the Future of Massachusetts' Regional Transit Authorities," Report of the Task Force on Regional Transit Authority Performance and Funding, April 5, 2019, <https://www.mass.gov/doc/a-vision-for-the-future-of-massachusetts-regional-transit-authorities/download>.

⁸⁴ "ADA Paratransit Service," Massachusetts Rehabilitation Commission, accessed on Feb. 25, 2021, <https://www.mass.gov/doc/ada-paratransit-service-and-the-ride/download>.

⁸⁵ "I-Team: Paratransit riders claim long wait times," WWLP, June 22, 2015, <https://www.wwlp.com/news/i-team-paratransit-riders-claim-long-wait-times/>.

⁸⁶ "Worcester Regional Transit Authority Battery Electric Bus Deployment Project," Moving Together 2017 Conference, Sept. 28, 2017, <http://www.umasstransportationcenter.org/Document.asp?DocID=319>.

over the next few years.⁸⁷ The PVTA has three electric buses in service⁸⁸ and has received recent state and federal grants to purchase more – as have the Greater Attleboro-Taunton and Southeast Regional Transit Authorities (GATRA and SRTA).

Still, the vast majority of RTA buses run on diesel. Transportation produces more greenhouse gas emissions than any other sector in Massachusetts,⁸⁹ and diesel buses are highly polluting vehicles.⁹⁰ Diesel exhaust from tailpipes is a dangerous pollutant – one that is common in the air in urban areas and places with frequent truck and bus traffic.⁹¹ Springfield, which was named the national “asthma capital” in 2019 is an example of a city that could see huge public health benefits from bus electrification.⁹²



The PVTA is Massachusetts' largest Regional Transit Authority. Source: Newflyer504, licensed under Creative Commons

The state and the RTAs should work together to set a goal of electrifying RTA fleets by 2035. This will likely require the identification of new capital funding. RTAs should work together where possible on joint procurements to reduce costs, and seek federal grants to help offset the currently higher purchase prices of electric buses. The state should also provide RTAs with new sources of capital funding specifically for electric buses through the Transportation and Climate Initiative.⁹³

⁸⁷ Sarah Shemkus, “Martha’s Vineyard transit plan goes beyond electrification” Energy News Network, Dec. 10, 2018, <https://energynews.us/2018/12/10/northeast/marthas-vineyard-transit-plan-goes-beyond-electrification/>.

⁸⁸ Mary Serreze, “Volkswagen settlement cash to buy electric buses for transit authorities in Pioneer Valley, Martha’s Vineyard,” Masslive, Jan. 30, 2019, https://www.masslive.com/politics/2018/07/vw_emissions_settlement_to_buy.html

⁸⁹ “GHG Emissions and Mitigation Policies,” Commonwealth of Massachusetts, accessed on Feb. 25, 2021, <https://www.mass.gov/service-details/ma-ghg-emission-trends>.

⁹⁰ “Air pollution is cutting years off lifespans, diesel trucks and buses are a major cause,” Climate and Clean Air Coalition, March 2, 2020, <https://www.ccacoalition.org/en/news/air-pollution-cutting-years-lifespans-diesel-trucks-and-buses-are-major-cause>.

⁹¹ Alana Miller, “Electric Buses: Clean Transportation for Healthier Communities and Clean Air” MASSPIRG, May 2018, <https://masspirg.org/reports/map/electric-buses-clean-transportation-healthier-communities-and-cleaner-air>

⁹² “Asthma Capitals: Top 100 National Ranking,” Asthma and Allergy Foundation of America, 2019, <https://www.aafa.org/asthma-capitals-top-100-cities-ranking/>

⁹³ “About Us,” Transportation and Climate Initiative, accessed on Feb. 25, 2021, <https://www.transportationandclimate.org/>

In addition to helping mitigate global warming and unhealthy emissions, electric buses have the potential to cut operating costs for RTAs. Electric buses have the potential to lower fuel and maintenance costs, saving tens of thousands of dollars over each buses' lifetime.⁹⁴

Electric buses, especially if equipped with vehicle-to-grid technology,⁹⁵ also have the potential to provide further benefits by providing a new resource for energy storage or even as temporary sources of power during grid outages or emergencies. At the end of their useful lives powering the buses, batteries can also be converted to energy storage units.⁹⁶

MassDOT and the RTAs should work together to complete an electric bus feasibility study and all RTAs should begin wider scale pilots of electric bus implementation as soon as possible.

Investment and Funding Needs

The first category of recommendations taken up by the RTA Task Force was "Investment and Performance." This category included recommendations for funding for fiscal year 2020 moving forward as well as recommendations for new performance-based funding and performance metrics.⁹⁷

RTAs NEED PREDICTABLE BASELINE FUNDING

The first recommendation of the RTA Task Force reads: "The legislature should fund the RTAs in fiscal year 2020 with a base of \$90.5 million in state contract assistance. Each subsequent year increase the state contract assistance by an automatic inflator."⁹⁸

This recommendation was not adopted in full by the legislature. Instead, the legislature passed a budget that gave the RTAs \$87 million in base funding plus \$3.5 million in discretionary grants to be distributed by MassDOT on a one-time basis.⁹⁹ A provision providing for an automatic annual increase in the base funding based on the Consumer Price Index (CPI)¹⁰⁰ did not make it into the final budget.¹⁰¹

⁹⁴ Alana Miller, "Electric Buses: Clean Transportation for Healthier Communities and Clean Air" MASSPIRG, May 2018, <https://masspirg.org/reports/map/electric-buses-clean-transportation-healthier-communities-and-cleaner-air>

⁹⁵ "Vehicle to Grid - an overview," Science Direct, accessed on Feb. 25, 2021, <https://www.sciencedirect.com/topics/engineering/vehicle-to-grid>

⁹⁶ "Electric Volvo Bus Batteries Get Second Life," OEM OffHighway, September 15, 2020, <https://www.oemoffhighway.com/electronics/power-systems/batteries-capacitors/press-release/21194179/volvo-group-global-electric-volvo-bus-batteries-get-second-life>.

⁹⁷ "A Vision for the Future of Massachusetts' Regional Transit Authorities," Report of the Task Force on Regional Transit Authority Performance and Funding, April 5, 2019, <https://www.mass.gov/doc/a-vision-for-the-future-of-massachusetts-regional-transit-authorities/download>.

⁹⁸ "A Vision for the Future of Massachusetts' Regional Transit Authorities," Report of the Task Force on Regional Transit Authority Performance and Funding, April 5, 2019, <https://www.mass.gov/doc/a-vision-for-the-future-of-massachusetts-regional-transit-authorities/download>.

⁹⁹ FY 2020 Final Budget, Commonwealth of Massachusetts, accessed on Feb. 25, 2021, <https://malegislature.gov/Budget/FY2020/FinalBudget>.

¹⁰⁰ "Consumer Price Index," U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, accessed on Feb. 25, 2021, <https://www.bls.gov/cpi/>

¹⁰¹ FY 2020 Final Budget, Commonwealth of Massachusetts, accessed on Feb. 25, 2021, <https://malegislature.gov/Budget/FY2020/FinalBudget>.

RTA funding over the past several years has been inconsistent and unpredictable. Unpredictability is a problem for the RTAs, which need to complete their annual budgets, route plan and determine service levels at the beginning of the year. When they don't know what their budget is going to look like, that makes it harder for them to operate.

Unpredictability in funding is also a problem for riders. People move to certain areas, take certain jobs and go to certain schools based in part on the commute. Riders need to know that their transportation options aren't going to change drastically in order to make these important, long-term decisions. Losing a bus route, or even just losing frequency on a bus route, can mean an inability to get to work or school. It can mean severing a community's connections.

Setting an appropriate base and legislating an automatic annual increase solves the problem of unpredictability. That was the point of the first recommendation of the Task Force report. While the legislature did not adopt that recommendation in full for fiscal year 2020, it can still be achieved. Using the total funding of \$90.5 million allocated for 2020,¹⁰² the legislature should pass a bill securing an automatic increase, based on the CPI, for each following fiscal year.¹⁰³

The governor's proposed fiscal year 2021 budget (which was crafted and released before the COVID-19 crisis hit the state), allocated a total of \$94 million for the RTAs: \$90.5 million in base funding and \$3.5 million in performance-based grants.¹⁰⁴ Fortunately, this funding proposal was passed by the state legislature at the end of the last legislative session. But Massachusetts must ensure that base funding level is reliable throughout future fiscal years.

REFORMING THE DISTRIBUTION OF OPERATING FUNDS

Currently, the RTAs are allocated a total amount from the annual state budget, which is then divided up between the RTAs largely according to percentages that were determined in 2014 based on ridership as measured in 2015.¹⁰⁵ Those ridership figures were already outdated when adopted, and it makes little sense to continue to use those numbers to determine disbursement. The intention was that these would be updated as necessary, but more than five years later, that has not yet happened.

Reforming this allocation of operating funds is necessary to better reflect the current reality of RTA budgets and needs, and can also help achieve some of the long-term goals that were identified by the RTA Task Force, including piloting new types of service and implementing more weekend and evening service.

Any new formula for distributed operating funds to the RTAs should also take into account more than just ridership. Using ridership as the prevailing factor puts RTAs operating in rural or low-density areas at a disadvantage. Ridership alone does not necessarily reflect the value that the RTA service provides, and Massachusetts should be striving to create a system where RTAs in all corners of the Commonwealth are put in a position to succeed.

¹⁰² FY 2020 Final Budget, Commonwealth of Massachusetts, accessed on Feb. 25, 2021, <https://malegislature.gov/Budget/FY2020/FinalBudget>.

¹⁰³ In fiscal year 2021, state contract assistance should not be reduced due to CARES Act or other stimulus funding, which was designed to help RTAs address COVID-19 specific needs and offset lost fare revenue.

¹⁰⁴ FY21 Budget, Commonwealth of Massachusetts, accessed on Feb. 25, 2021, <https://malegislature.gov/Budget/FY2021/GovernorsBudget>

¹⁰⁵ "2018 MassDOT Annual Report on Regional Transit Authorities," MassDOT, Dec. 31, 2018, <https://malegislature.gov/Reports/7539/MassDOT%20RTA%202018%20Year%20End%20Report.pdf>.

FARE REFORM: FREE FARES AND THE FAREBOX RECOVERY RATIO

Transit agencies across the world, including a few in the U.S., are beginning to experiment with free fares, usually with great success.¹⁰⁶ It is popular, ridership increases and car travel decreases. Importantly, those who couldn't afford fares are given a new option.

One of the performance metrics included in the RTA Task Force's report, and one that MassDOT has relied heavily upon, is the "farebox recovery ratio." The "profitability" of a transit system is usually measured using the farebox recovery ratio, which is the difference between the revenue collected as user fares and operating expenses.¹⁰⁷

The fundamental problem with the farebox recovery ratio as a prevailing performance metric is that public transit systems are not meant to be profitable. That is not, or at least it should not be, their purpose. Their purpose is to provide efficient, affordable, safe and reliable transportation. They provide a public service— helping people get where they need to go. They provide further societal good by taking cars off the road, meaning less traffic and fewer global warming and health-harming emissions. Massachusetts should invest in public transit systems because they return social good – not because they may make a profit.

Despite the farebox recovery ratio performance metric, some RTAs are exploring free fares. Notably, in 2019, the city of Lawrence provided the Merrimack Valley Transit Authority (MVTA) with \$225,000 to offset the fare losses from three of the busiest bus routes in Lawrence for two years.¹⁰⁸ The routes service several important locations in the city, including Lawrence General Hospital, the technical school, the senior center, the industrial park, and the Essex Street business district. In the first few months of the program, ridership on the routes went up 24 percent.¹⁰⁹

Both the WRTA¹¹⁰ and the SRTA¹¹¹ implemented fare free pilot programs during the start of the COVID-19 pandemic.¹¹² The SRTA program will end in April 2021, while the WRTA program has been extended through summer 2021. Both of these programs demonstrate the potential for free fares to significantly increase ridership.¹¹³

¹⁰⁶ Josh Cohen, "Who's Afraid of Fare-Free Public Transit," Next City, May 25, 2018, <https://nextcity.org/daily/entry/whos-afraid-of-fare-free-public-transit>.

¹⁰⁷ "Farebox Recovery Ratio," The Geography of Transport Systems, accessed on Feb. 25, 2021, https://transportgeography.org/?page_id=5233.

¹⁰⁸ Bruce Mohl, "Lawrence eliminates fares on 3 bus routes," Commonwealth Magazine, Sept. 9, 2019, <https://commonwealthmagazine.org/transportation/lawrence-eliminates-fares-on-3-bus-routes/>.

¹⁰⁹ Jon Kamp, "Cities Offer Free Buses in Bid to Boost Flagging Ridership," Wall Street Journal, Jan. 14, 2020, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/cities-waive-bus-fares-in-bid-to-boost-ridership-11579007895>.

¹¹⁰ Neil McNamara, "Coronavirus: WRTA Stops Fare Enforcement, Enacts Rear Boarding," Patch, March 31, 2020, <https://patch.com/massachusetts/worcester/wrta-suspends-fare-enforcement-enacts-rear-boarding>.

¹¹¹ "Free rides coming to an end as SRTA will resume collecting fares on April," South Coast Today, February 26, 2021, <https://www.southcoasttoday.com/story/news/local/2021/02/26/srta-resumes-charging-fares-after-free-ma-public-transportation-rides-during-covid-pandemic/6802353002/>.

¹¹² Kerri Tallman, "Free rides coming to an end as SRTA will resume collecting fares on April," South Coast Today, February 26, 2021, <https://www.southcoasttoday.com/story/news/local/2021/02/26/srta-resumes-charging-fares-after-free-ma-public-transportation-rides-during-covid-pandemic/6802353002/>.

¹¹³ Tom Matthews, "WRTA board votes to extend fare suspension through June," Masslive, Feb. 18, 2021, <https://www.masslive.com/worcester/2021/02/wrta-board-votes-to-extend-fare-suspension-through-june.html>.

Whether to implement a discounted fare structure, or free fares, is something that needs to be studied and considered carefully by each individual transit agency. But as long as the farebox recovery ratio remains a prevailing performance metric, the RTAs will be discouraged from trying.

FINDING NEW SOURCES OF FUNDING

The RTA Task Force report indicated that RTAs should maximize all sources of funding, including fare recovery, advertising and local and federal funding, so as not to need to rely so heavily on state funding. The Task Force did not, however, discuss what additional funding the RTAs need to fully modernize, or discuss some new potential sources of that funding.¹¹⁴

As the Task Force noted, and as this report discusses on page 19, there should be a statewide standard of seven-day-a-week service, with evening and night service as necessary in any particular area. There should be higher frequency on heavily traveled routes and expanded service into traditionally underserved areas. In order to do all that, the RTAs will need a significant increase in operating funds over and above the current base. If Massachusetts truly wants the RTAs to succeed and become a widely used and successful 21st-Century public transportation network, we should give it to them.

The MBTA receives much of its funding from a dedicated source: the sales tax.¹¹⁵ The RTAs could benefit from a similarly stable dedicated source. For example, if the legislature raised the state gas tax, which hasn't been raised since 2013 (when it was raised from 21 cents to 24 cents),¹¹⁶ and dedicated three cents to the RTAs, that would equal \$90 million every year.¹¹⁷ This additional funding could be added to (and not replace) baseline funding and allow the RTAs to achieve many of these goals.

¹¹⁴ "A Vision for the Future of Massachusetts' Regional Transit Authorities," Report of the Task Force on Regional Transit Authority Performance and Funding, April 5, 2019, <https://www.mass.gov/doc/a-vision-for-the-future-of-massachusetts-regional-transit-authorities/download>.

¹¹⁵ Patrick Garvin, Catherine Cloutier and David M. Butler, "How the MBTA makes and spends its money," Boston Globe, March 2, 2015, <https://www.bostonglobe.com/metro/2015/03/02/how-mbta-makes-and-spends-its-money/PL3Z70XaEFfnl42awRcKMO/story.html>.

¹¹⁶ DOR Motor Fuel Excise, Commonwealth of Massachusetts, accessed on Feb. 25, 2021, <https://www.mass.gov/info-details/dor-motor-fuel-excise>. In fact, since 1991, the Massachusetts gas tax has only been raised by 15 percent. For perspective, in that same time, MBTA fares are up 325 percent.

¹¹⁷ Adam Vacarro, "Driving is surging in Massachusetts. Gas tax revenue? Not so much," Boston Globe, Nov. 30, 2019, <https://www.bostonglobe.com/metro/2019/11/30/driving-surgin-massachusetts-gas-tax-revenue-not-much/oBuJb06wMqgc1XsorZTewO/story.html>
Note: Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, each \$0.01 increase in the Massachusetts gas tax resulted in \$302 million in revenue so a three cent increase would result in \$90 million in revenue. A post-pandemic figure is not yet available due to shifting transit behavior patterns across the Commonwealth.

Governance

The RTA Task Force made two recommendations relating to RTA governance:¹¹⁸

1. Maintain local control of day-to-day operations and management of the RTAs, while standardizing performance metrics for level and quality of service and increasing regional collaboration to present a statewide vision for public transportation in the Commonwealth. MassDOT should include the RTAs as partners in statewide planning and decision making.
2. There should be a reinvigorated RTA Council that fosters greater collaboration, promotes best practices, and provides a statewide vision for RTAs.

The goal of these recommendations was to better coordinate services and technical assistance for the RTAs, as well as to standardize performance and procedure throughout the state. There has already been some movement on both of these recommendations. To receive money from the fiscal year 2020 state budget, RTAs were required to sign memorandums of understanding with MassDOT, through which they agreed to report on a number of performance metrics, in the following categories: ridership, customer service and satisfaction, asset management and financial performance, including farebox recovery.¹¹⁹

The “reinvigorated” RTA Council from recommendation six has met six times, in April, September and December 2019, as well as May and September 2020 and most recently in January 2021.¹²⁰

- **April 2019:** Covered “workforce transportation,” and new potential partnerships were discussed.¹²¹
- **September 2019:** Covered Federal Transit Administration Public Transportation Agency Safety Plans.¹²²
- **December 2019:** Consisted of a presentation on the not yet completed, new MBTA Automated Fare Collection 2.0 system.¹²³
- **May 2020:** Covered discussion on reopening transit in Massachusetts during the COVID-19 pandemic.¹²⁴

¹¹⁸ “A Vision for the Future of Massachusetts’ Regional Transit Authorities,” Report of the Task Force on REgional Transit Authority Performance and Funding, April 5, 2019, <https://www.mass.gov/doc/a-vision-for-the-future-of-massachusetts-regional-transit-authorities/download>.

¹¹⁹ FY 2020 Final Budget, Commonwealth of Massachusetts, accessed on Feb. 25, 2021, <https://malegislature.gov/Budget/FY2020/FinalBudget>

¹²⁰ “Upcoming events for Regional Transit Authority (RTA) Council,” MassDOT, accessed on Feb. 25, 2021, https://www.mass.gov/regional-transit-authority-rta-council/events/past?_page=1

¹²¹ “RTA Council Meeting,” MassDOT, accessed on Mar. 4, 2021, <https://www.mass.gov/event/rta-council-meeting-2019-04-30t150000-0400-2019-04-30t170000-0400>.

¹²² “RTA Council Meeting - 09/17/19,” MassDOT, accessed on Mar. 4, 2021, <https://www.mass.gov/event/rta-council-meeting-091719-2019-09-17t100000-0400-2019-09-17t120000-0400>.

¹²³ “RTA Council Meeting - 12/10/19,” MassDOT, accessed on Mar. 4, 2021, <https://www.mass.gov/event/rta-council-meeting-121019-2019-12-10t100000-0500-2019-12-10t120000-0500>.

¹²⁴ “RTA Council Meeting - 05/28/20,” MassDOT, accessed on Mar. 4, 2021, <https://www.mass.gov/event/rta-council-meeting-052820-2020-05-28t130000-0400-2020-05-28t150000-0400>.

- **September 2020:** Included a discussion on service planning, electric bus deployment and a federal funding update.¹²⁵
- **January 2021:** Included a discussion on microtransit pilots as well as an update on state and federal funding.¹²⁶

The impetus behind the recommendation was that the RTA Council, which was created by law and supposed to be chaired by the Secretary of Transportation, has had little participation from MassDOT for several years. It was thought that this could be a forum, while not as formalized, more akin to the MBTA Fiscal Management and Control Board (FMCB), which could help ensure RTAs were making smart and strategic decisions and implementing best practices, while also fostering greater coordination. Although MassDOT is now a much more active participant, the reinvigorated RTA Council meetings have yet to take on the bigger challenges identified by the RTA Task Force – including statewide service and performance standardization, cross-RTA service and technical assistance.

Both of these recommendations note the need for a more defined statewide vision for public transportation and the RTAs. So far, none of the actions taken as a result of these recommendations have resulted in a more defined statewide vision for public transportation and the RTAs. Some overarching questions still remain: What is the expected standard of service in urban areas? In rural areas? What about weekend service? Evening service? What is the expected standard of service between RTA areas?

It may be that these important questions can be answered through the reinvigorated RTA Council if they are placed on the agenda in upcoming meetings, but it may also be that there needs to be another public process to set out these baseline expectations; then the RTA Council can be a forum for robust discussion about how the RTAs can best meet higher expectations. That likely means that the Commonwealth needs to undertake a distinct process to develop a true statewide transit plan to set those baseline expectations. This will also help with setting and measuring performance metrics.

¹²⁵ “RTA Council Meeting - 09/22/20,” MassDOT, accessed on Mar. 4, 2021, <https://www.mass.gov/event/rta-council-meeting-92220-2020-09-22t140000-0400-2020-09-22t160000-0400>.

¹²⁶ “RTA Council Meeting - 01/13/21,” MassDOT, accessed on Mar. 4, 2021, <https://www.mass.gov/event/rta-council-meeting-011321-2021-01-13t100000-0500-2021-01-13t120000-0500>.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The RTA Task Force was a productive and hardworking body of dedicated individuals. The end product, *A Vision for the Future of the Regional Transit Authorities*, has already begun to improve transportation in the Commonwealth, and will continue to do so over the coming years.

However, it is important that MassDOT, the legislature and the RTAs continue to be held accountable to the Task Force report, and progress towards the vision of the title must be monitored to assure this accountability. While progress has been made on some of the recommendations included in the report, there is still a long way to go on many of them.

Among the recommendations that have not yet been adopted or acted on, we recommend that the following be prioritized:

- Adopt an automatic annual CPI increase in the base RTA operating budget, setting a floor of \$94 million in FY22.
- Continue to develop and improve the “reinvigorated RTA Council,” using it as a forum to tackle the big picture issues identified in the RTA Task Force report.
- Begin to pilot and implement more cross-RTA services as well as facilitate better coordination and connection between agencies, including with the MBTA.

It is also important that MassDOT, the legislature and the RTAs recognize that the Task Force report should be a living one; it is not comprehensive, nor should it be set in stone. As the RTAs work to modernize and adapt to our 21st-Century needs and challenges post-pandemic, we should continue to update the document, and work to find new solutions to improve RTA service and operation.

Already, there are a number of additional – or interim – recommendations to add, including:

- Reform the distribution of operating funds so that they are based on a more relevant and realistic picture of each RTA’s budget and needs, and so that funding will help RTAs achieve the service and performance goals set out in the RTA Task Force report.
- The Commonwealth should develop a statewide transit plan with a vision for the future of public transportation in Massachusetts, including setting baseline expectations for service in different types of geographic areas.
- Farebox recovery ratio should no longer be used as a performance metric for the RTAs.
- MassDOT and the RTAs should work together to complete an electric bus feasibility study and all RTAs should begin wide-scale pilots of electric bus implementation as soon as possible.