



## MORE RIDERS, MORE ACCESS, BETTER SERVICE: How Service Assessments Can Strengthen Regional Transit Authorities

Recommendations by Community Labor United's Public Transit-Public Good Coalition  
December 2013

### INTRODUCTION

#### ***A breakthrough for transit in Massachusetts***

In 2013, the people of Massachusetts and their elected representatives in the State House joined forces to fund our public transit system and to begin urgently needed reforms. H3535, the law securing additional transportation funding, included language in Section 63 requiring each regional transit authority (RTA) to create a comprehensive regional transit plan through a comprehensive service assessment (CSA). "Comprehensive," in the bill's language, means that each RTA's plan must include, among other items,

- *A thorough examination of the ridership trends for each line and service provided by the regional transit authority*
- *A determination of whether the regional transit authority's service is deployed in the most effective way possible to accommodate the needs of the region's workforce*
- *The development and evaluation of alternative service scenarios.*



Riders attending a regional transit advisory board meeting in Southeastern MA

riders, labor organizations, businesses, and other key stakeholders in developing and commenting on the plan.

These constituencies have not only an interest in the transit system, but also vital and unique expertise on how the transit system is or is not meeting current needs.

By fully carrying out these mandates, the RTAs can use their new state funding to create more effective service that meets current needs, attracts new riders, and builds the road toward future growth.

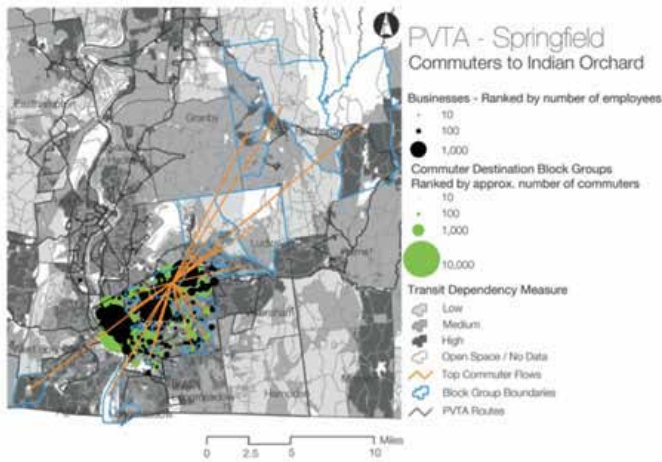
#### ***The problem that needs fixing***

Transit can help bridge the divides that separate us: economic class, race, age, disability status, and access to opportunities. Transit is unique in its ability to produce a more equitable state. But transit can play this role only if we design it to do so.

Current service design in many RTAs too often does not align with community and economic needs. A recent study in Southeastern Massachusetts found that almost no workers in the seafood processing industry take public transportation to work, though 78% of the workers who do not use public transit would use it if it were available.<sup>i</sup> In the Worcester transit region, only 60% of the jobs residents commute to are within walking distance of a WRTA route.<sup>ii</sup>

Where service does exist, it often comes with a significant "time fine." In our study of transit, demographic, and commuter-flow data, we found that bus trips in the RTAs take an average of 4.8 times longer than the same trip by car. In some regions a trip to work takes as much as 6 times longer.<sup>iii</sup>

The law specifically calls on RTAs to include



As residents age, robust public transportation will be even more important. A recent study focused on Boston showed that between 2000 and 2015, the proportion of seniors with poor access to transit will have tripled to 45%<sup>v</sup>.

An updated and streamlined transit system will attract more discretionary riders, increasing their physical activity and reducing the occurrence of ailments symptomatic of inactivity; taking cars off the road, limiting greenhouse gas emissions, lightening traffic, and reducing accidents; and reducing the maintenance costs for roads and bridges. Comprehensive service assessments will benefit the community at large. In order to achieve these outcomes, the comprehensive regional transit plans should be developed following certain best practices, which we recommend below. maintenance costs for roads and bridges.

Rank	Origin Address	TDM*	Car (min)	Bus (min)	Walking† (miles) (incl 3.7 mi taxi)	Transfers	First Bus	Last Bus
1	Reservoir Rd, Ludlow	M/L	16	40		0	6:11 AM	9:30 PM
2	Americo St, Ludlow	H/M	15	117	3.2	0	6:54 AM	3:49 PM
3	East Akard St, Ludlow	H/M	12	50	1.7	0	6:01 AM	9:30 PM
4	Ramblewood Dr, Springfield	H	13	77	–	1	5:28 AM	8:19 PM
5	Olney Ave, Springfield	H	6	36	1.7	0	5:09 AM	9:15 PM

\* The TDM is transit dependency measure score (High, Medium, Low, or a combination).  
 † This column represents the walking distance required by the bus trip.

Travel in the RTAs is further hampered by schedules that do not serve workers with jobs on the second or third shifts. According to the American Time Use Survey, as many as 12% of workers over 15 are on the job before 5 am and after 8 pm, while most RTA service begins at or after 5:30 am and ends before or around 8 pm.<sup>iv</sup>

Finally, workers who must leave their RTA district often face extremely long trips. To get to Brockton from Fall River, a public transit user has to go all the way to Boston, turning a half-hour trip into one that takes over 3 hours. Commuters who want to go to a destination in the region must rely on private transportation, including expensive cab rides for low-income workers without cars.

For the 12% of Massachusetts households without access to a vehicle, public transit is vital for carrying out many daily activities – how else can they get to jobs, education, healthy food, medical services? But regional transit authorities often struggle to meet the current needs of riders, communities, commerce, and industry, and to encourage drivers to shift to public transportation.

## RECOMMENDATIONS FOR CSAs

### 1) ENSURE ANALYSIS IS COMPREHENSIVE.

The goal of the comprehensive transit plans is to better match transit service to community needs. In many cases, the people participating in the planning process will need to entirely reimagine the shape of their system. If all the RTA's bus lines come into the center of town, some crosstown buses might make sense. If all buses are the same size, smaller buses might better serve lightly traveled but necessary routes. Comprehensive plans require comprehensive analysis of communities' needs and the transit systems' current services. This analysis should consider a spectrum of concerns including:

**All modes of transit in the system.** A robust evaluation of the public transit system needs to consider the whole system, including bus, paratransit, and, where relevant, rail. This analysis should:

- Match transit-rider density with the most appropriate service.
- Ensure parity of service for riders with limited abilities.
- Evaluate factors that discourage ridership, both for transit-dependent people and for those with cars.

**Physical accessibility.** Accessibility affects riders and potential riders dramatically. Accessibility can often be improved with relatively small fixes requiring capital, rather than operating, funds. The analysis needs to include a broad inquiry into accessibility issues such as:

- The need for bus shelters, particularly near senior housing, grocery stores, community and health centers.
- The ease of buying and loading transit passes, particularly for seniors and people with disabilities.

**Connections to vital services.** Transit should enable all Massachusetts residents to have full lives; to learn, work, and play; to access community resources and services; to connect with family, friends, and community activities. In order to ensure that the transit system is succeeding in that mission, analyze:

- Access to grocery stores, community health centers, and hospitals.
- Access to libraries, community centers, school, major parks.
- Access to major employers and job training programs, particularly from dense residential areas.

**The fare structure.** The analysis should:

- Compare the fare structure to the median income of the area, to ensure affordability for lower-income residents.
- Work with riders to assess and address any fare-based barriers to access.
- Adjust strict cost-per-passenger formulas to accommodate transit-dependent, youth, and/or senior riders.

**Opportunities for expansion; barriers to growth.** The analysis should explore:

- Service expansions to better serve transit-dependent riders.
- Service expansions that encourage new riders to choose transit.
- Ways to expand service without displacing current transit users.

**Effectiveness of interlining.** The inquiry in this area should examine:

- Current connections between neighboring RTAs.
- Current connections between RTAs and commuter rail.
- Current connections between RTAs and private carriers.
- The impact of each transit operator's hours of operation on the effectiveness of the overall system. For instance, can a person getting to their home RTA at 7:30 complete their trip on public transit?
- Ways to bring private carriers operating in an RTA area under the transit authority.

## **2) ENGAGE COMMUNITY PARTNERS IN A DEEP WAY.**

To conduct a truly comprehensive analysis and develop a truly comprehensive plan, community members – especially transit-dependent residents – must be integrally involved in every phase of the process and analysis.

Transit riders, transit workers, and other community members have vital expertise regarding the functioning of the transit authorities. Who knows better which questions need to be answered in order to better design transit service? Who has thought more about different ways to meet their transportation needs than bus riders whose rides to work take 4 times longer than their neighbors with cars?

When riders develop research questions, collect surveys, and analyze the data, the analysis will more effectively address the needs of riders and potential riders. Community engagement should include:



Riders attending a regional transit authority meeting in the Pioneer Valley

**Far-reaching surveys.** Surveys about transit services should be available as widely as possible.

- Planners should collaborate with advocates and community members on survey design.
- Surveys should be comprehensive, asking paratransit riders and non-transit users about fares.
- Surveys should be distributed on buses and in major public transportation hubs.
- Surveys must be multi-lingual.

**Engage “trusted messengers” – community organizations.** Response rates and reliability will rise if the transit authority contracts with community groups with a “proven track record” in their communities to help with:

- Outreach for surveys and forums
- Administration of surveys.
- Facilitation of forums.
- Outreach regarding service changes, to generate new business for new service.

Engaging community organizations that have a long history and deep commitment in their neighborhoods has been a successful strategy for other industries and sectors.

For example, speaking about residential energy efficiency programs, one utility company in Massachusetts said, “Community groups are a useful ‘on the ground’ presence...and have a unique role as trusted community members – they do a good job educating customers as a trusted source.”<sup>VI</sup>

Local RTA's should consider setting aside funds to support community groups in doing this sort of outreach as a key component of their service assessments.

### **Community forums and focus groups.**

Forums & focus groups are crucial to explain survey results, generate and vet proposals to restructure transit services. They should be:

- Held at times and places so that working, transit-dependent people can attend.
- Posted at all bus stops and on several buses; with several weeks notice.

### **3) MAKE SERVICE PLANNING MORE**

**EQUITABLE.** As the RTAs evaluate current service offerings and assess changes, equity should be at the core of the decision-making criteria. The goal of attracting riders who have other transportation alternatives is not at odds with the goal of ensuring that transit serves the people who depend upon it.

**Equity metrics.** Equity planning will be more successful if the planners:

- Broaden measurements used to evaluate individual transit lines- use equity measurements in tandem with farebox recovery analysis
- Plan according to access of opportunity.
- Preserve routes that serve transit-dependent communities.

- Set equity goals for service. For example-
  - Transit authorities should establish an appropriate maximum distance between transit stops to boost accessibility for residents. The Center for Transit-Oriented development defines a transit oriented development as one that occurs within 1/2 mile of a rail or rapid bus transit stop.
  - Transit Authorities should strive to provide some baseline level of evening and weekend service to ensure mobility at all times.

***Focusing on quality, not just quantity.*** In considering service realignment, the kind of trips should be considered in addition to the number of trips on a line. This will in turn help make the transit service attractive to all riders. A transit system that serves transit-dependent needs will attract discretionary riders as well. It will move people from home to work, medical care, school, shopping, and other basic services

- Predictably & Quickly,
- With appropriate frequency to avoid overcrowding, and at a cost that is affordable to low-income people.

***Funding with equity.*** When large commercial or industrial projects require additional services, RTAs should pursue strategies to creatively leverage those transit needs in order to promote service throughout the system. We encourage RTAs and MassDOT to work with municipalities to include transportation costs when negotiating PILOT (Payment in Lieu of Taxes) contributions from non-profit development projects. For the private sector, a “Transportation Utility Fee” should be considered to help expand new service to private developments. And for both the non-profit and private sectors, the creation of Universal Pass Programs could give large employers and universities the opportunity to purchase transit passes in bulk at a discounted rate for their students and employees.

## CONCLUSION

Community service assessments and transit plans developed and implemented with integral community involvement is in the interest of all of Massachusetts. It will help the Commonwealth build towards the long-term sustainability of the state’s transit system and the regions’ transit authorities. And it will build a deep partnership with constituents and passengers, so that riders and other community members will become advocates of the transportation system.

Of course, RTAs will not be able to immediately implement all of the plans they develop through this process. But they will be better able to prioritize which projects should come first and when to make future changes to ensure the equity and accessibility our communities deserve.

All of the recommendations we have made can be implemented through the administrative action of the regional transit authorities. The information from these comprehensive reviews and the input of riders and other stakeholders are vital to good decision-making. Both the tools – comprehensive assessments and plans – and the methods – deep community engagement – should become fundamental and recurring components of the RTAs’ operating systems.



<sup>i</sup> Bus Riders United, Accessible Public Transportation & the Seafood Processing Industry (New Bedford, MA: August 2013), 2 and 3.  
<sup>ii</sup> Connie M. Razza, Jessie Partridge, and Jeremy Thompson, Route to Our Future: Transit Solutions for Equity, Sustainability, and Economic Growth in the Commonwealth (Boston, MA: Public Transit—Public Good/Green Justice Coalition): 13.  
<sup>iii</sup>Razza et al, 12.  
<sup>iv</sup>“Table A-4. Percent of employed persons working on their main job on days they worked, by occupation and hour of day, 2011-12 annual averages,” American Time Use Survey (Washington, DC: Bureau of Labor Statistics).  
<sup>v</sup> Claire LeSage, “Future Transportation for Seniors and Baby Boomers,” Norton Patch (June 28, 2011).  
<sup>vi</sup> Mindy Fried, M.S.W., Ph.D and Madeleine Taylor, Ph.D, Evaluation of Community Mobilization Initiatives (Boston, MA: Arbor Consulting Partners): 16.

## Public Transit–Public Good Campaign [www.publictransitpublicgood.org](http://www.publictransitpublicgood.org)

Alternatives for Community and Environment/T Riders Union · Amalgamated Transit Union Local 22 · Amalgamated Transit Union Local 1547 · Bus Riders United of Southeastern Massachusetts (Amalgamated Transit Union Locals 174 & 1037, Community Economic Development Corporation of Southeastern MA, Coalition Against Poverty/Coalition for Social Justice, Greater Southeastern Massachusetts Labor Council, Massachusetts Senior Action Council, University of Massachusetts Dartmouth Labor Center) · Carmen’s Union–ATU Local 589 · Community Labor United · Greater Four Corners Action Coalition · Massachusetts Communities Action Network · Massachusetts Senior Action Council · On the Move · United for Transit Equity–Pioneer Valley (Alliance to Develop Power, Amalgamated Transit Union Local 448, Massachusetts Senior Action Council, Student Labor Action Project, Western Massachusetts Jobs with Justice, Stavros) · Massachusetts AFL-CIO · IAM Local 264 · Unite Here!/New England Joint Board · Teamsters Local 25 · Neighbor 2 Neighbor MA · SEIU 615/Local 32BJ · Chelsea Collaborative · Greater Boston Labor Council



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