

Boston Region Metropolitan Planning Organization

Pilot Transit Working Group

Partnerships for Ongoing Transit Recovery Chat: Thematic Summary

May 12, 2021

12:00 PM–1:00 PM, Zoom Video Conferencing Platform

Representatives from the Massachusetts Bay Transportation Authority (MBTA), transportation management associations, municipalities, state agencies, transportation advisory groups, and not-for-profit organizations met for one hour to discuss partnerships that could support ongoing transit recovery after the COVID-19 pandemic. Boston Region Metropolitan Planning Organization (MPO) staff suggested the following discussion questions for this meeting:

1. How have you approached partnerships with employers, institutions, transit agencies, or municipalities before, during, and after the COVID-19 pandemic?
2. What organizations are you working with to sustain or adapt transit service to sustain ridership or meet customer needs?
3. How are you adapting your transit service as work-from-home policies become more commonplace?
4. What lessons would you share with others about forming transit-supportive partnerships?
5. What resources or support would help you to create transit-supportive partnerships?

Changing Transit and Traffic Patterns

- Crosstown Connect shuttles in Acton have been suspended during the pandemic. There have not been many people parking at the South Acton MBTA rail station, which may suggest that Crosstown Connect does not need to rush to restart its rail shuttle service. However, some riders had been taking the shuttle in the area because they prefer not to drive. The service is seen as an alternative to driving and parking at the station, but not necessarily as an alternative to driving for other types of trips.
- Prior to the pandemic, Lexpress riders were primarily older adults, people with disabilities, and youth. During the pandemic, most riders were people working in-person jobs, such as at grocery stores, medical offices, or childcare centers,

while youth and older adult ridership has dropped significantly. Many of the places older adults had visited have not been open. A large portion of Lexpress riders were from countries whose populations have been hit hard by COVID-19, such as India, and it is unclear whether their ridership patterns will return to what they were before the pandemic.

- Traffic is expected to continue to grow. School reopenings are contributing to increased traffic, and summer weekend and holiday traffic will likely be intense. Vaccines have helped stabilize the pandemic, and people may start returning to transit in a short period of time.
- The Town of Lexington will seek to connect people to commuter rail service in towns surrounding Lexington via Lexpress as commuter service becomes more frequent.
- The MBTA's implementation of clockface schedules for commuter rail stations may facilitate shuttle connections that were not possible before. It would be great if similar improvements could be made to streamline MBTA bus schedules, particularly in downtown Waltham.
- In the Alewife area, employees of biotech firms have been commuting to worksites throughout the pandemic. Recently, vaccines are helping to stabilize conditions. Other employers and property managers are aiming to have more people return to sites in the fall. Ridership is beginning to increase.

Forming and Maintaining Partnerships and Communication

- Prior to the pandemic, the Town of Lexington had partnered with area agencies to help people reach specific destinations. For example, the Town of Lexington worked with the Town of Belmont's Council on Aging to help people get to Lahey Hospital in Burlington via Lexpress.
- The Town of Lexington is working on a regionalization action plan for transportation service, using funding from the Massachusetts Department of Transportation's (MassDOT) Community Transit Grant Program and some consulting support from 128 Business Council.
 - Part of this project involves inventorying and mapping the transportation agencies operating in and surrounding Lexington. This can help highlight opportunities for partnerships and connections.
- The business community in the 128 Business Council service area is dealing with its own uncertainty in terms of how to manage operations post-pandemic. The 128 Business Council has heard from some partners but, in general, not the ones that were using the shuttles extensively before the pandemic. There has been

more interest in shuttle service lately, but the 128 Business Council has needed to make service planning decisions without little indication of what its partners will do.

- The 128 Business Council also needs to balance working with both employers and commercial real estate companies when making plans and decisions. Property managers may have a sense of their tenants' plans but they are a step removed from that information and those decisions.
- The City of Cambridge requires new developments in the Alewife area to join the transportation management association (TMA) shuttle as part of the permitting process, which provides stable funding for the TMA. If other cities and towns replicated this arrangement, it could help alleviate congestion.
- The 128 Business Council has been working with municipalities in its service area, and those municipalities remind employers that they have commitments to TMA service.
- The MBTA has been conducting ongoing rider and employer surveys to collect information. Members of the MBTA's Community Liaison teams are finding that external stakeholders have been connecting with MBTA staff. Making this process more streamlined would be helpful. The MBTA would like to foster ongoing relationships with community organizations as it has with employers.
- The MBTA's Systemwide Accessibility team is planning to create a comprehensive mobility center. A goal of this center will be to share information about both fixed-route and ADA service options, and about services that connect to the MBTA and are available throughout the Boston region. This information would available be in multiple languages. The MBTA hopes to have this center in place in 2022 and is interested in transit service inventories that others are producing.
- It is important to maintain good communication and information flow between organizations. TMAs help to connect stakeholders of an area, including employers and major residential and commercial developments.
- It has been difficult to coordinate shuttle schedules with MBTA commuter rail service because of both the schedules themselves and the lack of communication about them.

Marketing and Messaging

- It would be great to have a regional campaign that encourages people returning to work to use transit.

- The Alewife TMA used funding from a MassDOT Workforce Transportation grant to run an incentive program where people receive five dollars per trip if they use a green mode of transportation to get to work. During the pandemic, not many people were using transit, but there were many people walking and biking. Perhaps this type of incentive structure could be used to encourage people to take transit.
- The Town of Lexington is interested in marketing to encourage people to ride Lexpress. One strategy could be to remind people that if they ride Lexpress, they are supporting a service that helps others. For example, if a senior rides Lexpress, they are supporting a service that is also available to youth, people with disabilities, or low-income households. People can also have more freedom to travel with transit.
 - When Needham provided transportation network company (TNC) and taxi rides, they told riders how much trips actually cost and let them know they could make donations to the program. People made donations more than the trip actually cost. Telling people that they are helping people and helping to improve the system can be effective.
- The Town of Lexington is interested in encouraging youth to ride transit. It would be great if more students rode the MBTA bus instead of school buses, which could cut down on traffic delays (because the school bus stops at MBTA bus stops) and help to speed up the MBTA bus service. More transit riders help to support more service, including increased frequency.
- Simplified and streamlined schedules make it easier to coordinate transit services. It is also easier to convey this information to customers.
- One strategy could be to market different transit options that people could use to accommodate variable commuting schedules. People might take one transit service on days they leave work at 1:00 PM, and a different service on days they leave at 5:00 PM.

Other Challenges and Considerations

- 128 Business Council funding sources were affected when a lot of businesses shut down contracts during the pandemic. This is especially challenging given the large fixed costs associated with staff and vehicles. The 128 Business Council worked to operate shuttles at the minimum amount of service needed for biotechnology and building maintenance workers who were still commuting to worksites.

- Workers, including those in manufacturing, need good commuting options to access employment centers, especially if affordable housing is not available nearby. It is also important for train schedules to align with employer schedules.
- TMAs can access private dollars, but it is difficult for them to access public funding. If TMAs were regularly included in transportation infrastructure funding, they could have more robust staffing and more stable services. TMAs could use these resources to enhance stakeholder coordination.

Other Notes

- [Boston Region MPO staff](#) are working on the MPO's "[Access to Central Business Districts - Phase 2](#)" study, which is expected to generate a COVID-19 Transportation Recovery guidebook. As part of the project, staff plan to examine the impacts of changing remote work trends on central business districts, and they will suggest guidance that responds to different scenarios. The report from the Phase - 1 study, "[Transportation Access Studies of Central Business Districts](#)" is available on the [Recent Publications page](#) on the MPO website.
 - Staff should consider older adults and people with disabilities in the Access to CBDs Phase 2 study, in addition to people who are in the workforce. These centers may become more important to older adults and people with disabilities.

Other Resources

- The Massachusetts Department of Transportation provides a [Mobility Dashboard](#) that visualizes a variety of data sets to describe recent travel trends across modes.
- Information about supportive housing and group homes for people with disabilities (and other kinds of group housing) in the region, which could support service planning decisions, may be available through the [Massachusetts Department of Developmental Services](#), [local MassHire Workforce Boards](#), or the [Massachusetts Rehabilitation Commission](#).

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