

Transportation Mobility

Goal

Develop and fund sustainable, efficient and convenient transportation options in rural areas to provide optimal mobility and accessibility to goods, services and employment.

Key Issues

General Description of Focus Area and issue

Many rural communities are unserved or marginally served by Regional Transit Authorities (RTAs) and other forms of shared-use transportation – including passenger rail. This lack of service is attributable to lower population densities and the challenge of providing cost-effective and efficient service over longer distances. In particular:

- RTAs have been unpredictably and inadequately funded, requiring service reductions and eliminations;
- RTAs also must comply with extensive regulations that hinder their abilities to make the most efficient use of existing organizational capacities and assets, and
- passenger rail service connecting rural communities to one another as well as to urban areas is a priority, but requires significant infrastructure and operational investments.

Examples that highlight the issue

Lower population densities result in fewer available mobility options and technologies for rural areas. Shared-use mobility services have little incentive to serve rural communities. While residents desire to travel via transit and shared mobility services, it can be challenging to develop such service in a manner that is both efficient and cost-effective. Vehicle fleet mixes, technologies, and trip distances in rural areas lead to lower service efficiencies, higher environmental impacts and costs.

- The Berkshire Regional Transit Authority (BRTA) and Franklin Regional Transit Authority (FRTA) do not provide late evening service. Most routes stop service before 7:00 PM. The FRTA does not provide any weekend transit service. The BRTA does not provide any Sunday service.

New and improved rail services must be developed to provide connectivity within rural areas and between rural and urban areas. Current passenger rail service west of Worcester is limited to one train per day serving Springfield and Pittsfield, owing to available trainsets and personnel as well as to its operation on rights-of-way owned by other railroad(s), which is common for Amtrak. Accordingly, freight operations predominate and are dispatched accordingly. In the 'Northern Tier' of Massachusetts, the MBTA Fitchburg Line is the sole east-west passenger rail service operated – from Boston only as far west as Wachusett Station.

The current RTA operational funding mechanism does not provide predictable or sufficient year-to-year State Contract Assistance (SCA) funding, nor does such funding increase with inflation. Level funding for transit in FYs 2018 and FY2019 resulted in operating deficits for the RTAs, requiring service cuts and in some cases, fare increases.

The increased mobility needs generated by youth, elders and others who do not or choose not to drive will generate more on-call and appointment based transportation demand. People have different transportation needs based on their age, income, place of residence and place of employment. The existing transportation system is not designed to be “age friendly” in rural areas to allow all people to have access regardless of their age or ability.

Existing Policies and Programs

A Vision for the Future of Massachusetts’ Regional Transit Authorities – The Task Force on Regional Transit Authority Performance and Funding was created in 2018 to investigate the challenges and opportunities facing transit service providers and how RTAs can:

- provide and improve transit services that meet community needs;
- conduct regular service planning to maximize ridership using available resources; and
- ensure that fares, local contributions, and other revenues cover an appropriate share of costs.

The report recognized that RTAs face unique funding challenges that limit opportunities to improve existing service. A total of twenty-four diverse recommendations were developed to guide the Massachusetts Executive and Legislative branches in advancing high quality transit service in the Commonwealth.

MassDOT East-West Rail Study – Passenger rail service from Boston to Springfield and Pittsfield is currently under study by MassDOT. The study will examine the costs, benefits, and investments necessary to implement passenger rail service at a speed and frequency to be a competitive travel option along this corridor. A number of alternatives will be studied including a high speed (>90 mph) option. This study is expected to be complete in late 2019/early 2020.

Best Practices

Quaboag Connector. Serving nine rural communities in the Pioneer Valley and Central Massachusetts regions, the Quaboag Connector utilizes Community Transit Grant Program funding to improve transportation options for residents traveling to work and school. Service is provided on weekdays from 6:30 AM to 7:00 PM and costs \$2 per trip. Rides must be requested 2 days in advance and trips related to employment and education are given priority. Ridership is increasing with 5,720 rides provided in 2017, 8,871 in 2018 and 4,420 through May of 2019.

SCM Elderbus, established in 1974, is a private non-profit providing transportation to residents aged 60+ and disabled residents in twenty-one Central Massachusetts communities. Service is

reserved in advance and available weekdays from 8:30 AM – 4:00 PM. In-town trips (those which begin and end in the same town) start at \$1.50 each way.

Recommendations

Provide efficient, reliable, and affordable passenger rail and intercity bus service to connect rural areas in Massachusetts to one another and to urban areas. – Ongoing MassDOT studies will assess alternatives for future rail service. It will be important to identify funding to implement the recommendations of these studies to provide passenger rail service for rural areas to connect them to larger urban areas.

Implement Recommendations #1 and #4 from the RTA Task Force - “A Vision for the Future of Massachusetts’ Regional Transit Authorities”

- Recommendation #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.”
- Recommendation #4: “Establish a Human Services Transportation working group to explore ways to better collaborate, improve service and save money through the brokerage system.”

Evaluate the feasibility of coordinating local transportation resources owned and/or operated by/for RTAs, schools, Councils on Aging, and private service providers to actively develop sustainable cross-border transportation partnerships. Opportunities exist to serve rural areas through shared transportation assets. A coordination function must be established to eliminate single trip – single ride issues, which often occur in paratransit work. Creating defined shared mobility options that work with but do not compete with other modes is also a challenge. It is recommended that a pilot project be developed to expand on existing best practices in this area.

Ensure that transportation policies relevant to mobility support the Commonwealth’s Green Communities policies. Rural transit and vehicle fleets are typically less efficient and produce higher levels of greenhouse gas emissions. The lack of adequate green infrastructure such as charging stations for electric vehicles hinders the advancement of this technology in rural fleet vehicles. It is recommended that green infrastructure expansions be targeted to rural areas and electric vehicles be actively promoted to increase purchases by fleet owners, lessors, and the general public.

Consider reevaluating the existing RTA funding formula to include population density for rural, suburban and urban areas. First, while State Contract Assistance (SCA) is important, it isn’t the only transit funding source. Further, in rural areas Human Services Transportation (HST) constitutes transit; uses other funding sources, and remains a very significant cost and delivery of service challenge. Finally, even if SCA is increased in accordance with RTA Task

Force recommendations, performance measures and incentives will favor transit operations in urban areas. It is recommended that the Massachusetts Legislature reevaluate the current funding formula in order to create a more equitable distribution of transit funds to all areas of the Commonwealth.

For Appendix

Stakeholders consulted: Many people, agencies and organizations were consulted in the drafting of this Plan. Recommendations contained in this document are not necessarily supported or endorsed by all parties listed below.

Transportation for Massachusetts (T4MA)
Federal Highway Administration (FHWA)
Federal Transit Administration (FTA)
Massachusetts Association of Regional Planning Agencies (MARPA)
Massachusetts Association of Regional Transit Authorities (MARTA)
The Nature Conservancy
Massachusetts Municipal Association (MMA)
Quaboag Valley Community Development Corporation (QVDC)
MassDOT Rail and Transit Division
Massachusetts Public Interest Research Group (MassPIRG)
Union of Concerned Scientists

References:

A Vision for the Future of Massachusetts' Regional Transit Authorities -
https://www.mass.gov/files/documents/2019/04/17/dot-rta_task_force_report_040519.pdf
Quaboag Connector - <https://www.rideconnector.org/>
SCM Elderbus - <https://www.scmelderbus.org/>