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Introduction



2024 Regional Transportation Plan

1 Introduction

Franklin County is the most rural county in the Commonwealth and as a result, transportation planning and its implementation pose interesting challenges. The sparse population and large geographical area naturally constrain many modes of travel beyond that of the private automobile. The large area that the transportation network covers also makes it difficult to efficiently provide improvements. In spite of these obstacles, Franklin County has had a very successful record for maintaining, improving, and preserving its transportation system. The Franklin County Regional Transportation Plan, which is updated every four years, helps to provide a clear vision of the county and prioritizes its needs in a context that is suitable for the rural nature of the region.

This Regional Transportation Plan (RTP) update focuses on the importance of providing safe, efficient, and resilient mobility for residents and freight, while taking into account the rural character of the county. The RTP specifically emphasizes the following goals: preservation and improvement of the existing transportation system, while also maintaining the region's scenic and natural resources; providing residents with transportation options to the singly-occupied vehicle; strengthening the local economy and industries; and improving the region's livability and resiliency.

As in past plans, safety is a major focus for this update to the RTP. The safety of the regional transportation system continues to be a high priority when evaluating and setting the agenda for regional transportation projects and activities. For this reason, projects that will make the existing system safer, more efficient, more secure and better able to support the goals of this RTP are prioritized in the region rather than those that will create new roads or add capacity to the region's roadways. The maintenance of the existing infrastructure is a critical and ongoing task for the communities in Franklin County.

Resiliency is another equally important focus for the Regional Transportation Plan. Projects that reduce the vulnerability of the existing infrastructure to natural disasters, including the mitigation of storm water impacts, are important to the region's ability to adapt to the changing climate and maintain a durable transportation network.

Through the completion of this Regional Transportation Plan update, the accompanying public participation process, and other planning work conducted by the Franklin Regional Council of Governments (FRCOG), it is clear that there is a very strong interest in expanding

the transportation system to include additional transportation options to the singly-occupied vehicle.

Specifically, there is a very strong demand for expanded public transit services either through the establishment of new routes to unserved areas of the region, or the initiation of additional service runs on existing routes. During the COVID-19 pandemic, there was a threefold increase in bicycle ridership across the country compared to 2019.¹ Focusing on bikeways and complete streets will help increase safe travel options for bicyclists and pedestrians. Additionally, the establishment of new park-and-ride facilities throughout the county, and the return of passenger rail services to the region, has further heightened interest in other modes of transportation.

During the development of the 2024 Regional Transportation Plan, a particular emphasis was placed on public participation and outreach. Chapter 2 details the public participation process that was undertaken during this update. The Franklin County Transportation Planning Organization (FCTPO) recognizes that there are finite financial resources available to advance the recommendations of this report. Therefore, in order to ensure that the recommendations are realistic, a financial component has been included as part of this plan.

The Franklin Regional Council of Governments

The Franklin Regional Council of Governments (referred to as the FRCOG) serves the towns of the Franklin County region in western Massachusetts. The FRCOG integrates regional and local planning, human service advocacy and coordination, and the provision of municipal services such as cooperative purchasing and building inspection to advance the following regional goals:

- Balance economic development with the protection of natural and cultural resources, and with the rural character and heritage of the region;
- Ensure the most economical creation and delivery of public services in a rural region comprised of many political subdivisions; and
- Build healthier communities by developing and connecting broad-based coalitions, which raise the level of expectations for community achievement.

The FRCOG advocates on behalf of its member communities at the state and federal level to ensure that funding, programs, and policies are sensitive and respond to the rural nature, economic strengths, and human and natural resources of the region.

¹ Rails to Trails Conservancy, <https://www.railstotrails.org/COVID19/#trailcount>

Additionally, the FRCOG serves as one of the Commonwealth's thirteen (13) Regional Planning Agencies and Metropolitan Planning Organizations (MPO). An MPO consists of a Committee of Signatories, who together makes decisions about transportation planning goals, projects, priorities, and funding. In Franklin County, this group is referred to as the Franklin County Transportation Planning Organization (FCTPO). In its role as a FCTPO member, the FRCOG follows federal transportation planning regulations. The FRCOG staff is responsible for coordinating and working with the other FCTPO members to develop, implement, and routinely update the Regional Transportation Plan for Franklin County, as well as provide a wide range of other planning services.

The FCTPO is governed by a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) that was executed in 2006 and updated in 2010. As defined by the MOU, the TPO's committee membership contains nine members including the following representatives:

- The Secretary and CEO of the Massachusetts Department of Transportation (MassDOT) (to act as the Chair of the FCTPO);
- The Administrator of the Highway Division of MassDOT;
- The Chair of the Franklin Regional Council of Governments Executive Committee;
- The Chair of the Franklin Regional Transit Authority;
- The Franklin Regional Council of Governments Regionally Elected Official;
- The Mayor of Greenfield; and
- Three Franklin County Sub-Regional Appointments (one from the West County, one from Central County, and one from the East County sections of Franklin County as defined in the MOU).

The MOU defines that the FCTPO shall have the responsibilities of developing, reviewing, and adopting the region's annual transportation Unified Planning Work Program, the Regional Transportation Plan, the Transportation Improvement Program, and air quality conformity determinations. The MOU further states that the FCTPO shall have the responsibility of meeting all of the provisions of the federal 3C (Continuing, Cooperative, Comprehensive) Transportation Planning Process that may include: the initiation of studies, evaluation and recommendation of transportation improvements, and the programming of funds for transportation projects in the region for which funding is sought for implementation. The MOU also states the FCTPO shall be the forum for cooperative decision-making by officials of local government, regional planning commission, regional transit authority, and state officials representing state transportation agencies.

The MOU defines that the Franklin Regional Planning Board (FRPB) will act as an advisory board to the FCTPO in order to ensure that all transportation decisions are considered within the context of comprehensive regional planning. The composition of the FRPB includes a Select Board and Planning Board member designee from each town as well as 18 at-large members. The FRCOG is, by state designation and consistent with applicable federal transportation laws, the primary transportation planning staff for the FCTPO and also serves as the principal source of transportation planning for local and regional transportation projects.

Fixing America’s Surface Transportation Act (FAST Act)

The federal legislation that guides transportation planning (including Regional Transportation Plans) and implementation is called Fixing America’s Surface Transportation (FAST) Act. On December 4, 2015, President Obama signed the FAST Act into law as the latest federal transportation legislation, which guarantees funding for highways, highway safety, public transportation, and other modes of transportation. The FAST Act builds on the previous legislation, Moving Ahead for Progress in the 21st Century Act (MAP-21), which created a new, streamlined and performance-based program in 2012. It also builds on many of the highway, transit, bike, and pedestrian programs and policies established under the previous transportation legislations.

The FAST Act addresses the many challenges facing our transportation system today, such as improving safety, reducing traffic congestion, improving efficiency in freight movement, increasing intermodal connectivity, and protecting the environment, as well as laying the groundwork for addressing future challenges. It focuses on a mutli-modal program that promotes sustainability and economic development. In addition, the legislation seeks to reduce delays in project delivery and adds an emphasis on freight movement. This Regional Transportation Plan was developed within the framework of the FAST Act’s requirements and focuses on the priorities of this transportation legislation.²

The following Table 1-1 is a list of the Ten Planning Factors that the FAST Act considers to be a priority. The Table shows how the various chapters of the Regional Transportation Plan addresses each planning factor.

² United State Department of Transportation, Federal Highway Administration, *A Summary of Highway Provisions in FAST Act*, FHWA website, https://www.fhwa.dot.gov/summary_of_FAST_Act, 2019.

Table 1-1: FAST Act Ten Planning Factors and How the RTP Addresses Them

FAST Act Ten Planning Factors		Corresponding RTP Chapter
1)	Support the economic vitality of the metropolitan area, especially by enabling global competitiveness, productivity and efficiency.	Chapter 4, 5, 6
2)	Increase the safety of the transportation system for motorized and non-motorized users.	Chapter 13
3)	Increase the security of the transportation system for motorized and non-motorized users.	Chapter 13
4)	Increase the accessibility and mobility of people and for freight.	Chapter 5, 6, 7, 8
5)	Protect and enhance the environment, promote energy conservation, improve the quality of life, and promote consistency between transportation improvements and State and local planned growth and economic development patterns.	Chapter 4, 10, 12
6)	Enhance the integration and connectivity of the transportation system, across and between modes for people and freight.	Chapter 5, 6, 9, 10
7)	Promote efficient system management and operation.	Chapter 5, 12, 13
8)	Emphasize the preservation of the existing transportation system.	Chapter 5, 12
9)	Improve the resiliency and reliability of the transportation system and reduce or mitigate stormwater impacts of surface transportation.	Chapter 12
10)	Enhance travel and tourism.	Chapter 11

The Regional Transportation Plan

The FAST Act requires that each MPO complete a regional transportation plan and update it at least every four years. The FAST Act further specifies that:

“...the Plan and TIPs for each metropolitan areas shall provide for the development and integrated management and operation of transportation systems and facilities (including accessible pedestrian walkways and bicycle transportation facilities) that will function as an intermodal transportation system for the metropolitan planning area and as an integral part of an intermodal transportation system for the State and the United States... The long-range plan must describe the performance measures and

targets used in assessing system performance and progress in achieving the performance targets.”

In summary, a Regional Transportation Plan is a planning document that details existing conditions, identifies current deficiencies, and projects future needs related to transportation systems for a particular geographical area. The RTP reviews all types of transportation, including vehicular, rail, air, bus, bicycle, and pedestrian. The RTP is intended to set the vision for the region’s transportation system and is updated at least every four years. The update is an opportunity to review and update transportation priorities within the region. The Regional Transportation Plan is required to forecast the transportation needs of the region for the next twenty years (the year 2044 for this plan) and it is required to do so in the context of financial constraint. This Plan also establishes performance measures so that future progress in meeting the region’s goals can be assessed.

The recommendations in the Franklin Regional Transportation Plan provide the framework for transportation projects in the county. It is from this Plan that projects are chosen to be designed, funded, and implemented. Historically, the region has been very successful with the rate at which the RTP’s recommendations have been implemented. Table 1-2 at the end of this chapter shows that out of the twenty-five recommendations from the previous 2020 Regional Transportation Plan, ten have already been completed and another thirteen are in progress or are nearly completed.

Vision Statement for this Regional Transportation Plan

In 2013, the FRCOG along with regional partners and input from many stakeholders, created the *Sustainable Franklin County: A Regional Plan for Sustainable Development*. This comprehensive Plan examined the long-term needs of the Franklin County region with a focus on sustainability. The following vision statement comes from *Sustainable Franklin County* and, based on recent outreach conducted for this plan’s update, still accurately reflects the region’s character and goals for the future. This RTP fits within the framework of that vision.

The Regional Plan for Sustainable Development's vision for Franklin County is one in which economic vitality and social equity will thrive in balance with our natural and cultural resources. Our region's agricultural, forestry, and manufacturing heritage and history of innovation and creativity will provide a strong foundation for increased local living-wage jobs, more affordable and energy efficient housing, increased utilization of locally-grown and produced clean energy, and revitalized town centers. Sound infrastructure, sustainable transportation options that support mixed use development and reuse of historic structures in our town centers, and reduction of fossil fuels are essential to increasing the sustainability of our region. Sustainable development decisions and long-term planning policies that include energy efficiency and conservation as well as climate change adaption and mitigation will effectively and equitably meet the needs of all current and future generations of Franklin County.

As made clear in the 2018 Governor's Commission on the Future of Transportation in the Commonwealth, the future is uncertain and various growth and/or technology scenarios may develop. This Regional Transportation Plan outlines the general needs and issues that Franklin County faces while acknowledging that adaption will be necessary for a resilient and efficient transportation system that serves all modes and populations.



Entrance to the JWO Transit Center, Home of the FRCOG Offices

Top 25 Recommendations from 2020 Regional Transportation Plan*

Recommendation	Status	Notes
Advocate and support regional expanded passenger rail service between Greenfield and Springfield.	Completed	Valley Flyer is now permanent.
Increase frequency & extend bus service hours during evenings and weekends.	Completed/In Progress	FRTA Access Program has been extended to the weekends.
Create a microtransit service program for the region.	Completed	FRTA Access Program was initiated in January 2020 and has continued to grow since. http://frta.org/getting-around/frta-access-program/
Rehabilitate the General Pierce Bridge	Completed	
Resurface roadway, construct pedestrian and transit accommodations, and create safety features on Routes 5/10 in Whately and Deerfield.	Completed	
Continue to support the funding and construction of a new FRTA Operations and Maintenance Facility.	Completed	Grand opening of the Maintenance Facility will be June 2023.
Create additional Park & Ride lots throughout the County.	Completed / Ongoing	Erving Park and Ride completed July 2022.
Advance Route 2 Safety Improvements in Farley, Erving Center, and Gill/Greenfield	Ongoing/In Progress	Conducted Road Safety Audit on Route 2 and projects are under design and development.
Explore safety concerns at the intersection of Route 5/10 and Christian Lane in Whately.	Completed/Ongoing	Conducted crash evaluation and site assessment and coordinated with MASSDOT on long-term recommendations.
Implement Complete Streets projects throughout Franklin County	Ongoing/In Progress	
Continue to support and fund the construction of additional electric vehicle charging infrastructure around the region.	Ongoing/In Progress	
Assist municipalities with assessing transportation infrastructure most at risk to climate change and plan for upgrades and replacements that are designed to handle future storm events.	Ongoing	
Implement safety and traffic flow improvements on Route 2 West in Greenfield near the commercial developments west of the Interstate 91/Route 2 rotary.	Will start Fall 2023	
Continue supporting, the funding, and use of the small bridge program to replace structurally deficient bridges in small communities	In Progress	
Design and implement safety improvements for bicyclists/pedestrians on Turners Falls Road connecting Greenfield and Turners Falls	In Progress	Pedestrian and bicycle counts were conducted in 2022.
Construct a Bikeway to connect the downtowns of Orange and Athol	In Progress	Athol received MassTrails funding in 2020.
Create an Erving-Wendell Bike Path to connect Erving Center with Farley and Erving side	In Progress	Erving received money for a feasibility study in 2022.
Construct a sidewalk to Buckland Recreation Area connecting Mohawk Trail Regional High School along Rt. 112 and North St.	In Progress	Project is in preliminary design and is programmed for 2028 of the TIP.
Continue implementation of trailblazing signs along the Franklin County Bikeway	In Progress	Signs will be installed by Fall 2023.
Expand fixed bus service routes throughout the county, including to the North County towns of Bernardston and Northfield.	No Progress	
Remove the existing Schell Bridge over the Connecticut in Northfield and replace with new pedestrian and bicycle bridge.	On hold	Put on hold for construction costs
Design and implement safety improvements for bicyclists/pedestrians on Leyden Road in Greenfield	In Progress	Pedestrian and bicycle counts were conducted in 2022.

Purchase conservation restrictions, agricultural preservation restrictions or land in fee from willing land owners to permanently protect important areas along the Scenic Byways	No progress	
Design and install a prefabricated pedestrian bridge to connect the Turners Falls Canal District with parking, bike path, and downtown Turners Falls.	On Hold	Pedestrian bridge designed and purchased. Will wait for white bridge and 5 th street bridge to be replaced.

*Projects are not listed in any order of priority. Status as of May 2023.