

RI ACCESSIBLE TRANSPORTATION ADVISORY COMMITTEE

Thursday, April 4, 2024
MEETING MINUTES

Participants (Teams and in-person): Chairperson Heather Schey, Benny Bergantino, Christopher Bove, Myles Brawn-Husband, Kerry Clark, Tracy Clossick, Frank Cummings, Rachel Ferreira, Deanne Gagne, Zachary Gauthier, Mona Hussein, Melanie Lawhead, Crystal Martin, Richard Moreau, Janice Musco, Grace Pires, David Schutltz, Ed Soares, Angie Stabile, Mark Susa.

RIPTA: James Canty, Sarah Ingle, Joelle Kanter, Cristy Raposo Perry, Nathan Watchous, Nicole Yee.

Call to Order: Chairperson Heather Schey called the Accessible Transportation Advisory Committee (ATAC) meeting to order at 4:03 PM. She then reminded participants about expectations for those who attend in person.

Zachary Gauthier made a motion to approve the minutes from the March 7, 2024 ATAC meeting. Angie Stabile seconded the motion, and all were in favor.

RIPTA Finance Update:

Nathan Watchous, RIPTA's executive director of finance, shared a general overview of the agency's fiscal situation. He said that RIPTA has an overall operating budget of \$144 million, including \$103 million for salary and benefits. Revenues come from passengers and federal and state subsidies. The agency is not keeping up with expenses, as salaries and benefits have increased in recent years, while revenues have stayed the same or increased slightly. He said the projected overall deficit is about \$18 million for the next fiscal year and is expected to increase over time.

Nathan said that federal funds cover 80% of the \$12.3 million budget for paratransit service, and RIPTA provides a 20% match. RIPTA has ordered 50 paratransit vehicles which should arrive within the next 6 months.

A discussion followed about proposed service cuts, alternatives to gas tax funding, and RIPTA's role in advocacy. Participants also requested more information about the new Ride vehicles. Nathan encouraged people to submit additional questions through email.

Ride Updates:

- Wave payment testing for Ride program: Volunteers said they were still waiting to receive Wave cards to test on the Ride system. Joelle Kanter said she would follow up with the Ride division for an update.
- Ride Anywhere pilot program: RIPTA will continue reporting on the statewide paratransit pilot program every month. In January, 130 trips were scheduled through the pilot, with 353 pilot trips scheduled in February and 465 trips in March. Ridership increased, with 25 unique riders participating in January, 74 in February, and 83 in March. The total program cost through end

of March was estimated at \$45,736.43.

RIPTA Project Updates: RIPTA's Deputy Chief of Planning & Project Management James Canty reported on several projects:

- East Side Tunnel construction: Work continues to replace the tunnel's drainage and lighting systems and repair cracks and leaks. It is expected to finish in September. While bus stops on the edge of the tunnel are temporarily closed, riders are being directed to other stops nearby.
- CCRI Warwick bus hub: RIPTA's redesign of the CCRI hub is complete with new shelters, signage, and bus lanes. Within the next two weeks, custom brackets will be installed for smart screens with push-to-talk buttons.
- Pawtucket/Central Falls Transit Center: Now that design work is complete on a new passenger facility with a waiting area, RIPTA is preparing an RFP for construction. It should be posted on the state's purchasing website on April 15th.
- Providence Transit Center: This project aims to move the downtown hub from Kennedy Plaza to a new indoor facility sited with transit-oriented development. RIPTA is moving forward with Next Wave Partners on the initial phase to evaluate several sites including the I-195 parcel and others that are privately owned. Public engagement sessions will be announced soon.

RIPTA Public Hearing Schedule:

Public hearings are scheduled in Providence on April 8th and West Warwick on April 15th to address revised proposed service changes. Specific route information will be available on RIPTA's website.

Discussion:

- A discussion followed about the Providence transit center, with participants asking why RIPTA would choose to build a new facility when facing financial challenges. James Canty explained that the state issued a bond specifically for this purpose, and it cannot be used for operating funds. Once RIPTA has land for the facility, the hope is for retail and other uses to help generate revenue to cover the costs. RIPTA currently leases space at Kennedy Plaza, so this new arrangement would be financially beneficial to the agency.
- Questions were also asked about meeting spaces for public hearings, with a recommendation to host them in larger facilities. RIPTA will continue looking for suitable locations.
- Others encouraged RIPTA to hold public hearings remotely. RIPTA follows state guidelines by hosting them in person, but the agency posts presentations on its website and accepts public comments online and through messages at (401) 784-9500 x1101. People may send their concerns directly to the board as well.
- A rider provided recommendations for driver training. He mentioned that one driver had trouble operating a Flex bus that provided RIdE trips. Heather Schey suggested calling customer service about this kind of issue.
- Another RIdE customer said that his trips have been inconsistent, with some arriving late. He asked when the Reveal app will be upgraded, and expressed concern about RIdE communication when trips are late.
- Another customer added that the Reveal app doesn't work on her phone, and she had a

situation where she was late for an important appointment. She would also like RIde to communicate about the estimated arrival time when late.

- Customers said that when they call RIde, they get long, inaccurate wait times. They asked when it will be fixed.
- A RIde customer with a permanent disability learned that his certification had expired, and he was given a grace period. He encouraged RIPTA to simplify the RIde recertification process.
- Another RIde customer called dispatch a few nights ago when her van hadn't arrived yet, and she had trouble communicating with the staff person on the phone. She ended up canceling her RIde trip and getting a ride from someone else, but she encouraged RIPTA to address this communication issue.

The meeting adjourned at 5:40 PM.