



Approved June 24, 2020

**Cooperative Alliance for Seacoast Transportation  
Minutes of the Board of Directors Meeting  
Wednesday, May 27, 2020**

Per RSA 91-A:2,III(b) the COAST Chair has declared the COVID-19 Outbreak an emergency and has waived the requirement that a quorum be physically present at the meeting

**PRESENT:** Scott Bogle, Arthur Capello (Arr: 8:50) , Denis Hebert, Margaret Joyce, Valerie Labrie, Colin Lentz, Marty Pepin, Dave Sandmann, Dennis Shanahan, and Juliet Walker

**ABSENT:** Jim Campbell, Steve Fournier, Dave Sharples, Maria Stowell, Shelley Winters, and Thomas Wright

**STAFF:** Rad Nichols, Michael Williams, and Heather Hesse-Stromberg

**I. CALL TO ORDER AND INTRODUCTIONS**

The meeting was called to order at 8:31am. Mr. Nichols read the information regarding authorization to meet electronically pursuant to the Governor's emergency order. Each member identified themselves, their location and whether anyone was in the room with them and listening contemporaneously.

**II. APPROVAL OF MINUTES**

Ms. Joyce made a motion to accept the minutes as presented and Mr. Pepin seconded. All voted in favor by roll call.

**III. PUBLIC COMMENT**

Mr. Nichols shared a Thank You note written by a staff member to the Board regarding her gratitude for being paid through the furlough.

**IV. FINANCIAL REPORT**

Financials for April were not available yet. Mr. Nichols noted that we were primarily shut down, except for Demand Response services, and are determining how to best use the federal funds available to us. Our accountant is also handling the impact of COVID at his own transit agency.

Mr. Nichols presented a report on direct COVID-19 related expenses through May 10. He noted that we are currently in the process of working with FTA Region 1 staff to amend one of our FTA 5307 grants by adding approximately \$407k of funding for Emergency Relief Operations (at up to 100% Federal participation).

Mr. Nichols shared that we have \$323,149.11 in COVID-19 related expenses through May 10<sup>th</sup>. These expenses include wages, personal protective equipment, sanitizing supplies, legal guidance and other supplies associated with working remotely.

Mr. Bogle asked if this allows us to hold off on accessing CARES Act funding. Mr. Nichols said between the two new categories of Federal funding, we will access Emergency Relief funds first.

## **V. Old Business**

### **Portsmouth Senior Transportation**

Staff were notified in mid-May that the funds the City of Portsmouth were planning on using to support Portsmouth Senior Transportation in the City's FY21 were going to switch (for the coming year) from parking revenues to HUD funds. Staff has provided the materials requested by the City's Community Development Coordinator, Elise Annunziata, to enter into an agreement with the City for the award of these funds.

### **Medicaid Non-Emergency Transportation**

It seems as if there are some significant shifts going on in the Medicaid NEMT broker arena. There will now be up to three separate brokers that transportation providers may have to work through. This ultimately will increase the complexity of working within this program as a transportation provider. COAST has been asked to become a provider by the new brokers coming into the state, and we have indicated that, until the rates make business sense, it is not something we are interested in getting back into. Mr. Bogle asked if we know why CTS was not asked to be the broker and if we anticipate any increase in the rates offered given other providers have had the same reservations. Mr. Nichols indicated we do not know why CTS was not selected to be the broker and that we do not know whether rates will be increased.

### **Operations and Maintenance Facility Planning**

Staff have negotiated a scope of work with our A&E firm, CMA Engineers, and are very close to coming to agreement on the proposal for the work. COAST has determined that the CMA's costs are reasonable. The effort will include evaluating renovation and new construction options for our facility at 42 Sumner Drive. The existing facility needs repairs and modifications to comply with building codes and standards; the layout is inefficient for current operations; and COAST's administrative functions have had to move offsite due to capacity constraints. The purpose of the project will be to evaluate the work needed to bring the existing facility up to code in a way that meets COAST's needs and to compare this with the cost to construct a new facility. Following the project, COAST will have enough information to decide on a direction to proceed and will use the work from this project to pursue funding and further engineering and construction along the chosen path. The hope is that this part of the project will be complete in the November to December timeframe.

## **VI. New Business**

### **Action Items**

#### **Action Item #1: Update Lost and Found Policy**

It has been some time since COAST's Lost and Found Policy has been reviewed and updated. Upon staff's recent review of the Policy, in preparation for passengers being able to ride a COAST bus to our Administrative Offices, needed updates were identified. We have determined that COAST is holding on to lost items for too long and that valuable items are not begin turned over to the police as we would like them to be.

The proposed policy was included in the Board Packet.

**Action Required:** *The COAST Board of Directors approve the updated Lost and Found Policy, to be effective June 1, 2020*

Mr. Lentz made a motion to approve the updated Lost and Found Policy to be effective June 1, 2020 and Mr. Shanahan seconded the motion. All voted in favor by roll call vote.

### **Committee Reports**

**Executive Committee** – There was an emergency meeting on May 8, 2020 for the purpose of authorizing Mr. Nichols to enter into an agreement for a 5310 grant with the State. The Executive Council will take action the third week of June to approve this. Mr. Nichols noted that he expects another meeting during the first half of June.

**Board Development Committee** – did not meet.

**Policy Committee** – did not meet.

**Legislative Committee** – did not meet.

### **Discussion Items**

#### **Discussion Item #1: Service Resumption Overview**

Mr. Nichols shared the CDC Considerations for Reopening Mass Transit and will share that with members after the meeting.

Mr. Nichols reported that COAST resumed service on May 11, though not at full schedule. We continue to work to resume full services and are only held back by having appropriate staffing levels. We continue to have about 14 operations employees out due to COVID-19 related reasons, though this number is constantly evolving. Given the dynamic situation and need to be reliable for our riders, we are being careful to not increase service to a point where a small change in staffing would result in us having to cut back again.

Starting May 26<sup>th</sup>, we resumed full Route 1 and Route 33 service. Starting June 1, we will be resuming Route 41cc, increasing frequency on Route 41, and opening an earlier run on Route 40. We will continue to increase services as capacity allows but based on our current situation, we anticipate we may be on a reduced schedule until June 29th.

Mr. Nichols noted that it is unlikely that we'll be able to expand current service prior to the launch of our new system due to the number of staff who continue to be out due to concerns over COVID-19. Several operators are expected back at the end of June so we should be all set to launch full service.

Mr. Nichols presented ridership data for both Fixed Route and Demand Response operations. In April, demand response ridership reflected average daily rides of 44 with ADA Paratransit services being the most frequently used. In May, demand response ridership has shown an increase to an average of 48 trips per day. There has been a significant increase in medical rides through Portsmouth Senior Transportation in proportion to overall PST trips.

Mr. Nichols and Mr. Williams indicated that things have been going smoothly since we resumed service and that, although ridership has significantly decreased, we saw gains in fixed route ridership from week 1 to week 2.

Mr. Sandmann noted that it may take time for people to get back to being comfortable with riding the bus.

### **Discussion Item #2: FTA 5307 ER and CARES Act Funds Status**

The Federal Transit Administration has two sources of funding that grantees such as COAST have access to for offsetting COVID-19 related expenses and revenue losses. Without these sources of funding, and the ability to use these funds without matching local funds, public transit agencies across the country would have failed in April and have not been able to return. These funds included a 100% Federal participation rate. ER covers direct expenses related to COVID from January 20, 2020 to a point in time that is defined by individual systems' grants.

#### FTA 5307 Emergency Relief (ER) Funds

The flexibility granted by the FTA under the 5307 Emergency Relief program all for COVID-19 specific expenses (capital and operating) that are above and beyond normal operations to be paid at a Federal share of 100%.

Eligible expenses include such things as:

- administrative leave (furlough),
- removal of health and safety hazards such as additional vehicle and facilities cleaning,
- costs associated with shutting down and/or restarting service,
- materials like hand sanitizer, gloves, soap and cleaners,
- emergency protective gear relevant to the emergency

These are all direct, nearer term expenses (only) that are related to the COVID-19 pandemic. The flexibility granted under this program is not expected to be indefinite.

To be able to draw 5307 ER funds at these higher Federal participation rates, such funds must be identified in a scope on a grant. Grant funds that have not been drawn down, but are on an existing active grant, will need to be amended to create a new ER scope. Any unobligated funds could be used in a new grant or amended into an existing grant.

Our current estimate is that we will have just over \$405,000 of expenses that we can use 5307 ER funds on (through June 2020). We are amending a grant that is currently active with FTA to expand that scope. Once amended, we will draw down those funds fully by late July or early August. We will then use CARES Act funding to cover increasing costs or lost revenues, particularly in farebox and advertising losses.

Revenue in farebox and advertising have seen a tremendous decrease.

#### CARES ACT Funds

CARES Act funds (\$25B) were allocated to urbanized area and rural area formula programs across the country. Funding is provided at a 100% Federal share, with no local match required, and will be available to support capital, operating, and other expenses generally eligible under the 5307 and 5311 programs in order to prevent, prepare for, and respond to COVID-19. Such expenses incurred back as far as January 20, 2020 are eligible for reimbursement under 5307

ER. There are not a lot of funds we expended for COVID prior to March 1, 2020. These funds have no lapse date and remain available until expended once placed on a grant.

Funds allocated to the region under the CARES Act:

	<u>Total Allocation</u>	<u>Granted To COAST</u>
Dover-Rochester, NH-ME	\$3,034,973	\$1,571,486
Portsmouth, NH-ME	<u>\$2,395,856</u>	<u>\$1,197,928</u>
	\$5,430,829	\$2,769,414

To date, the FTA has been authorized by the State of NH to award COAST up to half of the funds allocated to the two UZAs served by COAST. As the needs of the State and other eligible entities are further identified, additional authorizations for awards will be granted.

While significant in sum, the ongoing nature of the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic and the ripple effects it will have on the economy and ridership are expected to have lasting effects over years. CARES Act funds will be critically important for COAST to weather this incredible challenge. Lost fare and advertising revenues alone will be significant. Additionally, the ongoing cost to operate the public transit system post-pandemic will be higher as significant attention will have to be paid to ensuring the fleet and facilities are clean and safe for staff and our passengers.

Mr. Nichols noted that we are striving to be able to use CARES Act funds to help us get through financing the first 5 years of our new system, filling the funding gaps we had identified over the winter. He stressed that, while we know we will need to fill COVID-19 related funding losses, we also need to keep in mind our longer-term needs.

Ms. Walker noted that COAST needs to expect that municipalities will not be able to fund COAST fully as they have been impacted financially by COVID-19 as well. Mr. Nichols agreed that we expect to see a decrease in funding from our communities.

Mr. Capello noted that he is not able to fund the services in his town so COAST funding will definitely see a decrease.

**Discussion Item #3: New System Launch Preparations Update**

Staff continue to be focused on the launch of our new system on June 29.

Schedule Brochures

All content for the new schedule brochures has been finalized and after this meeting Mr. Nichols will let the designer know we are ready to go to print. We expect to have schedules delivered, and begin the initial distribution process, in early June.

Website Update

Extensive updates to the website are currently in staging, including new pages for all routes. The new site will go live on June 28. The current live site is in the process of being updated to better assist those interested in the new system to access to the information they will need starting June 29. There have been some glitches with the GTFS feed.

Destination Signs/Announcements

We have the data card so we can update the destination signs and annunciation system when it is time.

#### Training

Operations staff have begun conducting extensive training with bus operators during the second half of May.

#### Bus Stops

The newly designed bus stop signs are currently in production and should be delivered in early June. Staff will begin installing and replacing signs in the second half of June. Mr. Williams noted we will start replacing bus stop signs as soon as we get them in. They are not double-sided and will mount exactly as they are now. He noted that any that can be swapped out because they will still work with our current system will be done right away. Others may require that we wait until we get closer to the new system launch so as to not confuse riders.

#### 6 Sumner

We have identified a layout for the reception area at 6 Sumner Drive and are working with our engineering firm to move the project to completion. We are also working with the City of Dover on the installation of a new bus shelter at this location.

#### Outreach

We have begun our outreach efforts on social media to help riders plan for their most commonly taken trips. We are asking riders to send these trips in to us via direct message so we can help walk them (and anyone else seeing our responses) through how they would take this trip starting on June 29. Ms. Joyce asked if we are able to communicate with passengers who purchase passes, so they are kept up to date about the changes. Mr. Nichols noted that there have been ongoing communications with them through this whole process. He also noted that they are often the passengers who call us with questions.

#### Virtual Event

Given the coronavirus epidemic, staff are working on putting on a virtual event to celebrate the launch of the new system.

#### **Discussion Item #4: NHDOT CMAQ and 5307 Large Urban Funds Award Update**

Mr. Nichols and Ms. Winters have been trying to connect over the last week and a half but have not been able to so this update will have to wait.

### **VII. Community Updates/Information Items**

#### Ridership

Through February we had seen an increase in ridership over the past year, however, once COVID-19 hit the region, we began seeing ridership losses (mid-March).

All fixed route services and Route 7 On Demand were suspended during the month of April. Demand response services that operated during the month of April included: ADA, Portsmouth Senior Transportation, Community Rides (non-emergency medical trips) and Accessible rides for Ready Rides. Ridership on all of these services totaled 770 for the month. This represented a 61% decline in trips provided when compared with April 2019.

We have seen a nice increase in ridership (+32%) between the first week and second week of fixed route service resumption. We hope this trend will continue unless we see another increase in positive tests.

Ms. Walker thanked the staff for all of their hard work. Mr. Nichols thanked the Board for their support through this process.

### **VIII. Adjournment**

Ms. Joyce made a motion to adjourn the meeting and Mr. Lentz seconded. All voted in favor and the meeting was adjourned at 9:19 am.