



**Cooperative Alliance for Seacoast Transportation
Minutes of the Board of Directors Meeting
Wednesday, April 28, 2021**

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:** Arthur Capello, Adam Causey, Sönke Dornblut, Martin Dumont, Denis Hebert, Valerie Labrie (left 10:00am), Colin Lentz, Marty Pepin, Dave Sandmann, Michael Scala, Dennis Shanahan, Maria Stowell, Juliet Walker (Arr. 8:38am), and Shelley Winters (Arr. 9:11)
- ABSENT:** Scott Bogle, Margaret Joyce, Dave Sharples, and Thomas Wright
- STAFF:** Rad Nichols, Michael Williams, Heather Hesse-Stromberg, Margot Doering, and Vanessa Polychronis
- GUEST:** Lauren Haley, Phil Corbett, Rob Doyle, Sam Fortier

I. CALL TO ORDER AND INTRODUCTIONS

The meeting was called to order at 8:31 am. The meeting began with a moment of silence in honor of Robie Marsters, a COAST CDL Operator who passed away on April 19, 2021. Robie had been a member of our staff since September of 2014 and had been going through a many month health battle. He was a good soul and loved to tell a good story and a good joke. He was always happy to help out and truly loved working at COAST. We all miss him and grieve his loss.

Each member identified themselves, stated their location, and whether anyone was in the room with them and listening contemporaneously.

II. PUBLIC COMMENT

Mr. Nichols recognized Marty Pepin for his years of service to the COAST Board of Directors. Mr. Pepin is stepping down from the Board of Directors after serving as the representative from Somersworth since 2012. Mr. Pepin has been a wonderful addition to the Board since joining, having volunteered on multiple committees, and having provided valuable input over the years. He has kept the Somersworth City Council up to date on COAST matters, working tirelessly to educate his colleagues about COAST's services and to get Somersworth to provide full funding to COAST. Mr. Pepin can step away having achieved the goal of having Somersworth fully fund COAST. Mr. Pepin noted that he is stepping away for health reasons, but that COAST is near and dear to his heart and COAST will have his full support as long as he's on the Somersworth City Council.

Mr. Nichols recognized Vanessa Polychronis, COAST's Community and Employee Relations Manager, who has reached her Five-Year anniversary. He noted that she has been an incredibly important part of our administrative team and has always been willing to step in and do anything that needs to be done. Ms. Hesse-Stromberg especially pointed to how masterfully Vanessa handled payroll during COVID, with many additional layers added to complicate matters. We are grateful to Vanessa for her dedication to our passengers and our employees and look forward to many more years of working with her.

III. Discussion Items

Due to the attendance of multiple members of the CMA Engineering firm for the facility needs assessment update, this discussion item was moved up on the agenda.

Discussion Item #1: Facility Needs Assessment Update

Our engineering firm, CMA Engineers (Philip Corbett and Samuel Fortier) and their Architect (Robert Doyle) provided an update on where we currently are with the conceptual designs for a new Operations & Administration facility and provided initial cost estimates for the project. Renovation and new construction options were presented, along with initial cost estimates. A timeline for progressing to potentially be ready for new construction as early as FY22 was presented as well.

IV. APPROVAL OF MINUTES

Mr. Lentz made a motion to accept the March 2021 minutes and Mr. Causey seconded the motion. A roll call vote was taken to accept the minutes.

Mr. Capello	YES
Mr. Causey	YES
Mr. Dornblut	YES
Mr. Dumont	YES
Mr. Hebert	ABSTAIN
Ms. Labrie	YES
Mr. Lentz	YES
Mr. Sandmann	YES
Mr. Scala	YES
Mr. Shanahan	YES
Ms. Stowell	ABSTAIN
Ms. Walker	YES

V. FINANCIAL REPORT

Ms. Doering presented the financials for March and drew attention to the positive trends in farebox and contract revenue. While still under budget, the increase we saw in March in revenue and ridership was notable, and this trend has continued into April so far. In terms of utilities expenses, we recently received six months of utility bills from our landlord for 6 Sumner causing the large change in this line from months previous.

Mr. Scala asked about the decline in Advertising revenue and wondered if it was due to cancelation of contracts. Ms. Doering noted that last Spring there were significant cancelations of contracts but noted that ATA indicates that the trend is improving, we are getting more interest, and ATA has signed several new advertising contracts. Mr. Nichols noted that we saw a significant number of advertising contracts get canceled last spring with COVID, but that ATA predicted we would see advertising pick-up again this spring. He reported that ATA is looking into investing in a new service that allows a firm to track our buses and cell phone data to estimate the number of eyes that could have possibly seen our buses, and the advertisements on them, through the span of a day. This is a metric that is being used more and more as companies make decisions about spending their advertising dollars. Initial reports from one month pilot look positive.

Ms. Doering noted that the Balance Sheet shows fluctuations in wages and taxes payable. She noted that these will fluctuate depending upon when our pay periods fall versus month end date.

VI. OLD BUSINESS

Staffing

We currently have the following positions open at COAST and we are at a critical point with Operators and Vehicle Cleaners.

- 5 full time CDL Operators

- 1 full time non-CDL Operator
- 1 part time non-CDL Operator
- 1 or 2 vehicle cleaners
- 1 Supervisor

The number of Operator position openings are based on the new operator pick which will go into effect in the second half of May. We currently have one Non-CDL and one CDL Operator in training. We also have numerous Operators out currently due to short- and longer-term issues.

In the meantime, Supervisors and Dispatchers are driving multiple hours daily, Mr. Williams is dispatching and driving when necessary, and all staff are being asked to work much more overtime than they can continue to work safely. Our staff has done an amazing job maintaining services, but it is wearing them down and we need to address this situation in a timely way. We also regularly have no vehicle cleaner coverage on Saturdays now, and Operators are being asked to sweep, pickup, and fuel their vehicles at the end of the night. Between overtime and paying higher rates for certain staff to do tasks other lower paid staff typically performs, we are incurring significant costs. We continue to struggle to attract applicants. We have only had 4 applicants and have only had one successful CDL applicant in 2021.

A recent review of advertised pay rates reveals that we have, once again, slipped out of the competitive pay ranges, especially for CDL Operators. We last made a market rate adjustment to Operator pay scales in mid-2019, which ranged from 2-13% depending on the position and years in the role. Since then, the labor market for qualified CDL Operators has continued to tighten, the barriers to entry into the career heightened (particularly for the medical certificate), and wages have continued to increase much faster than inflation.

Mr. Nichols spoke with Executive Director of Nashua Transit a couple of weeks ago and they are also struggling to hire, as is Manchester Transit Association.

Recently Advertised CDL Rates in the Region

- First Student Rochester—starting at \$21.15/hr.
- Eliot, ME school bus—“up to \$23.55/hr.”
- Berwick Academy charter bus driver: \$25/hr. part time
- MTA is starting at \$20.84, which goes to \$22 at 6 months and \$23.16 at one year, plus a \$2,000 retention bonus per year, and a \$500 sign on bonus for new hires with the right CDL.

Other CDL postings do not show a pay amount, or the job is located out of our region. Many list quite a few job openings and say, “urgently hiring”. The Governor’s recent reopening of schools is putting extreme pressure on hiring, wage rates, and the use of hiring bonuses.

We start at \$19.45/hr. and last got an applicant with a CDL who responded to a phone call on March 5th. We have only had four CDL applicants in total this year, resulting in a single hire.

We are planning on market rate wage adjustments for CDL Operators, Non-CDL Operators, Dispatchers and Vehicle Cleaners that range between 5.4% & 9.3%. Wage ranges for these positions would be as follows.

Position	Starting Wage Rate	Top Wage Rate	Avg. Increase
CDL Operators	\$21.25	\$23.55	8.4%
Non-CDL Operators	\$17.65	\$20.05	5.4%
Dispatchers	\$22.05	\$26.15	7.8%
Vehicle Cleaners	\$16.00	\$17.30	7.1%

These adjustments would once again put us in the competitive range for these positions, particularly for CDL Operators. All told we are estimating that the annualized cost would be approximately \$135K. That

would keep us well within the current bottom line of our approved budget. We are planning on implementing these changes as soon as the beginning of the next payroll period.

Mr. Capello noted that we did this 2 years ago and can't continue to increase wages when we find ourselves in this position. He asked if we have done a wage study and Mr. Nichols indicated that we are on the low end of competitive, if even competitive. Mr. Nichols reported that the challenge is that anybody that needs CDL Operators is struggling because there are fewer workers in that field. We have to have those credentialed workers to provide our service.

Mr. Capello agreed but added that this is not unique to CDL drivers, it is an issue for all employers. He stressed that we need to have a broader discussion because we want to stay competitive and, at some point, we're going to price ourselves out of being able to provide the service. Mr. Capello urged us to proceed cautiously and look at other ways to attract people who may not be driven by wages. Mr. Williams noted that we brainstorm on this frequently and we would love to hear anyone's suggestions about how to attract workers. Mr. Nichols noted that we do have an Employee Referral program and it has been successful in getting people in.

Mr. Nichols reported that, after we made the last major adjustment, we saw a large influx in applicants. Mr. Scala agreed that we have to do what we have to do to get drivers and to keep buses on the road. He asked if we do cross-training and Mr. Williams shared that many staff are cross-trained and can fill multiple roles. The one cross-training barrier we have is that, while we can help people with endorsements, we can't train people to get their CDL due to insurance restrictions. Most people who get their CDL get it through an employer who will train you (school bus or UNH). Most driving schools don't have the right equipment to train people the way we'd need them to be trained.

Mr. Shanahan wondered if we have gotten any drivers from C&J after they shut down and, when they scale back up, are we concerned that we might lose them? Mr. Williams noted that we have brought on a few over the past year, and they tend to prefer our work scheduling.

Mr. Hebert asked if we reduce our routes with lower ridership to smaller vehicles and non-CDL drivers? Mr. Williams indicated that we have done that with Routes 34, 40, 42 and 44 which maxes out our fleet. To run any additional routes, we would need to purchase a new vehicle. We also have to run the vehicle that can carry the capacity at the peak capacity of the day, so that is also a limitation.

2020 Triennial Review

Our reviewer has recently held two meetings with us on different sections of the report (Vehicle Maintenance & Financial Management) and has requested additional supporting materials multiple times over the past 2-3 weeks. New questions have been supplied that will be gone over on COVID related operations, expenditures, and procedural changes (if any). We expect our close out meeting to be held in the first or second week of May.

VII. New Business

Action Items

Action Item #1: Acceptance of At-Large Appointee, Lauren Haley

The Board Development Committee has sought to add a new at-large member from one of the regional community health care centers. Contact was made with Janet Laatsch, Executive Director of Greater Seacoast Community Health, who recommended Ms. Lauren Haley for appointment. Ms. Haley is a Social Worker, working directly with individuals who use both the community health care system and COAST. Prior to her current position, she was at Seacoast Mental Health. Through her professional experience she has developed a good working knowledge of the transportation resources and challenges in the region.

Action Required: That the Board of Directors accept Ms. Haley as an At-Large Representative to the COAST Board of Directors.

Mr. Lentz made a motion to accept Ms. Haley as an At-Large Representative to the COAST Board of Directors and Mr. Shanahan seconded the motion. A roll call vote was taken.

Mr. Capello	Yes
Mr. Causey	Yes
Mr. Dornblut	Yes
Mr. Dumont	Yes
Mr. Hebert	Yes
Ms. Labrie	Yes
Mr. Lentz	Yes
Mr. Sandmann	Yes
Mr. Scala	Yes
Mr. Shanahan	Yes
Ms. Stowell	Yes
Ms. Walker	Yes

Committee Reports

Executive Committee – did not meet.

Board Development Committee –met on April 16 to discuss new member recruitment and a board self-assessment survey. There is one additional open board seat to fill.

Legislative Committee – did not meet.

Policy Committee – did not meet.

Finance Committee –did not meet due to lack of a quorum.

Discussion Item

New System Performance Analysis - Analysis document was distributed prior to the meeting.

COAST's new system design has predominantly met the goals that were set for it. Additionally, the benefits of the proposed system design have largely been proven out over the first few months of operations. There are potential further enhancements that have been identified, citing what they would correct, with associated annual costs, and general priority rankings.

COVID has made it impossible to measure prior ridership with ridership under the new system and there are too many factors to allow for a ridership analysis. On-time performance is 5% better under new system and we now offer hourly service (95.6% of the new service runs hourly) and to duplicate as much of our weekday service on Saturday service (73.3% of our weekday service is duplicated on Saturday). Sixty-one (61) percent of our service runs until 8pm or later. We had projected the new system to cost 11% less than the new system. So far, the new system represents a 17% reduction in costs, however, due to the pandemic, lower demand response ridership accounts for a significant part of the reduction in costs. We have met most of the non-ridership related goals. For goals that we did not meet, we analyze what would need to happen for us to meet those goals, and the associated costs.

Mr. Shanahan asked if there have been any communications with COAST regarding the Dover Back River Road area because there are an additional 150 units coming in the next several years. Mr. Williams noted that we have not.

VIII. Community Updates/Information Items

Ridership - Ridership data was presented with the Board packet.

In March we submitted to Congressman Pappas's office our facility project as a community project to be funded through the upcoming Infrastructure bill.

Mr. Nichols noted that COAST has been invited to a meeting of City Managers for the Tri-City Warming Center (off NH 108 in Somersworth). The meeting is on May 10th.

IX. Adjournment

Mr. Sandmann adjourned the meeting at 10:15am.