



**Cooperative Alliance for Seacoast Transportation  
DRAFT Minutes of the Meeting of the Board of Directors  
Wednesday, June 28, 2023**

**PRESENT:** Scott Bogle, Fred Butler (virtual), Mark Davie (8:44a), Sönke Dornblut (virtual), Ben Fletcher (virtual), Robert Gibson, Colin Lentz, Lauren Haley (virtual/8:37a), Denis Hebert, Margaret Joyce, Dennis Shanahan, Nick Taylor, Kristen Murphy, Michael Scala.

**ABSENT:** Michael Mates, Thomas Wright, David Sandmann, Shelley Winters

**STAFF:** Rad Nichols, Margot Doering, Michael Williams, Heather Hesse-Stromberg (virtual 8:30a to 8:36a)

**I. CALL TO ORDER AND INTRODUCTIONS**

The meeting was called to order at 8:30am by Mr. Shanahan.

**II. APPROVAL OF MINUTES**

Mr. Shanahan asked if a motion could be made to approve the minutes of the May 24, 2023 meeting. Mr. Bogle made the motion to accept the minutes as drafted, and Mr. Lentz seconded the motion. There was no discussion and Mr. Shanahan took the vote by roll call.

Mr. Bogle	Yes
Mr. Gibson	Yes
Mr. Hebert	Abstain
Ms. Joyce	Abstain
Mr. Dornblut	Abstain
Mr. Lentz	Yes
Mr. Shanahan	Yes
Mr. Taylor	Yes
Mr. Scala	Yes
Mr. Fletcher	Yes

The motion passed unanimously with three abstentions.

**III. PUBLIC COMMENT**

Mr. Nichols recognized Ms. Hesse-Stromberg's 10-year anniversary with COAST. He cited her dedication to COAST, its mission and employees. She has influenced just about every part of COAST's administration. Her role in HR touches every person at COAST and how she supports our employees exemplifies COAST's values. Mr. Nichols thanked Ms. Hesse-Stromberg for her commitment and dedication to COAST and for all the support she's provided to Mr. Nichols over the years.

**VI. FINANCIALS**

Ms. Doering stated that there were few notable changes to the trends COAST had previously been experiencing. One positive change is the increase in fare revenue due to higher ridership.

New advertising contracts have plateaued as ad space that emptied during the pandemic has refilled. The last of the four Gillig buses delivered in the spring of 2022 went into service in May. Until the next tranche of CMAQ funding is available in mid-July or August, our account receivable balance will increase each month for the undrawn balance.

Ms. Doering gave a rundown of the NH Gives Fundraising Event results. Individual donors gave \$1,199.81 (amount corrected in minutes) and the Board and Town of Kittery Challenges resulted in an additional \$1,500.00. There was one foundation match of \$25 and \$3,874.81 in Federal 5307/5339 Match. The total amount donated or accessed through match was \$6,619.62. With more awareness next year of COAST's status as a non-profit, a higher amount might be raised.

## **V. OLD BUSINESS**

### Staffing Update

Mr. Williams stated we have one open CDL position and one open vehicle cleaner position, and would gladly hire more part time CDL operators although there is not a big need right now. There are three, soon to be four, full-time CDL operators out on various leaves with undetermined return dates at this time. Those positions cannot be filled until the outcomes of the leaves are known which causes a bit of strain, but is not unmanageable. We have one person in training now with two more getting ready to start training. A question was asked about whether the medical leaves were preventable or workplace related. Mr. Williams stated that all details are kept confidential within HR, so he only knows when drivers are medically ready to resume work.

### Passio Implementation Update

Passio replaced hardware on ten of the buses with hardware more compatible with Verizon Wireless. Eight additional vehicles are scheduled to have their hardware replaced. This reduced the number of buses experiencing problems as well as the frequency they experience them significantly. While there are still bugs, the day to day is working well. Mr. Williams suggested removing this topic from the agenda unless there are specific updates requested.

Instead of every bus having problems every day, we have just a bus or two having an issue once or twice a day. So, the system is substantially performing. Mr. Williams noted that the vendor market for this product has changed and continues to change with names disappearing and new ones joining the space. Passio is superior to the system we had in place and has a similar number of issues as the ones Mr. Williams has seen throughout his career. There are some legacy providers that have a better track record, but they cost 4 to 5 times more and they are focused on larger transit agencies. He believes we chose a good system from the ones available to us. Programming real time bus tracking is difficult and COAST has some peculiarities that all vendors have problems dealing with, for example, our on-call stops.

Mr. Nichols provided the following updates:

### Resumption of Service Update

COAST brought back nearly all Saturday services, starting on May 20<sup>th</sup>. Mr. Nichols summarized the passenger count for the Saturdays since. In March and April, average ridership was around 275. In May, the first two Saturdays after the change averaged 408. The first three Saturdays in June averaged 535.

### Bus Shelter Cleaning

The new power washer was installed onto the old, repurposed maintenance truck. The first shelters cleaned look noticeably different, particularly the cement inside the shelter compared with the surrounding sidewalk. Mr. Williams explained that a rotating schedule to cover the 44 shelters will be set once the time to wash and capacity of the washer are fully understood. We expect there will eventually be a part time position cleaning 2-3 shelters per day. Meanwhile, the washing is being done by supervisor staff. Washing is done with just water. If a chemical is needed, it is administered manually from a spray bottle before being rinsed off. This protects the surrounding vegetation. The washer has a steam option that is not being used for safety reasons.

Low Floor Frontrunner Buses:

We were notified that the chassis should arrive in “late June” and that our buses are getting close to production. However, no exact delivery date has been offered beyond “early fall.” The four vehicles will go into service in our fixed route system.

Commuter Benefit Program

This has now been rolled out and is being introduced to employers starting with hotels in the Portsmouth area. One hotel group has 30-40 employees riding the bus. The program saves both employees and employers in fare and payroll tax. The program is on our website and is starting to attract interest.

Statewide Transit Coalition

The state budget for FY24-25 passed with a significant increase in funding for public transit across the state. Mr. Nichols congratulated and thanked everyone involved in that effort. Thank you letters will be sent to all the supportive public officials.

Forecast beyond FFY 2024

The Executive Committee continues to meet to discuss a variety of scenarios for COAST’s service levels and financial condition under a variety of Federal, State and Local support. A meeting with city managers and top elected officials is expected in August to talk about the future of public transit.

NHTA Annual Meeting

Mr. Nichols was elected to serve as the Chair of the NHTA for the coming year. At the annual meeting, every system was invited to recognize a staff member. Our morning dispatcher, Keith Dusinlleux, was awarded NHTA’s “Excellence in Service” award for his commitment to professionalism and excellence.

**VI. NEW BUSINESS**

**ACTION ITEMS**

**Action Item #1: Nominating Committee**

There was a brief discussion about asking the past Nominating Committee members to serve again in that capacity.

In accordance with Article XII, Section 2 of the COAST By-Laws, the Chairperson appointed the following directors to the Nominating Committee. No objections were raised with the chosen appointees.

Mr. Scott Bogle  
Ms. Margaret Joyce  
Dave Sandmann

The Committee was asked to report out on the nominations for FY24 at the July meeting.

### **Committee Reports**

Mr. Shanahan gave an overview of recent committee activities.

**Executive Committee** – met on June 15, 2023 to continue discussions on the fiscal picture beyond FY24 and will be inviting city managers and elected leaders from our constituent communities to a meeting to inform and gather input.

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

**Policy Committee** – did not meet.

**Legislative Committee** – more information to be provided in the discussion item on the Statewide Public Transportation Coalition update

**Finance Committee** – met on Monday, June 24 (2:30pm, COAST Administrative Office).

### **Discussion Items**

#### **Discussion Item #1: New Facility Update**

Mr. Nichols and our engineering firm have met twice with the Dover Technical Review Committee (TRC). The second meeting resulted in a much smaller list of remaining issues to be addressed, primarily around fuel tank locations and safety. He expects to our engineering firm to respond to the questions and have one more informal meeting with TRC before moving to the Planning Board.

He added we are currently waiting for an authorization from the FTA to submit our categorical exclusion (CE) from NEPA. FTA forwarded our request for a Section 106 review to NH SHPO which arrived earlier this week at their office. NH SHPO has 30 days to respond. If they do not have any issues, FTA can proceed with their review. If they concur, we would be able to place all our awards on Grants in the FTA system. Until this happens, we cannot draw on additional funds to support final design and construction or move ahead with contracts for those services.

Meanwhile we continue to seek non-DOT funding to match federal funds for the facility. Several letters to companies seeking support for our CDFA tax credits were sent out this month. The remaining amount needed is around \$3.0MM.

It is important that the design and bidding process continues concurrently. There were questions around the timing of requesting bids which is now likely for the fall of 2024. That timing will be ideal for bid response and pricing with construction starting in spring 2025.

Conversations hope to continue with NHDOT around the level of funding that might be available from the State, particularly now that the budget has passed and NHDOT has a better idea of their own resources.

**Discussion Item #2: Statewide Public Transportation Coalition Update**

Mr. Nichols reiterated the success of the approved SFY24-25 budget bill which included a total of \$2.283M for public transit operations over the next biennium.

While it appears as if our new Coalition has achieved some amazing success in the first few months of its formation, ideally, we now need to turn our combined focus to other mid-long term goals.

Potential goals for the upcoming SFY24 and SFY25 Legislative sessions may include:

- Laying groundwork for the SFY26-27 budget – can we build upon our successes achieved in the SFY24-25 budget.
- Local Option Fee Increase - the maximum fee has been frozen at \$5.00 since first enabled in the mid-1990s.
- Allowing audio recording on public transit buses – combined with a live feed, this could prove incredibly helpful and safer for our front-line employees who are working in an increasingly hostile environment.

There certainly may be other goals we may want to consider as well.

At the NHTA Annual Meeting one of the sessions focused on advocacy. The VP for Community Engagement for the NH Alliance for Healthy Aging, Martha McLeod, and Advocacy Director for the NH Alliance for Healthy Aging, Heather Carroll gave a very engaging presentation on their ongoing advocacy efforts in the Legislature and State House. Given that their causes are so inextricably linked to transportation, they indicated an interest in working together in the future with the NHTA and their membership. Plans are in the works to explore this option further as this may offer a very strong new foot in the door for our new Coalition.

**VII. Community Updates/Information Items**

Ridership

Mr. Nichols went over ridership in May.

- Overall ridership in May totaled 26,033 which was up 15.4% from the previous month and 18.1% from May 2022.
- Fixed route ridership totalled 23,894, up 15.5% from the previous month. This was the highest ridership month on COST fixed route buses since March 2020. Our ridership per revenue hour is now at 73.5% of our pre-pandemic levels.
- Demand response ridership May totalled 2,139, up 14.4% from the previous month. Ridership was a 23.3% increase over May 2022.
- Portsmouth Sr Transportation is regularly exceeding their pre-pandemic ridership numbers.

Our ridership and many of the smaller, regional systems are recovering faster than big metropolitan systems. Concord, for example, is back to pre-pandemic levels. Where Manchester, Nashua and COAST are similarly still below pre-pandemic ridership. We still have some weekday services that are partially suspended, usually in the later evening, as they were not part of the 2023 budget plan.

A follow-up question on staffing was raised at this point concerning service disruptions while operators are out on leave. Mr. Williams noted that we are always a little “over hired” to cover for all types of staffing absences (PTO, medical leave, retirement, etc.) as we almost always have at least one person out on some kind of leave. So, we are able to meet our current schedule using existing staff to fill the vacant positions. Mr. Nichols noted that we are seeing a younger demographic applying and joining our staff.

A discussion of the State of New Hampshire’s campaign to train people for CDL jobs followed. Mr. Williams noted how difficult the trucking CDL lifestyle is and how that can result in people choosing to work for COAST. School bus drivers also look to COAST for year-round employment. He stated that the more CDL drivers there are in the marketplace, regardless of what type of driving they are doing, is beneficial to COAST. Mr. Nichols pointed out that the prevalence of seniority in the transit industry makes it really difficult for drivers to move to another employer as they have to work less desirable hours (second shift) without seniority.

A question was raised about whether the existence of funding for training would make a difference. Mr. Williams pointed out that just paying for the tuition does not help drivers with the loss of wages while at the school. Past attempts to set up a program with Great Bay Community College faced too many hurdles to get beyond the initial discussions.

## **VIII. ADJOURNMENT**

Mr. Shanahan adjourned the meeting, without objection, at 9:37am.

Respectfully submitted by Ms. Joyce, Secretary