

**Cooperative Alliance for Seacoast Transportation  
Minutes of the Board of Directors  
Wednesday, February 25, 2009**

**Members Present:** Jim Wiggin – Chairman, Jon Frederick – Vice Chairman, Cynthia Copeland – Secretary/Treasurer, Scott Bogle, Carol Gulla, Dan Merhalski, Kenn Ortmann, Chris Sterndale

**COAST Staff Present:** Rad Nichols, Jenn Knox

**Proxy:** Richard Hayes

**Members Absent:** Christopher Morgan, Tom Morgan, Maria Stowell, Keith Trefethen, Sylvia von Aulock

**I. Call to Order**

Mr. Wiggin called the meeting to order at 8:35 AM.

**II. Public Comment**

Mr. Nichols stated that there was no public comment.

**III. Employee Introduction**

Mr. Nichols introduced Newell Whitford, COAST's special projects and Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) coordinator. Mr. Whitford has been with COAST since August 2005, when he was hired as an operator. Mr. Nichols stated that Mr. Whitford has been a "tremendous asset" in the last 15 months as COAST went through a staffing transition.

Mr. Whitford explained his background and recent accomplishments. Projects he has been working on include: revising the ADA application and the service guide, creating an annual client update process, improving ADA tracking and ridesheet data, and analyzing fares on an ongoing basis. Mr. Whitford passed around two graphs, one showing the decreasing late pickups for ADA trips and one showing increasing ADA trips being scheduled.

Mr. Whitford gave examples of recent challenges with the ADA program that need to be worked out before some individuals can become active clients. One client lacked the ability to pay for the trips, and has since gotten funding through a local social service agency. Another client has not been able to schedule trips due to our concern that he and his wheelchair may exceed our lifts' weight capacity. Mr. Whitford is waiting for documentation of this client's weight.

Ms. Copeland asked whether the drivers on the ADA trips are regular fixed-route drivers and whether we have been able to capture the actual cost of each trip.

Mr. Nichols stated that a few years ago, each trip was estimated to cost \$75. He stated he did not know the current cost of providing an ADA trip, but could easily get the information. He noted that since COAST is allowed to recover no more than twice the regular fixed-route fare for this service, and the fact that this service is extremely expensive to operate, the fare charged covers a much smaller portion of the overall trip cost. Changes in Health and Human Services (HHS) funding have prompted agencies to begin to shift the responsibility for transporting their clients onto COAST, since COAST is mandated by law to provide this service. Mr. Nichols stated that COAST can apply federal funds at a different percentage for ADA service. Right now, COAST is using 80% federal dollars for ADA service, but at a certain threshold, COAST will be able to use only 50% federal match.

Mr. Nichols stated that COAST is hoping to hire an ADA driver to help address the increasing demand. Mr. Sterndale asked if COAST could save money by negotiating trip times to combine rides. Mr. Nichols explained that combining rides is often impossible, given the nature of the current service and distance that the clients are from each other.

Mr. Whitford clarified that we can negotiate up to 1 hour of the requested trip time, but COAST tries to keep it within a 15-minute window. Mr. Nichols added that in many cases combining rides would cause passengers to be in the van for an inordinate amount of time, since they would be taken out of their way to pick up passengers in other towns. Mr. Ortmann said that perhaps we should start out with the 1-hour window so that passengers do not grow accustomed to the 15-minutes and then get upset when we have to start using the full 1-hour negotiating window. Mr. Whitford explained that our ADA Paratransit Service Guide does say that we have 1 hour, so this should not be a surprise to clients. COAST also tried to communicate with the client rather than a caseworker where possible, so that the clients are not given incorrect expectations.

Mr. Ortmann asked to what extent the increase in ADA service is associated with decisions made at the state or federal level. Mr. Nichols explained that much of it is, or soon will be, associated with the Center for Medicare and Medicaid Services (CMS) at the federal level. CMS has said that where there is comparable public transit, Medicaid will not pay more for a private ride than the ride would have cost on public transit. As the CMS rulings come down, HHS agencies will be forced to find an alternative, less costly means of transportation for their clients, and will pursue ADA paratransit service for them.

Mr. Wiggin mentioned the stimulus package and inquired whether this might help. Mr. Ortmann said that he felt the problem was systemic, rather than a stimulus issue. Mr. Bogle stated that this is another argument for state match and the regional brokerage concept. Ms. Copeland commented that the issue is local and federal match, rather than local and state match.

Mr. Sterndale asked what other transit systems are doing about this issue. Mr. Nichols stated that many of them started out as demand response services and evolved into fixed route. COAST is unusual in that it started out as fixed route, and had to start providing on demand service after the passage of the ADA in 1990. COAST has always been surprised that the service was not more popular. Mr. Whitford commented that cities are better able to combine rides because their clients are not as spread out, and vehicles can concentrate in particular areas.

Mr. Ortmann expressed his desire for COAST to deal with the issue proactively. Mr. Nichols said that it is important to express the need for state operational support. Senate Bill 136 would increase the local option fee for vehicle registrations. This bill was voted down as inexpedient. House bill 644 would increase the gas tax by 5 cents each year for 3 years. All revenues over 18 cents per gallon would go to highway and bridge work, but perhaps public transit would get some of the revenue below 18 cents. Mr. Ortmann asked Mr. Nichols to send an email blast about such pending bills so that the directors can show support.

At 9:25 Mr. Whitford left the meeting.

#### **IV. Approval of Minutes**

Mr. Ortmann made the motion to approve the minutes of the February 2, 2009 meeting, and Ms. Gulla seconded. Mr. Merhalski asked that a typographical error be corrected on the second page. The motion passed unanimously with this correction.

Ms. Copeland and Mr. Merhalski indicated that they had other meetings to attend shortly. Mr. Frederick made a motion to suspend the rules and move directly to the action items. Mr. Ortmann seconded the motion, and it passed unanimously.

#### **VI. Action Items**

- **Metropolitan Planning Organization MOU Approvals**  
Mr. Ortmann made the motion to endorse the MOU, and Ms. Gulla seconded. The motion passed unanimously.
- **Economic Stimulus Package Projects**  
Mr. Ortmann made the motion to endorse the list of projects, and Mr. Bogle seconded. Mr. Ortmann asked if there was any rationale for putting facility upgrades third on the list rather than second. Mr. Nichols explained that bus shelters can generate revenue. Mr. Wiggin stated that the Board of Directors would assist Mr. Nichols in paring down this list once we receive the money. Mr. Nichols stated that he expects to receive \$1.7 million dollars in federal stimulus funds. Mr. Nichols noted that the DOT had informed COAST that it should receive some of the Boston urbanized area (UZA) funding and a portion of the Maine portion of the Dover/

Rochester and Portsmouth UZA funding as well. This means that we can expect to receive about \$170,000 more. Manchester put in for only \$200,000 in projects, and Nashua put in for only \$1.5 million in projects.

Mr. Nichols stated that he and Mr. Ruzinsky discussed allocating the equivalent to these additional revenues to preventative maintenance, which could help offset potential shortfalls in local match. Ms. Copeland made the motion to allow Mr. Nichols to negotiate for preventative maintenance, since this would need to be included in the STIP amendment. Ms. Gulla seconded and the motion passed unanimously. Mr. Nichols stated that the stimulus process is moving forward very rapidly, and he expects to present the Board with contracts for the 3 new Gillig trolleys at the next meeting.

### **VIII. Information Items**

- **NH Proposed State Budget Cuts**

Mr. Nichols stated that the governor's budget has slashed support for public transit operations by 65% to 70%. This means a total revenue shortfall of \$68,000, resulting in 5.3 fewer hours of service every weekday. These hours would have to be cut from Routes 1, 2, 6, or 7, since they cannot be cut from the trolleys, FastTrans or the community routes. Mr. Nichols stated that COAST is already operating at a bare-bones level in terms of staffing in the office. He is less hopeful than ever that COAST will ever get back to level funding at the state level.

Ms. Copeland had to leave, but she suggested that COAST work aggressively to deal with this issue. New Hampshire already has one of the lowest ratings in the country for state funding of public transit. Mr. Bogle added that with this cut, New Hampshire probably be at the absolute bottom of states that provide funding. It was noted that other states with low levels of state funding instead have solid support at the county level.

Ms. Copeland and Mr. Merhalski left.

Mr. Ortmann said that he would like Mr. Nichols to draft a letter giving the particular amount of additional funding that Rochester would have to supply, given the local match formula, in order to make up for the difference. Mr. Wiggin added that that would mean eleven letters. Mr. Nichols said that he will do this, and that all the communities and entities that make up COAST have much more weight than COAST itself.

Mr. Wiggin stated that the meeting would revert back to the original agenda.

## **V. Financial Report**

- **December 2008 and January 2009 Income Statement and Balance Sheet**

Mr. Nichols presented the January financial report. He stated that COAST is back on track after audit season.

He explained that farebox revenues were down after the fare increase. There were also fewer days of service this year than at this point last year. There has also been an evaporation of advertising clients. Our advertising company has found that many advertising decisions are being made only at the national corporate level now, so established local relationships are less fruitful. Mr. Sterndale asked whether we could donate advertising space on our shelters to a local organization and count the value of the space for local match. Mr. Nichols stated that it cannot be used for local match, but in the past COAST did donate ad space to a radio station in exchange for airtime. Mr. Nichols stated that existing advertising clients are also taking longer to pay, in some cases three to five months.

Mr. Ortmann suggested that we encourage the advertising company to put something in the space, even if it's for a reduced amount. Perhaps we could offer the spaces to smaller businesses for a reduced rate and get some publicity out of it. Mr. Nichols stated that in the past, COAST negotiated lower rates to get advertising clients to sign up. He does not want to do this again because the companies had gotten accustomed to the lower rate and did not appreciate the increase. He would prefer to give away the space for a special introductory period, but charge the regular rate after that period is over. Mr. Ortmann suggested that COAST could come up with a local initiative, perhaps in partnership with Seacoast Local or the Main Street program, to publicize COAST's support of small businesses. Mr. Nichols stated that we could become more active in our local Chambers of Commerce.

- **Annual Audit Report Distribution**

Mr. Nichols announced that copies of the audit report were on the table for anyone who was interested.

## **VII. Discussion Items**

- **Regional Coordination – Mobility Management**

Mr. Ortmann asked that Mr. Nichols prepare for the next meeting a list of the pros and cons for each possible role that COAST could pursue. Ms. Gulla commented that she would appreciate this as well.

## **VIII. Information Items**

- **Dover FastTrans – Routes 1/33/34 and Ridership Update**  
Mr. Nichols stated that he had nothing to add on this topic. The low ridership may be due to a combination of the economy, the snow, and the fare increase. Mr. Wiggin commented that he had heard nothing negative about the fare increase. In fact, he had read one letter in the paper saying that it was about time. Mr. Frederick said he has seen more people waiting for the trolley on Route 1 than ever before. He asked Mr. Sterndale how the Cross Roads fare was working out. Mr. Sterndale said that he has seen a decrease in discretionary trips, but the free pickup at Cross Roads has definitely benefitted the residents. The trolley fare has not caused a great hardship for them.

### **IX. Old Business**

- **Facility – Interior Lighting Upgrade**  
Mr. Nichols stated that Phil Smith is working with PSNH to get a higher rebate, as was proposed at the last meeting.

### **X. New Business**

Mr. Nichols stated that there was no new business.

### **XI. Adjournment**

Mr. Ortmann made the motion to adjourn the meeting. Ms. Gulla seconded, and the meeting was adjourned at 10:05 AM.