

# **Draft Memorandum for the Record Boston Region Metropolitan Planning Organization Transportation Improvement Program (TIP) Process, Engagement, and Readiness Committee Meeting Summary**

## **December 14, 2023, Meeting**

1:00 PM–2:30 PM, Zoom Video Conferencing Platform

Jen Rowe, Chair, representing Mayor Michelle Wu, City of Boston, and the Boston Transportation Department (BTD)

## **Meeting Agenda and Summary of Discussion**

### **1. Introductions—*Jen Rowe, Chair, and Ethan Lapointe, TIP Manager***

J. Rowe and E. Lapointe welcomed committee members to the second meeting of the TIP Process, Engagement, and Readiness Committee.

E. Lapointe stated that the meeting objectives were to provide context for a TIP amendment regarding Newton's microtransit service, to be discussed at the MPO board meeting on December 21, and to discuss the full TIP Universe of Projects and Project Design Pilot.

### **2. Public Comments**

There were no public comments.

### **3. Status Update on Microtransit Projects including Newton in Motion (NewMo) Scope Change—*Ethan Lapointe, TIP Manager***

E. Lapointe provided background on the MPO's Community Connections investment program, which funds three-year pilots for new microtransit services. Projects must emphasize providing first- and last-mile connections and demonstrate air quality benefits.

E. Lapointe indicated that the MPO's Community Connections program is one of several funding sources for pilot funds used by service providers. MassDOT's Community Transit Grants is another source. He noted that pilots had been employed by the MPO in the past. The current program is an iteration of the Workforce Transportation Grant Program.

E. Lapointe listed the seven currently funded microtransit services in the FFYs 2024–28 TIP: Canton’s Royall Street Shuttle, Cape Ann Transportation Authority’s (CATA) On-Demand service, NewMo Microtransit, Montachusett Regional Transit Authority’s (MART) Microtransit service, MetroWest Regional Transit Authority’s (MWRTA) on-demand Catch Connect service, Stoneham’s fixed-route shuttle, and Watertown’s fixed route shuttle.

E. Lapointe provided background information on the NewMo shuttle, which has been funded by the MPO since federal fiscal year (FFY) 2021 with \$1.6 million in contributions over five years. The latest ridership data was also provided to illustrate rapid growth in demand and a stark decline in ridership after eligibility restrictions were put in place. Restrictions were put in place due to rising costs. MPO contributions did not scale with rising costs, and the on-demand nature of the service was not conducive to economies of scale. Costs per unique rider grew heavily.

E. Lapointe explained how the ridership eligibility restrictions put in place by the City of Newton required an amendment to the project in the FFYs 2024–28 TIP to reflect the change in scope.

E. Lapointe noted that NewMo is a strong performer in ridership, and the challenges faced are indicative of future discussions that will be had about other services that may be struggling.

E. Lapointe illustrated that the cost of running multiple MPO-funded microtransit projects has heavily impacted funding availability within the Community Connections program for other first-and-last-mile work. In FFY 2025, existing microtransit shuttles accounted for more than 60 percent of the funding set-aside before new projects could be considered.

E. Lapointe discussed demand and supply issues, noting that limited paratransit service is provided by regional transit authorities (RTAs) and that the MBTA is a strong driver of municipal demand for microtransit. He noted that RTAs may also treat microtransit as a substitute for low-ridership fixed routes. Almost every municipality has expressed an interest in microtransit, but funding has been a major constraint, and post-COVID mobility trends are being worked out.

E. Lapointe discussed how it is difficult to benchmark success and find out what works based on the unique contexts of many shuttles services. There is much academic, industry, and media coverage of the topic, but local contexts and changing mobility trends make implementation of a regional strategy difficult. Pilots often become expensive information-gathering exercises.

E. Lapointe discussed how each of the shuttle projects funded by the MPO were performing, with NewMo and MWRTA's CatchConnect services being the two that showed the strongest indication of being able to continue after MPO funding concluded.

E. Lapointe noted that further pilots could still be funded in future years of the TIP. However, most projects funded have struggled to demonstrate potential to continue.

***Discussion***

Nicole Freedman (City of Newton) expressed thanks for MPO support for microtransit and innovative technologies to gather data on this service. Cities like Newton with high car ownership rates still have high demand for these kinds of affordable services. Newton is looking at new avenues to continue funding the program under a new contract and will evaluate pricing to make the system sustainable.

Lenard Diggins (Regional Transportation Advisory Council) inquired as to what kinds of metrics MPO staff use to evaluate the success of microtransit programs.

E. Lapointe noted that reductions in carbon dioxide, volatile organic compounds, and nitrogen oxide emissions were necessary to demonstrate compliance. The MPO uses cost per passenger trip to gauge how viable the shuttle may be in the absence of an MPO subsidy. The MPO cannot support a project past three years because of Congestion Mitigation and Air Quality (CMAQ) funding rules. Reductions over time in the cost of passenger trips and the numbers of unique riders are key.

L. Diggins asked how benefits may be quantified in comparison to those costs for consistency with other MPO goals.

E. Lapointe stated that many shuttle operators survey customers to get information about satisfaction rates as part of funding reauthorization. MPO staff are using a Conveyal study to better understand how microtransit provides access and serves different equity populations. One of the issues in benchmarking success is the unique nature of each shuttle versus the others.

J. Ostroff clarified that NewMo uses a significant amount of mitigation funding from mixed-use development in addition to other grant funds for operating costs. Newton demonstrates coordination between housing developments with lower parking thresholds and microtransit service to support alternatives to single-occupancy vehicles and, therefore, lower parking thresholds.

J. Rowe asked how microtransit would compare in a cost-benefit analysis to other types of projects under Community Connections, citing Bluebikes as an example.

E. Lapointe noted that Newton was not being cited solely because of cost issues, rather because data was available and there was a scope change, and because the issues were somewhat systemic to microtransit projects funded by the MPO. The MPO is evaluating other new funding opportunities for Community Connections thanks to new flexibility under the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law.

N. Freedman mentioned that cost per trip for microtransit tends to factor in capital and operating cost, whereas Bluebikes does not necessarily factor that in. Factoring in capital costs for Bluebikes tends to increase the cost per trip to a degree beyond where it is shown in a solely operating context.

#### **4. FFYs 2025-29 TIP Universe of Projects Overview—*Ethan Lapointe, TIP Manager***

E. Lapointe reviewed the funding of the FFY 2024-28 TIP. There was \$150.2 million allocated to 21 new projects; 10 of were Community Connections projects and three were Transit Transformation projects. The TIP funds 58 projects with \$697.5 million in Regional Target funding, and in the FFY 2024-28 TIP new programs, such as the Design Pilot and Bikeshare Support programs, were created to bolster the project pipeline.

E. Lapointe cited the stark downward trend in applications that the MPO has received since the FFYs 2019-23 TIP cycle, decreasing from 25 applications in that year to eight applications to core investment programs in FFYs 2024-28. Smaller dollar investment programs represent a growing part of the application portfolio.

E. Lapointe reviewed the lifecycle of projects that are candidates for TIP funding. The cycle begins either with a MassDOT Highway discussion or with MPO staff. Both lead to the intake process and project scoping. MassDOT's Project Review Committee is the main gate for project proponents seeking federal funding.

E. Lapointe described how these phases enable projects to be eligible under the TIP for the project design pilot and construction funds, and how 25 percent design enables preference for construction funding consideration.

E. Lapointe reviewed the new TIP Universe. This Universe is based on the one presented in November 2022 minus the programmed or deactivated projects. The list is refined through correspondence with state, regional, and local stakeholders.

E. Lapointe gave a high-level visual overview of the TIP Universe with 143 projects. The Universe now accounts for Community Connections. There are 38 more projects than last year due to less gatekeeping, which allows the TIP Universe to reflect projects that may be pursuing design funding. A growing Universe means there is a growing body of work.

E. Lapointe discussed the Universe by subregion. The Inner Core had an increase in bicycle and pedestrian projects, and Inner Core projects tended to have momentum in obtaining MassDOT approvals and funding for design. MAGIC and MetroWest saw the most increases, from 7 each to 15 in MAGIC and 10 in MetroWest. In these subregions, there are multiple municipalities expressing interest in projects, including projects for Community Connections. The northern suburbs and North Shore saw some growth, but these regions have historically been well engaged with the TIP and are familiar with designing and initiating projects; most of the projects focused on vulnerable user safety. The southwestern subregions of SWAP and TRIC saw growth thanks to Complete Streets, but almost all new projects were in four communities because other communities had issues getting projects initiated and designed. The South Shore communities saw the least growth and had little engagement with MPO staff, who are currently working with the Metropolitan Area Planning Council (MAPC) to coordinate a strategy there to address resilience and trail gap concerns.

In the interest of time, a discussion of this topic occurred during the subsequent agenda item on the Design Pilot Update.

## **5. FFY 2025 Project Design Pilot Update—*Ethan Lapointe, TIP Manager***

E. Lapointe discussed the parameters of the design pilot, explaining that \$4 million was available for design work only in FFY 2025 to bring projects to any desired stage of design. Applications to date have focused heavily on dedicated bike and pedestrian infrastructure and intersection safety, with fewer applications applying directly for the Complete Streets investment program. E. Lapointe cautioned that strong interest in the Design Pilot program may be positive to justify demand for the resources, but would constrain the MPO's ability to support all of the applications it received.

E. Lapointe suggested a compartmentalization process for Project Scenarios. The objective would be to create "bundles" of projects for the Design Pilot, Community Connections, Transit Transformation, and new Outer Year projects, so they may be discussed separately for ease of consideration. If additional funding was available, those uses would be addressed after the draft scenario was created.

E. Lapointe mentioned that new scenarios for the FFYs 2025-29 TIP would emphasize some project areas more heavily than in previous years. For example, more consideration may be given to an applicant representing a municipality that had not had a TIP project in recent years.

***Discussion***

J. Rowe opened the floor to discussion.

Brad Rawson, Inner Core Committee (City of Somerville), noted that the forum was helpful for enabling further discussion and transparency in the TIP development process at this early stage.

L. Diggins noted that communities that lack staff capacity may be affected negatively in the evaluation of design pilots and that the process may reinforce the pattern of these communities not having projects. These communities should also be given resources to get that capacity, he said. L. Diggins asked if funding or MPO staff capacity were the main constraint to providing technical assistance to communities.

E. Lapointe said that if funding is available, the MPO board makes the decisions. He cautioned that the Community Connections program is an example of where funding too many projects over multiple years would constrain the ability to administer funding to new projects over time and make managing projects at the state, local, and regional levels tricky. The other major consideration is that projects funded for design by the MPO may be funded for construction by the MPO. While obligations to fund more construction projects offsets current issues with low application volumes, in an environment of future fiscal constraint these designs could be shelved and expire.

L. Diggins asked if scenario compartmentalization applied only to Community Connections or if it counted for other projects.

E. Lapointe responded that it is not for each investment program, but for the Design Pilot, Community Connections, Transit Transformation, and Outer Years at first. The purpose of the change was to mitigate the number of adjustments to programming that would be required if the scenarios are adjusted by the board during a discussion in a meeting.

Eric Bourassa, MAPC, asked if the trail and bike path projects had any overlap or coordination with the MassTrails programs to advance more projects in tandem.

E. Bourassa also asked when the Universe would be formally presented, and

E. Lapointe noted that it would be presented December 21st.

Rachel Benson, Town of Wrentham, asked how MassDOT Highway Districts and their capacity may be influencing the ability of communities to advance projects. R. Benson also asked about TIP outreach to directors of Departments of Public Works, and she asked what smaller communities were doing with their projects given they were seeing some development.

E. Lapointe noted that most of the Districts are aware of the design pilot, but most MassDOT districts work with multiple MPOs. District 6 is an exception, working only with the Boston Region MPO, and the MPO benefits from that. District 3 and 4 are also working with other MPOs that are considering project design programs. Staff capacity and prerequisites for initiation and approvals can also be an issue for state staff. For construction projects, the cost of designing projects has limited municipal progress alongside staff capacity issues.

Dennis Giombetti, MetroWest Regional Collaborative (City of Framingham), expressed thanks for coordination between MPO staff and communities in the region and for advancing a large volume of design project applications and supporting interest.

E. Lapointe also thanked MassDOT District staff, MAPC subregional liaisons, and other MPO members for advancing interest in these projects.

J. Rowe thanked members for the discussion and asked for a motion to adjourn.

## **6. Members Items**

There were none.

## **7. Adjourn**

A motion to adjourn was made by the Regional Transportation Advisory Council (L. Diggins) and seconded by the MAPC (E. Bourassa). The motion carried.

## Attendance

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<b>Members</b>	<b>Representatives and Alternates</b>
City of Boston (Boston Transportation Department)	Jen Rowe
Massachusetts Department of Transportation (Office of Transportation Planning)	Derek Krevat
Metropolitan Area Planning Council	Eric Bourassa
Town of Arlington	John Alessi
Regional Transportation Advisory Council	Lenard Diggins
MetroWest Regional Collaborative. City of Framingham	Dennis Giombetti
Minuteman Advisory Group on Interlocal Coordination, Town of Acton	Kristen Guichard
Inner Core Committee, City of Somerville	Brad Rawson
Town of Brookline	Erin Chute

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<b>Other Attendees</b>	<b>Affiliation</b>
Stephanie Groll	City of Cambridge
Joshua Ostroff	City of Newton
Nicole Freedman	City of Newton
Lauren Craik	City of Somerville
Pete Robie	Massachusetts Bay Transportation Authority
Jim Nee	Metrowest Regional Transit Authority
Tyler Terrasi	Metrowest Regional Transit Authority
Joy Glynn	Metrowest Regional Transit Authority
Charles Quigley	Town of Marblehead
Morgan Griffiths	Town of Natick
JP Cacciaglia	Town of Needham
Taylor (TJ) Torres	Town of Canton
Jon Rockwell	TEC Incorporated
Rachel Benson	Wrentham
Andrew McCaul	Pioneer Valley Planning Commission
Zach Kaufman	Baltimore Metropolitan Council

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**MPO Staff/Central Transportation Planning Staff**

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Tegin Teich, Executive Director

Logan Casey

David Hong

Annette Demchur

Ethan Lapointe

Erin Maguire

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