

Boston Region Metropolitan Planning Organization

Pilot Transit Working Group

Improving Connections and Closing Gaps Chat: Thematic Summary

May 19, 2021

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

Representatives of transit providers, transportation management associations, municipalities, state agencies, the Massachusetts Bay Transportation Authority (MBTA) Advisory board, and other advisory groups met for one hour to discuss ways to improve transit connectivity in the Boston region. Boston Region Metropolitan Planning Organization (MPO) staff suggested the following discussion questions for this meeting:

1. Do you have advice to share from your experiences coordinating schedules or services with other transit providers or other institutions?
2. Have you used apps or other technology to help customers make connections or to coordinate service? What was the outcome?
3. What improvements to transit or mobility hubs in your area (or in general) could help your customers make connections between services or modes?
4. What roles do bicycle, pedestrian, shuttle, and parking options play in helping your customers make connections?
5. What opportunities do you see for future coordination among service providers in the region?

Service Coordination

- It is challenging to facilitate connections between two or more low-frequency services. This difficulty can result in some services, such as shuttles to commuter rail, losing ridership. MBTA commuter rail's shift to clockface schedules is exciting, and if this approach extends to the bus network, it may facilitate connections that have not been possible in the past.
- How can operators move to cleaner, simpler schedules, which makes it easier for connecting services to plan around?
- It can be challenging for other transit providers to adjust to MBTA schedules when there is only a week or two of notice.

- What is a good way to build trust across agencies to support schedule coordination between formal service providers, especially before formal schedules are published?
- Consistent schedules, such as those with standard headways, can make it easier to coordinate services.
- It is difficult to support coordination between services if buses do not stay on schedule.
- Implementation of transit priority infrastructure can help transit services stay on schedule and support connections. During the COVID-19 pandemic, service providers did not need to put too much time padding in schedules, but traffic is returning. Providers need to create ways to increase rider confidence that vehicles will arrive on time.
 - Transit priority may be most advantageous when it creates connections to rapid transit stations, where connecting service will be more frequent, compared to commuter rail.

The Role of Technology and Fares in Improving Connections

- Fare interoperability across systems is important for supporting connections.
 - Ideally there would be fare media that would help people transfer between the MBTA, the Rhode Island Public Transit Authority (RIPTA), Amtrak, regional transit authority services, or private services. This fare media would help riders take advantage of service that is already running (e.g., Amtrak trains running between Providence and Boston, which stop at Route 128, or service running from Worcester or through Haverhill), even if they are not on the system those riders typically use. The MBTA or regional transit authorities (RTA) could give people access to these services for little or no cost. Customers do not care who is taking them where they want to go, only that they get there.
 - When the MBTA CharlieCard was first released in 2004, it was meant to support this interoperability; but the technology available today may be better able to support this interoperability.
- Lexpress could be a good pilot for exploring interoperability because it operates between the MBTA and the Lowell Regional Transit Authority and has customers that use these other services as well.
- RIPTA just launched its WAVE fare collection system. Extensibility is included in both that system and in the MBTA's AFC 2.0 system. RIPTA is interested in coordinating these services.

- There should be coordination on how transit fares are going to be set in the future, and how fares can be administered in ways that are equitable. Some conversation about having fares be free statewide is happening.
- Smaller private operators are concerned about fare interoperability with the MBTA, because investments in compatible fare equipment can be expensive. Some operators are moving toward mobile ticketing, which may be implemented before it is clear what the AFC 2.0 system may look like. How will other agencies coexist with it? Can decisions be made in a coordinated way before it rolls out?
- Fare policy goals should be set for Massachusetts or New England as a whole, but there is no space for coordinating. This would be a great area for coordination.

Mobility Hubs and Amenities for Supporting Connections

- A transit hub is being built at Burlington Mall.
- Restroom access is important aspect of helping both customers and operators support service and make connections. If restrooms are not readily available, customers and operators can be uncomfortable, and operators may not be able to stay on schedule. The lack of restrooms available during the COVID-19 pandemic was a challenge for operators.
- It is not always clear who is responsible for managing different aspects of MBTA stations, or what agencies (such as MassDOT or municipalities), are responsible for the roadway networks just outside of those stations. These factors affect passenger comfort and shuttle arrivals and departures.
- Parking near transit stations is helpful when it is easy for the customers to reach their destinations at the other end of their transit trip. Parking availability does not encourage transit ridership if people have to make multiple connections to make their trips.
- An overwhelming majority of first-and-last mile trips are made by walking. The more people who can get within reasonable walking distance of transit, the better. Those transit services need to be usable, though, so we need to look at what we can do to improve the frequency and connectivity of those networks.
- The Town of Lexington has shared links about events and activities promoting Lexington's [walk, bike, and bus](#) options, including by providing people an opportunity to [practice putting their bikes on bus bike racks](#).
- Wellesley's train stations are not Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) accessible. Funding is available for station improvements in the recent

transportation bond bill. Ideally, construction could have happened during the pandemic. How can we get improvements like these to be made more quickly?

Other Notes

- What mechanisms exist to support coordination, particularly between municipalities and regional transit authorities, for transporting people from new multi-family housing developments to transit stations? This is a need for the Route 2 and Route 20 corridors in Lincoln, where development is happening. How can we best take advantage of commuter rail access and leverage opportunities to decrease roadway congestion?
- The Town of Lexington is working on a regionalization action plan for transportation services.
- The MBTA may maintain information about connecting transit services that was compiled during the snow emergency in 2015.
- The design of workplaces and suburban office parks can affect the efficiency of transit service operations suburban areas. Shuttles may need to travel long distances to get from one building to another in an office park, and it may be difficult for shuttles to get in and out of these areas. How can office parks be designed to allow for sidewalks and shuttle drop off and pick up in centralized locations?
- It can be challenging to provide translations of information about transit services. It can be difficult to get consistent volunteer support, and the more materials that need to be translated, the more support is needed. What kind of assistance or coordination is available for transit services?
- Wellesley is working on a sustainable mobility plan and trying to encourage people to use transit. Wellesley also looks for opportunities to extend sidewalks and add bike lanes during construction projects so that those connections are there when housing is built.
- Marketing transit alternatives and getting people to change their behavior is challenging. How can we better coordinate on that?
- How can we help people to better make connections in other parts of the region, as opposed to only focusing on connections to the Inner Core communities?

Resources

- [Remix](#) makes it possible to draw transit routes, import schedules set up according to the Google Transit Specification Feed (GTFS), create schedules, and see where transit services exist (and do not exist). This tool can make it

easier to brainstorm where it might be possible to improve connections. Remix started as a [Code for America](#) project and was recently acquired by Via.

- [GoMassCommute](#) helps TMAs manage guaranteed ride home programs, transit subsidies, and other aspects of their programs. It has not yet been used for transit services and does not contain gap or last-mile information. As transit service begins to return, hopefully people will tap into GoMassCommute for transit access and ridematching information.
- The MBTA held [public events about fare policy](#) on May 25 and May 27 as part of a broader outreach effort on fare transformation.
- The Greater Attleboro Taunton Regional Transit Authority manages [RideMatch](#), which is a database of public, private, community-based, and non-profit transportation providers in Massachusetts. This database can be a starting point for understanding the services that are available in a particular area. Transit providers can contact Angela Constantino (aconstantino@gatra.org) to add or update information about their service.
- The Boston Region MPO offers funding for first- and last-mile solutions, community transportation, and other small, nontraditional transportation projects that can help improve connections through its [Community Connections Program](#). Sandy Johnston (sjohnston@ctps.org) can provide more information about this program, and you can learn about upcoming Community Connections projects in the federal fiscal years [\(FFYs\) 2022-26 Transportation Improvement Program](#).
- The Commonwealth of Massachusetts and other organizations offer [additional sources of funding for community transportation](#).
- The [Riders' Transportation Access Group \(R-TAG\)](#) advises the MBTA on transportation issues that affect people with disabilities and seniors, including systemwide accessibility. Information about upcoming R-TAG meetings is on the [MBTA's Events page](#).
- The [Gloucester Connection website](#) offers information about transportation and other community resources in 104 languages via Google Translate. This is one example of a way to provide translated material about transit services to communities.

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