



Thursday, February 6, 2025

**ADVISORY BOARD**

**MERRIMACK VALLEY REGIONAL TRANSIT AUTHORITY**

**MEETING CONDUCTED VIA ZOOM (INCLEMENT WEATHER)**

**Board Members Attending:**

Amesbury: Mayor Cassandra Gove	Andover: Jacki Byerly
Boxford: Matt Coogan	Groveland: Rebecca Oldham
Haverhill: Josselyn DeLeón-Estrada	Lawrence: Myra Ortiz
Merrimac: Mitch Kostoulakos	Methuen: Kathleen Colwell
Newbury: Kristen Grubbs	Newburyport: Christian Cyr
North Andover: Andrew Shapiro	North Reading: Lillian Hartman
Rowley: Bob Snow	Salisbury: Adrienne Linnell
West Newbury: James Blatchford	
Disability Community Representative: Gerard Boucher	

Mayor Gove, being Chair of the Board, called the meeting to order at 8:35 a.m.

- 1. Welcome & Introductions:** Mayor Gove invited Mr. Berger to call the roll.
- 2. Approval of Minutes of the Meeting of December 5, 2024:** Mayor Gove called for a motion to approve the minutes of the Advisory Board meeting of December 5, 2024. So moved by Mr. Blatchford of West Newbury, seconded by Mr. Snow of Rowley. Mr. Berger called the roll: Vote to approve: Unanimous, with five abstentions: Ms. Oldham of Groveland, Ms. Ortiz of Lawrence, Ms. Grubbs of Newbury, Mr. Cyr of Newburyport, and Mr. Shapiro of North Andover.
- 3. Governance: Election of new MeVa Advisory Board Committee Members:** Ms. Gove introduced Mr. Blatchford of West Newbury to present the candidate slate to fill positions left vacant by the resigning Board Members James Ryan of Salisbury and Andrew Levine of Newburyport. Mr. Blatchford motioned to nominate: Andrew Shapiro of North Andover to replace James Ryan as Treasurer of the Advisory Board and Chair of the Finance and Audit Committee; Josselyn DeLeón-Estrada of Haverhill to replace Andrew Levine on both the Finance and Audit Committee and on the Fixed Route Service Committee; Mitch Kostoulakos of Merrimac to replace James Ryan and Matt Coogan of Boxford to replace Andrew Levine on the Administrator Performance & Compensation Committee, with current Committee member Kathleen Colwell of Methuen to be elevated to Committee Chair. We will also be forming a new Committee, the Ferry Service Committee. Nominees for that Committee are: Mayor Cassandra Gove of Amesbury as Chair, Josselyn DeLeón-Estrada of Haverhill, Christian Cyr of Newburyport, and Elizabeth Maldari of MVPC. The motion was seconded by Ms. Ortiz

of Lawrence. Ms. Hartman of North Reading asked to become a member of the Paratransit Service Committee. Mr. Blatchford amended his motion to add Ms. Hartman to the Paratransit Service Committee. Mr. Berger called the roll: Vote to approve – Unanimous.

**4. Fare-Free Business Case Analysis Report:**

- a. Mayor Gove introduced Patrick Reed of The Merrimack Valley Planning Commission (MVPC) to present the results of the Fare-Free Analysis. Mr. Reed then introduced representatives of Stantec Consulting Services, Inc., which was hired by MVPC to conduct the study. They presented the results in detail to the Board. The results of the study can be found at our website: [www.MeVaTransit.com](http://www.MeVaTransit.com).
- b. At the completion of the presentation, the members asked questions of Stantec and Mr. Berger.
- c. Mr. Shapiro of North Andover made a motion to adopt the policy statement dated February 6, 2025, making all MeVa bus and paratransit services fare-free on a permanent basis or until such time that the Board may decide to amend the policy. The motion was seconded by Ms. Ortiz of Lawrence. After discussion, Mr. Berger called the roll. The vote was unanimous to adopt with one abstention: Ms. Hartman of North Reading, who abstained as a largely unserved community.

**5. Administrator's Report: Mr. Berger briefly updated the members on the following:**

- a. State of Administration:
  - i. Staffing Update: We've been very aggressive in hiring drivers, allowing us to bring back Saturday service. Targets for hiring additional drivers include 10 by April 1st and 25 by July 1<sup>st</sup>.
  - ii. Launch of CDL Training Incentive Program: This program allows new Mini-MeVa drivers with their CDL permit to participate in CDL training. They will work part-time as a van driver and part-time as a CDL trainee – all while being paid. Additionally, current Mini-MeVa operators hired before January 7, 2025, will be offered a \$1,000 bonus if they obtain their CDL license and move to transfer to bus operations before the end of this calendar year. The bonus is paid after 60 days as a bus operator.
- b. State of Operations:
  - i. Ridership: As of February 1<sup>st</sup>, we have restored the full Saturday service span and half-hour headways on the #1. We are on track to carry 3.1 million fixed-route riders this fiscal year, an all-time high. Paratransit is expected to carry nearly 115,000 riders this fiscal year, also an all-time high.

- ii. Service and Operations Planning: Restoration of full Saturday service, and 30-minute frequencies on the #1 began February 1, 2025; Restoration of full, all day 30-minute weekday service on all Lawrence routes will begin on April 6, 2025; Weekday frequencies will be increased from every 30-minutes to every 20-minutes on the #1 and #24 beginning July 6, 2025; and new crosstown service in Lawrence, Methuen, Andover and North Andover will begin September 7, 2025.
- c. State of Finance:
- i. Funding: We are monitoring the prospect of a supplemental budget for FY25 using the Fair Share amendment surplus revenues. This could be an opportunity to use the funds to pay down or pay off RTA Revenue Anticipation Notes, an idea that was suggested by this Board at the June meeting.
  - ii. Open Federal Grants: The open grant funds are already obligated and executed in grant agreements with the FTA and, therefore, should not play any part in the uncertainty of funding circulating in Washington.
  - iii. FY24 Variance Report: Most things are tracking according to budget. While the report shows that we are currently almost a million dollars to the good, that is primarily a function of the lumpiness of when costs and revenues are received.
- d. State of Planning and Implementation:
- i. American Training Coordination: MeVa met with American Training, Inc. (ATI) in West Andover at the suggestion of MassDOT. Multiple opportunities to collaborate were identified, including travel training for their clients, MeVa referring to ATI for access to areas we don't service, and promotion of our #7 bus, which goes by their headquarters every 30 minutes.
  - ii. Human Trafficking Awareness: January was Human Trafficking Awareness Month. NEPTA put on a webinar that reviewed steps transit should take to become more aware. Managers and safety and training officers of MeVa participated in that webinar. In addition, our driver training already includes a human trafficking awareness module.
  - iii. MBTA South Elm Street Bridge Project Outage Coordination: MBTA has been very cooperative in an effort to disrupt our operations as little as possible while the railroad bridge is being replaced. They have committed to work around VeVa's service needs as the project progresses, including facilitating access for our overnight maintenance staff.

- e. *State of Outreach:* Recently, we elected to shut down comments on certain social media posts, as hateful rhetoric was posted by a mean-spirited poster, directed at another poster and members of their family. We are reviewing how we can best balance maintaining the open dialogue we value on social media while being more proactive about limiting hurtful or bullying commentary directed at others. Meanwhile, we've been out and about in the communities and the subject of numerous media stories.
6. **Update from MVPC:** Patrick Reed from MVPC updated the members on current activities. For planning updates, please see their website at [www.mvpc.org](http://www.mvpc.org)
7. **Confirm Next Meeting:** The next meeting will be held on Thursday, March 6, 2025, at 8:30 a.m. at MeVa's Bradford headquarters.
8. **Adjournment:** At 10:41, Ms. Gove asked for a motion to adjourn. Mr. Boucher, Disability Rep., so moved, seconded by Mr. Coogan of Boxford. Mr. Berger called the roll. Vote to adjourn: Unanimous.