



Thursday December 5, 2024

ADVISORY BOARD

MERRIMACK VALLEY REGIONAL TRANSIT AUTHORITY

MCGOVERN INTERMODAL TRANSPORTATION CENTER

211 MERRIMACK STREET, LAWRENCE, MA

Board Members Attending:

Amesbury: Kassandra Gove

Haverhill: Josselyn DeLeón-Estrada

Salisbury: James Ryan

West Newbury: James Blatchford

Rowley: Bob Snow

Methuen: Kathleen Colwell

Andover: Jacki Byerly

Merrimac: Mitch Kostoulakos

North Reading: Lilian Hartman

Ms. Gove, being Chair of the Board, called the meeting to order at 8:38 a.m.

1. **Welcome & Introductions:** Ms. Gove invited Board Members and guests to introduce themselves.
2. **Approval of Minutes of the Meeting of November 7, 2024:** Ms. Gove called for a motion to approve the minutes of the Advisory Board meeting of November 7, 2024. So moved by Mr. Ryan, seconded by Mr. Blatchford; Vote to approve: Unanimous.
3. **Administrator's Report:** Mr. Berger presented his report to the Members:
 - a. **State of Administration:**
 - i. Key Promotions at MeVa: Several MeVa employees have been elevated to key leadership positions, filling important vacancies: Jesse-
nia Fernandes from Safety and Training Officer to Director of Safety
and Training; Lionel Metet from Supervisor to Lead Supervisor; Leo
Worcester from Supervisor to Director of Paratransit; Yuli Diaz and
Jose Perez Columna from Bus Drivers to Supervisors and Betsaida Jar-
vis from Reservationist to Office Coordinator.
 - ii. MeVa was represented at the *Transit Workforce Center's Making
Connections 2024 Conference* by Nio Mendez (Deputy Administrator),
Jaymi Swarbrick (Director of Human Resources), Amy Jenkins (Gen-
eral Manager) and bus operator Jense Rodriquez. The conference,
held in Baltimore, Maryland, was attended by 450 participants, in-
cluding frontline workers, agency executives and educators who
shared their experiences of hiring, retention, training and apprentice-
ship. Jaymi and Jense had the opportunity to explain MeVa's strategy

for hiring, improving morale, retaining drivers, as well as the benefits of free fares to the public and our drivers.

- iii. MeVa was represented at the annual Latinos in Transit Summit in Portland, Oregon by Mr. Berger (Administrator), Nio Mendez (Deputy Administrator), Jessenia Fernandes (Director of Safety and Training) and Jasmin Ortega (Comptroller). This is our third year participating. Nio signed up to be a mentor to up and coming transit professionals across the country. Jessenia and Jasmin were matched with mentees, recognizing MeVa as a national leader in public transit.
- iv. MeVa's annual Holiday Luncheon was scheduled for Friday, December 13 at headquarters from 11:30 a.m. to 4:00 p.m. Board members were invited to attend.

b. State of Operations:

- i. After a long period of steady growth, Fixed Route ridership has leveled off over the last month. Paratransit ridership had a reduction of riders in November, following the highest ridership in our history in October (11,162 riders).

c. State of Finance:

- i. Given the upcoming changes in the administration and congress, there is uncertainty as to the amount of federal funding we will have available going forward. What is positive for us is that the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law established the federal programs through September 30, 2026. The parameters for annual appropriation are set and the executive branch is legally obligated to spend what has been appropriated by congress. The greatest funding risk will be to discretionary programs.
- ii. Through the first quarter of Fiscal 2025, expenses are, overall, tracking according to budget. Fixed Route is running under budget, mostly offset by Paratransit running over budget.
- iii. MeVa closed two older grants over the last month and has one grant currently under review. We now have \$26.2 million in unexpended funds available, of which 5.9 million are funds from COVID relief grants.
- iv. New and continuing grant awards: The Governor announced that we were awarded a discretionary connectivity grant which will allow us to run the #24, connecting Lawrence to Lowell, every 20 minutes. We also received a \$17,100 grant from the Department of Industrial Accidents, allowing us to hold three training sessions for 12 drivers in "Crash Prevention and Close Quarters Maneuvering" classes. We also received over \$2.5 million in discretionary free fare funding, which

will help us cover the 12-month period from August 1, 2024 through July 31, 2025. Beginning in September, MeVa has implemented the Innovation Grant funds with the #14, connecting Haverhill and Lawrence via Route 125 in North Andover and the #11 Limited, connecting Lawrence and Haverhill with Newburyport via Groveland and West Newbury. During the first three months of service, the two services have carried over 26,000 new riders, providing employment opportunities that would not otherwise have been available. We're moving forward with our Barr Foundation grant, having done a number of videos, one by Elevated Thought highlighting four riders and one by Vessel Vision about rider experiences. Elevated Thought is also doing a picture campaign of riders to accompany their written stories about riding MeVa and how fare free transit has impacted their lives. Elevated Thought is also designing murals to bring art and culture into the space. We are using the Community Transit Grant to reach out to educate people how to use the service. Metro Mobility will be bringing electric bicycles to McGovern and Gateway in 2025. Thanks to a grant from Massachusetts Clean Energy Center (*MassCEC*), bike rentals will be subsidized for income qualified riders down to \$1 per 24 hours, allowing our riders to close gaps in first and last mile travel. Metro Mobility will also provide a location near the Newburyport MBTA station and the rail trail. Through a National Endowment of the Arts *Our Town Award*, our partners at MVPC and ECCF are working to develop signage, create maps, fliers, and outreach materials, and remove transportation barriers to make local art, culture and historical assets more accessible using MeVa buses.

- v. Pending Applications: We have applied for a Mobility Management Community Transit Grant which allows us to train staff from local organizations to actually take people out and get them familiar with public transportation. We have also submitted a request for a total of 10 minibuses and vans targeting seniors and people with disabilities for MeVa and area COAs.
- vi. Upcoming Opportunities: We will be putting in a request to the Shared Streets and Spaces program, which is the program through which we obtained bus shelters for Amesbury and Lawrence two years ago. While we will use the shelter locations included in last year's application that was not selected, we are reaching out to all of our fixed route communities to make revisions based on changing circumstances.
- vii. New Revenue for Transit Outside of Boston: The Transportation Funding Task Force is scheduled to report on new revenue options for transportation. There is concern that the recommendations will not meet the needs of transit riders outside of the core MBTA area. MeVa

and its riders will continue to highlight the important work that RTAs do and make sure that our needs are not overshadowed by the urgency of the MBTA's fiscal cliff.

d. State of Planning and Implementation:

- i. Methuen Arlington Neighborhood Infrastructure Discussion and Tour: The MeVa Team joined Methuen City officials, the state and federal legislative delegations, HUD and the Executive Office of Housing and Livable Communities to discuss the infrastructure challenges facing the Methuen Arlington Neighborhood. In addition, Deputy Administrator Nio drove a MeVa bus so everyone could see first hand the challenges that exist AND experience a MeVa bus ride.
- ii. MeVa Turns 50! MeVa celebrated its 50th Birthday twice. First, with our partners at MVPC (which is 65 this year) for a joint party at the Merrimack Valley Golf Course, then with our drivers and riders at the McGovern and Haverhill Stations on the road! This was an opportunity to reflect on the gutsy move to create RTAs when private transit operations in regions like ours were failing.
- iii. Scholar Conducts Research on MeVa: University of Pennsylvania PHD Candidate came to the Merrimack Valley to start his fieldwork querying transit users at fare-free transit agencies. MeVa was the first of several operations he is studying. He was funded by APTA and Latinos in Transit, where he first connected with MeVa staff.
- iv. Peer Exchange with PVRTA: Three MeVa staff members, Amy Jenkins, Tim Petronio, and Christina Minicucci, traveled to PVRTA for a peer exchange. The meetup was an opportunity to learn how another RTA operates, with both sides sharing their methods and policies of how best to operate efficiently.
- v. Gillig Factory Tour: Dan Flaherty, Tim Petronio and Jessenia Fernandes traveled to the Gillig factory plant in California to inspect our newest shipment of buses and see the production process from beginning to end, all the way through road testing. They learned about products and solutions they were not previously familiar with. MeVa will use this newly gained knowledge when preparing our next order.
- vi. Gateway Memorandum of Agreement for Site Management: The City of Lawrence has expressed a desire to manage the Gateway parking lot, including operations, maintenance, control of the leases, etc. Though we don't own it, Federal transit funds were used for that project, with MeVa as the grantee. It's a superfund site. There is a purchase and sale agreement in place that, if it's ever cleaned up, the property reverts to MeVa. We are working with the City to come up

with a Memorandum of Agreement (MOA) that works for both parties.

e. State of Outreach:

- i. Join Us for MeVa's 2nd Annual "Stuff a Bus" Toy & Clothes Drive: The Board Members were invited to stop by one of two locations, Target in Haverhill and Target in Methuen, where MeVa will have a bus to stuff with toys, clothing and non-perishable foods that will be donated to members of the community by Debbie's Treasure Chest and Neighbors in Need.
- ii. MeVa is in the Community: We have been very active in the community, educating folks about all of the opportunities our service provides; and we listen to what people need for transportation. We have visited seven senior centers, Methuen Housing Authority properties, the Memorial Hall Library and the Nettle School in Haverhill, all in the last couple of months. Board Members were encouraged to share their suggestions and contacts with MeVa staff.

4. **Follow-up from MeVa Retreat:** Nio Mendez and Christina Minicucci related the discussions and suggestions made by the Members in each of their discussion groups at last month's retreat. These included how the members can bring back what's discussed at Board Meetings to their respective Cities and Towns. They would like to have a brief weekly update from Noah by email to the Members to keep them up to date and in the loop. Work to make sure that every voice from every community is heard. Also, it will be beneficial if Board Members can facilitate in communication to the riders in each of their communities with things like cancellations or snow route information, schedule changes, bus stop locations, etc. The Board members like having MeVa staff members in attendance at the meetings to get their input and have the ability to ask them questions specific to their roles at MeVa. They suggested that it would help us to understand better the passengers' needs if we ask them, perhaps by way of more surveys, where it is they want to go and what else they want from MeVa's service. They'd like to see high school students get more engaged in our buses, which now do go to a few local high schools. This can lead to life time riders. Fixed Route communities that have more rural areas would like to see if there's a way to get bus service to cover those areas where people now do not have access because of the rural locations.

5. **Update on Outstanding McGovern Station Matters:** General Manager Amy Jenkins presented an update on pending matters. The members were given a Memorandum that detailed the progress on items addressed at the October meeting of the McGovern Ad Hoc Committee. Amy referred them to the memo to see route performance and schedule changes. She said the main focus has been on getting more drivers so we can add cut services back in. She asked the members to consider advising their respective communities that there are driver openings by posting it on their websites, in their city or town halls, and wherever else they think it might be helpful. We are

expecting some drivers who are out for various reasons to return in early January. There are also fewer drivers scheduled for vacations each week starting with the January bid. Also, at McGovern, many new signs have been installed and a new information kiosk has also been added. New digital informational signs are being produced to help riders find the platform where their bus is and much other helpful information.

6. **Update from MVPC:** Patrick Reed from MVPC updated the members on current activities. The MVPC team has completed Automatic Passenger Count validation on MeVa fixed route buses, whereby MVPC counts passengers in order to ensure that the Automatic Passenger Count software is reporting the number of riders accurately. The FTA will use MVPC's report to confirm that MeVa's software is operating accurately. For other planning updates, please see their website at www.mvpc.org
7. **Confirm Next Meeting:** The next meeting will be held on Thursday February 6, 2025 at 8:30 a.m. at MeVa's Bradford headquarters.
8. **Adjournment:** Ms. Gove asked for a motion to adjourn. Mr. Snow so moved, seconded by Mr. Ryan. Vote to adjourn: Unanimous.