



**Cooperative Alliance for Seacoast Transportation
Minutes of the Board of Directors Meeting
Wednesday, October 27, 2021**

PRESENT: Scott Bogle, Adam Causey (Virtually), Arthur Capello (Arr. 9:00am), Sönke Dornblut (Virtually), Benjamin Fletcher (Virtually), Denis Hebert, Margaret Joyce, Colin Lentz (Virtually), Marty Pepin, Dave Sandmann, Michael Scala, Dennis Shanahan, and Shelley Winters (Virtually)

ABSENT: Lauren Haley, Dave Sharples, Maria Stowell, Thomas Wright

STAFF: Rad Nichols, Margot Doering, Heather Hesse-Stromberg (V), Michael Williams

I. CALL TO ORDER AND INTRODUCTIONS

The meeting was called to order at 8:32 am.

II. APPROVAL OF MINUTES

Mr. Hebert made a motion to accept the September 2021 minutes and Mr. Bogle seconded the motion. All voted in favor to approve the minutes.

III. PUBLIC COMMENT

Mr. Nichols acknowledged the following anniversaries of COAST employees over the past several months.

- In July, Jerry Clark, a part-time Fixed Route Operator celebrated 10 years with COAST.
- In August, Renee Anderson, a full-time Driving Instructor celebrated 15 years with COAST. She has experienced a lot as a driver and was part a valuable part of the Strategic Planning effort in 2016.
- In September, Staci DeRaps, our full-time reservationist at TripLink celebrated 5 years with COAST.
- At the beginning of October, Michael Williams, Director of Operations, celebrated his 5 year mark with COAST.

Congratulations and thanks for all each has done, and continue to do, for the organization.

IV. FINANCIAL REPORT

Ms. Doering went over the initial draft year end financials and balance sheet for FY21.

The more variable revenues such as fares/contract revenues and advertising revenues, both ended the year stronger in the last quarter. Other revenue lines reflected expenses and fluctuated accordingly. On the expense side of the income statement, wages ended the year over budget, due to the mid-year wage adjustment for most hourly staff. The fringe benefits line was impacted at year end due to a Return of Surplus from HealthTrust. Most other expense lines continued previous trends. Revenues ended the year 6.5% over budget, and expenses 4.0% under budget.

The balance sheet reflected trends for the year. Unrestricted net assets continued to grow and met our ratio goal of 29.0% by year end.

V. OLD BUSINESS

Staffing

Through the end of September and now mid-October we continued to lose driving staff. We continue to struggle to maintain all services some days now and know we will not be able to by early December.

Since our last board meeting, we have had three (3) operators resign (1 FT and 1 PT fixed route operator, and 1 PT non-CDL operator who was in training). Additionally, one (1) FT fixed route operator has moved to PT. We have not had any new hires, nor any terminations.

In terms of applicants, we had two (2) FT CDL applicants and two (2) non-CDL applicants. One of the non-CDL candidates is expected to start on 10/28 (FT), the other never responded to our efforts to reach them. One of the CDL applicants turned down our offer of employment (undesirable shift), and the other CDL candidate has accepted our conditional offer and is expected to enter CDL training in Concord at the end of the month. If all goes well it will likely be the new year before he would be completed with his training and released to drive independently. The last application that came in was received on September 23.

We have budgeted for a pay increase on Jan 1 which we hope will help keep us attractive to potential employees, but we also anticipate all employers will be doing the something similar.

November 2021 Temporary Service Suspension Adjustments

Given the continued staffing issues highlighted above, we have no choice but to make further adjustments to our temporary service adjustments. The situation only becomes worse in December and January due to known absences.

Mr. Scala asked if there had been any pushback on additional service suspensions. Mr. Nichols noted that there had not been much feedback at all.

Mr. Hebert asked, if our pay was lower, why that was the case. Mr. Nichols pointed to what appeared to be average starting wages for CDL operators of \$23-\$24, some with starting bonuses. Mr. Nichols noted that between the raises we budgeted and the increase in affordability for 2 Person and family medical coverage we can be more competitive.

Mr. Shanahan asked if there was a correlation between ridership and our service suspensions. Mr. Nichols noted that ridership had gone down a little bit in September after we reduced service in late August. He added that we hope that suspensions we implement on 11/13 don't have as big of an impact on ridership.

Property & Liability Insurance Renewals

Mr. Nichols advised that a meeting with our broker on this year's renewal pricing was held on Wednesday, October 20. We had budgeted for a 10% increase overall, based on previous guidance we had been given. In the end our increase at renewal was only 2.36%. We also are expanding our coverage to include assault and battery. The result is that we expect to see just over a \$17,000 savings in this expense line vs. what we had budgeted. That will likely fluctuate however based on new additions and deletions to the fleet over the course of the coming year.

VI. New Business

Action Items

Action Item #1: 5339 Grant Applications

The 2021 FTA 5339 Bus & Bus Facilities capital grant program cycle is well underway.

First up is the grant offered through the NHDOT. These 5339 funds are awarded to the state for distribution by the NHDOT according to their own grant program within the state.

We are in the process of putting the finishing touches on this grant, which is due November 8. Capital funds we will be applying for will support the following:

1. Four (4) light-duty low floor buses (non-CDL) for use on our fixed route services (\$493,000 Fed/\$87,000 Local).
2. One (1) operations support vehicle for use in shuttling operators to remote relief points (\$28,000 Fed/\$7,000 Local).
3. Three (3) bus shelters with benches and solar lighting (\$26,400 Fed/\$6,600 Local)
4. Phase 1 of new facility construction – Final design, permitting, site work, and construction of a new indoor bus storage facility (\$5,104,000 Fed/\$1,276,000 Local). This is being submitted as a placeholder in case our nationally competitive grant application doesn't receive funding or only partial funding.

Local match for facility construction still would need to be raised and we will be pursuing other matchable Federal funds, foundation grants, CDFA tax credits, and other sources of match. We need letters of support as soon as possible.

In mid-late November we will also be submitting a 5339 grant directly to the FTA that will go through a nationally competitive evaluation. In that grant we will be applying for all the funds necessary for construction of a new facility as currently outlined in our conceptual design plans completed earlier this year (\$14,700,000). Given the competitiveness of these grants, we will be providing details on the potential for project scalability, which would reduce our request down to \$8,900,000 for Phase 2 of a distinct, separately phased construction project involving the new administration, operations, and maintenance buildings and not the indoor vehicle storage building. We will need letters of support for our nationally competitive FTA 5339 grant as well.

Action Requested: That the Board of Directors express their full, enthusiastic support for COAST's 5339 applications, and commitment to pursue other matchable Federal funds, foundation grants, CDFA tax credits, and other sources of match in order to fully match and leverage awarded 5339 grant funds for the projects as identified.

Mr. Capello made the motion, Mr. Bogle seconded the motion. All voted in favor.

Action Item #2: Gillig Bus Purchase Price Adjustment

At the November 2020 meeting, the Board of Directors authorized the Executive Director to enter a purchase order with Gillig Corporation for four (4) new 35' heavy duty buses as specified, for a total of \$2,049,584. A purchase order for that amount was executed in December 2020 between COAST and Gillig.

Subsequently, as the specifications of the buses have been further refined, final pricing has also been adjusted to account for those changes. Final pricing for the four (4) new buses now totals \$2,050,076. This is a \$123.00 increase per bus and we need approval to move ahead with this price modification.

Action Requested: That the Board of Directors authorize the Executive Director to revise the purchase order with Gillig Corporation for four (4) new 35' heavy duty low floor buses as specified for \$2,050,076.

Mr. Bogle asked if it makes sense to make it “not to exceed” in case there are additional changes. Mr. Nichols noted that at this point, additional changes aren't anticipated.

Mr. Bogle made the motion and Mr. Shanahan seconded. All voted in favor.

Action Item #3: Initiatives to Build Ridership

In the early days of the pandemic, to maintain recommended safe physical distance guidelines, we asked riders to only take “essential” trips on public transit. Later we changed our language to say “necessary” trips, before dropping that language altogether.

Today, the air systems in most buses have ionizers neutralizing any viruses and/or bacteria in the air flowing through them, riders are required to wear masks, and unaffiliated passengers spread out in the buses the best they can. In studies, here and elsewhere in the world, riding buses has not proven to be a particularly risky activity, particularly if individuals remain masked.

It is time to invite and encourage riders who are comfortable doing so back onto the buses.

Marketing

We had planned for significantly more marketing of the launch of the new system when it occurred in June 2020, however given where we were in the pandemic at the time, it ended up being a much softer rollout than intended.

Given the significant reduction in expenses we are experiencing due to being forced to suspend some services, we propose using some of those saved dollars to increase marketing of our services, particularly since the system today looks much different than it did when many people stopped riding in the spring of 2020.

We expect to contract for services to create new content and messaging for our targeted audiences as part of this effort.

Free Transfers

When we redesigned the new system, we significantly enhanced the timely connectivity of all our routes across the system. We now have three main hubs where transfers happen on the system (Dover Transportation Center, Hanover Station, Lilac Mall/Downtown Rochester). For many passengers however, a ride that used to only require one fare to make their trip now requires two or even three fares.

On our old system transfers happened on approximately 35% of trips. That percentage had grown slowly but steadily over many years. We admittedly do not know what the current percentage of trips are that require transfers on the new system. It is reasonable to assume,

however, that many first legs of trips may not be taken because of the cost of the transfer(s) necessary to get to the end destination.

Given the continued lower overall ridership on the system, the need to begin intentionally growing ridership again, and the emergency funding we currently have available, it is a very good time to pilot a free transfer system at COAST. We would propose a six-month trial period, during which we can measure the number of actual transfers, as well as the impacts to ridership that result from removing this potential barrier to riding. We need Board support and authorization for such a pilot program.

Customer-facing Technology Integration

One of the impacts of the pandemic is the rapid integration of more customer-facing technology. This technology typically includes mobile fare payment options, trip planning, live service updates, and bus tracking on a customized mobile specific app. Many, though not all, users of transportation services are increasingly expecting these sorts of technology enhancements. Because not all riders have access to, or rely heavily on, this technology, cash payments will likely continue to need to be used for the foreseeable future. COAST already has trip planning, live service updates, and bus tracking capabilities, but they are not integrated into a single app. While we are not proposing adding anything to these types of amenities for passengers now, we will likely be looking at this potential within the next year or two.

Action Requested: That the Board of Directors authorize a six month pilot of free transfers at COAST.

Mr. Nichols added that a free transfer pilot would allow for us to see to what degree such a program would impact ridership. It is also an opportunity to measure the number of transfers happening.

Mr. Shanahan noted that it might be challenging going back from free transfers to charging for transfers.

Mr. Scala asked about the cost of electronic payment systems. Mr. Nichols stated that in the past costs to implement such a system have roughly equated to a whole year of fares.

Mr. Shanahan made the motion to authorize a six month pilot program of free transfers, and Ms. Joyce seconded. All voted in favor.

Action Item #4: Proposed Stroller Policy Revision

Currently our policy for strollers onboard the bus reads as follows:

Infant strollers are allowed on the bus; however, you should plan to carry your child on your lap during the ride. Strollers should be folded up and tucked in between or underneath seats. Strollers cannot be left in the aisle, the doorway, or restrict the ability of passengers with mobility devices to ride.

In a recent Transportation Cooperative Research Program report on strollers and large items on buses, the following points were made:

“The results of the survey and the literature review are inconclusive with regard to whether a child in a stroller is safer than a child taken out of a stroller, and different agencies have policies

that reflect the two different perspectives. The dissimilarity of the two types of policies points to the value of additional research on this topic.”

“Among the stroller policies that transit agencies have deemed most effective are those that minimize an operator’s involvement: strollers must fit through vehicle doors and be kept out of aisles.”

Staff proposed the following amendment to our policy for simplicity of understanding and minimizing conflicts.

“Infant strollers must fit through vehicle doors and be kept out of aisles. A child may remain in a stroller, unless in an umbrella-style stroller, and must be kept out of the aisle. The adult accompanying the child is responsible to ensure the stroller is held in place and not rolling free.”

Action Requested: That the Board of Directors approve the proposed stroller policy revision as worded or further modified.

Mr. Shanahan suggested modifying the suggested language to read, “... A child may remain in a stroller, unless it is an umbrella-style stroller, if the stroller is kept out of the aisle ...”

Mr. Capello made the motion to approve the revised policy with the suggested language change and Mr. Shanahan seconded. All voted in favor.

Committee Reports

Executive Committee – met on October 25 at 2:30 in a nonpublic session under NHRSA 91-A:3, II(a)).

Board Development Committee – did not meet.

Legislative Committee – did not meet.

Policy Committee – did not meet.

Finance Committee – met on October 25 at 1:30.

Discussion Items

Discuss Item #1: SERVICE LEVEL PLANNING

Mr. Williams gave a presentation on service level planning he had been doing to proactively manage service levels given short staffing. He stressed that our goal is to be proactive instead of reactive. We want to have a response ready rather than hitting a breaking point.

We’ve been moving towards a system that projects out into the future taking into consideration any predictable departures. We want to move towards a model that allows us to set service levels for a defined period and based on predicted capacity rather than reacting to a crisis. This would allow us to have set schedules that do not change during that time frame and have schedule materials ready for distribution to riders in advance. Every 6-8 weeks or so we would estimate service in the upcoming period and then put a plan into place. Many transit systems that have significant seasonal changes use a system like this.

This would also allow us to give customers much more notice of upcoming changes which will look less reactive.

Mr. Scala commented that he liked how proactive this approach was. Mr. Nichols noted this requires a significant effort up front, but would allow us to transition back and forth as needed much more easily.

VII. Community Updates/Information Items

Ridership information was presented.

Ms. Joyce suggested that COAST take advantage of PSAs in the future as part of an expanded marketing effort. She also mentioned that the Chamber would be open to selling fare media.

Mr. Nichols described that he had attended the GACIT hearings in Dover, Somersworth, Kingston. There had been good turnout and many speakers in support of public transit. Mr. Donald has also spoken on behalf of ACT in Kingston and Dover. Mr. Bogle stated that Mr. Nichols' personal story of lack of community transportation was particularly powerful and seemed to catch the attention of the panel and NHDOT.

VIII. Adjournment

Mr. Hebert made a motion to adjourn the meeting and Mr. Shanahan seconded the motion. The meeting was adjourned at 10:07am.