

Why Zero Fare?

By Adam Thielker

Massachusetts is a state with one intense urban core, cocooned in suburbs, inside a rural landscape dotted with patches of rust, framed by various vacationlands. This letter will show how the Cities, State, and Federal governments can take steps to provide effective public transportation across all the areas served by its Regional Transportation Authorities. I will be focusing on the Worcester RTA, which is charged with providing bus service to Southern Worcester County.

Worcester is a microcosm of the challenges faced across the state: An up-and-coming urban core, pleasant suburbs, rural fields and forests, and many empty factories and mills. It is also the center of the Commonwealth's Zero Fare movement. The WRTA has not charged passengers for rides since April, 2020. Without fares, ridership quickly returned to normal levels. Unlike other RTAs, which soon went back to fare collection, with the expected loss of riders, the WRTA, with the help of a strong group of public transit activists, continued its fare free policy. The result is that there are now as many riders as there were before the pandemic. Fixed routes recovered the fastest, and paratransit (also fare free) followed. Encouraged by this success, the WRTA used some of its CARES act funds to add greater frequency and evening hours to a few of the more heavily travelled lines.

Bus lines serve 12 of Worcester's neighboring towns. There are twice as many towns within the WRTA's service area, and a few of those participate on the board, but Zero Fare is mostly an issue for Worcester itself. 75% of all rides take place within the city. This means that the residents of Worcester, many struggling on the edge of poverty, were paying between 1.5 and 2 million dollars a year into the public transit system. While that is a lot of money to be extracting from a poor population, passenger fares, even if you include the surrounding towns, only amounted to around 13% of the annual operating expenses for the system. It was a token contribution. Since the advent of Zero Fare, this money is now being spent in Worcester itself, boosting local business and helping families meet their necessary expenses. This money is now generating sales and business taxes, as well as creating jobs which are now more affordably accessible. There is now a widespread recognition that trying to run an RTA through the collection of fares is a failure. Zero Fare has been accepted by both the business and the political communities. However, the WRTA, having kept its fare free program in place through administrative fiat, is reluctant to make a long term change in fare collection policy.

What can the City do? While the WRTA Advisory board is made up of appointees who are not beholden to anyone other than whoever appointed them, the City of Worcester, in recognition of its outsized place in the system, has a weighted vote of 42% of the total membership. This means that with minimal support from its suburbs the City can make policy all by itself any time that weighted vote is used. However, in an effort to be inclusive, the weighted vote is never used and rarely even suggested for fear that the other board members might not even bother to show up if Worcester starts to swing its weight around. The Zero Fare Coalition is pressing for a weighted vote to form a policy whereby the board would approve a three year fare free pilot, leading to a new state-wide mechanism for funding all the RTAs, making them fare free on a permanent basis. The WRTA could easily fund its own program. Thanks to a massive injection of Federal funds, the board has 26 million dollars available, and a three year pilot would not need more than one third of that amount to make up for the missing fares. Not only would this be a win-win for Worcester, it would not cost the towns or city a penny. If the City

Council and City Manager order their appointee to use its weighted vote in favor of the change in policy, a three year pilot would be inevitable.

A three year pilot has several benefits. With no payment at the point of service, passengers can simply board the bus and take a seat. This substantially reduces dwell time, the time a bus spends not moving. With the bus lines running more quickly, the routes can be redesigned to run at greater frequencies, and a three year pilot gives the route planners confidence to make the needed changes. Greater frequencies, with less time waiting at the curb, makes the system easier for the passengers to use, and is a more efficient use of the WRTA's finite resources, such as buses and their operators. Lastly, and most importantly, a thriving bus system would make Worcester a more environmentally responsible city. Riding a bus, as opposed to driving a single occupancy vehicle, is a much more efficient use of fossil fuels. Even a bus trip only serving six riders is less polluting than six cars. Less polluted air has obvious public health benefits as well. As we move towards electric vehicles, it's much easier to electrify a fleet of buses than to get all the old cars off the road. I don't need to add that transportation is the largest carbon pump in the Commonwealth and there are rewards for any city that can cut its carbon emissions. Zero Fare, by encouraging greater ridership, is an important step towards achieving these goals.

But public transit planners worry about Zero Fare. This has less to do with any loss of revenue than the fear that a radical increase in ridership would quickly lead to the need for more buses and operators; that the system would become the victim of its own success. On the other hand, increasing ridership makes it easier for the Federal Government to justify support for the purchase of an electric fleet, and increases pressure on Beacon Hill to come up with a realistic funding mechanism for operational expenses, rather than relying on the fiction that fares, accompanied by regular fare hikes, a good idea. Right now, Mass DOT relies on historical data, showing ever-decreasing ridership, to figure how much money the system needs. Zero Fare, by reversing that trend, forces the state government to look forward towards the growing need for better buses. As things stand now, the state is unwilling to spend more than it did the year before.

What can the state do? This coming fiscal year, the annual budget will include 94 million dollars for the RTAs, together with 2.5 million in competitive grants to explore reduced fares for vulnerable populations. Think about that. 94 million dollars spread over 16 RTAs, which serve half the population and more than half the geography of Massachusetts. It's a starvation diet. Every year, the RTA are forced to justify their existence to a state authority that seems to consider public transportation to be a problem to solve rather than an opportunity to take advantage of. Every year, RTAs are asked to improve service or perish. And should they be successful, the state authority takes this as proof that no increased budget is needed. The state, if it is to achieve its own stated goals, needs to scrap this model.

Right now, the RTAs' boards and directors are in an impossible situation. How can any long-term plans be made when nobody can say what the next year's budget will be? Every attempt to raise fares, as demanded by Mass DOT, results in reduce ridership, which reduces state support, leading to reductions and amputations of the bus lines, resulting in even fewer riders. There's a term of art for this. It's called the Death Spiral. More and more riders give up and walk (if they can) or buy cars (if they can) and that's how we have ended up where we are today. That's why the RTAs are moving away from payment at the point of service. It's not worth it. It's a failed concept, and it's well past time for the state to recognize this failure and move on. Trying to run the RTAs in this manner works against the Commonwealth's stated goals: fewer miles driven and less fuel burned. Figuring our future transportation needs by

studying past ridership levels will never work. The state must make a guaranteed long-term commitment based on where we want to go, not where we have been.

So, first Worcester must start to use its weighted vote to use Federal funds for a three year pilot, and the state must use that time to develop a realistic long term funding mechanism.

Lastly, the Federal government did not arrange its once-in-a-lifetime transportation grants in order to preserve the status quo. These grants are offered in order to disrupt our reliance on single occupancy vehicles; to make taking buses and trains a viable alternative. Public transit has the potential to immediately lessen pollution and poverty. Reducing our reliance on fossil fuels will improve our economic stability, reduce our political instability and our dangerous reliance on kleptocrats and dictators. It's not enough just to give money to the states and transit authorities and hope for the best.

As Stephanie Pollock, recently Secretary of Transportation for Massachusetts, now serving the same post in the Biden administration often says, transportation isn't just cars. It's about integrating all forms of transit into a single platform.

Here in Worcester, Zero Fare is where we start.