



MUNICIPAL PARTNERS TRANSIT COMMITTEE

WEDNESDAY, MAY 6, 2020

ZOOM

9:30 – 11:30 a.m.

MINUTES

Attendees

Members

Karen Fussell, City of Brewer – Committee Chair
Linda Johns, City of Brewer
Kyle Drexler, Town of Orono
Belle Ryder, Town of Orono
Sophie Wilson, Town of Orono
Tom Spitz, University of Maine

Community Connector Staff

Rich Cromwell
Debbie Laurie
Laurie Linscott

BACTS Staff

Sara Devlin
Connie Reed

MaineDOT Staff

Lori Brann
Chris Mann

Guests

Darcy Cooke, Transportation for All
Marcia Larkin, Penquis Transportation

Call to Order: The meeting was called to order at 9:30 a.m. by Karen Fussell.

Public Comment: No public comments were made.

Approval of January 8, 2020 Meeting Minutes: Karen Fussell called for any comments or edits to the minutes as presented. No comments were made.

Community Connector Staff Updates: Rich Cromwell told the group that the staff report gives the Committee an idea of some of the big projects Community Connector will be working on for the end of this fiscal year and next fiscal year. One project identified by the Transit study which will be implemented is designating stops. This project will include developing a bus stop policy, as well as identifying the location of the designated stops and what amenities will be required.

The City of Bangor is in the initial phases of trying to plan the best way to execute this process. There have been discussions with Sara at BACTS to identify ways to proceed with this project, as well as conversations with John Gobis, who is one of the consultants that Stantec used to complete the Transit Study. There has already been some work done by Community Connector staff in terms of identifying where riders are boarding and getting off the bus, but there needs to be a more thorough analysis, including consideration of impact to the public, as well as property and business owners where stops may be located.

In October 2018, the City of Bangor took on providing ADA Complementary Paratransit services. Since then, the City has been leasing paratransit vans in order to provide those services. This year, Community Connector will need to purchase more vans in order to continue to provide those services.

CARES Act funds received will be used to purchase those vehicles. In addition, Community Connector will be looking to purchase five additional buses this year, with VW Settlement Funds being used for the local match to the federal grant. The Gillig Plant is currently still shut down, but Laurie is working on ordering those buses.

FTA reached out to the City of Bangor to perform a site visit of the location for the proposed Transit Center in Pickering Square. Because of the travel-restrictions they were not able to come to Bangor, but working with John Theriault, the City Engineer and Laurie Linscott obtained the required information about the area and the construction of that building. Once FTA has provided the go-ahead, the City will move forward with putting out an RFP for an architect to design the building, then an RFP for actual construction of the building. Rich and John Theriault are meeting later today to draft an anticipated timeline for the Transit Facility construction. They will be meeting with the City Manager to put together an update for Monday's City Council meeting, which will also include a plan for amenities in Pickering Square for late fall and winter should the building not be constructed.

Transit Agencies are required to develop an agency safety plan, which was originally mandated to be complete by mid-July, but the deadline has been extended to December 31. Rich and Laurie are working on the Plan, with assistance from the City's Safety Director. It is anticipated that a draft of the Plan will be ready by July 20 and will be finalized well before the December 31 date.

CARES Act Funding: Laurie Linscott told the committee that FTA received \$25 billion in CARES Act funding which was distributed to transit agencies based on their regular formula funding. The City of Bangor was apportioned \$4,003,122. This funding can be used to pay for any eligible transit expenses, whether or not they are COVID-related. The funding does not have an expiration date and does not have a required local match. Debbie Laurie stated that the plan of how to use the CARES Act funding awarded to the Community Connector will be explained with the budget and financial status report.

Sara Devlin noted if any of the CARES Act funds will be used for planning projects, a Unified Planning Work Plan (UPWP) amendment is required. To create new operating projects using CARES Act funding, a TIP amendment is not required, but if regular programmed formula funding requires shifting, some amendments to the TIP will be necessary.

Discussion ensued regarding why the fiscal year 2021 budget shows only \$1.8 million in CARES Act funding applied towards operating expenses, not the full \$4 million apportioned while continuing to assess municipalities local share contributions, and whether it is possible to use full apportionment in order to reduce the financial burden on the municipalities in the coming fiscal year.

Debbie Laurie said the Community Connector could make the decision to use the entire apportionment to fund operations, but from a financial planning standpoint she believes it is not in the best interest of Community Connector, and it is not in the best interest of the City of Bangor. Using one-time money to solve a recurring expense is not something that the City of Bangor participates in. The strategy is to flatten each municipality's contribution, both from an operating and capital perspective. Part of the plan is to use part of the CARES Act funding to pay for expenses for the last quarter of fiscal year 2020. April, May, and June had absolutely no revenue coming in. As currently budgeted, every municipality would have to pay more than their anticipated local share due the significant loss in revenue. Using CARES Act funds for the last quarter attempts to level out the financial impact on all the partners and have adequate funding left over to soften the financial impacts of the pandemic on municipal budgets over the next couple years.

Belle Ryder stated she understood the desire not to create a hole in municipal budgets that would be difficult to fill in a following year, but the Town of Orono is expecting significantly reduced revenues for this upcoming budget year and if it is possible to use grant funding to offset \$80,000 of cost to the Town, that would be a huge benefit to the Town of Orono. She expressed concern about leaving available grant funding on the table because it affects Orono's budget.

Financial Report: Debbie Laurie presented the income statement as of March 31, 2020 for the fixed route operations and Black Bear Orono Express. The report highlights variances of more than five percent above or below budgeted amounts and includes revenues received to date and grants that have been appropriated. To date, grants have not been drawn down. The report shows the budgeted local share to date.

The last page, titled *Summary of Billing and Grant Status*, shows there was \$1.415 million in federal funds budgeted for the year. In order to support operating expenses through March 31, it is anticipated that \$1,214,963 in federal funds will be utilized and drawn down, with a matching local share of \$686,219. Every year the federal funds are fully expended before the end of the year, so the benefit of cost sharing is not received in the later months of the year. Through the first nine months of the year, utilizing \$1.2 million of federal funding, there are not enough grant funds left in the \$1.375 million budgeted for operating expenses to fully pay for the service. If CARES Act funding is used to fund the last three months of fiscal year 2020 operations, there will be no local share required because CARES Act funds are 100 percent federal. Typically, the cost share for operating expenses is 50 percent federal and 50 percent local. It is estimated that the operating expenses for April, May, and June will be between \$850,000 and \$875,000.

Taking into account the \$850,000 estimated to be required to fund operations for the last quarter of 2020 from the \$4 million leaves \$3,150,000. In the budget for fiscal year 2021 is just over \$1.7 million to fund operations, and \$300,000 estimated for capital purposes for ADA paratransit vehicles and continuation of the bus stops and technology projects. That leaves about \$1.15 million in CARES Act funding unspent. The fiscal year 2021 budget assumes fares will be reduced but will likely need to be revisited as the expectations on social distancing may not allow lifting the limit of 10 passengers at a time. There will be discussion about whether or not to go back to the honor system of fares. In addition, ridership drops with reduction of gas prices. Part of the reasoning for holding that \$1.15 million in CARES Act funds is that it may be needed later to cover costs to continue to provide service at the level it is in right now.

FY2021 Budget: Karen Fussell inquired about where the \$1,766,940 in funding that is programmed in the fiscal year 2021 budget with CARES Act funding would have been normally come from without the CARES Act funding. Debbie Laurie said that probably \$1.5 million would be in FTA federal funding and there would be an increase in the local share required from the municipalities. Belle Ryder asked what happens if the \$1.15 million in CARES Act funding is not spent, as FTA has recommended to spend these funds expeditiously because they could be taken back if unspent. Debbie Laurie told the Committee that the City of Bangor will not let \$1.1 million go away, even if it means changing billing strategy. The City of Bangor could limit local funding at mid-year by redirecting local funds to capital items which would allow for draw down of more federal funds. Fiscal Year 2022 is going to be as much of a challenge, if not more.

Belle Ryder suggested that for the coming fiscal year municipal assessments be reduced by the reserve funding amount and CARES Act funds be used to make up the difference. Debbie Laurie stated that they are already doing that in some way because that is how the City of Bangor is raising the local share for the first half of the depot project. The depot project requires \$320,000 local share. Instead of asking all of the communities to come up with a \$320,000 local share, the City of Bangor has added more CARES Act funding into the operating budget and will be directing part of the local municipal contributions towards the depot local share.

Belle Ryder expressed concerns that having bill reductions mid-year would be great, but at that point municipalities have already committed taxes. They are looking for ways to find savings now before committing local taxes for the fiscal year. Belle inquired if using CARES Act funding of \$850,000 for April, May and June expenses will cover all the expenses at 100 percent, or will that require municipalities to still be assessed regular local share on that amount?

Debbie Laurie said that she hadn't thought that all the way through and maybe can look at that to see if there can be some savings made for municipalities by billing municipalities in this fiscal year and carrying local contributions forward to next year to reduce fiscal year 2021 budget contributions. Belle Ryder stated that the Town of Orono has already assessed taxpayers for this fiscal year so it would be better for it to impact next fiscal year budget. Debbie Laurie said she would look at additional strategies and send out alternatives to everyone by Tuesday of next week to look at as a group.

Capital Plan: Debbie Laurie noted that in the budget packet the fiscal year 2021 capital requests and program requests includes the ADA vehicles, bus support equipment, the five new buses, the Transit Center, and funding of the joint reserve. The only distinction in the five-year plan at this point is that in the following fiscal year, there is uncertainty as to how the Transit building is going to get built out. In fiscal year 2022, the other half of funding for transit center depot will require \$160,000 in local share. Two additional buses will be coming in 2023. Next year's capital plan will look much different because of the work on implementing designated bus stops and technology projects from the transit study.

COVID-19 Service Changes and Effects: Laurie Linscott told the group that the biggest changes to bus service came on March 20. It was decided to have passengers board at the rear door and discontinue collecting fares. Later it was decided to limit passengers to 10 allowed on the bus. Now, passengers are required to wear face coverings. The first three first seats on buses have been blocked off for drivers to have more social distancing. Two sets of hand sanitizer have been installed on all buses. One in front early in March, then in one in the rear when rear door boarding began.

In last couple weeks drivers have been offered N95 masks and fit tested on a voluntary basis. Drivers are wearing N95 masks, or face coverings if they chose not to wear a N95 mask. Each night 14 buses are being cleaned because 13 buses a day are required. Because ADA service has dropped, only two ADA vans, not four, are being used. The administration office is closed to the public.

Darcy Cooke stated that the City of Bangor and Community Connector are doing a good job in implementing these changes and involving riders and drivers. She told the group that she sent an email earlier in the week asking if the cleaning schedules could be posted on the buses for peace of mind for riders. Rich Cromwell and Laurie Linscott are looking at the process and procedure to make sure each schedule actually gets posted and does not get missed and cause panic. Rich stated that it has been a progression during the COVID wave of trying to protect drivers and riders. Drivers have done a really good job working through the pandemic and being calm in difficult situations. They are put in

vulnerable situations with the public and everyone appreciates what they have done. Thank drivers for what they are doing and their patience.

Sara Devlin echoed Darcy's sentiments that the City of Bangor has stepped up and responded to the situation well and inquired if any reduction in service or route changes are foreseen. Laurie Linscott stated that at the current time, they are trying to keep as many people on the bus and spaced out as much as possible and service is maintaining. There was an express bus added in the early days of April and May to help with overflow to get to Hannaford and WalMart. Passenger count is down by about two-thirds, but is holding. Community Connector is continuing to offer free fare because getting passes and tickets out to vendors is not logistically easy right now.

Belle Ryder asked that as service comes back and new guidance is being issued on how bus service changes, the municipal partners be notified in advance so that they know before it is happening instead of after it has already occurred. This way guidance can be put out by those municipalities at the same time the City of Bangor puts it out to the public. Rich Cromwell acknowledged and apologized for the lack of communication. He said they will work on getting any service changes out to the municipalities as fast as possible prior to releasing it to the public.

Municipal Partner Updates: Karen Fussell - City of Brewer. Brewer is hoping to have some paving projects over the summer, specifically, South Main Street.

Belle Ryder – Town of Orono. The Kelly Road Bridge will be closed starting on May 11, south-bound access onto I-95 will no longer be possible.

Tom Spitz – University of Maine. No decisions have been made about classes for the Fall. The University is planning for all kinds of contingencies, including opening and figuring out how to do social distancing. It will likely be mid-summer before any decisions are made.

MaineDOT Update: Lori Brann offered to answer any questions about CARES Act funding.

Next Meeting: Wednesday, August 5, 2020