

Transit Advisory Committee

June 2023

Abbreviated meeting summary

Attendance

Members **Present** (5) Carl Rothenhaus, Devin Chausse, Jim Gascoigne, Melissa Zampitella, Peter Septoff.

Absent (5) Arthur Strang, Jackson Moore-Otto, Katherine Rafferty, Matthew Coogan, Bill McAvinney.

City staff (2) Andrew Reker, Bill Deignan (CDD)

Others (20) Josh Weiland (MBTA), Cecilia Cobb, Kyle Vangel (CRA), Bruce Kaplan, Rachel Burckardt, Ned Codd (WSP), 14 members of the public

Note: CDD = Community Development Department; TPT = Traffic Parking and Transportation Department; MBTA = Massachusetts Bay Transportation Authority, BNRD = Bus Network Redesign.

Welcome and committee introductions

Andy Reker (AR) began the virtual meeting at 5:33 PM by welcoming members of the Transit Advisory Committee (TAC), members of the public and presenters. AR gave a tour of the virtual space for people joining by application and telephone and shared ground rules for virtual meeting participation.

Carl Rothenhaus (RA) then conducted a roll call of the members of the TAC – 5 members were present, 5 were absent. The committee did not conduct a roll call vote to approve the meeting minutes for the May 2022 meeting. The committee will do this at the next committee meeting.

AR then turned it over to guests who included members of the Cambridge Redevelopment Authority, and WSP who introduced themselves.

Presentation: Grand Junction

Members of the Cambridge Redevelopment Authority and WSP presented a transit feasibility study on the redevelopment of the Grand Junction into a transit corridor and multi-use path – responses to TAC member questions during the presentation are italicized.

Context:

The Grand Junction is a corridor that runs through east Cambridge, Kendal Square, and Cambridgeport. The grand junction has always been a freight only line. It originally served the warehouses in East Cambridge for the several private rail companies that operated out of the Boston area since the 1800s. Currently the Grand Junction is used by the MBTA and Amtrak to reposition cars between North and South Stations. Using the Grand Junction as a transit

corridor would provide a major north south link across Boston, alleviate portions of the existing MBTA transit system, provide Cambridge residents with a more sustainable commute option, and increase transit accessibility and ridership in an area cited for population growth over the next several decades.

- What we learned from previous studies
 - o 16 different studies have been conducted that heavily to loosely involved the grand junction.
 - o Grand junction is currently used by MBTA to move cars, Freight car movement, Amtrak movement. Because of this, everything must be FRA compliant, which means a high level of crashworthiness (greater than is what expected of regular urban rail service).
 - o This means that the feasibility study looked at what previous studies looked at including FRA compliant answers as well as other answers such as LRT and BRT.
- Universe of alternatives
 - o Route and Terminus locations
 - The feasibility study looked at previous studies that determined possible terminus locations for service through the grand junction, such as north to Sullivan Square then out to Lynn, or west out to Worcester.
 - o Ridership markets:
 - People who work in east Cambridge going to Everett/Chelsea or the reverse, and workers who commute to/from Cambridge from south of the Charles north into Cambridge.
 - o Transit modal alternatives:
 - BRT - would not be FRA compliant, too small, and would prohibit existing uses.
 - An underground tunnel – would be cost prohibitive and grades would be too steep.
 - LRT - likely unfeasible due to lack of temporal separation, cost prohibitive, grade changes to connect existing green line would be very challenging.
 - What is Temporal Separation?
 - o *Presenters: A scheduling necessity that separates the uses of a section of track during a period of time so that the different uses of the track do not conflict. You do not want a green line train following a freight train because they have a different level of crashworthiness i.e., the freight train will, at worst, easily crush a Green Line train.*
 - o Possible Stations
 - Cambridgeport, Mass Ave at MIT, Kendall Square, East Cambridge, North Point.
 - o Possible connections: Would connect into commuter rail tracks or less feasibly, the green line.
 - o Headways:

- 15 minutes - Would require double tracking in most places but is feasible with the single track currently in place. The harder part is fitting the tracks and the multi-use path in. Tracks may have to be shifted, center platforms may have to be used, or Cambridge and the MBTA may have to work with adjacent land owners to fit the platforms in. In addition, it will take some work to get coherent track alignments. The research team looked at staggering the platforms (such as with Downtown Crossing) to address this concern.
 - Concerns about crossings:
 - 15-minute headways will significantly affect travel on crossing streets
 - It takes about 40 seconds of closed gates to get a Commuter Rail train through a crossing. Add in the staggering of directions and that is a closed gate about every 6½ minutes. Signalized intersections may help alleviate crossing issues - like on Commonwealth Avenue.
- Further Plans: Goal for technical study report is in October. – Goal is for the Grand Junction working group to come back in September while they are finalizing their report.
- Overhead electrification vs Battery power – *The time it will take to get the line ready will be considerable. Given the trajectory of battery technology it starts to suggest that BE would be attractive for this service.*

Public Comment

AR opened a short comment period for members of the public – where applicable responses to questions posed by commenters are below the question in italics.

One member of the public thanked the presenters for their work. He was all for this project and asked if increased commuter rail usage of the yard in Reedville would allow for exclusive track rights for this project.

- *Presenters: No, the southside facility would not eliminate the issues, the Downeaster would still have to run on the Grand Junction to get from South Boston to North Station. In addition, grand junction trains mingling with Worcester Line Commuter Rail south of the Grand Junction rail would necessitate temporal separation.*

Another commenter was excited about the prospect of additional stops in Cambridge. The commenter asked if there were specific political constraints on from whom equipment can be procured?

- *Presenters: Yes, but they are feasibly addressable. The main constraint is “Buy America” but it is fairly easy to get enough parts from American producers to satisfy the Buy America requirements.*

The commenter also asked if the grand junction path would be separated bike and pedestrian paths or mixed bike and pedestrian paths?

- *Presenters: The main issue preventing full mode separation is the spatial constraints around stations, but full modal separation of ped and bike is not unfeasible.*

One commenter was extremely concerned about battery electric vehicles and expressed their fear about the project hedging its bets on battery technology which is unproven, rather than catenary or other forms of electric power generation which are proven systems.

Another commenter asked if this project is the best use of high amount funds – can we use funds somewhere else like Alewife?

City: Grand junction is a solid case for opening corridors that people use but are not actively served by transit. – The City expressed a “both and” stance to the question.

City, MBTA, + TAC Updates

AR presented upcoming meetings for the TAC, including:

- Next meeting July 6th – likely to be cancelled.
- August 3rd – potential orientation month.
- September 7th Thursday after labor day – will be the return of the Grand Junction.

AR went on to review other updates for the TAC, including:

- City projects with updates MT AUBURN updates – one version was shown to the committee and recommended that the TAC check out the website and scheduled meetings.
- MBTA will heavily be using subway bus diversion this month such as JFK-Quincy.
- New commuter rail schedules are implemented.
- Bus service reductions starting July 2nd – making the service more reliable using the staffing they have.
- 3 slow zones are Alewife to Davis, Porter to Harvard, Harvard to Central.

Public comment

AR opened a final short comment period for members of the public: – where applicable responses to questions posed by commenters are below the question in italics.

One commenter complained that the MBTA is having track problems and slow zones despite the years of work to replace the slabs that the tracks sit on.

One member of the TAC asked about redline shutdowns.

Another member of the TAC asked about the realized benefits of the month-long Orange Line shutdown.

City: Service seems to be better

Meeting was adjourned at 7:07 PM

Version Information

Draft: (6/22/2023 CFR)

Approval: ■