

Transit Advisory Committee

May 2024

Abbreviated meeting summary

Attendance

Members

Present (6) Arthur Strang, Jackson Moore-Otto, Carl Rothenhaus, Devin Chausse, Melissa Zampitella, Peter Septoff, Makayla Comas

Absent (5) Arthur Strang, Matthew Coogan, Katherine Rafferty, Bill McAvinney, Jim Gascoigne,

City staff (1)

Andrew Reker (CDD); Adam Schulman (TPT)

Others (2)

Olivia Mobayed, Tara Kamal Ahmadi, Marcela Moreno, Annie Arguello, Ed Luna, Greg McNally (MBTA)

Note: CDD = Community Development Department; TPT = Traffic Parking and Transportation Department; MBTA = Massachusetts Bay Transportation Authority; TSP = Transit Signal Priority; BNRD = Bus Network Redesign; BRT = Bus Rapid Transit.

Welcome and Committee Introductions

Andy Reker (AR) began the virtual meeting at 5:34 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 then conducted a roll call of the members of the TAC – 6 members were present, 5 were absent. He then conducted a roll call of the meeting notes for April 2024. The committee unanimously approved the April meeting notes.

Presentation: BNRD Implementation Updates

AR turned the meeting over to members from the MBTA who shared updates on the implementation of the BNRD.

The director of the BNRD began by reviewing the goals and timeline of the BNRD. The director stated that the MBTA has planned out the capital needs of, but not scheduled, what needs to be completed in order to implement at least the first phase of the RD. This includes upgrading signage and facilities. Operator headcount is still the biggest bottleneck of completing the BNRD, but given the current hiring spree, he is confident the MBTA will have enough operators by the time the RD is fully implemented. Increasing operator headcount will not only allow the MBTA to implement the BNRD but also rebuild the “extras list” (a list of people who are hired to act as spares when bus drivers and motorpeople call in sick, or when other operational needs arise). This will decrease dropped trips and allow operators to attend more frequent recurrent training while the extras fill in for them.

The MBTA showed off the new sign design pilot. The new sign is bigger, two sided, has a specific bus stop number, and is compliant to the ADA 2-inch-tall text standard. The MBTA will do an internal review of lessons learned from the pilot after it ends this month.

The MBTA is also developing a communications playbook that they will use to have a specific defined way to communicate bus route changes. Currently the BNRD website is the hub for BNRD information.

The MBTA then laid out the three phases of the BNRD. The division of the BNRD into phases will allow the MBTA to concentrate on certain garages rather than all the garages at the same time.

BNRD phase 1: set to begin December 2024

- 60% increase in service on five routes
- Expanding snow removal
- More consistent schedules

Route 109:

- Going from 45mins off peak to 15mins all day (tripling resources)
- Extending from Sullivan Square (today) to Harvard Station via stops near the GLX

Route 86:

- Is a very peaky bus in terms of ridership
- Line is getting truncated
- Every 16mins during peak and 22-29 off peak
- Some riders will have to change busses at Harvard and/or Dawes Island
- There are four possible places riders could easily change between the 86 and the 109

Non-Line Specific Changes:

- Transit Priority will be part of the BNRD
- Upgraded amenities (both for riders and operators)
- Better layovers (allocated amount of recovery time which allows buses to have time between runs to allow for operators to get back on time and use the restroom)
- 66 and 86 will layover somewhere around Waterhouse Street and Cambridge common – this will allow operators to use the restroom at Cambridge Common or the restroom near Dawes Island.

Phase 2: Roxbury Dorchester Mattapan

Phase 3: Other lines in Cambridge and the north shore.

- The timing of phase 3 will be dependent on when phase 2 is complete (earliest is 2026, but is lose could slide)

AR then turned the conversation over to members of the TAC for comments and questions. City responses are in italics.

The city cares and is happy to see that the MBTA is taking into consideration the necessity for people to change buses at Harvard. The city is also happy about operator hiring numbers.

One member of the TAC asked if the MBTA has specific literature about the new signs and the BNRD that employers in Cambridge could distribute to their employees.

MBTA:

- The most current information can be found on the BNRD website
- MBTA is working on producing a rider guide and route explainers for riders.
- Better Bus Project update: a newsletter with the latest updates about better bus umbrella every other month

One member asked about idling and noise pollution

- The MBTA is planning to use hybrid electric buses on these lines.
- The MBTA is also planning to train operators to recognize where they can and cannot idle based upon local regulations.
- Electrification (Battery electric buses) are a way for buses to not idle in no-idling areas.

The same member also asked about operator outreach i.e. has the T or the city asked operators what they think of the changes?

The city has gone out to talk to operators at the North Cambridge Car house to get their feedback on changes to Mass Ave.

One member asked about how signage is changing outside the pilot redesign of the traditional bus stop sign pole.

- Every sign that will be affected by BNRD will be replaced with something new based on lessons learned from the sign pilot.
- Harvard busway – the BNRD will change birthing locations in the busway and thus most signs in the Harvard busway, including every arrow sign, will have to be corrected or replaced. This replacement will occur in time for the launch of phase 1.
- Network maps: will have to be updated in time to show the changes in routes. This will occur not only at Harvard but also in all 94 Blue Line cars due to the BNRD changes in East Boston and Revere.

Will signage be updated if it does not touch the BNRD?

- Unfortunately no – BUT wherever the MBTA is making changes to signs, they are trying to gather as much information and knowledge of this sign changing process to make new process guidelines to make the MBTA better and faster at changing signage at other locations outside of the BNRD.

Presentation: North Cambridge Retrofit Project

AR then turned it over to the MBTA project manager overseeing the car-house retrofit.

Overview

- The MBTA sees the retrofit of the car-house as a critical project for the MBTA.

- The project contractor will be J.F. White. [Secretary note: J.F. White is an experienced contractor with the MBTA. The company was heavily involved in removing multiple speed restrictions on the Blue Line]
- The project will install 11 battery electric bus charging units that can charge a total of 32 buses at the same time.
- Fire protection upgrades will be made to the site as well.
- A large amount of underground exploratory activity was needed and has been completed to install new water and electrical systems on the site before the rest of the construction proceeds.
- As of the time of the meeting the overhead catenary system has been removed and the overhead gantry drill shafts for the new charging system has been drilled.
- The new overhead gantry that will hold the charging infrastructure will be erected in the summer of 2024.

AR then turned the conversation over to members of the TAC for comments and questions. City responses are in italics.

- One member asked if the gantry would exist anywhere outside of the garage or just at the site itself.
 - o Just the garage
- Another asked if the MBTA planning on erecting similar charging infrastructure at other garages?
 - o Quincy Garage
 - o Arborway – which is currently in the design phase.
- A member asked if operators will need to be retrained on the new buses.
 - o Yes, but battery electric buses currently operate out of the South Hampton Yard so operators who come from there will know how operate the chargers. Operators will have to be trained on how to operate buses in the yard. The buses operate like any other non-catenary-powered bus outside of the yard.
- A member asked how long it will take for buses to charge.
 - o The bus will take 3-4 hours to charge to full capacity
 - o This full capacity will allow the buses to have enough charge left over after a run to easily get back to the yard, and then some.
- One member asked how the bus connects to the charging infrastructure.
 - o The charging pantograph comes down from the gantry and connects to the bus.
- A member asked about power draw.
 - o A 13KV switch gear that reduces to 480KW which then reduces to 180KW on the actual charger.
- A member asked at what frequency buses will pull back to yard to be charged?
 - o Every bus will pull back before it runs out of battery and will leave with a full charge.
- A member asked why the gantry had to be dug so deep, and if it hit bedrock – 30ft.
 - o No, 30ft is simply what the engineers said was needed to support the structure.
- The city then asked: *Is there any screening material being installed or any changes to how people on the street can peer into the yard.*
 - o Where the switch house will be – there will be a gate, and also a CMU wall will be installed that matches the one in the bus garage and the apartment complex to the left.

- The city also asked if there is any difference between how fast buses will charge while on the gantry versus charging while inside the maintenance facility.
 - o No, it's the same power source so they will charge the same.
- To make this a great facility: will there be bike racks for employees?
 - o Unsure, but he will pass along the idea.

Presentation: City and TAC project updates

AR presented upcoming meetings for the TAC, including:

- Joint meeting on May 15th
- TAC will be hybrid starting next month

AR presented updates to several projects in the city including:

- Mass Ave Partial construction:
 - o City is leaning towards bus lanes on both sides of the street but the southbound is AM only.
 - o Next public activity is an open house in June.
 - o A member of the committee stated that the conversation at the recent open house meeting was concerned about bus lanes on northbound side due to funeral home and that people were feeling hurt by potential loss of parking. They said the event was attended by people of different backgrounds and business owners who care about how Mass Ave will change and agree that Mass Ave has to change.
 - o A member of the TAC shared their opinion that the attraction of Cambridge is predicated on the ability to be able to get around by modes that are not just cars or walking and wishes the city could share this fact.
- Mt Auburn Street
 - o A lot of the major changes are complete
 - o One member shared that he was unhappy that users were not fully adopting the new layout.
 - *Wait until around June 10th for people to fully be following the new layout. Transitions like this usually take about a month.*
- Concord Ave TSP
 - o Two signals have been implemented so far
- Belmont Street
 - o Only last little items left
- Real time signage – City has had items trip them up before bidding – bids are going out
- Park to JFK is “shuttleized”
- Alewife to Kendall – Shuttles through Cambridge
 - o Dedicated shuttle stops
 - o Sidewalk repairs for where stops could go
 - o Blue bikes free or reduced fares, in addition to on the commuter rail
- One member mentioned that in a prior meeting a member had suggested express shuttles between stops. The member explained that the MBTA implemented this for the Blue Line to great success during the recent closure. He acknowledged that

Massachusetts Ave and Bennington Streets are very different but despite this, he still believes that express shuttles would be a feasible option for the Red Line shuttles in Cambridge.

- The MBTA is thinking about implementing this in Cambridge but nothing set in stone at the moment.

Public comment

- AR opened a short comment period for members of the public.
 - No members of the public chose to speak during this period.

Meeting was adjourned at 7:10 PM

Version Information

Draft: (5/22/2024) CFR

Approval: