



Special Board of Directors Meeting Minutes

Thursday, November 9, 2023

9:30 a.m.

**Rhode Island Department of Transportation
2 Capitol Hill, Providence RI
Traffic Management Center**

Members Present: Peter Alviti, Board Chair; Michelle Wilcox, Board Treasurer; Patrick Crowley, Board Secretary; James Leach; and Normand Benoit.

Absent Members: Robert Kells, Board Vice Chair; Marcy Reyes and Heather Schey.

Also Present: Scott Avedisian, CEO; Christopher Fragomeni, Esq., Board Counsel; Christopher Durand, Chief Financial Officer; Jamie Pereira, Chief of Security; Steven Colantuono, Chief Legal Counsel; Kathy Nadeau, Chief Human Resources Officer; members of RIPTA's staff; and members of the public.

Call to Order: Mr. Alviti called the meeting to order at 9:34 a.m., indicating that quorum was present.

Agenda Item 1: Public Comment / Board Discussion

1. Liza Burkin:

- Ms. Burkin represents the Providence Streets Coalition, an alliance of 42 organizations in Providence that works for safer streets, more transportation choices and policies that advance mobility justice.
- Ms. Burkin asks the Board not to accept the budget and to demand a transformative, bigger, bolder vision for RIPTA. Since the Transportation Master Plan came out three years ago, the budget has been level funded. In the meantime, she adds, RIPTA has been slowly reducing service and drivers have been retiring.
- Ms. Burkin describes a recent meeting with ATU to discuss what she calls the driver cliff, with 125 drivers up for retirement soon. She believes drivers need higher wages to compete with other types of work that are less stressful and have a better work-life balance. She says that drivers provide an incredible public service and deserve to be compensated fairly, especially as the cost of living has increased.
- Ms. Burkin believes everyone at the table cares about transit and has a platform. As a member of the advocacy community, she says it is time for everyone to demand the governor increase the budget in a transformative way.

- Ms. Burkin adds that several things are converging that require a better transit system. The economy and environment will benefit from it.
- Ms. Burkin encourages the board, operators, and advocates to work on this together.

2. **Patricia Raub**

- Ms. Raub thanks RIPTA for reopening the photo ID office in Kennedy Plaza once a week, although she wants to see it open more often. She appreciates the agency listening to riders and describes it as a step in the right direction.
- Ms. Raub supports Ms. Burkin's plea because she says there is clearly a driver cliff, and RIPTA has had to cut back service already. RIPTA will not attract more riders if it keeps reducing the schedules, and it certainly won't achieve the Transit Master Plan which requires expanding service.

3. **Barry Schiller**

- Mr. Schiller speaks as a former RIPTA board member, lifetime transit user, and advocate.
- Mr. Schiller calls attention to the proposed organizational chart and the importance of marketing, broadly defined. He calls this a time of opportunity as the public is more aware of climate and housing problems, and how transit could help both in terms of reduced emissions per mile and supporting compact walkable neighborhoods in transit-oriented districts. He believes that connection is not widely known. He has been calling for a shelter near the State House for more than a decade as RIPTA does not have a visible presence there.
- Mr. Schiller encourages the board to make marketing, broadly defined, more central to RIPTA. He recognizes the challenges of improving scheduling distribution and changing the perception of so many people in Rhode Island who believe that transit is not for them.

4. **Michelle Rivera**

- Ms. Rivera echoes the sentiment of those before her by saying that the state cannot afford to let RIPTA fail, and instead must invest in its systems. Having this infrastructure fail would be catastrophic to all Rhode Islanders.
- Ms. Rivera says that RIPTA must invest more in drivers and offer competitive wages to bring more of them to the table. This would reduce the amount of payout for overtime, reduce workers' burnout, and improve their overall health and the culture of a more positive work environment.
- Ms. Rivera adds that Rhode Island must support students and make it easier for them to have transportation to go to school. Increased student attendance is important for increasing performance and graduation rates.

5. **Walter Melillo**

- Mr. Melillo seeks the board's help, with the advocates, to get funding for RIPTA. As president of Local A.T.U. 618, his vision is for safe, reliable transportation and economic growth for the people who really need transit.
- Mr. Melillo states that RIPTA needs more drivers. In order to achieve what RIPTA wants for the community, the agency must expand service. Without funding, RIPTA cannot hire more drivers. The agency currently has 378 fixed route drivers. 15% are eligible for retirement. There are also 109 Flex/Ride

drivers with 19% eligible to retire. Roughly 50 vacancies need to be filled. If RIPTA wants to provide more runs, it can get more people to use public transit. He wants to see RIPTA move forward, and he says he's willing to work with everyone to get that done.

- Mr. Alviti then mentions the 50 current vacancies and asks a question about right sizing the pay scale. Mr. Melillo says that entry level paratransit drivers earn \$21.71 per hour. When asked what would positively affect the filling of vacancies and retirement positions, Mr. Melillo says that with today's standard of inflation, RIPTA would probably require a 20% increase in pay. Compared to some other jobs, RIPTA is stable full-time job. For those who look at the overall benefit, it's a great place to work, with the community, as a big family.
- Director Alviti then asks whether Mr. Melillo has had a chance to look at the budget and the proposal by RIPTA's administration to not fund some of the vacant positions. He requests a view from an operations standpoint about the impact on the workforce if RIPTA fills those vacancies. Mr. Melillo responds that if the positions are filled, more operators can complete more runs and provide more frequent service, at a cost to the Authority. With vacancies, RIPTA would need to cut service.
- Director Alviti then asks about the effects of stress on existing drivers. Mr. Melillo gives an example of losing a driver on a particular route that covers 8-12 trips. If RIPTA incorporates more drivers at a higher frequency, the product is better for consumers.

6. Yanine Castado

- Ms. Castado describes her experience as a RIPTA rider which started as a high school freshman. She recalls later expenses related to car ownership, such as maintenance, gas, and insurance, which drove her choice to not have a car as an adult.
- If RIPTA were to not accept the current budget, but instead, pay operators more and increase the budget, Ms. Castado says that more people would ride buses because frequency would improve and people could go to more places.

7. Randall Rose

- Mr. Rose shares the concerns that were expressed about this budget. He says that the budget is really not enough to even pay for RIPTA's current operations, funding match requirements, and other post-employment benefits such as life insurance and health insurance.
- Mr. Rose adds that the number of driver positions RIPTA budgets for is too low for current schedules.
- Mr. Rose says that there is also a shortage in customer service, and he has heard shifting explanations for why the photo ID office in Kennedy Plaza is not open full-time. The photo ID office is essential to riders, and he views this as part of the overall neglect of Kennedy Plaza, which he blames on outside pressure.
- Mr. Rose states that this budget request to the Governor and General Assembly is not enough to fund RIPTA, and it understates the seriousness and scale of the fiscal cliff. He believes the fiscal cliff can be managed as ridership recovers, but it is important to start by being realistic about how much is needed.
- Mr. Rose adds that he is aware this meeting was scheduled with an executive session and believes it is an abuse of executive session to not have clear

justification and instead discuss matters that should be open to the public. He advises the board to be careful about that in the future.

- Mr. Rose recognizes that the board is trying its best to take care of serious financial problems, but with the agency's precarious financial position, he does not believe RIPTA has the money needed to construct an expensive new bus hub, which he says riders do not want.

8. Grant Dulgarian

- Mr. Dulgarian mentions comments he has made at past board meetings but has not received answers about.
- Mr. Dulgarian suggests a traffic circulation pattern around Kennedy Plaza that would only require repainting and relocating four shelters from Fulton Street to Washington Street, making Fulton Street two ways for everyone.
- Mr. Dulgarian recommends placing remote control heaters under the roofs of shelters in Kennedy Plaza.
- Mr. Dulgarian also requests an additional FTE to work in customer service on nights and weekends.
- Mr. Dulgarian repeats his offer to meet with Director Alviti.
- Mr. Dulgarian shares his idea to encourage people to take the bus by offering free transportation for a week in April around Earth Day and school vacation week.

Agenda Item 2: Board Discussion / Potential Vote Request for Approval: Annual Financial Plan

Mr. Alviti begins the process of reviewing the annual financial plan by asking board members for questions to field to the administration on the budget. Christopher Durand, RIPTA's CFO, then gives a high-level view of RIPTA's financial picture, beginning with the increase in healthcare costs after Covid. While revenues have improved, he points to the gas tax as a declining revenue source. He says that RIPTA is trying to reduce the deficit in FY25 while keeping the budget as accurate as possible.

A discussion follows with questions about the fiscal cliff, presented as an \$18 million deficit for this fiscal year. Director Alviti describes it as a reduction in driver positions and asks the administration to explain the difference between the \$18 million deficit and the actual projected need of \$242 million. Mr. Durand responds that the budget recognizes that RIPTA will not be able to maintain current service levels without changes. Future budgets will address different scenarios.

Director Alviti states that if RIPTA's intention is to move forward with implementation of the Transit Master Plan and fleet electrification, related costs should be reflected in the budget. Mr. Durand states that the presented budget allows RIPTA to make payroll and provide required matching funds. The request for additional funding will appear in a separate document.

Director Alviti advises RIPTA to submit a budget that outlines compelling reasons and recommended revenue streams to accomplish a bigger mission. If the agency is committed to fulfilling the expectations of the Transit Master Plan, the budget request should include data and alternate funding provisions for successful implementation. He recommends meeting with the RI Office of Management and Budget.

Director Alviti also questions why the budget eliminates driver positions instead of accounting for an increase in starting salary to attract more drivers and provide better service. He recommends entering collective bargaining prior to making the budget request.

Mr. Benoit motions to enter executive session to discuss the sub-issue of collective bargaining to address issues that have been raised by the union president and members of the public. Mr. Crowley seconds. Mr. Alviti votes against entering executive session, but the motion carries with affirmative votes by Mr. Leach and Ms. Wilcox.

Agenda Item 3: Executive Session: Executive Session to consider, discuss and act upon such matters as may be closed to the public pursuant to: R.I. Gen. Laws § 42-46-5(a)(2), (5), and (7).

The public meeting pauses for executive session at 11:06 a.m.

The public meeting reopens at 11:31 a.m.

Mr. Alviti announces that the Board of Directors will ask the administration to provide budget information on the impact of funding vacant positions along with a strategy to attract new employees into those positions. He requests information showing a demonstrable expectation of the positive benefits of fully funding the larger mission and the delta between the budget request and the actual need.

Mr. Crowley motions to table Agenda Item 2 until a future meeting. Mr. Benoit seconds, and the motion carries with favorable votes by Mr. Alviti, Mr. Leach, and Ms. Wilcox.

Agenda Item 4: Adjournment - 11:34 a.m.

Mr. Crowley makes a motion to adjourn. Mr. Benoit seconds, and the motion passes with favorable votes by Mr. Leach; Mr. Alviti; and Ms. Wilcox.

Respectfully submitted,

Patrick Crowley, Secretary