



THE WORCESTER REGIONAL TRANSIT AUTHORITY: PROBLEMS AND OPTIONS

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Executive Summary

The Worcester Regional Transit Authority (WRTA), which was established in 1974, is facing some serious problems. These include:

- decreasing ridership on fixed-route service;
- increasing costs that are largely the result of expensive labor contracts and increased demand for Federally mandated ADA (Americans with Disabilities Act) paratransit trips;
- work rules that inhibit productivity and do not conform to transit industry standards;
- strictly enforced funding formulas that limit state subsidies to 75% of net operating costs and local assessments to 25% of net operating costs, as well as limiting yearly increases in funding from those levels of government to 2.5%;
- working within the constraints of a 25-year agreement that gives the Amalgamated Transit Union, Local 22 a monopoly on the fixed-route service designated in the agreement until 2013.

In order to address these problems, the Research Bureau suggests that the WRTA consider a number of possibilities to reduce expenditures (the largest of which will result from renegotiation of work rules), and to increase revenues. These proposals, which are elaborated in the Options Section of this report, include the following:

- Adjust maintenance and operations practices in accordance with recent audit recommendations .
- Replace the “Report Driver” system with a “Spare Board” system.
- Initiate competitive contracting for the five routes that are not subject to the 25-year agreement.
- Reduce service on the lowest volume fixed-routes.
- Increase fares on the non-ADA Elder Medical and Weekend Cab services, and cap the number of those trips.
- Offer new service to commuters in the I-495 area from the commuter rail stations to companies along the corridor. Since this is new service, it would not be subject to the 25-year agreement, and could therefore be contracted to the bidder that can provide the best service at the lowest cost.

I. Introduction

In 1986, the Research Bureau published a report entitled “Charting a New Route for Worcester’s Mass Transit”(No. 86-6). The report argued that the Worcester Regional Transit Authority was “facing serious problems that require the exploration of more cost-effective methods of operation...in order to avoid substantial cuts in service.” The problems cited were: decreasing ridership, increasing costs of operation, increased need for government subsidies, and declining farebox revenues relative to operating costs. The report suggested a number of options for addressing these problems, including raising fares, reducing low-volume service, renegotiating work rules, contracting out portions of fixed route service, and using more part-time labor.

Since that time, the overall health of the WRTA has continued to deteriorate. Ridership declined over 12% between 1996 and 2001, while the cost of operations increased nearly 39%. This report will reexamine the WRTA to identify the reasons for its continuing problems and suggest some ways of increasing the cost-effectiveness and service delivery of the Authority.

II. Background

Until the end of WWII, most city rail and bus lines in the United States were privately owned, profit-making enterprises. Following the war, however, there was a massive population shift to the suburbs stimulated by Federal policies such as FHA and VA mortgages, mortgage-interest deductibility, and federally subsidized urban expressway construction, as well as by growing economic prosperity. Drastically reduced population density changed the economics of fixed-route mass transit: bus companies lost more of their market in the urban core and found it much more expensive to serve a widely dispersed suburban population, most of whom could afford, and preferred, automobiles. In addition, state and/or local regulatory policies generally made it difficult for bus companies to raise rates, adopt distance-based fares, or drop routes with low ridership.¹

In response to declining ridership, Congress enacted the Urban Mass Transportation Act (UMTA) of 1964. It was designed to provide a one-time infusion of grants for capital equipment to refurbish local transit systems in the hope of attracting new riders, which would make urban mass transit cost-effective. When ridership continued to drop and transit losses continued to mount, however, there was pressure for further Federal subsidization, culminating in the Urban Mass Transportation Act of 1974. This act provided funds for operating subsidies in addition to capital grants. Despite these subsidies, the nationwide decline in mass transit ridership has continued.

The situation in Worcester paralleled developments nationwide. By 1974, the State and City were paying \$300,000 each to the Worcester Bus Company, the provider of the City’s mass transit, to keep it out of bankruptcy. The previous year the state legislature approved enabling legislation allowing the establishment of regional transit authorities that coordinate transit services by contracting with private companies that provide the services. According to Chapter 161B Section 25 of the Massachusetts General Laws, no state-established transit authority is

¹ Lave, Charles A., ed. Urban Transit: The Private Challenge to Public Transportation. Pacific Institute for Public Policy Research. 1985.

permitted to directly operate any mass transportation service. The purpose of this restriction was to ensure that services would be provided by professional transit providers free of political interference. In response to this legislation, the Worcester Regional Transit Authority (WRTA) was established in 1974 by Worcester and six other towns: Auburn, Boylston, Grafton, Millbury, Shrewsbury, and West Boylston.² The authorities established under this legislation were eligible for Federal assistance in the acquisition of new equipment and for both Federal and state assistance to cover operating deficits. Now, however, Federal money is limited to the purchase of capital equipment, preventive maintenance, and operating expenses (up to 10% of the annual Federal grant) associated with service mandated by the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990. Farebox revenues, the state, and the Authority's member communities must cover the remainder, which is the largest share of the WRTA operating costs.

The WRTA is governed by an Advisory Board composed of one representative from each member community. A community's vote on the Board is weighted according to a statutory formula based on the most recent annual assessment for each community. (The City of Worcester, for example, held 38.9% of the vote in FY01.) The Board is responsible for determining service levels, fares, budgets, capital improvements, and hiring an administrator. The administrator can shape policy but cannot raise fares or change service levels without the approval of the Board. Planning support for the transit administrator of the WRTA is obtained through a contract with the Central Massachusetts Regional Planning Commission.

In accordance with state law, as noted above, transit operations must be contracted out. The WRTA, at its inception, selected the Worcester Bus Company to furnish vehicles and provide the service. In addition to its contract with the WRTA, the Worcester Bus Company operated charter service and school bus service, the latter under contract with the Worcester School Committee. In 1978, Worcester Bus lost the school bus contract to the United Truck and Bus Company, which offered a substantially lower bid. This loss apparently precipitated the shutdown of the Worcester Bus Company. Its assets were then purchased by the WRTA. The Transit Authority currently contracts with First Transit and its local affiliate, RTA Transit Services, Inc., for the operation of transit services.

There are two types of service provided by all mass transit authorities: fixed-route, which operates on a predetermined schedule along set routes, and demand-response, which operates only when there is a demand for the service. The 1964 UMTA mandated reduced fares on mass transit for elders and people with disabilities, and encouraged Federally-subsidized transportation systems to design programs and facilities accessible to people with disabilities. Section 504 of the 1973 Rehabilitation Act established the right of all "otherwise qualified" disabled people to participate in and enjoy the benefits of all programs and services receiving Federal financial assistance, including transit authorities. Loss of Federal funding was threatened for programs failing to comply. The Rehabilitation Act articulated more strongly the policy implications of UMTA, and in response, paratransit services separate from the traditional fixed- route services of mass transit were gradually established around the country.

² WRTA member municipalities now include Auburn, Barre, Berlin, Boylston, Brimfield, Brookfield, Charlton, Clinton, Douglas, Dudley, East Brookfield, Grafton, Holden, Holland, Leicester, Marlboro, Millbury, New Braintree, Northborough, North Brookfield, Oakham, Oxford, Princeton, Rutland, Shrewsbury, Spencer, Southboro, Southbridge, Sturbridge, Sutton, Warren, Wales, Webster, Westborough, West Boylston, West Brookfield, and Worcester (See Appendix I).

Paratransit services within the City of Worcester began on a limited basis in the mid-1970's. By the mid-1980's, this service had gained ridership and momentum in the surrounding communities as well because of the need for "curb to curb" transportation to help elders stay in their homes and remain independent. Local Councils on Aging initially became transportation providers themselves, offering health- and nutrition-related paratransit trips. Grants, fundraisers, and donations provided funding for this early service. In order to secure a stable source of funding, communities began to join the WRTA, which budgeted for this service from its revenue sources: Federal and state subsidies, assessments of member communities, and farebox revenues.

In 1990 Congress passed the Americans with Disabilities Act. ADA is civil rights legislation that mandates equal access to public services and facilities for persons with disabilities. This means that transit authorities must provide service to persons with disabilities based on a minimum standard of comparability (in terms of hours and routes) with services provided to non-disabled persons. The WRTA reached full compliance with all of the required ADA paratransit service throughout its service area by the January, 1997 deadline.³ It should be noted that ADA is an unfunded mandate, which means that the WRTA is required to absorb the net costs of this service with no reliable financial assistance from the Federal government⁴.

III. Description of WRTA Services

Fixed-route mass transit serves approximately 1% of all person- trips in the Worcester region. In the city of Worcester itself, transit serves approximately 3% of all person trips. The WRTA fixed route system is radially-oriented, concentrated along the traffic corridors leading into the Worcester Central Business District (CBD).⁵

RTA Transit Services operates 29⁶ fixed bus routes within Worcester and 13 surrounding communities (See Appendix II). The remaining member communities contract for paratransit services only. These services are provided by the WRTA fixed-route fleet of 56 full- size (35ft. and 40ft.) buses and a fleet of 96 vans and mini-buses (which provide non-ADA service to community residents and ADA paratransit service in the mandatory 3/4 mile ADA service area surrounding the fixed –routes that travel thorough the communities). WRTA fixed-route and ADA paratransit service hours are 4:50am to 12:20am on weekdays, 5:10am to 12:20am on Saturdays, and 8:00am to 12:25am on Sundays. These extended hours were initiated in 1999 to accommodate the Federal Job Access – Reverse Commute program.⁷

³ Central Massachusetts Regional Planning Commission. 2000 Regional Transportation Plan, IV-45.

⁴ In FY01 the Federal government provided \$438,168 in operating assistance for ADA service. This funding is not required, however, and so the amount can change from year- to -year or not be given at all.

⁵ Central Massachusetts Regional Planning Commission. 2000 Regional Transportation Plan, IV-1.

⁶ There is one additional route to Southbridge that may be discontinued in February.

⁷The Federal Job Access and Reverse Commute program is administered by the Federal Transit Administration. The program provides competitive grants to local governments and nonprofit organizations to develop transportation services to connect welfare recipients and low -income persons from their homes to employment and support services. For urbanized areas with a population over 200,000 (such as the Worcester region), Metropolitan Planning Organizations (MPO's) must designate applicants, solicit and review applications and submit a consolidated grant request for all applicants. Grants are awarded on factors including the percentage of the population that are welfare recipients, the need for additional services, coordination with existing transportation providers and state welfare agencies and the use of innovative approaches. Capital and operating projects are eligible for grants. Federal funds can be used for up to 50% of the total project cost; the remaining 50% must come from local sources. The grants are awarded annually on the basis of a Federal fiscal year.

A. Ridership

Transit systems in the United States generally fall into two categories: systems whose primary ridership consists of transit-dependent populations, that is, those who do not own or have access to automobiles or other private vehicles, such as the elderly or economically disadvantaged, and a more broad-based system, including discretionary riders, where people choose to use mass transit because it is more convenient than using a car. Transit in Worcester clearly falls into the former category, which is typical of all regional transit authorities in Massachusetts (except the MBTA). The reasons are: low population density, inexpensive downtown parking, lack of severe traffic congestion, and lack of a vibrant central business district. The WRTA provided approximately 16,000 passenger trips per weekday on its fixed-route service in FY01. Roughly 71% of these passenger trips are by people who use transit 5 or more days per week, and for these riders, a car or other private vehicle was available to only 19%. The median income of these same “5 or more days” riders is \$7 per hour, or \$14,560 per year before taxes.⁸ As noted earlier, ridership has dropped by 12% during the last five years, but increased slightly during the last year.

B. Paratransit

During the last twenty years, the WRTA emerged as the dominant funder of demand-response paratransit service for elders and people with disabilities in its current 37-member communities. Participating communities have their paratransit service funded through the WRTA budget which, as noted above, is funded by farebox revenues, the Federal government, and the remainder and by far the largest portion, the state (75% of the remaining cost) and assessments to member communities (25% of the remaining cost). In compliance with the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990, the only paratransit service the WRTA is legally required to provide is ADA paratransit service throughout the City of Worcester and along 3/4-mile corridors surrounding its fixed-routes that extend into communities outside the City. In addition to ADA service, however, the WRTA funds the RTA Transit Services/Van Division, the Assabet Valley Council on Aging (AVCOA), South Central Massachusetts Elderbus, and ten Councils on Aging, and several for-profit taxi and livery services to provide non-ADA service to elders. (Most provide some ADA-level service as well.) Providers such as AVCOA, South Central Massachusetts Elderbus, and the various Councils on Aging serve outlying communities where WRTA fixed-route service is very limited or non-existent.

In the City of Worcester, the Paratransit Brokerage Services, Inc. (PBSI) brokers both ADA-level and non-ADA paratransit services. PBSI arranges all Worcester ADA lift trips (and elder trips that can be fit into the ADA trip schedule) and assigns them to the RTA Van Division. All other paratransit trips are assigned to less expensive vendors under contract to the Brokerage. WRTA-member communities outside Worcester provide their own paratransit service, which preceded the establishment of the RTA Van Division. In the event that a town cannot cover an ADA trip, PBSI provides backup brokering to another provider. In Worcester, non-ADA paratransit trips are limited to medical and grocery shopping services on weekdays, and any trip purpose on weekends. For all other purposes, non-ADA passengers must use fixed-route service. In the other member communities, however, non-ADA eligible elders may request trips for a

⁸ Clark, Hugh M. Final Report: An On-Board Survey of Bus Riders for WRTA. CJI Research Corporation. May, 1998.

broader range of purposes because, as mentioned above, fixed-route service is very limited in the communities outside Worcester.

C. Net Cost of Service

As indicated in Chart 1, between FY96 and FY01, the cost of fixed- route service increased from \$9.2 million to \$11.4 million, or 23.7%. Demand-response paratransit costs increased from \$3.2 million to almost \$4.4 million, or 35.7%. Contract service costs (which include vender costs to provide trips and brokerage fees for scheduling trips) increased from \$3.7 million to almost \$6.5 million, or 73.5%. All these increases have been largely as a result of increases in service and the cost of labor contracts. Overall, operating costs increased by almost 39% between FY'96 and FY'01.

Revenues to fund transit services came from the farebox, the Federal and state governments, and local assessments of the member towns. Once the Federal subsidy and farebox revenues are determined, the state and the member communities fund the remaining cost of operations. Those subsidies are determined by two formulas. First, the state pays no more than 75% of the net costs and the member communities assume 25% of the burden. Second, under Proposition 2-1/2 restrictions, the amount of the yearly increase in the subsidy for either level of government cannot exceed 2.5%. Alternatively, service must be reduced or fares must be increased. In the current fiscal year, the WRTA is in danger of exceeding the 75% cap on state funding.

Between FY96 and FY01, the Federal government reduced operating assistance by 73.5% but substantially increased assistance to be used for capital expenditures, preventive maintenance, and ADA-related expenses. Overall, Federal funding for the WRTA increased from \$1.1 million to \$3.9 million, or almost 256%.

Farebox revenues increased by 8.7% during that time period, from \$3.1 million to \$3.4 million. Reimbursement for the contract service increased from \$3.7 million to \$6.3 million, or 69%. Overall, total operating revenues increased from \$8.2 million to \$14 million, or 71%. Subtracting the revenues from the operating costs leaves a net cost of service each year that must be funded by the state and member community assessments. This deficit or net cost increased by 9.4%, from \$8.9 million to \$9.8 million between FY96 and FY01. In order to fund it, the state had to increase its share by 17%, from \$6.2 million to almost \$7.3 million. Local assessments increased by 32.6%, from \$1.8 million to almost \$2.5 million.

WRTA NET COST OF SERVICE FY96-FY01

Chart 1.

	FY96	FY97	FY98	FY99	FY00	FY01	% Change
I. GROSS OPERATING COSTS							
RTA Administrative Costs (excluding depreciation) ⁹	\$498,003	\$602,332	\$576,528	\$572,301	\$583,629	\$627,224	25.9
Purchased Services:							
Fixed Route	9,241,511	8,599,850	9,035,304	9,168,080	10,657,494	11,433,142	23.7
Demand response	3,223,824	3,524,928	3,291,049	3,470,402	3,848,196	4,374,606	35.7
Contract Service	3,726,301	4,107,025	5,019,139	5,824,545	6,352,399	6,466,075	73.5
Access to Jobs	NA	NA	NA	187,542	803,277	284,968	NA
Commuter Service	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	49,435	NA
Debt Service	471,868	498,694	492,443	447,977	444,803	590,218	25.1
Total Operating Costs	17,161,507	17,332,829	18,414,463	19,670,847	22,689,798	23,825,668	38.8
II. FEDERAL OPERATING ASSISTANCE							
FTA Operating and Administrative	784,393	756,064	306,641	208,000	208,000	208,000	-73.5
Other Federal	317,131	627,926	2,377,779	3,078,220	3,352,030	3,710,178	1069.9
Total Federal Assistance	1,101,706	1,383,990	2,684,420	3,286,220	3,560,030	3,918,178	255.6
III. REVENUES							
Operating:							
Fare Box Revenue	3,110,771	3,225,931	3,334,731	3,106,392	3,177,310	3,380,451	8.7
Contract Service Reimbursement	3,713,175	4,167,930	5,186,679	5,355,465	6,204,333	6,290,274	69.4
Commuter Service Grant	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	47,358	NA
Access to Jobs	NA	NA	NA	187,542	800,857	273,529	NA
Other Revenues:							
Advertising	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA
Parking	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA
Sale of Capital Assets	NA	55,648	37,567	8,684	NA	NA	NA
Interest Income	261,912	188,561	179,627	227,811	76,159	107,774	-58.9
Miscellaneous	19,344	96,373	9,909	NA	14,027	9,322	-51.8
Total Revenues	7,105,202	7,734,443	8,748,513	8,885,894	10,272,686	10,108,708	42.3
Revenues and Federal Operating Assistance	8,206,908	9,118,433	11,432,933	12,172,114	13,832,716	14,026,886	70.9
IV. NET COST OF SERVICE (I-II-III)	8,954,599	8,214,396	6,981,530	7,498,733	8,857,082	9,798,782	9.4
V. NET COST OF SERVICE FUNDING							
Local Assessments	1,857,007	1,957,661	2,106,433	2,164,952	2,340,986	2,462,573	32.6
State Contract Assistance	6,268,782	6,322,700	5,236,147	5,624,050	6,516,096	7,336,209	17.0

*Source: McCarthy-Hargrave Certified Public Accountants, WRTA Annual Auditors Reports FY96-FY01
Prepared by: Worcester Regional Research Bureau*

⁹ Administrative costs include legal, auditing, and planning expenditures.

D. Labor Costs

Labor and fringe benefits cost constitute the single greatest expense for the Transit Authority. These expenditures totaled \$10.4 million, or about 44% of the WRTA's total operating expenses in FY01 for 131 full-time and 2 part-time operators, and 31 full-time maintenance workers for its fixed-route and van service. 115 full-time operators and 28 full-time mechanics support the fixed-route service. These employees are represented by Local 22 of the Amalgamated Transit Union .

The wages and benefits provided in this contract pose a significant fiscal strain. Wages stipulated in the contract are very high for a system the size of the WRTA. As of July 1, 2001, the wage rate for top Operators was \$19.86/hour, or \$41,308 per year. An Operator also works an average of 208 overtime hours each year, bringing the annual salary of a top operator to approximately \$47,500. As indicated in Chart 2, this wage rate is the highest for all RTA's in the Commonwealth. (The average wage rate in Worcester is \$19.00/hour while in Springfield it is \$15.52/hour.)

Chart 2.¹⁰

Massachusetts RTA's Top Operator Wage Rates 2001	
RTA	Top Operator Wage Rates
<i>Worcester</i>	<i>\$19.86</i>
Brockton	\$18.05
Montachusset	\$18.00
Springfield	\$17.87
Southeastern RTA	\$17.24
Merrimack Valley	\$16.25
Cape Cod	\$16.11
Lowell	\$15.87
Berkshire	\$14.32
Franklin	\$13.34
Greenfield-Montague	\$13.34
Cape Ann TA	\$13.12
<i>Prepared by: Worcester Regional Research Bureau</i>	

The benefit structure negotiated in the labor contract increases the total compensation of an employee by 37%. Thus, total yearly WRTA expenditure for a top operator is almost \$63,000 including benefits and overtime pay. (This figure will increase to \$68,000 by 2003.). The most expensive portion of employee benefits is health insurance. Last year WRTA changed insurance providers in an attempt to cope with rising costs. The WRTA attempted a similar change this year, offering employees a comparable provider with a slight cost savings for the employee, but this offer was rejected overwhelmingly by members of the Union. As a result, WRTA was forced to absorb an increase of 23% in insurance costs. Those costs would have risen only 14% if the Union had accepted the change in providers, and a savings of over \$40,000 would have been realized.

¹⁰ Not included in this list are the Transit Authorities serving Martha's Vineyard and Nantucket Island. These Authorities are seasonal, and not directly comparable to others in Massachusetts.

E. Farebox Revenues

Each passenger currently pays a base fare of \$1.00 for travel within a given fare zone. (Until 1996, the base fare was \$0.75.) There is a surcharge of \$0.25 for each additional zone, with a maximum fare of \$1.75. In 1996 operating revenues covered 30.5% of the total operating cost for the WRTA. In 2001, this figure dropped slightly to 30.1%. As indicated in Chart 3, total revenues from fixed-route service increased by 23.3% between FY96 and FY01, while costs for this service increased 24.5%, from \$9.2 million in FY96 to \$11.5 million in FY01. It should be noted that the revenue/cost ratio last year (30.1%) was an improvement from the low it had reached the previous year (28.2%). Demand-response farebox revenues have risen from \$251,591 to \$288,457, or 14.7% since FY96. However, this revenue increase is far less than the 35.7% increase in costs during this same time period.

Chart 3.

WRTA Revenue from Fixed Route Operations FY96-FY-01							
	FY96	FY97	FY98	FY99	FY00	FY01	% Change
Revenue from Operations	\$2,804,273	\$2,803,657	\$3,076,778	\$2,748,195	\$3,053,763	\$3,458,460	23.3%
Operating Cost	\$9,241,511	\$8,599,850	\$9,035,304	\$9,168,080	\$10,810,320	\$11,501,101	24.5 %
Revenue/Cost Ratio	30.5%	32.6%	34.1%	30.0%	28.2%	30.1%	-1.3%
<i>Source: McCarthy-Hargrave Certified Public Accountants, WRTA Annual Auditors Reports 1995-2000 Prepared by Worcester Regional Research Bureau</i>							

IV. Major Issues Facing WRTA

Fuel, labor, and health insurance costs have been rising steadily each year. An increasingly high proportion of Federal aid is being spent on preventive maintenance, leaving insufficient funds for the purchase of capital equipment.¹¹ Because of increasing costs on fixed-route service coupled with uncontrolled growth (and therefore expense) in mandatory ADA demand-response service, the cost of WRTA operations is on a course to increase more than the 75% state funding that is allowable. This problem prompted the Authority to propose an 8% reduction in its fixed -route service, an action that was approved by the Advisory Board in December.

Although the WRTA cannot manage or control the year- to- year increases in ADA paratransit expenses, the management which assumed control in April, 2000 has taken some steps which it hopes will curb expenditures. These include the following:

- Replaced top managers and added off-hours management coverage for the first time;
- Reorganized WRTA staff to include manager of finance and grant management, and manager of marketing with funds transferred from RTA Transit which has been performing these functions for WRTA;
- Instructed First Transit to conduct a series of audits on every functional area under its management;

¹¹ It is of concern that even though an increasing amount of Federal Capital Assistance monies have been earmarked for preventive maintenance, a 2001 auditor's report indicated that 52% of vehicles were overdue for a preventive maintenance (PM) inspection. The WRTA is now addressing this issue.

- Renewed First Transit’s contract for one year with mid-term and year-end goals, including achievement of audit recommendations;
- Developed WRTA service and performance standards for WRTA service;
- Made service adjustments for low performing routes and trips.

While these changes constitute important steps toward controlling expenditures, the recently prepared audits of various operations indicate that many of the practices at the WRTA are highly unusual in the transit industry, and are contributing to the increasing costs of operations.

A. Labor

1. Maintenance and Operations

In January and April of 2001, an independent audit was performed on the Maintenance and Operations Departments of RTA Transit. The maintenance audit found glaring problems with the productivity of the maintenance workforce. According to the audit, “the RTA technician headcount almost doubles the industry standard while the basics of maintenance are not being performed to provide reliable service to the public.”¹² The “Specialist” system, which is part of past practice in the RTA shop, is also a problem. In a typical shop, a manager will assign work based on the needs of the shop. Any technician who is qualified may work on a bus. In the WRTA shop, however, a “Specialist” bids on a job such as engines or brakes, and that is the majority of the work he will perform. The Specialist is allowed to perform non-Specialist work at Specialist pay, but cannot perform the work of other Specialists. In Worcester, almost the entire fleet of buses is the same age and has about the same mileage, meaning the component parts will need service at roughly the same time for these vehicles. Under the current system, regardless of the number of buses needing brake or engine service at any given time, only the Specialist in that area is allowed to perform the service, setting up a situation in which service interruptions are probable. (To alleviate this problem, a “fill-in Specialist” position was established recently to provide flexibility in scheduling repairs.) Management is currently addressing the “continuity of work” problem with the union, which has agreed that certain work may be passed on.

To emphasize the low productivity of the RTA maintenance department, the audit points out that the average time for a rear brake job is 19 hours, as compared with the average for other First Transit properties which is 4.3 hours. (In recent months, the productivity of the Maintenance Division has improved: a rear brake job now takes 13 1/2 hours.) The average time (7.5 hours) for an RTA preventive maintenance inspection is more than double that of other First Transit properties (3.3 hours).

The findings of the Operations audit indicated that the laissez-faire management style of the former RTA management team was documented by a lack of recorded disciplinary actions. (In September, 2000 a discipline policy was implemented. According to WRTA management, however, it has not been aggressively administered.) One problem resulting from this lack of

¹² Hawkins, Todd, “Worcester Regional Transit Authority Maintenance Audit”. First Transit Vehicle Services (January 2001).

discipline may be found in the “written deadhead routing.” This means that drivers who deviate from the established route to get from the garage to the start of the fixed route are not corrected. The result of these deviations is off-route buses, potential safety hazards, and increased mileage costs.

The current practices regarding Starters, or dispatchers, and Inspectors, or street supervisors, were also deemed problematic by the audit. Not only are most Starters and Inspectors junior employees, they are Union employees who have no authority to take disciplinary action. The fact that they are Union members also leads them to attempt to resolve any problems that arise through the Union hierarchy rather than through company management. Under this system, management does not generally learn of a problem until the second or third offense.¹³

2. Split Runs

Even though it is not expressly stated in the labor contract, the long-standing practice between labor and management is that at least 70% of the runs will be “straight runs,” meaning the shift is not split in half by a prolonged break. The labor contract does provide for combination runs (split runs) that require RTA Transit to pay premiums for time worked beyond 11 hours in some cases, and beyond 10 hours in others. The established practice requiring straight runs results in a scheduling system that limits the system’s flexibility to provide different levels of service during the day. Current labor contract provisions also stipulate that full-time employees cannot be replaced by part-time employees. Additionally, part-time employees may not be used at all unless at least 106 full-time operators are employed.

3. Report Drivers

In its current practice, RTA Transit schedules 5 daily shifts for what are known as “Report Drivers.” Full-time RTA Transit employees bid on these shifts which pay a full day’s salary. The “Report Drivers” are intended as back-up operators in the event that a regular operator cannot make his or her runs. “Report Drivers,” are sent on runs only until another regular full-time operator can be called in on overtime to make the runs. The “Report Driver” then goes back to the garage to wait for another assignment. As a result of this practice, “Report Drivers” are working for minimal periods of time, but are being paid for 8 full hours of work. Because the “Report Driver” shifts are highly sought after, senior operators generally win the bid for these shifts. Therefore, RTA Transit Services, Inc. is paying top wage rates to 5 operators each weekday for minimal productivity at a cost of over \$4,500 per week.

4. Section 13(c)

Section 13(c) of the Urban Mass Transit Act of 1964 requires that as a condition of receiving Federal transit funds, the U.S. Secretary of Labor must certify that the use of the funds will not result in the worsening of the position of the affected employees. Section 13(c) was intended to protect those already working in the transit industry prior to the passage of the Act from losing their positions as a result of automation and technology that might be purchased with the infusion of Federal funds.

¹³ “First Transit Operations Review: RTA Transit Services, Worcester, Massachusetts.” First Transit, April 2001.

The WRTA and Local 22 are currently in a “discovery process” preceding arbitration on the interpretation of the 13(c) agreement signed in 1978. The implications of the Union’s interpretation are unfavorable for the riders who currently rely on WRTA paratransit services, as well as for those who use WRTA fixed-route service. If the union’s interpretation of 13(c) were to prevail, it would result in a significant increase in the costs of providing paratransit, and a decrease in the flexibility of assignments, scheduling, and use of part-time drivers. In addition, these services would not be considered “new service,” and so the increased expense associated with bringing them under the auspices of RTA Transit would be subject to the yearly 2-1/2% cap on increases in state and local funding and the 75% limit on state funding. Further fixed-route service cuts as well as paratransit cuts would be required since the WRTA must find a way to operate within state funding constraints. Some member communities may withdraw from the WRTA and provide paratransit service themselves.

5. The 25-Year Agreement

On September 1, 1988, the WRTA, Worcester Area Transportation Company (WATC, the predecessor of RTA Transit Services, Inc.) and Local 22 signed a contract binding for 25 years. The contract stipulates that the “routes currently (1988) operated by the WATC...will remain with the WATC or its successors and the Amalgamated Transit Union, Local 22, and shall not be subcontracted for the next 25 years” (See Appendix III).

An obvious problem with this agreement is that it eliminates the possibility of cost-cutting measures like competitive contracting on routes designated in the agreement, and essentially gives Local 22 membership a monopoly on fixed- route transit service in Worcester until 2013. This situation cannot be altered unless the Union agrees to renegotiate the 25-year agreement.

B. Fixed-Route Service

In June of 2001, the WRTA published performance standards for fixed-route bus service. According to these standards, developed by the WRTA but based on national models, a route whose revenue-to-cost ratio falls between 50% and 70% of the average ratio for all routes should be reviewed. During this review, options for improving or discontinuing the route will be considered. The average rate of revenue-to-cost for all fixed routes was 27.4% for FY01. Therefore, according to the new WRTA standards, any route with a revenue-to-cost ratio between 13.7% and 19.2% is in need of review. In FY01, 10 of the 29 WRTA fixed -routes fell into this category. As indicated in Chart 4, this poor performance is not limited to FY01. These same routes have had a below average revenue-to-cost ratio since at least 1996. This suggests that they are underutilized because there is either a lack of population to support service or potential riders are choosing other means of transportation.

Chart 4.

Revenue/Cost Ratio for Selected WRTA Fixed Service Routes FY96-FY01							
Route	FY96	FY97	FY98	FY99	FY00	FY01	% Change
2W	20.3%	15.1%	16.8%	15.0%	16.9%	17.7%	-12.8
5W	19.8%	24.3%	23.5%	21.1%	16.5%	16.9%	-14.6
6N	13.7%	11.4%	12.2%	11.0%	9.6%	10.7%	-21.9
10	19.1%	22.6%	19.0%	17.0%	14.8%	15.0%	-21.5
12	12.7%	15.6%	17.5%	15.6%	16.8%	18.7%	39.4
17	19.0%	15.4%	15.5%	13.9%	11.0%	11.2%	-41.1
18	17.3%	18.2%	18.4%	16.4%	13.2%	15.2%	-12.1
22	16.2%	25.5%	18.7%	16.8%	13.0%	14.7%	-9.3
32	7.8%	13.7%	10.2%	9.1%	6.1%	6.6%	-15.4
33	16.7%	19.4%	17.3%	15.5%	11.9%	13.3%	-20.4
<i>Source: McCarthy-Hargrave Certified Public Accountants, WRTA Annual Auditors Reports FY95-FY00 Prepared by Worcester Regional Research Bureau</i>							

C. Paratransit

Paratransit service is the fastest growing part of WRTA services. Since FY93, total ADA annual ridership has increased from 10,983 trips to 84,657 in FY01. ADA-level paratransit poses a serious fiscal problem for the WRTA because the WRTA has no ability to control these expenses. While Worcester ADA trips showed a modest increase over the previous year, non-ADA elder trips increased by 6,000 during the same period.¹⁴

The causes of the growth in demand for non-ADA paratransit services are the Worcester Elder Medical and the Elder Weekend Cab Services. The Worcester Elder Medical service was implemented in the 1970's and was originally funded by the City of Worcester. Eligible Worcester residents 60 and older can use it for medically-related trips. The Elder Weekend Cab service was implemented during the last decade. While the WRTA is the current funder, these services are not mandated. Until FY98, WRTA-funded Elder Medical trips were limited to "available capacity" on the RTA Van service at no additional cost in vehicle or operating resources. The only cab trips provided were brokered on behalf of other funding sources (first the Central Massachusetts Agency on Aging and later the Worcester Executive Office of Elder Affairs). Cab trips were limited by the agency's budgeted amount, which never exceeded \$14,000/year. (The average cost of a cab trip is \$8-\$12 while the fare for riders is \$1.00, half the base ADA fare of \$2.00.) In FY98, the WRTA also began funding cab trips to supplement Elder Medical van trips and Elder Weekend van trips. Although there was discussion about "capping" all non-ADA elder trips as early as FY99, to date there has been no resolution. The result, which is clearly illustrated in Chart 5, is that cab trips and the associated costs have grown significantly each year. Rising ADA demand and WRTA funding constraints make it difficult for the WRTA to continue absorbing the costs associated with non-ADA Elder trips.

¹⁴ Central Massachusetts Regional Planning Commission. 2000 Regional Transportation Plan, IV-45.

Chart 5.

WRTA Funded Non-ADA Elder Medical/Weekend Cab Trips and Costs FY98-FY01						
Year	Elder Medical	Elder	Total Trips	Allocated Cost	EOEA Subsidy	WRTA Cost
FY98	3,697	1,069	4,766	\$10.50	\$10,450	\$39,593
FY99	4,575	1,409	5,984	\$11.04	\$14,000	\$52,063
FY00	7,351	1,877	9,228	\$10.97	\$14,000	\$87,231
FY01 est. ¹⁵	11,762	3,331	15,093	\$11.72	\$13,224	\$163,666

*Source: Central Massachusetts Regional Planning Commission
Prepared by Worcester Regional Research Bureau*

D. I-495 Corridor Initiative

The I-495 Corridor Initiative was founded in 1997 to address growth issues along the I-495 Corridor – the fastest growing area in the state of Massachusetts. A transportation subcommittee, chaired by Marlborough Mayor Bill Mauro, was charged with addressing the transportation concerns of the Metrowest region. The communities in the Metrowest region are currently served by a number of different regional transit authorities, but services are limited to ADA and non-ADA paratransit. The success of the Framingham-Southborough-Marlborough-Solomon Pond commuter shuttle led the Metropolitan Area Planning Commission (MAPC) and the I-495 transportation committee to explore the possibility of creating a new “Metrowest Regional Transit Authority” to serve the needs of commuters and employers in the region. The Executive Office of Transportation and Construction (EOTC) has hired a consulting firm to conduct a feasibility study to determine the need for a new transit authority to serve eight area communities: Framingham, Natick, Marlborough, Hopkinton, Ashland, Westborough, Hudson, and Southborough, and what kind of service should be provided.¹⁶ This study is to be completed by the end of February, 2002.

In lieu of the creation of a new transit authority, a pre-existing transit authority with service areas bordering the Metrowest area and currently providing paratransit to several of those communities– such as WRTA – could provide commuter service in this area. The Administrator of the WRTA has had discussions with the I-495 transportation committee for the provision of such service. If state highway funds were approved for shuttle service to the commuter rail stations, providing this service could reorient the Authority from a transit-dependent service model to more of a broad-based commuter system, which would bring increased revenue.

V. Options

The WRTA is currently planning cuts in its fixed-route service to prevent a projected \$600,000 deficit. (Local 22 contends that the projected deficit is the result of mismanagement.) Based on the evidence presented above, we believe that some cuts are a necessary first step toward solving the financial problems of the Authority. But much more needs to be done. The issues raised in the previous section point to some of the options for reducing expenditures and increasing revenues that should be considered to provide an improved and more cost-effective service. Several management initiatives to adopt some of these options have already been undertaken.

¹⁵ Based on 5 months annualized.

¹⁶ Thanassis Cambanis,. “Thriving Along I-495.” *The Boston Globe*, 12 April 2001.

A. Renegotiate Work Rules

The greatest savings to the WRTA will be realized by First Transit's renegotiation of some of the work rules.

1. Adjust Maintenance and Operations Practices in Accordance with Audit Recommendations

The January 2001 audit of the RTA Transit Maintenance Department pointed to a number of glaring problems impairing the productivity of the shop. The audit also suggested actions necessary to correct the productivity problems. The practices of the RTA Transit shop should be adjusted in accordance with the following recommendations:

- Appoint maintenance supervisors who have the authority to assign work and challenge unproductive technicians. These supervisors should not be union members, and should be able to discipline unproductive employees.
- Eliminate the specialist system in the shop. Instead, the shop manager (rather than the employee) should assign work based on skill, ability, and the needs of the shop.
- Eliminate the practice of requiring that one technician do a repair from start to finish. Some progress has been made toward the industry standard where work is passed on to the next shift to finish.
- Engage qualified suppliers, not shop technicians to rebuild component parts. By having parts remanufactured by suppliers, RTA Transit and the WRTA would realize significant cost savings; parts will have a replacement warranty, and downtime for vehicles will be reduced.¹⁷

The Operations Department audit also suggested that a formal chain of command be established for Starters and Inspectors so that RTA management is aware of and involved in a disciplinary matter from the first infraction, not the third as under the current system.¹⁸

2. Replace "Report Driver" system with a "Spare Board" system

Nothing in the current labor agreement mandates the "Report Driver" system. Providing back-up operators through the use of these shifts is neither efficient nor cost-effective. At a cost of over \$4,500 per week, the Report Driver shifts are a financial liability to the transit system and should be eliminated. Instead, the more cost-effective "Spare Board" system to provide back up for regular shifts should be used.¹⁹ Under this system, members of the spare board fill absences that are anticipated ahead of time. Any unassigned members of the spare board then cover unanticipated absences. These operators fill in for the absentee for the duration of the latter's scheduled shift. Under the report driver system, by contrast, the report driver covers a route only until another operator can be called in on overtime, then goes back to the garage to wait for another possible assignment. Thus, the WRTA must pay for both the report driver and the

¹⁷ Hawkins, Todd. "Worcester Regional Transit Authority Maintenance Audit". First Transit, January 2001.

¹⁸ "First Transit Operations Department Review," RTA Transit Services, Worcester, MA. April, 2001.

¹⁹ The "Spare Board System" is used by many Transit Authorities, including the Pioneer Valley Transit Authority in Springfield, MA. It is widely acknowledged as one of the more cost-effective methods for providing back-up drivers and covering absences.

operator who is called. The Spare Board system would inevitably reduce labor costs for the WRTA since the Authority would be paying only one operator, and this operator would actually be providing a full day's service.

Effective January 19, 2002, report drivers will become spare board drivers, and the amount of work they are expected to perform will be greatly increased. Management and the union are currently in mediation to reach agreement on this arrangement. If no agreement is reached, management's plan will be implemented.

B. Competitive Contracting

According to a recent study by the Transportation Research Board, most transit service contracts are awarded through competitive processes.²⁰ Nearly all managers who contract out report that the major characteristic of successful transit contracting is cost savings. The case of Las Vegas, Nevada illustrates the successful use of competitive contracting in regional transit service.

According to the American Public Transit Association, Las Vegas's Regional Transit Commission is one of the best in the United States. It earned this reputation through the use of competitive contracting. RTC bid out the provision of service in the Las Vegas area, and ATC VanCom has won this bid since 1992. Simply put, ATC is efficient. The hourly cost of operations for ATC is \$43.00, as compared with \$60.40 for RTA Transit Services, Inc.²¹ Operator wages start at \$9.50/hour and reach a high of \$14.00/hour because ATC refuses to pay substantially more than the average rate of all labor in Las Vegas. By comparison, RTA employees start at \$12.90/hour and earn up to \$19.86/hour. (According to the Commonwealth's Department of Employment and Training, the average wage rate for all "Production, Construction, Operating, Maintenance, and Material Handling Professions" – which includes bus operators – is \$14.42/hour. The average hourly wage rate for *all* occupations in Massachusetts is roughly \$17.04/hour.) The contract between the Las Vegas RTC and ATC VanCom includes performance measurements, and if these are not met, ATC is subject to a fine. If poor performance continues, RTC has the option to void the contract. This system has clearly worked in Las Vegas, resulting in superior performance at a lower cost to taxpayers.

The WRTA should use competitive contracting for the five community routes (17, 22, 32, 33, 42) that do not fall under the 25-year agreement and could be subject to competitive contracting. If the Union agreed to work rule changes such as those discussed above, it would be in a favorable position to bid successfully on those routes.

If the WRTA is unable to implement changes in the work rules, it will be forced to cut service or develop ways for increasing revenue. Options for reducing service include the following:

A. Reduce Service on Low-Performing Fixed-Service Routes

The WRTA should reduce service on the 10 lowest performing fixed routes identified in this report: **2W** (West Tatnuck), **5W** (June/Mill), **6N** (Holden/Ararat), **10** (College Hill), **15** (Plantation/Lakeview), **17** (Clinton), **18** (Hamilton/Lake Avenue), **22** (Millbury), **32**

²⁰ Transportation Research Board. "Contracting for Bus and Demand-Response Transit Services: A Survey of U.S. Practice and Experience." Washington, D.C.: National Academy Press, 2001.

²¹ By comparison, the hourly rate of operations is \$47.69 in Lowell, MA, and \$68.29 in Hartford, CT.

(Holden/Jefferson), and 33 (Brookfield). Each of the routes recovers less than 70% of the average cost for all fixed service routes. By the WRTA's own performance standards, as noted above, these numbers indicate the need for reconfiguring these routes, reducing service or discontinuing service. With minimal demand for the service provided by these routes,²² and at a net cost of approximately \$2.4 million per year, the routes are a serious financial liability for the WRTA.

B. Change Non-ADA Elder Medical/Weekend Cab Service

Since rising ADA demand for paratransit service and WRTA funding constraints make it difficult for the WRTA to continue absorbing the cab costs associated with significant increases in non-ADA Elder trips, the WRTA should adopt the following cost-saving measures:

- Cap non-ADA Elder Medical cab trips at 5,000 for each fiscal year.
- Charge at least \$2.00 per trip which is the same as the ADA fare. This is intended to discourage ADA eligible riders from crossing over to ride for the lesser non-ADA fare. This change in the fare structure should result in only non-ADA elders using the Elder Medical Service. It should also be remembered that since most Worcester residents live within 1/4 mile of fixed-route service, this alternative is available to non-ADA elders as well.

C. Increase Revenue

- ***Increase Fares***

The WRTA has considered increasing fares on its fixed-route service but has decided against this course of action since it is counterproductive. The last time fares were raised was in 1996 when they were increased from \$0.75 to \$1.00. The increase in fares resulted in a 16.5% decrease in ridership. Studies conducted by the Central Massachusetts Regional Planning Commission indicate that a 10% increase in fares would be followed by a 4-5% decrease in ridership. While a fare increase would result in a small increase in revenues, it would apparently force those who need public transit the most to abandon it.

- ***Provide New Service***

Before attempting to provide new service, the WRTA would have to go through what the transit industry calls "a comprehensive service redesign." This means starting over – reconsidering its passenger base and then reworking route structure, service levels, labor contracts, and all areas of operation and administration accordingly. Service redesign is typically undertaken out of financial necessity, and to improve internal efficiency and effectiveness of service. An excellent opportunity for such a comprehensive redesign exists with the I-495 corridor initiative.

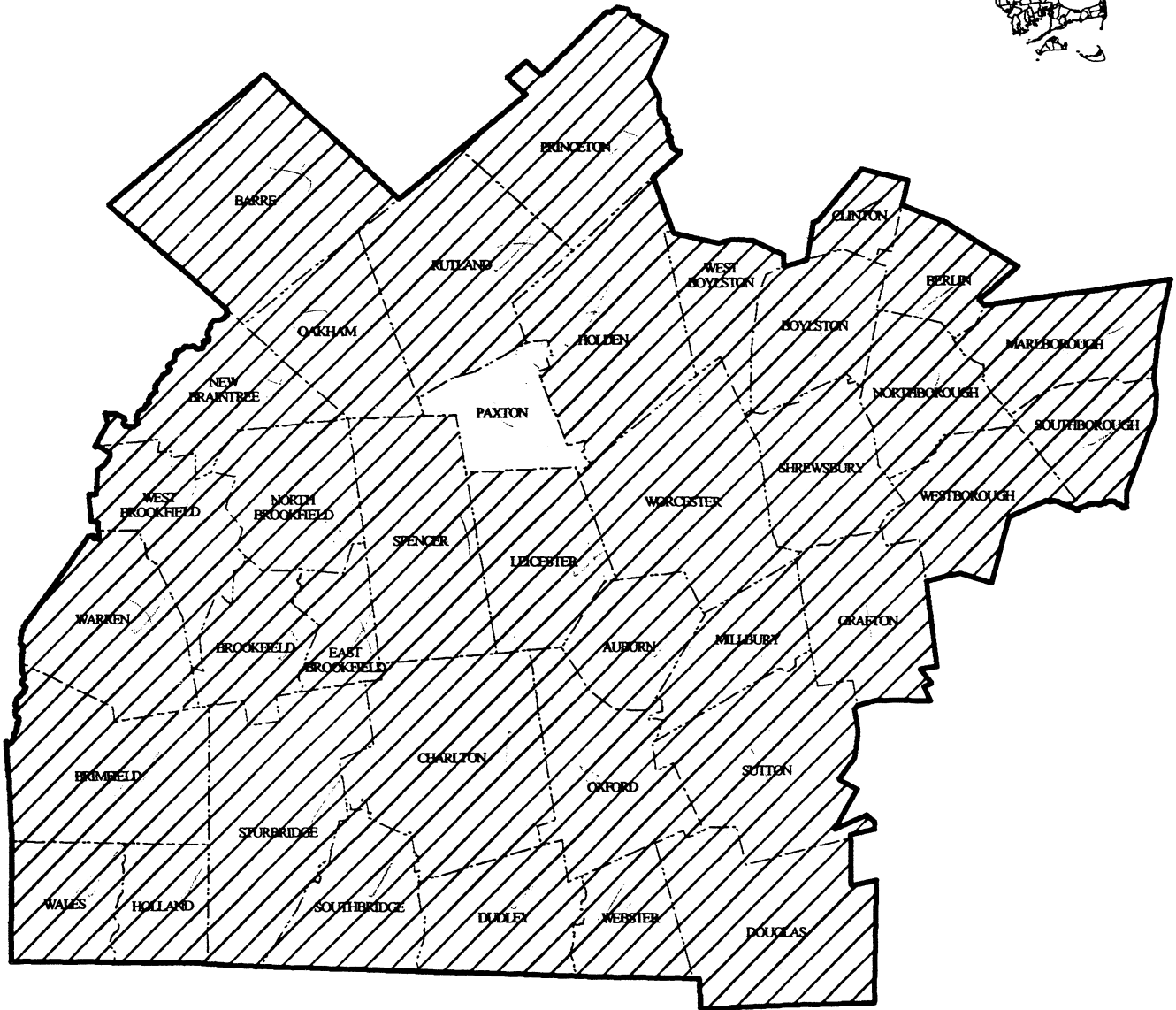
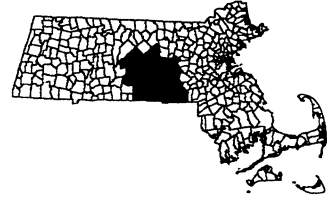
The WRTA should pursue the option of becoming the transit provider for the communities of the Metrowest area. The transit need in this region is primarily for commuters going to and from jobs at companies along the I-495 corridor. Providing this service would enable the WRTA to redefine itself in part as a broad-based commuter system, rather than simply a system serving

²² According to the latest available numbers (1997), there are roughly 1,772 passenger boardings on all these routes each day. This constitutes approximately 10.7% of daily WRTA passenger boardings. Central Massachusetts Regional Planning Commission. 2000 Regional Transportation Plan, IV-5.



transit-dependent populations. Such a service redesign would bring an increase in revenues by expanding the WRTA ridership base to commuters in the fastest growing region in Massachusetts. Since this is new service, it would not fall under the 25-Year Agreement, and could therefore be contracted to the bidder that can provide the best service at the lowest cost. In addition, the WRTA should consider providing shuttle service to and from the major companies whose employees use Union Station as well as the Grafton and Westboro stations. If Local 22 altered its work rules, it would be in a position to compete for providing this new service.

VI. Conclusion

The WRTA is facing a number of serious problems that are impeding its ability to function in a cost-effective manner. Some issues, such as 13(c) and ADA-level paratransit service, create difficulties for transit authorities across the country. Others, however, such as the work rules governing current maintenance operations and the 25-Year Agreement, are unique to Worcester. Declining state revenues, which may well have an impact on revenue allocation to regional transit authorities in the next fiscal year, make cost-effectiveness a particularly urgent issue. Given declining ridership on fixed-route service and increasing costs on both fixed-route and demand-response services, the WRTA should carefully consider the options suggested. If it does not, it risks financial insolvency, and perhaps even collapse.

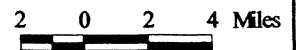


Legend

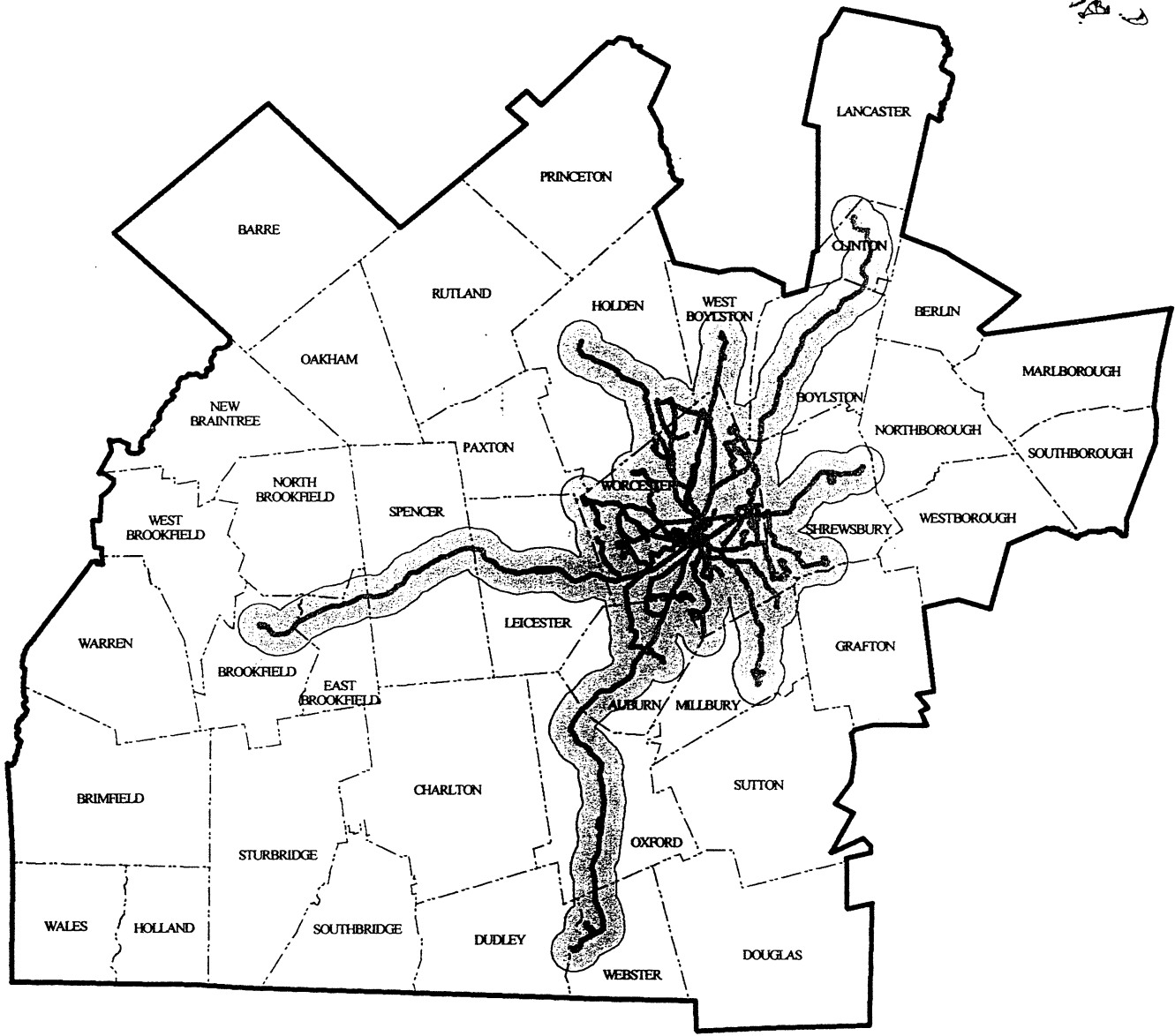
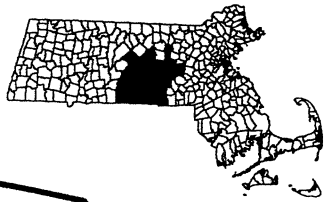
-  Member Municipalities
-  Non-Member Municipalities



**Worcester Regional Transit Authority
2000 Member Municipalities**



Source data provided by MassGIS.

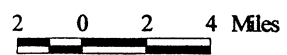


Legend

- WRTA Fixed Bus Routes
- ▨ 3/4 Mile ADA Paratransit Buffer



WRTA Fixed Bus Route System and 3/4 Mile ADA Paratransit Buffer



Source data provided by MassGIS.

AGREEMENT BETWEEN
WORCESTER REGIONAL TRANSIT AUTHORITY
WORCESTER AREA TRANSPORTATION COMPANY
WORCESTER AREA VAN EXPRESS
AND
AMALGAMATED TRANSIT UNION, LOCAL 22

The Worcester Regional Transit Authority (WRTA), the Worcester Area Transportation Company, the Worcester Area Van Express and the Amalgamated Transit Union, Local 22 agree that effective September 1, 1988, the following four routes will be transferred from the Worcester Area Transportation Company (WATC) to the Worcester Area Van Express (WAVE);

Route 17/Clinton
Route 22/Millbury
Route 32/Jefferson
Route 33/West Brookfield

These routes will be transferred as allowed by the normal attrition at the WATC, not as a result of layoffs.

It is also agreed that the remaining routes currently operated by the WATC, as shown below, will remain with the WATC or its successors and the Amalgamated Transit Union, Local 22, and shall not be subcontracted for the next twenty-five years;

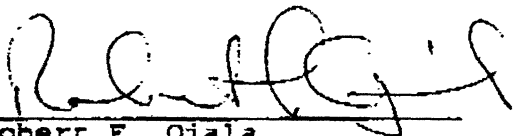
Route 1/Providence St.
Route 2/Pleasant-West Tatnuck
Route 4/Millbury City Line
Route 5/East Grafton-Wheelock
Route 5/West June-Mill
Route 6/South Chandler-Dawson
Route 6/North Holden-Chaffins
Route 10/College Hill
Route 11/Upsala
Route 12/Plantation-Lakeview
Route 15/Shrewsbury
Route 18/Hamilton
Route 19/North Burncoat
Route 19/South Cherry Valley-Leicester Ctr.
Route 21/North Highland-Flagg
Route 23/North Lincoln-Mtn. Village
Route 24/Belmont St.-Lake Avenue
Route 25/Auburn Industrial Park
Route 26/South Bryn-Auburn Mall
Route 26/North Lincoln-Great Brook Valley
Route 28/Lakeshore
Route 30/South Park Ave.-Mill
Route 30/North Summit-W. Scylston-Holden
Route 40/Plumley Village East-Fruit-Sever-Seabury

AGREEMENT BETWEEN
WORCESTER REGIONAL TRANSIT AUTHORITY
WORCESTER AREA TRANSPORTATION COMPANY
WORCESTER AREA VAN EXPRESS
AND
AMALGAMATED TRANSIT UNION, LOCAL 22

It is further agreed that all operations and maintenance of vehicles used on these four routes, 17, 22, 32 and 33, shall be performed by members of Local 22 employed by the Worcester Area Van Express or it's successor and said employees shall be covered under the 13C agreement currently in effect between the Worcester Regional Transit Authority, the Worcester Area Transportation Company and Local 22 of the Amalgamated Transit Union.

It is understood by both parties that the intent of this agreement is to ensure that all routes currently operated by members of the ATU will continue to be operated by the ATU in the future while, at the same time, costs associated with operating services into suburban areas can be reduced to reflect the low productivity of such routes. Should the percentage of cost savings achieved through this agreement be decreased, the above paragraph will become null and void.


This agreement was completed on the 11th day of August, 1988.




Robert E. Ojala
Administrator
Worcester Regional
Transit Authority



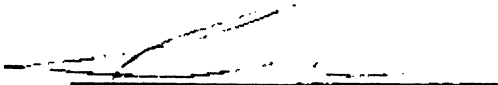
Robert Borelli
Business Agent
Amalgamated Transit Union
Local 22



James O'Brien
Legal Counsel



Leon James Shea
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John W. Powell, Jr.
General Manager
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