

Executive Summary

As of March 2023, the WRTA Advisory Board's Audit and Finance Committee has recommended continuing Fare Free through the end of June 2024; the full Advisory Board will vote on this budget on April 20, 2023. This report is the second in the Worcester Regional Research Bureau's 2023 analysis of the WRTA and fare-free service, beginning with [*All Aboard: Financing a Fare-Free WRTA*](#). To gain a comprehensive perspective of the WRTA, this analysis focuses not only on the profiles of the WRTA's riders and its ridership recovery, but also on regional mobility, key to understanding the context within which the WRTA's riders choose to use its service. This report ultimately finds that the WRTA experienced rapid ridership monthly-recovery since March 2020, and by December 2022 it exceeded pre-pandemic levels; in FY23, the WRTA is projected to have a total of 3,913,772 total UPT across all modes, the highest since its historic peak in 2016. Fare-free service undoubtedly played a role in that recovery. This report is divided into three sections that explore these aspects in detail:

- ⇒ Pages 3-9 discuss the mobility of workers in Central Massachusetts:
 - According to the 2021 American Community Survey (ACS), **the pandemic doubled remote work and halved the use of public transit for work commutes** in Worcester.
 - According to 2019 commute data, among workers who commuted outside their communities, **nearly 10% of those from Worcester traveled to Shrewsbury and Auburn**, while 47% of workers from those two communities traveled to Worcester. A further **8% of Worcester residents commuted to Suffolk County for work**.
- ⇒ Pages 10-15 analyze rider profiles using the American Community Survey (ACS) and WRTA data:
 - According to the ACS, when comparing public transit users in the communities served by fixed route buses to those who drive to work, public transit users:
 - * Have a **younger median age and a higher poverty rate**.
 - * **Black and Hispanic populations are overrepresented**, since they make up 14% of all workers but 22.6% of work-related public transit users. White population makes up 75% of the total.
 - * Are twice as likely to take more than 30 minutes to get to work and **six times more likely to take more than an hour**.
 - * Nearly half (47.7%) **work in “management, business, science, and arts” occupations**.
 - According to WRTA satisfaction surveys conducted in 2018 and 2019, although **“Work” is the number one reason to take the bus, more than half (61%) use it for other purposes** (medical, shopping, social, etc.), and almost half of riders (44%) use it daily. Around two-thirds **(65%) reported yearly earnings below \$25,000, and (70%) not owning a vehicle**.
- ⇒ Pages 16-28 review ridership and its pandemic recovery:
 - Demand response ridership in FY2022 (141,273 Unlinked Passenger Trips UPTs) doesn't reach mostly-pre-pandemic FY2020 levels (141,951 UPT). In FY2022, **fixed route ridership of 3,064,750 UPT reached and surpassed pre-pandemic FY2019 (3,013,268) and FY2020 (2,421,591)**.
 - Between CY2019-2022, most fixed route trips were made in the second half of the year (54%), especially in October; on routes 11, 19, 26, or 27 (38%); and taken in Worcester (85%).
 - Although all service metrics (vehicle revenue miles, vehicle revenue hours, and vehicles operated in maximum service) have fully recovered, the number of unlinked passenger trip improved the most. **The WRTA achieved complete pre-pandemic UPT recovery in early CY2022 and closed the year with a 140% recovery rate, above MA peer agencies that haven't reached CY2019 values**.
 - The final pages of the report explore suggestions by the Transit Cooperative Research Program (TCRP) to improve public transit UPT for agencies such as the WRTA.