EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

INTRODUCTION

There are 15 regional transit authorities (RTAs) operating in the Commonwealth of Massachusetts, not including the Massachusetts Bay Transportation Authority (MBTA). These agencies serve a total of 262 communities and provide over 29 million trips annually. RTAs are funded through a combination of federal grants, state funds, passenger fares and other locally-raised non-fare revenues, such as advertisements. The combined operating costs of the 15 agencies are estimated at more than $150 million annually. Funding for the RTAs, while stable, has not increased substantially over the past several years, despite increasing costs.

The environments in which RTAs operate continue to change and evolve. With each year, the population of Massachusetts and its local communities is becoming more diverse demographically and economically. The Commonwealth's population is also becoming older and there are more persons living with disabilities. These and other factors are changing the demand for public transportation systems and the types of services needed.

The combination of a constrained fiscal environment and an evolving market for transit service means that it has become increasingly important that limited resources available for public transportation are used as effectively as possible. Despite ongoing challenges, the RTAs have been diligent in their efforts to maintain existing transit services in their local communities and regions, at the same time that they work develop new public transportation services and markets. The objective of the Beyond Boston study, therefore, was to inventory the strengths and weaknesses of the how the Massachusetts Department of Transportation (MassDOT) and RTAs deliver public transportation services in Massachusetts and identify efficiencies and other opportunities that will support a more robust transit network that better meets the needs of the Commonwealth's residents, workers and visitors.

STUDY APPROACH

The Beyond Boston study included an extensive research process based on interviews with RTA Administrators as well as the ideas, perspectives and experiences provided from a variety of stakeholders representing funding agencies, rider and advocacy groups, and service operators (among others). The study team also collected and analyzed a wide range of data and statistics about the RTAs including productivity statistics, funding data, capital and operating plans, service plans and contracts, agency budgets, and public information systems. The team also compared and contrasted practices and approaches used in Massachusetts with best practice research nationally. Ideas generated through these efforts were shared with a study Advisory Committee and MassDOT staff through an iterative process that resulted in identifying key issues, improvement opportunities, and recommendations and implementation plans.

KEY ISSUES FACING RTAS

The Beyond Boston research and review process resulted in identification of several issues, the most important of which include:

- Capital planning and funding decisions are not made through a consistent and transparent process that ensures needs are met and funds are used effectively from a statewide perspective.
- The distribution of operating and capital funding is largely based on historical practices. As a result, funding decisions are not easily articulated and only loosely reflect need.

- There are no clear procedures or formats for RTAs to report financial and service information to MassDOT. As a result, MassDOT does not have a consistent set of data on RTA service performance and cannot easily interpret the information available. This means there is no reliable set of information available to support programming and funding decisions.
- RTAs operate a range of services, some of which are well matched to demand and perform well and others that are less responsive and perform less well. This finding highlights a challenge facing the RTA network overall - the lack of a systematic approach to review transit service productivity, community needs and an ongoing method to adjust service to meet changing needs.
- Due to reductions in funding levels, RTAs have understandably focused on maintaining existing services. A lack of comprehensive service planning may mean RTAs are missing opportunities to adjust service levels and types to match demand.
- There are no guidelines or expectations for type, formats and quality of public information provided by RTAs. As a result, public information systems vary considerably. Some public information systems are very good, while others lag industry standards.
- RTAs in Massachusetts are required to contract with private transportation providers for service, but contracting practices vary considerably across the state. This makes it difficult to compare and contrast practices. In addition, despite widespread contracting for similar services among the different RTAs, there is little formal collaboration or sharing of best practices between RTAs or between RTAs and MassDOT.
- Despite being fiscally constrained, not all RTAs have successfully pursued the full range of potential revenue sources that may be available to them.
- RTAs work together on many issues, but most information sharing is done on an ad-hoc and informal basis, with limited opportunities for formal collaboration. Consequently, some RTAs benefit considerably from the ad-hoc network, but others are left out.
- MassDOT and the RTAs have a poor relationship. The lack of trust and cooperation is to the detriment of the state's transit services.
- MassDOT is not sufficiently staffed to address RTA issues and effectively support 15 agencies. This problem is longstanding and has exacerbated the lack of trust and cooperation between the RTAs and MassDOT.

IMPROVEMENT OPPORTUNITIES

Analysis and discussion of the key issues led to 10 initiatives, which were organized into three major themes: (A) improve service and determine needs, (B) improve efficiency and use of funds, and (C) improve collaboration. Each of these initiatives was evaluated in considerable detail and discussed with MassDOT and the Advisory Committee.

Improve Service/Determine Needs

Develop Service Standards and Guidelines to set minimum statewide productivity standards and guide the provision of local services.

Improve Service Planning to ensure that service meets current demands and the most appropriate services are being provided in different service areas.

Develop Consistent Data and Reporting to ensure a fair and consistent basis for determining need.

Enhance Public Information to increase awareness of the availability of transit and increase ridership and productivity.

Improve Efficiency and Use of Funds

Improve Contracting to better control costs.

Improve Capital Planning to better match funding with need.

Identify Additional Revenue to maintain, expand, and improve service.

Develop More Effective Funding Processes that better consider need.

Improve Collaboration

Foster "Cross-Border Collaboration to provide more effective and efficient inter-regional services and share expertise.

Improve MassDOT/RTA Collaboration to increase the overall effectiveness of transit statewide and effectively implement the above improvements.

RECOMMENDATIONS AND IMPLEMENTATION PLANS

Discussion and debate over the 10 initiatives led to a series of recommendations that provide MassDOT and the RTAs with a strategy for addressing the major issues. Implementation plans—identifying responsibilities and timelines—were ultimately prepared for nine of the 10 Beyond Boston initiatives. One initiative, Foster Cross-Border Collaboration was not included in the Beyond Boston recommendations because it is an effort that would be undertaken entirely by the RTAs without MassDOT involvement.

The implementation plan is presented according to preliminary priorities set by the Advisory Committee, with the understanding that MassDOT and the RTAs will determine final priorities when the RTA Council reconvenes in the next few months (2012).

A. Improve MassDOT/RTA Collaboration: A strong MassDOT – RTA relationship would greatly improve transit in Massachusetts. Benefits from an improved relationship would include a better ability to solve issues and ultimately deliver more effective and efficient service. Next steps to improving MassDOT/RTA collaboration include:

- Reconvene the RTA Council with a constructive agenda and regularly scheduled meetings.
- Hire additional Rail and Transit Division staff at MassDOT to more effectively fulfill program requirements.

B. Develop More Effective Funding Processes: MassDOT currently distributes operating and capital funding largely based on historical patterns rather than need. All parties agree the current process is unsatisfactory. MassDOT and the RTAs will work together through the RTA Council to create a more effective funding process that includes the following steps:

- Develop a new process for State Contract Assistance.
- Develop new Capital Funding Allocation Process.
- Address Forward Funding.

C. Improve Capital Planning: Massachusetts does not have a clearly articulated strategy for capital transit investment and consequently, capital funding decisions at the state level do not reflect clearly articulated goals or specific project need. There is also no comprehensive inventory of statewide transit assets or assessment of asset condition, making it difficult for MassDOT to fully understand statewide transit needs. Finally, the need for capital funds outpaces available resources and there is a large backlog of deferred needs. To help the RTAs, MassDOT and other stakeholders set priorities for investment, the following steps are recommended:

- Develop a Preliminary Asset Inventory.
- Develop a Framework for a long-term statewide RTA Asset Inventory.

- RTAs will prepare annual capital plan updates.
- MassDOT will work with RTAs to develop a statewide RTA Capital Plan.

D. Enhance Public Information: It is important for transit systems to provide clear and concise information on available services and ensure this information is available in a variety of formats. The agreed upon action plan to improve public information includes:

- Identify public information priorities and standards and work collaboratively on their implementation.
- Identify discretionary funds for a "challenge grant' to advance RTAs public information systems.

E. Develop Consistent Data and Reporting: Consistent and accurate data will help ensure both RTAs and MassDOT understand the performance of the existing service network. This information will also ensure limited funds are used as effectively as possible. Next steps include:

- Develop standardized reporting methodology.
- Prepare RTA Reporting Guidebook.
- Develop electronic submittal protocol.

F. Develop Service Standards and Guidelines: Service standards and guidelines can serve as a valuable management tool for the RTAs and many RTAs already use formal or informal standards. The tracking of service performance is also necessary to ensure that MassDOT and other stakeholders understand the network's strengths, weaknesses and opportunities. Next steps for developing service standards and guidelines are:

- Identify standards and guidelines that RTAs find useful.
- Advise, refine, and finalize the RTA proposal.
- Identify a simple process for RTAs to report data to MassDOT.

G. Improve Service Planning: Service planning is necessary to document and understand market needs and ensure transit services are periodically adjusted to meet changing needs. The proposed action plan to improve service planning includes:

- Conduct Comprehensive Service Analyses (CSAs) on an ongoing basis.
- Develop a CSA guidebook.

H. Identify Additional Revenue: RTAs will benefit from both diversifying their revenue sources and developing revenue opportunities they can directly control and influence. Agreed upon next steps that advance these goals include:

- Review current fare policies and triggers for fare increases.
- Develop framework for UPass agreements.
- Develop a framework for other partnerships.

I. Improve Contracting: Improving contracting practices in Massachusetts offers the potential to help RTAs better manage and control costs. Contracting also represents an opportunity for MassDOT to support RTAs in adopting best practices. To achieve these goals, MassDOT should:

- Develop and maintain a contracts database.
- Support RTAs interested in piloting alternative contracting approach.

Implementation Plan Timeline

Next steps as identified in the implementation plans were also laid out according to an indicative proposed timeline (see Figure ES1). This timeline is intended to reflect preliminary priorities and a preliminary work program, with the understanding final priorities and schedules will be determined jointly when the RTA Council reconvenes in the summer of 2012.

Figure ES-1 Proposed Implementation Timeline

