

# Public Transit Advisory Council

Meeting Minutes of April 22, 2024 – Held via Zoom

Decisions and commitments in ***bold italic*** type

**PTAC Members in attendance:** Stephanie Carver, Larry Allen, Maddie Jensen, Jess Maurer, Tim Cowan, Eamonn Dundon, Chris Hall, Michael Hallundbaek, Erin Bingham, Dana Knapp, Nick Mavodones, Katherine Freund, David Landry, Jonathan Labonte, Rebecca Grover, Barbara Schneider, Duane Scott, Amanda Dioszeghy, Josh Caldwell, Sandy Buchanan, Chad Heid, Omolola Achuba, Cole Cochrane.

**Others in attendance:** Ryan Neale, Lori Brann from MaineDOT, Judy Shanley, Scott Dionne

Chad Heid called the Zoom meeting to order at 12:05 p.m.

(Note: Chats made during this meeting are found at the end of the minutes).

- 1. Call to Order:** Chad welcomed everyone and said he appreciates the the opportunity to chair the PTAC and has reviewed Council bylaws and past meeting minutes. Chad noted that the Council is responsible for the next biennial report to the Legislature.
- 2. Ascertain Quorum:** It was determined that a quorum was in attendance.
- 3. Approval of Previous Minutes:** Jess offered a motion to accept the February 29, 2024, meeting minutes, and Tim seconded the motion. ***The minutes were accepted without comment.***
- 4. Review Objectives of PTAC:** Chad explained that by statute the PTAC is tasked to report to the Legislature every other year. The report needs to show the status of public transportation service in each region of the state. To do this, there is a need to evaluate investments and make recommendations. Chad mentioned that subcommittees might accomplish this work moving forward and sought comments from the group on potential subcommittees.

Cole commented that a priority is the amount and source of funds to support ongoing initiatives. The PTAC does not need to recommend service improvements, but should focus on how to fund the good work that is already ongoing.

Eamonn suggested that a first step would be to develop long-range planning efforts in each region and noted that some have already been done. The PTAC could summarize each region's plan and path forward.

Chad followed up that PTAC members and service providers in each region could present on the state of transportation service in their region during future PTAC meetings. Those updates would include an overview of service levels, modes, a gap analysis, and a summary of where the region hopes to go.

Tim suggested that it would be helpful to include updates from other sectors such as healthcare and area agencies on aging. Tim noted that the statewide collaborative health needs assessment will be happening this fall and that transportation should be a topic of those assessments.

Several PTAC members expressed a willingness to present their region's perspective during subsequent meetings.

Jess expressed concern over last mile options and the role of volunteer networks to access jobs and healthcare. There is a need for a coordinated volunteer network in rural Maine.

Jonathan commented that there needs to be equity in respect to transit access and a rider's ability to pay needs to be part of the conversation. Jonathan suggested that the State could play a role in funding equity.

Katherine said that frequent destinations, like healthcare providers, grocery stores, should be considered when seeking funding for transportation.

Maddie suggested that subcommittees be tasked with collecting information to present to the larger membership.

Amanda suggested looking at other cities/states to see if there are any successful initiatives that could work in Maine. The PTAC can collect and share some success stories. A model approach could be based on situations elsewhere.

Josh noted that it is important to evaluate and help the Legislature understand the current level of public transportation service relative to the current level of need. A legislative champion could be helpful.

The group discussed MaineDOT's role with the PTAC going forward. The overall direction can come from the PTAC, with MaineDOT providing staff support.

- 5. Overview of Current State Funding:** Ryan explained that the current process for allocating state transit funding is based on the 2010 Census, using population/public road miles/land area with a 50/50 split between urban and rural regions. Going forward, the process will at least need to be updated with 2020 Census data and could utilize other metrics to distribute funds such as ridership, vehicle revenue hours, or vehicle revenue miles. The additional \$5M authorized by the Legislature will be split between transit providers and an amount to be determined for special projects to be determined by MaineDOT.

Chad commented that there is a need to understand resources available and resources needed.

Jonathan asked about other funds such as Congestion Mitigation Air Quality (CMAQ) funds, Maine Turnpike funds, etc., and noted understanding other potential funding sources is necessary to see the full picture.

Chad asked if there is a single source of information with the funds available from all sources.

Erin asked about increasing the federal share for transit operations from 50% to 80%. Ryan noted that the ratio is set at the federal level. Transit industry groups have discussed revising the ratio, but it is a federal decision. Ryan noted that MaineDOT is reviewing its match policy across the board.

Larry suggested that Erin's proposal could be a recommendation of this Council.

Cole asked if other criteria are considered for allocating transit funding, such as economic development or environmental issues. Ryan responded that these are not currently included in the formula, but could be considered moving forward.

Josh noted the need to reduce vehicle miles per person and transit's role in reducing the number.

Chad asked for a timeline to change the distribution formula. Ryan noted that there has been a suggestion by Maine Transit Association leadership to utilize the current formula, updated with 2020 Census data, for this year so funds can be distributed quickly, and to revisit the formula and potential metrics for next year.

## **6. Priorities/Concerns of Members:**

Amanda asked if the PTAC will consider high-speed rail and its potential impact. Chad said that Catherine Davidson represents the Northern New England Passenger Rail Authority but was not present at today's meeting and the Council will seek input from NNEPRA. Cole stated that rail should be considered with transit rather than kept separate.

Omolola noted that she works with many asylum seekers and new Mainers in her role with the Maine Department of Labor and that light rail could help new Mainers living outside of Portland get into the city for jobs and services.

Chad said that bus rapid transit is a good alternative to light rail and there are many examples where the frequency enables it to be successful.

Eamonn urged the group to use caution with the rail discussion. A lot of planning has been already to improve transit in Maine, and with the ongoing efforts could lead to a world class system. Along with microtransit, this could meet local transit demand.

Katherine noted that ITN America works with recruiting volunteer drivers in small rural communities. She suggested that incentives for electric vehicles for volunteer drivers would improve mobility for older adults and help the environment.

Erin stated that she would like to see the PTAC's 2025 biennial report to the legislature be more ambitious than meeting the 20% of estimated transportation need that has been a benchmark in past PTAC reports.

Chad noted that the PTAC statute tasks the Council with identifying systems, services, and strategies to meet transit need. Part of this effort is to demonstrate the difference between existing funding and what funding should be. All of the elements listed in the statute will be part of the 2025 report, including policies, incentives, and the best investments to achieve the desired transit future.

Cole noted that Maine Youth Action advocates for public transit, workforce availability, access to education. Public transportation connects people to good paying jobs and education. People may reject job offers because they do not own a vehicle and public transit is not available. We should consider the economic impact of owning a personal vehicle.

Josh said he would like to see a committee focused on envisioning the future of the transportation system in Maine and what Maine could look like as a more connected and accessible state.

Chad noted that agenda items for the next few PTAC meetings could include reports on the status of public transportation by region, a visioning session of what the statewide system could look like, refining the list with multi factor decisions. He asked whether this should occur at full Council meetings or at committee meetings and asked about member priorities.

Tim expressed support for conducting a visioning session first, identifying ideas which could be revisited after the Council learns what services and challenges currently exist.

Sandy commented that there is a need to focus more on linking rural areas to urban areas for basic needs. Rural providers need help with this, which will affect urban providers as well.

Jonathan noted that MaineDOT has just completed an extensive long-range planning process for the Family of Plans. Members should review these first to understand the work that has already been done and frame recommendations moving forward.

## **7. Discussion Items**

Chad asked all Council members to read the Maine State Transit Plan and the Locally Coordinated Plan. MaineDOT can provide a presentation on these efforts as needed or helpful.

After discussion it was decided that the PTAC will meet every other month, with subcommittees meeting in the off months. Cole, Erin, Josh, Katherine, and Stephanie volunteered to help decide which subcommittees should be formed. It was decided that PTAC meetings should be at least 2 hours long to get more work done.

**8. Public Comment:** None

**9. New Business/Meeting Feedback:** None

**10. Adjourn:** The meeting was adjourned at 1:27 p.m.

### **Substantive Zoom meet chat comments:**

12:16:52 Cole Cochrane: I think (presenting on regions) would be incredibly helpful, especially for rural regions (personally)

12:18:37 Erin Bingham: Happy to present on the goings-on in Region 4!

12:19:47 Sandy Buchanan: I am happy to present for the service area (Region 7+) WMTS serves

12:22:47 Amanda Dioszeghy: Agreed Jess (on last mile options). Further, I'd urge the group to not silo by region and ensure those regions are connected.

12:22:51 Duane Scott: From an Age-Friendly perspective, volunteer driver programs are extremely important

12:28:53 Tim Cowan: Very well said Katherine (on the role of volunteer drivers and frequent destinations).

- 12:30:12 Barbara Schneider: As a public member, I wonder how we engage ordinary Mainers in this process. Do we need some public forum to hear from employers, users, etc.
- 12:31:50 Tim Cowan: Barbara - I like your suggestion (on public forums). Amanda- great suggestion (on best practices from other states).
- 12:32:09 Duane Scott: Wearing my healthcare volunteer hat at MaineGeneral's Medical Center and now the Harold Alfond Cancer Care Center, there are numerous transportation disconnects - drop offs at the wrong facility or a cancelled appointment resulting in outpatients being stranded for hours until a pickup arrives. Even with successful drop offs, the pickup may take hours.
- 12:37:52 Amanda Dioszeghy: It would be important to take tourism into account beyond just the census. Increased public transit could really create relief in tourist areas. It would be a huge data point to miss if we only reference the census.
- 12:43:28 Tim Cowan: To Lori's point (on state transit funding), it might be helpful to look at financial amounts/sources for more than a single year- say past 3-5 years. If easy to collect.
- 12:54:51 Jonathan LaBonte: Transit (including rail) should involve discussions on land use and development density.
- 12:57:18 Jess Maurer: People from away?
- 13:00:10 Tim Cowan: We have 61% of our residents who live in a rural community. So transportation that addresses rurality is important.
- 13:00:20 Tim Cowan: 2nd largest rural population in the U.S.
- 13:05:09 Jess Maurer: 72% of all older people live rurally - outside of communities with a fixed/flex route system.
- 13:05:17 Tim Cowan: In addition, larger percentages of those in more rural counties are ages 65+
- 13:08:04 Josh Caldwell: Cars are only getting more expensive too, even relative to inflation: <https://apple.news/AN0YmPr2tREOaITZ7JmNvhQ>
- 13:13:31 Barbara Schneider: I am very supportive of visioning. Might that effort be better if we know what is happening at local levels that might be implemented more broadly?
- 13:13:53 Jess Maurer: I agree - would like to have a visioning session first. So many important points - including Sandy's right now (on rural/urban connections) - have come up - it would be good to put them all together in a big vision and then talk about funding, coordination, planning, etc.
- 13:14:17 Josh Caldwell: I like the idea of that visioning including some value statements that undergird our work, along the lines of: "we believe all Mainers should be able to access essential goods and services", etc.
- 13:14:21 Jonathan LaBonte: DOT did just adopt a new long range plan, that includes the transit plan. We should start with the existing plan before we look at creating a new plan.

13:14:54 Tim Cowan: Great point Jonathan.

13:15:22 Cole Cochrane: Like Eamonn said earlier, we need a rundown of current visions first in my opinion. I think that is a good guide as to what we are trying to accomplish more broadly.

13:15:35 Jess Maurer: Agree with Cole.

13:21:10 Tim Cowan: Bi-monthly meetings works for me.

13:22:12 Jonathan LaBonte: Bi monthly full group, and allow committees if they are formed to meet in between. Two potential committees...1) to gather funding strategy documents and summarize. 2) to document stakeholders with transit plans/strategies and how to present those in summary fashion

13:22:17 Katherine FREUND: What about a Committee on Volunteer Transportation?

13:23:32 Nick Mavodones: Bi-monthly would be preferable

13:24:15 Cole Cochrane: I would agree with Jess

13:24:39 Tim Cowan: I would be happy with scheduling a longer-time per full meeting