# **MEETING MINUTES OF THE NORTHERN MIDDLESEX METROPOLITAN PLANNING ORGANIZATION March 27, 2024**

## WELCOME AND INTRODUCTIONS

Ms. Raitt welcomed Monica Tibbits-Nutt, MassDOT Secretary and CEO to chair the meeting. The Northern Middlesex Metropolitan Planning Organization (NMMPO) meeting was called to order at 2:00 P.M. in person at Northern Middlesex Council of Governments (NMCOG), 672 Suffolk Street, Suite 100, Lowell, MA and via Zoom. Attendees included:

**Voting Members in Attendance:**

* Monica Tibbits-Nutt, MassDOT Secretary and CEO
* Derek Shooster - MassDOT
* Brian Fallon, MassDOT D4 (Representing MassDOT Highway Administrator Jonathan Gulliver)
* Pat Wojtas, Chelmsford Select Board Chair, NMCOG Representative
* Andrew Deslaurier, Billerica Select Board, NMCOG Chair
* Karyn Puleo, LRTA MPO Representative

**Stakeholders and Other Attendees:**

* Derek Krevat, MassDOT
* Tim Paris, MassDOT
* Miranda Briseno, MassDOT
* Justin Howard, LRTA
* Kirstie Hostetter, FTA
* David Langlais

**NMMPO Staff:**

* NMMPO staff Jennifer Raitt, Kelly Lynema, Jessica Boulanger, Blake Acton, Carlin Andrus, Austen Torres-Davis

REMARKS

Monica Tibbits-Nutt shares what MassDOT is focused on through the next fiscal year.

* The proposed budget has been submitted. This is a very tight budget because revenues are down. The State’s focus is on safety, and MassDOT spends a lot of time talking about safety. This includes safety on the MBTA, safety on our roadways, infrastructure and bridge safety, safe streets to school. They are also looking how we are training our drivers and how to do better roadway design to start bringing the speeds down. They are working on education to get residents more on board with what the state is trying to do by talking about the impacts of those designs. They are also spending a lot of time talking to young people about safety around their schools and continuing that conversation as they're going into high school and getting closer to getting their driver’s license.
* The state is focused on infrastructure. Getting funding for bridges is very difficult, but they are going after every Federal grant possible, acknowledging that having a state match may be difficult.
* Housing is a major focus. Secretary Tibbits-Nutt shared that she spends a lot of time with Secretary Augustus and Secretary Howe, working on the overlap between economic development, housing, and transportation. This collaboration is reflected both in bond bills and in how they are reviewing executive orders and different policies.
* MBTA Communities Law. The state is working on making passing MBTA Communities-compliant amendments easier for municipalities, whether by helping them through the permitting process, or working with local planning boards to try and help push them to think differently about how they're doing some of the permitting for not just affordable housing, but full spectrum of housing.
* Secretary Tibbits-Nutt noted that housing will be a major topic over the coming year, as well as Beyond Mobility. They are also working on MassDot15, as it is MassDOT’s 15th anniversary in November. MassDOT is taking the opportunity to look at who they are, what they are doing, and how they are going to pay for it. This intersects with Beyond Mobility, but also with MassDOT’s strategic business plan. This is looking over the last 15 years and what does the Commonwealth needs to do to meet those needs.
* Transportation Funding Task Force, created through Executive Order 626. They are trying to engage a different audience with this work, bringing in more business community advocates and more nonprofits. They are also making sure that they are covering the Commonwealth, so every region is represented with a focus on rural communities. By December 31st of this year, they will be tasked with delivering recommendations to the Governor on revenue options and will be laying out every revenue option possible. They are looking at the maximum amount of revenue they can raise with initiatives – e.g., congestion pricing, tolling, and other types of user fees – and are looking at what other states have done. For example, New York has adopted congestion pricing, so they invited Rich Davy, president of MTA, to share their work on congestion pricing, organizational efficiencies to bring down the cost of operating transit, and the innovations that raised additional taxes such as cannabis. In New York, they have raised sufficient funding for transportation to the point where they don’t need to raise additional revenue. The Secretary explained that they will be looking to understand what the regions need through outreach and engagement but noted that the process will move quickly.
* **Question** – **Pat Wojtas** – Gas taxes are dedicated to transportation, but what about people that have electric cars? They are getting a break driving on the roads and not having to pay a gas tax.

**Response – Monica Tibbits-Nutt** – We are looking into EV charges. It is not just that they're not having to pay a user fee. But EVs also have a large impact on roadways. The weight of electric cars is going to shorten the useful life of much of our infrastructure. A big part of this conversation is looking at balancing equity as well because many of the communities that need more transit the most are the ones that are already paying more than everyone else just for transportation. Everyone needs to pay into this independent of what type of car they are driving.

* **Comment and Question – Jenny Raitt** - Ms. Raitt thanked Monica Tibbets-Nutt for working in coordination closely with other secretariates, particularly in housing and economic development.

You mentioned how MassDOT is interested in making things easier and relaying that to local permitting boards and maybe select boards as well. What are some of those messages that you would like us to deliver on your behalf?

**Response – Monica Tibbits-Nutt** – Try to drive home that we are not trying to tell communities how to plan or what they need to look like. They need to understand that this is a partnership, and we are in an absolute crisis. The concern for us is that people are leaving the Commonwealth. Our communities have such amazing character. The last thing we want is for more people to leave. We want more people in the communities investing in communities. It is about the quality of life within communities. This work needs to be a partnership and we need to know from a resource standpoint if there are reasons why communities can’t build housing or reasons why more small businesses can't come so we can help them. The state wants to be partners in this and open the lines of communication. We're not just going to drop policies on people.

## NMCOG PLANNING HIGHLIGHTS

Kelly Lynema, NMCOG Deputy Director gave an overview of NMCOG and some of the planning highlights which consisted of a selection of recent projects from 2021-2024. The details of this presentation can be found in the meeting materials.

## OPEN FORUM – OPPORTUNITY FOR COMMENTS FROM MPO MEMBER COMMUNITY STAKEHOLDERS AND THE PUBLIC

No comments.

## APPROVAL OF THE February 28 2024 NMMPO MEETING MINUTES

NMMPO members were provided with copies of the February 2024 NMMPO minutes prior to the meeting. Based on a motion by Pat Wojtas and seconded by Andrew Deslaurier, the February 28, 2024 NMMPO meeting minutes were unanimously approved.

1. STATUS REPORT ON TRANSPORTATION IMPROVEMENT PROGRAM PROJECTS UNDER DESIGN AND CONSTRUCTION

Tim Paris from MassDOT District 4 and Justin Howard from LRTA gave a summary of the projects under design and construction.

* 613213 – Bedford, Billerica, Chelmsford, Tyngsborough bridge preservation – 41 bridges on the Rt. 3 corridor – the ad date for that has been pushed back two months to May.
* 607887 – Lowell Rourke bridge replacement – estimated cost increase of $5 million.
* 608227 – Billerica Yankee Doodle Bike Path – has a new project manager.
* 609250 – Billerica intersection improvements at Boston Road, 3A Lexington Street and Vlad Valley Road – cost increase of $1.5 million up to nearly $8 million for a total Federal participating.
* 609025 – Westford rehabilitation of Boston Road in District 3 has a cost increase. The total Federal participating increased about $1.5 million up to almost $15 million.

Justin Howard gave a summary of the updates from the LRTA

* They have an automatic vehicle locator/automatic passenger counter project that is in the first year of the TIP that is being updated and should be in place by May with the rollout to our customers in the next State Fiscal Year.
* They are looking to employ a Mobility Outreach Coordinator to better service our Council on Aging.
* They have been awarded a Lono Award from the FTA. The first hybrid bus is scheduled to be delivered some time next month.
1. FEDERAL FISCAL YEAR (FFY) 2025-2029 TIP DEVELOPMENT SCENARIOS

Kelly Lynema and Austen Torres-Davis gave an overview of how we assign TEC scores and two potential scenarios for the FFY 2025-2029 TIP. The details of this presentation can be found in the meeting materials.

Based on a motion by Pat Wojtas and seconded by Andrew Deslaurier, the Federal Fiscal Year (FFY) 2025-2029 TIP Development Scenario 1 was unanimously approved.

1. FFY 2025-2029 TIP SCENARIOS –LOWELL REGIONAL TRANSIT AUTHORITY (LRTA)

Justin Howard from LRTA presented a list of transit projects for the region.

Projects included:

* An ADA commuter Access Way project, currently underway. Many maintenance issues at the Lowell Commuter Station need to be addressed and these will be funded in the Federal Fiscal Year 25-26 TIP.
* Continually replacing the LRTA bus fleet.
* Hail Street facility upgrades including replacement of solar panels in Fiscal Year 29.

**Question** – Ms. Raitt – Just confirming that you received the additional Grant funds?

**Response** – Justin Howard – Yes – LRTA has received these funds.

1. FFY 2025 UPWP DEVELOPMENT

Ms. Raitt presented the NMMPO Activities: UPWP Development Schedule and Key 2024 meeting dates. The details of this schedule can be found in the meeting materials.

Ms. Raitt also confirmed the budget that was delivered to the Joint Massachusetts Association of Regional Planning Agencies will be $1,123,832.

Staff have started a list of activities that require funding. We are looking at many different sources of revenue to maintain and sustain and grow our team to advance these projects.

1. SS4A: VISION ZERO PHASE 2

Jessica Boulanger, NMCOG Transportation Mobility Specialist, gave an update on the second phase of Greater Lowell Vision Zero. The details of this project update can be found in the meeting materials.

1. REGIONAL HOUSING STRATEGY (AT HOME IN GREATER LOWELL)

Kelly Lynema gave an overview of this project and the process we are using with the intent to take action. The details of this presentation can be found in the meeting materials.

**Question – Derek** – several years ago opportunity zones were identified for redevelopment. We had some generation with capital gains tax benefits for prospective developers. Is this factoring at all with your developers or when you are talking to people to put housing in certain parts of this region?

**Response – Jennifer Raitt** – We will be looking back at historical trends and patterns, however the purpose of At Home in Greater Lowell is to be forward thinking and is getting in to all the communities, encourage them, and give them the tools to move forward with housing production.

1. OTHER BUSINESS

March 20th NMCOG hosted the Massachusetts Bike and Pedestrian Advisory Board. Approximately 70 people were in attendance in person and online. The meeting included presentations on the Vision Zero Plan, the Yankee Doodle Bike Path in Billerica, and the Traffic Garden presentation from the City of Lowell.

1. ADJOURNMENT Based on a motion made by Pat Wojtas and seconded by Andrew Deslaurier, the MPO voted unanimously to adjourn at 3:12 PM.