

# Needham Transportation Committee

Minutes of October 3, 2018 Meeting  
(7:30pm – 9 pm in the Highland Room of Needham Town Hall)

Members in attendance: Steve McKnight (Chair), Duncan Allen, David Montgomery. Also in attendance: Anne Weinstein, district office head for Rep. Garlick.

## **7:30 Call to order**

### **1) Minutes**

Minutes from the last meeting on November 28, 2017, have not been located. Minutes from the previous meeting on May 23, 2017, by Justin McCullen (Secretary) were passed around, but it is not known if these minutes were approved at the November 28, 2017 meeting.

Action Item: It was agreed that Stephen McKnight, Chair, will e-mail the last copy he has of the 5/23/17 minutes for approval by committee members and posting on the Town web site.

### **2) Review of Commuter Rail Reliability and On-Time Performance**

Duncan Allen comment that the on-time performance is perhaps marginally better following the new Keolis schedule which has train sets dedicated to the Needham Line. It was noted, however, that the new schedule has added some minutes to the travel time for peak hour trains. In general, having the same train sets on the Needham Line has made it easier to predict late trains departures caused by late arrivals, the schedule now indicates which trains will be cancelled in winter, and in general the new Keolis schedule is seen as an improvement.

Short train sets continue to be an issue. It has been observed that two Mondays in September the 7:32am departure from Needham Heights was served a train set with only 5 single-level cars causing an extraordinarily packed train with consequent increase in station dwell times, incomplete ticket checking, and late arrival at South Station.

It was noted also that Keolis/MBTA are developing a plan for automatic fare collection which will require gating on platforms with ticket scanning equipment. The Committee is interested in examining plans for the automatic fare collection system as soon as possible when the plans are developed. The loss of revenue from incomplete ticket checking is one result of the smaller train crews which were implemented to cut costs. It was noted that train systems in other cities utilize spot-checking of tickets with large fines for non-ticketed passengers.

### **3) Update on Commuter Rail Station Platform Repairs**

Platform maintenance issues were previously reported on in the May 23, 2017, meeting, and a letter was sent from the Committee to MBTA/Keolis. Saturday service was temporarily halted in August by Keolis to allow for platform repairs. The observations of members of the Committee this fall of the work done is that some large cracks were filled, the platforms were patched in places, the platforms were seal-coated, and the station warning lettering at the track edges was redone. The wavy surface and “ruts” at Needham Heights and Hersey remain and will make snow and ice clearance difficult in the winter. The work completed this August appears to be ‘repairs’ or ‘maintenance’ rather than any sort of ‘improvement’, and decisions on what to address appear to have made selectively with a view to making visible changes while minimizing short-term expenditures.

The dying trees along the Needham Center platform have been removed. The trees along the center of the platform, where the platform paving was extended to the very base of the trees, have all died and been removed. The trees at the north end of the platform, where an extended area of soil with embedded rocks was left unpaved have done

much better. The platform interspersed with trees was an attractive feature of the original sketches of the Needham Center station and would complement the attractive tree-scaping of the Needham Bank properties on the other side of the tracks. It is the opinion of the Committee that the trees that died and were removed should be replaced, this time with enough bare soil to allow the roots to take up water so the trees can thrive.

#### **4) Report on the Selectmen's Meeting of August 7, 2018: GY2019-2020 Goals and Great Plain Avenue Grade Crossing Improvements**

Stephen McKnight, motivated by issues on the Selectmen's agenda for their August 7, 2018, meeting, attended the meeting as a spectator. He reported that:

- a) The FY2019 – FY2020 Board of Selectmen Proposed Goals included a bullet under “Maintain and develop amenities that contribute to the desirability of Needham as a place to live and work, Continuing Strategies” that the Selectmen would “Evaluate options to reduce train horn noise.” The entire list of Proposed Goals was passed with no discussion at the beginning of the meeting while waiting for members of the VHB Engineering firm to arrive.
- b) Under “Great Plain Avenue Crossing Improvements,” the Selectmen engaged in an extensive discussion with representatives of VHB Engineering about the second traffic light installed at the commuter rail grade crossing on Great Plain Avenue just before the traffic signals at Great Plain Ave and Chapel Street. The Selectmen noted extensive driver frustration with the extra signal and asked if the extra signal was necessary. VHB representatives indicated that the new signal was standard practice to prevent automobiles queuing on the train tracks when the light at Chapel Street was red. The VHB representative noted that the MBTA has agreed to reconstruct the entire at-grade crossing system, track, and crossing surface, including new gates, warning signals, track, etc. at the Great Plain Avenue railroad crossing.

The Transportation Committee felt strongly that if new gates were to be installed that they should be, as much as possible, consistent with the installation of Four Quadrant gates with Vehicle Presence Detectors, Constant Warning Time Devices, and Power Out Indicators to bring our most important on-grade crossing to the highest possible level of safety, whether used with train horns sounding or in conjunction with a Train Horn Quiet Zone. Four Quadrant gates have been used extensively on the new Greenbush Line in such towns as Hingham and Weymouth. If the level-crossing at Great Plain Ave in Needham is to be upgraded, it should be brought to the highest safety level in the commuter rail system. If necessary, the Town should budget the extra funding necessary to up-grade to Four Quadrant gates.

Action Item: Stephen McKnight will draft a report to the Selectmen on the topic of the installation by the MBTA of Four Quadrant gates at the Great Plain Ave level crossing, on the platform repairs completed, and on the desirability of replanting trees at the Needham Center Station.

#### **5) Member's Updates: D. Montgomery on Boston MPO and Needham Crossing**

David Montgomery reported as the Needham representative to the Regional Transportation Advisory Council (RTAC), an advisory council to the Metropolitan Planning Organization (MPO) which controls the federally structured program by which federal transportation funding is dispersed. The MPO has supported an up-grade to the Needham Street/Highland Avenue corridor including enhanced transportation options for the “Needham Crossing” business park between Highland Ave and Kendrick Street east of Rt 128. The Needham Street/Highland Ave corridor is a state-owned parcel which the MPO has been considering returning to the towns of Needham and Newton. The MPO has supported this with the condition that the corridor be upgraded first. It appears as if the MPO is ready to make this a priority as early as 2019-2020. Needham/Newton cooperation is needed to make this a reality, and the vision is to make the Needham Crossing business park a transportation hub, possibly using the old Green Line right-of-way.

**6) Next Meeting**

It was suggested that the Transportation Committee should schedule meetings quarterly, perhaps with the summer quarter meeting skipped. The next meeting will be arranged for January. Among the agenda items will be election of Committee Officers: Chair, Vice Chair, and Secretary.

**9:00 Adjournment**

Respectively Submitted,  
Stephen McKnight, Chair and Interim Minute-Taker