

Minutes of the School Programs Subcommittee of the Override Study Committee

Meeting Date: January 17, 2018

Time: 5:00 p.m.

Location: Room 310, Town Hall

Members Present: Heather Hamilton, Harold Petersen, and Meggan Levene. Charles Terrell was unable to attend.

Staff Present: Andrew Bott, Superintendent of Schools, Mary Ellen Dunn, Deputy Superintendent of Schools, and Matthew Gillis, School Director of Operations and Facilities.

Others Present: Abby Swaine, chair of the Brookline Public Transportation Advisory Committee, Julie Schreiner-Oldham, member of the School Committee and a member of the Override Study Committee, David Pollock, Chair of the School Committee, Betsy DeWitt, member of the Override Study Committee, Jeff Rudolph, member of the Override Study Committee, Michael Sandman, member of the Advisory Committee, and also Lynn Raymond, Mark Gray, and Arielle Ballard.

Harold Petersen noted that Cliff Brown had resigned from the Override Study Committee and thus our subcommittee no longer has a chair. Mr. Petersen was selected as the new chair.

The minutes of the Meeting of January 3 were approved as submitted.

Rental Revenue: Matthew Gillis gave a presentation on rental revenue. He noted that a good many groups use the school buildings, even for religious services on Sunday morning. Most of the users are either associated with the schools or are non-profit groups, and the rental charge, if any, is intended to cover incremental cost. In terms of fees, Brookline's fees are a bit below those of other communities, and thus it might be possible to increase revenue by a bit.

Transportation: A major item in the superintendent's budget proposal for School Year 2018-19 is for bus transportation between South Brookline and the High School. Abby Swaine reviewed a report she had prepared on the issue (attached), in which she indicated that public transportation is far from adequate as a means of bringing students to school and getting them home. Many live three to four miles from the high school and thus walking is not feasible. Some parents drive their children and pick them up, some students take an hour to get to school, some drive cars and look for parking, and some take a long time in getting home. The school department's proposal is to run two buses in the morning, each doing two loops, and two in the afternoon, each doing two loops. The cost of two buses is estimated at \$840 per day, or for 180 school days a total of \$151,200. Parents have indicated they would be willing to pay for transportation, perhaps at a rate of \$250 for the year. This would be expected to cover approximately 15% of the cost, given there would be some allowance for those who could not afford to pay.

The meeting adjourned at 6:55 p.m.

Attachment

Memorandum

Date: January 8, 2018 From: Abby Swaine, Chair, Brookline Public Transportation Advisory Committee To: Andrew Bott, Superintendent, Brookline Public Schools (BPS)

Cc: Joshua Safer, Chair, Brookline Transportation Board Pamela Zelnick, Vice Chair, Brookline Transportation Board Todd Kirrane, Administrator, Brookline Transportation Department David Pollack, Chairman, Brookline School Committee Mary Ellen Dunn, Deputy Superintendent for Administration & Finance, BPS Matt Gillis, Director of Operations, BPS Anthony Meyer, Headmaster, Brookline High School

Re: Budget for new school bus service to Brookline High School in 2018-19

The Public Transportation Advisory Committee (PTAC) was tasked by the Transportation Board in March 2017 to approach the School Department and School Committee to ask them to consider providing additional school bus service to BHS students. Since then, PTAC has worked with Mary Ellen Dunn and BPS staff to outline potential service and test demand, informed the School Committee of our efforts, and briefed the BHS and Baker School PTOs. Given the high level of apparent interest in and demand for such service, which is likely to grow with the BHS population, we recommend that the 2018-19 School Budget include funds for beginning BHS school bus service. A fee-for-service funding structure, in which user families pay some portion of the cost of BHS school bus service, should be considered in order to reduce taxpayer burden. Piloting this service in the 2018-19 school year will provide important data on the potential for reducing car travel to/from BHS for use in transportation planning for the BHS expansion project.

BACKGROUND

Currently, no Town school bus service is provided to BHS students after school, and limited service is provided in the morning, appended to elementary school bus routes. The MBTA provides one special run of the Route 51 bus to pick up students at BHS after school and bring them to South Brookline before continuing on its regular route. Neither the Town's nor the MBTA's bus service meets current demand for student travel between BHS and South Brookline; both are overcrowded to the point of being unsafe, and many students are left behind after school and forced to find another way home.

Since at least 2011, PTAC has received feedback from South Brookline students and parents asking for increased bus service to BHS, many offering to pay fees. A BHS senior who uses current services has given us valuable observations consistently over the last 2 years on behalf of other (often frustrated) student riders. PTAC staff have studied MBTA and Town school bus trips in the field on several occasions, noting serious deficiencies.

PTAC worked intensively for over a year with the MBTA to obtain additional service, to no avail. (This special service is vestigial, and is in fact now prohibited under Federal Transit Administration funding policy.) We brought this information to the Transportation Board in March, asking for advice on next steps. The Board agreed that a significant public transportation need is not being met, and stated that it seems reasonable to expect that the Town should pay, in moderation, for school bus transportation for BHS students not well-served by MBTA transit. They directed PTAC to approach BPS Administration with our findings, generate options, and poll parents of current and prospective BHS students to ascertain the scope of demand.

(For additional background, see Appendices 1 and 2.) **NEEDS ASSESSMENT**

PTAC and the School Department developed two brief online polls on the Survey Monkey platform, one for BHS families, and one for 6-8

grade Baker, Heath, Lincoln, and Runkle families (prospective BHS students from districts that include areas not well-served by transit). Both asked about current student travel behavior, potential interest in Town school bus service, and willingness to pay. Ben Lummis distributed them on Nov 30 and Dec 5 via the Blackboard system. PTAC tabulated the responses and shared them with School Department staff, and discussed them with Matt Gillis and others at our Dec 19 public meeting.

The BHS survey yielded 273 responses, covering at least 14% of students (actually probably a much higher percentage, due to multiple-student families). In the morning, about 30% of students are driven to BHS, 30% take the school bus, and 30% walk or bike. In the afternoon, about 15% are driven home, 30% take the special MBTA bus, 30% walk or bike, and 15% take regular MBTA service (D line, etc). Asked about the likelihood of their students using a new school bus service before and after school, 50% said they would be very likely to use such service, 12% were likely, and 25% very unlikely.

The grades 6-8 survey yielded 189 responses (the percentage of all families has not been calculated). More families of 8th graders responded than those with children in earlier grades. (This is consistent with frequent statements by Baker parents that parents tend to not think ahead about school transport, some even assuming that comprehensive school bus service will be provided.) 50% stated that they plan to use the existing morning school bus for the BHS commute, 40% plan to use special MBTA afternoon bus, 30% plan to bike/walk, and 25% plan to drive. Asked about the likelihood of their students using a new school bus service before and after school, 45% said they would be very likely to use such service, 15% were likely, 20% very unlikely.

Willingness to pay for new school bus service was consistent among BHS and elementary school parents. 30% were not interested in bus service, so skipped the question; of those who answered, 55-60% were

willing to pay up to \$250/year/child; another 25% were willing to pay up to \$400/year/child; and 15-20% willing to pay more.

Both surveys allowed for open responses. Most were pro-bus, many passionately so. There were quite a few complaints about existing services, in terms of timing, safety, and reliability. Some were angry about the concept of charging fees. Some who planned not to use school bus service thought the Town should provide it anyway for the greater good. Many parents volunteered their email addresses to help design or advocate for new service, or merely stay informed.

While these poll results cannot be considered reliably predictive of future behavior, they do indicate enough interest in instituting new BHS school bus service to make it worth proposing a more specific program and the budget to pilot it.

NEXT STEPS

At our Dec 19 meeting, PTAC and Matt Gillis discussed starting new Town school bus service to/from BHS in 2018-19 along these lines:

- Two buses plying two routes, each doing two loops before school, and two loops after school. This would require contracting for two buses. (Routes would serve primarily South Brookline residents, but exact scope and routing would be refined based on further outreach and analysis.)
- Morning dropoff times at BHS would be 7:15 for Z block, and 8:15 for regular start of school. Pickup times at BHS would be 3:30 for regular end of school and 4:30 for after school activities.
- Matt roughly estimated that charging parents \$250/child/year for this service would pay for about 15% of the cost. PTAC strongly recommends that the School Department and School Committee adopt this new initiative and budget for it accordingly, and stands ready with the Transportation Board to assist with outreach and

refinement. Our teenage students deserve the safe, dependable, low- emission transport to and from BHS that only a yellow school bus can provide. **APPENDIX 1** Talking Points for PTAC Presentation to BHS PTO on School Bus Transportation Oct 25 2017 PTAC has been aware for several years of strong interest in better bus service between BHS and South Brookline. At a 2011 meeting convened by PTAC at Baker School on South Brookline mobility, parents asked for it and expressed willingness to pay fees for it.

Currently, 2 morning school buses return from K-8 school routes to pick up BHS students in South Brookline and bring them to BHS by 8 a.m. After school, they are dedicated to transporting BHS teams to/from sports venues after they finish transporting K-8 students back home, and not available to ferry BHS students back home. School buses are also not available for earlier or later arrival times at BHS.

MBTA sends one Route 51 bus on a special spur route every afternoon at 3:05 to pick up kids at BHS and bring them to South Brookline. MBTA has several vestigial spurs that contradict FTA policy.

Some students get to/from BHS via the “regular” Route 51 bus and the D line. This route does not serve the west side of South Brookline at all, and is a 2-seat ride with connection delays.

PTAC members rode the supplemental Rte 51 bus, and observed that it is too full to be safe or comfortable. Some kids who manage to arrive in time to catch the bus are left behind.

For over a year, PTAC worked with MBTA to make the existing supplemental bus more efficient & reliable, and get a second “special” Route 51 bus in the afternoon. We reached a dead end.

(We also explored partnering with institutions and providers like Bridj on shuttle service for users of all ages, and rerouting the 51 bus to serve more populated neighborhoods in South Brookline...to no avail.)

One of the two morning school buses is usually too full of BHS students

as well.

Under state law, school districts have no obligation to provide transportation to students beyond grade 6. For K-6, districts must provide service for any students that would have to walk more than 2 miles to get to school (Brookline policy currently says 1.5 miles).

At least in part because of inadequate bus service, queueing for private vehicle drop-off & pick-up is pretty intense, and likely to worsen with BHS population increase. Some upper-class students give rides to one another, and some take Ubers, both of which may not be legal.

In March, the TB directed PTAC to ask the School Dept and School Committee to consider providing school bus service to BHS students not well-served by MBTA transit or within walking distance, after school as well as potentially before school.

PTAC approached Mary Ellen Dunn, Assistant Superintendent for Administration and Finance, and Matt Gillis, Director of Operations. They are experienced and willing to take on the challenge of developing new school bus service because they see the need in terms of mobility, safety and traffic reduction, and wonder why Brookline hasn't met it already. We've also made the School Committee aware of what we're up to, although not in as much detail.

Given the schools' substantial operating deficit and pending major capital projects, the fact that not all parents/students will want to use a school bus, and the fact that state law does not mandate bus service for older students, we should test parents' willingness to pay for fee-based service, as opposed to completely "free" school bus service.

PTAC presented this to the Baker School PTO in Sept, and they're eager to see this happen. Baker parents realize too late what will happen in 9th grade, then are stuck. Emily Engeland, a former Baker PTO chair, is our liaison.

Mary Ellen stated that building such service into the 2018-19 school

year budget is feasible. By Dec 1, she needs to submit a preliminary budget proposal to the School Committee. At the first SC meeting in January, the budget is finalized, and the SC votes on both the balanced and override budgets by Feb 15.

The next step is to assess parent interest and willingness to pay, quickly. The survey will be sent to parents of 8th-11th graders who live in South Brookline (8th graders at Baker, Lincoln, & Heath).

Mary Ellen and Matt will lay out potential costs under 3 different funding scenarios-- School Dept only, User only, and a combination of the two—so parents will be asked about their willingness to pay at 3 different price points, \$350, \$500, and \$700/year per child. (Subsidies would be available for low-income parents.)

Parents will provide their address and the grades their kids are in.

The survey will include standard disclaimers: there is no guarantee of service at this time, service is not door-to-door, and instituting service is predicated upon funding it.

The survey will be distributed via the ASPEN system in early November, so results-- approximate number of interested families/students, and price tolerance-- will be available to use by mid-Nov in drafting the proposed school budget.

Neel Sharma, a BHS senior who has been championing this issue to PTAC along with several parents (and sending us great photos of overcrowded buses), will beta test the survey on peers and advertise it through Advisory, etc.

We could use the BHS PTO's help in getting the word out to parents and providing context if they ask about the impetus for the survey and the overall effort to assess demand for school bus transport for BHS. We could also use your help in talking to Anthony Mayer and Hal Mason, and to School Committee members, to get them on board. Eventually we'll need your support during the operating budget override process.

We'd like a point-person at BHS PTO to work with us.

If reliable bus transportation were provided, demand (currently satisfied by parent chauffeuring, etc) might increase. Demand for student on-street parking permits, and the need to satisfy that demand, might decrease, easing neighborhood impacts.

Taking on the cost of providing additional school transportation will not be welcomed, given looming costs of school expansions. At a 2011 meeting at Baker School on South Brookline mobility (see Appendix), parents expressed willingness to pay for student busing. Although Town officials and staff have frowned on fee-for-service schemes in the past, perhaps that should be reconsidered. BHS athletics fees (\$300/sport/season) probably defray the cost of transportation, serving a portion of the student population just as a South Brookline student shuttle fare would. Providing safe transportation for students should be a Town priority.

APPENDIX 2

MARCH 16, 2017 PUBLIC TRANSPORTATION ADVISORY COMMITTEE (PTAC) BROOKLINE HIGH SCHOOL STUDENT TRANSIT: FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATION TO TRANSPORTATION BOARD ON NEXT STEPS

Various BHS students have been in touch with PTAC for several years asking for more bus service, noting overcrowding and need for more arrival and departure times. Kids have done class projects on the topic & written articles for the Sagamore. On Oct 5 2016, the Environmental Action Club staged a Car Free Day. BHS students have generally been in touch with School Dept staff rather than Transportation staff, but a few have gotten through to PTAC.

Two morning school buses return from elementary school routes to pick up BHS students in South Brookline and bring them to BHS by 8 a.m. After school, they are dedicated to transporting BHS teams to/from sports venues after they finish transporting elementary school

students back home, and therefore not available to ferry BHS students back home. School buses are also not available for earlier arrival times at BHS, e.g. for Z block at 7:30.

MBTA sends one Route 51 bus on a special spur route every afternoon at 3:05 to pick up kids at BHS and bring them to 4 stops in South Brookline before returning the bus & driver to regular Route 51 service. MBTA has several spurs like this serving school populations that were created many years ago and are now vestigial. MBTA says that providing special after school service to BHS is costly, requiring the MBTA to bring a driver onto duty 30 minutes early (shifts and drivers vary widely based on route demands). The driver needs to finish both by 3:45 in order to make it to Forest Hills station by 4:03 to begin rush hour service.

Many students get to/from BHS via the “regular” Route 51 bus and the D line. After school, they can take the D line to Reservoir and catch a Route 51 southbound at 3:24, 3:35 and 3:54. This is less direct and involves some waiting at the origin & connection, but is more flexible in allowing kids time to have meetings or participate in clubs after school.

For over a year, PTAC worked with MBTA planners to see if the existing bus could be made to work more efficiently & reliably, and demonstrate a need for and feasibility of providing a second “special” Route 51 bus to serve BHS in the afternoon. We’ve reached a dead end, with the MBTA saying that providing a second bus is both impossible under current funding/staffing levels, and improper per federal transit policy. (FTA policy: recipients of public transportation system funds cannot compete with school bus service providers.)

PTAC members rode and followed the Rte 51 bus, and observed that it is packed (SRO) and therefore unsafe, and some kids are left behind. MBTA also did their own cursory assessment. (Details of both are below). We disagree with MBTA planners on how long it should take to do two loops rather than one, and offered to pilot expedited loops with fewer stops, but they are not willing to budge.

May 2016: PTAC members rode the after school 51 bus and noted it was SRO (~70 students) and may have left some students behind (a frequent occurrence according to students they chatted with). Nov 17: MBTA counted 68 students boarding. PTAC members reported that the driver waved many kids onto the bus without having them pay to expedite boarding. Seating capacity is 39 plus standing room; “crush load” is 77, and the MBTA tries to stay within a load of 66. The bus driver often lifts/locks seats to accommodate more students and their bags. Nov 18: PTAC observed 78 kids waiting, but the bus didn’t show up until 3:25, by which time all but 25 had taken the D line to Reservoir to catch the regular 51 bus there (or sought other means of travel). Nov 29: PTAC did another site visit, with similar results. MBTA did an automatic passenger count (34 kids) on an early release day in the Fall, so it underrepresented typical ridership. (Also if kids don’t have fare and get waved on, as happens regularly, their boarding is not counted.)

Abby has let School Committee, BHS administrators (Hal Mason), and School Dept transportation (Mary Murphy) & administration (MaryEllen Dunn) staff know via email that PTAC has exhausted our leverage with the MBTA, and that the logical next step is for the Town to consider providing additional school bus / shuttle service to meet current and future BHS needs, as well as Baldwin Elementary School and any other school transportation needs. School Dept rep Mary Ellen Dunn expressed interest and willingness to examine transportation needs in the context of school expansion projects, in several months’ time.

Under state law, school districts have no obligation to provide transportation to students beyond grade 6. Brookline Schools’ own policy is consistent with this. For K-6, districts must provide service for any students that would have to walk more than 1.5 miles to get to school.

BHS expansion plans (per community outreach meeting on March 15) scale up parking, and the “high” option provides for sub-level garage parking. Unknown: if any of that is for student parking. BHS expansion

is designed for 2700 (compared to current 2000), which means 700 more kids & their parents in private vehicles per day unless they can get there on mass transit.

Buttonwood Village residents note a burgeoning population of young children who will need transportation to/from BHS in a few to several years. Probably similar from Hancock Village expansion.

Currently, queueing for private vehicle dropoff is pretty intense in the morning, and kids are limited in their afternoon mobility. Upperclass students get rides from one another home and to fields & elsewhere; students are probably parking in neighborhoods without permits. At Brookline Day 2015, South Brookline residents asked for an afterschool bus from BHS to Lars Anderson for sports team practice; currently, parents are carpooling their kids; parents willing to help subsidize. Altogether 75-100 kids.