

Getting there from here

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The future of Worcester transportation

By Scott Zoback

Getting around Worcester is tantamount to The Endless Forest in The Legend of Zelda: You can't always get in, you can never get out, and you're not quite sure what to do once you're inside.

It's the natural result when you mix old horse and carriage trails coming together at odd angles (Kelley Square) with an underfunded regional transit system (the WRTA), a half-used airport (Worcester Regional), not frequent enough commuter rail (MBTA), and an utter lack of usable commuter-friendly bike lanes.

In a word, the Worcester region's current system of transportation is inadequate. Infrastructure doesn't mesh with modern traffic patterns. Our commercial air service doesn't even hit an average of one flight a day. Trains run at such an infrequent basis, they aren't always a reliable option for commuters. Regular fixed bus service has been cut back, while fares have gone up. And let's just ignore the nonsensical driving habits.

But despite the iffy state of Worcester transportation, there are several hopeful signs that the region could be seeing vast improvements across all modalities over the next decade.

The American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009 (aka the federal stimulus bill) allocates about \$64.1 billion for transportation infrastructure improvement, according to the House Committee on Transportation and Infrastructure. According to US News, \$48 billion will go directly to the Department of Transportation for rail and road infrastructure repair and improvement. And that says nothing for the reported \$144 million that will go to state and local governments for discretionary use.



WRTA head Stephen O'Neill says the agency has 'got to be strategic in our thinking.'

Those state and local officials are chomping at the bit: On Massachusetts' list of state-reviewed, shovel-ready projects (not necessarily projects that are getting money, but ones that have passed the first step of qualification), almost \$90 million in Worcester County (or MBTA Worcester line) wish-list transportation projects are listed. And that says nothing for the 178 pages of yet-to-be reviewed projects from throughout

the state.

Beyond that wish list is Governor Deval Patrick's recently unveiled statewide transportation system reshape. Aside from the widely touted streamlining of positions and agencies, the plan calls for 1.5 cents of the proposed 19-cent gas tax to go to Regional Transit Authorities, 1.5 cents to targeted regional road projects and 3 cents for rail projects outside of Boston.

Locally, Patrick's plan calls for MassPort takeover of Worcester Regional airport, and infrastructure and service improvements for rail, road and buses.

There's one more major plan that could drastically alter the transportation landscape in Central Massachusetts.

Since July, the Central Massachusetts Regional Planning Commission and partner transportation consultant agency Vanasse Hangen Brustlin have been coordinating the most massive and holistic regional mobility study ever conducted in the region. The study has a simple, if ambitious, goal: "Improve the movement of people and goods through the urban core of Central Massachusetts."

CMRPC Transportation Program Manager Mary Ellen Blunt says that the study — still in the information-gathering phases, but designed for final recommendations this fall — comes at a good time.

"It's so hard to predict exactly what's going to happen, but there's a feeling we're moving toward looking at a more intermodal fit. The challenge is really coordinating it all," Blunt said.

"We have a system of roadways we've inherited from a bygone era. How do we look at that, improve it, and improve how other modes fit in."

The combination — federal funds, state funds, a massive plan — could potentially lead to a reshaping of how we move about Worcester. It's not something that will happen overnight, but there is a real possibility that the next ten years will see the most massive transportation infrastructure changes at one time since I-290 was finished almost 40 years ago.

A ROAD TO SOMEWHERE

It's something of a pastime to complain about traffic patterns or intersections in Worcester, unless you're the one causing the problem. In that case, it's just the other guy's fault.

Here's the main problem: Roads in Worcester simply weren't designed to handle today's traffic, especially moving into and through Worcester from the western suburbs. The thoroughfares that aren't built on old horse paths were laid out when manufacturing plants like US Steel and Norton dominated and downtown was a the hub of business. Without the same level of concentrated business on the main routes, we see traffic congestion.

Blunt says the exhaustive traffic studies have shown that, "We still have a lot of traffic from the west into Worcester and continued travel to the east." But, she says, the traffic is going to "more scattered patterns." Add to it the utter lack of a major east-west corridor, and the result is what every Worcester commuter knows: heavy bottlenecks at intersections like Webster Square and Tatnuck Square during morning and afternoon drives.

The VHB research has shown that many of the problem intersections have the same characteristics: They're older, not designed to handle the modern level of traffic, have uncoordinated lights, and poor direct access to highways.

"If Highland Street is backed up," says Blunt, "people will go onto neighborhood streets. So how do we make

our main thoroughfares more effective?"

The Future: The solutions that will eventually be endorsed will be designed to streamline main east-west roads like Highland Street, Pleasant Street and Chandler Street. Look for intersection improvements, including adding turning lanes in some places, limiting turns in others, and synchronizing signals better on some main roads. On a more dramatic level, Blunt says the possibility of putting together a new road may be considered in the future; at the very least, some street widenings will be looked at. One potential candidate for an additional lane could be Vernon Street.

"If we only fix one east-west route, it wouldn't fix [the problem]," says Blunt.

Beyond the streets, VHB and CMRPC are looking at I-290 highway traffic, and how the intermingling of local and thru traffic causes bottlenecks, especially at the I-190 interchange. A potential solution could be repainting lanes to better direct appropriate traffic or reconfiguring.

GET ON THE BUS

No other local transit modality is in such desperate need of government funds as the Worcester Regional Transit Authority bus service.

"It's been in a downward spiral," says Blunt. "It's just not convenient enough."

Under Governor Patrick's recent transportation reform plan, the agency could see some help. Over \$100 million would be dedicated to regional transportation around the state under the Governor's proposal, up from just below \$60 million currently. With one of the largest non-Boston regional transit systems, a good deal of that money could come to the WRTA. Add to that the significant amount of federal stimulus money allocated for transit capital expenses, and the WRTA could be seeing some quick improvements.

What will the money go to?

There are two main needs of the WRTA: one is operational stability (more on that in a minute), the other is capital improvements.

WRTA head Stephen O'Neill says that the agency is taking a look at just about every aspect of service, from the types of buses, to the balance of fixed routes and flexible routes, to rethinking the whole model of operation.

"Do we have the best system out on the street?" he asks. "Or do we do what Council on Aging is doing with more vans and flexible service, and cut back to fixed routes in Worcester and ring towns?"

One possible solution is teaming up with major area employers to offer tailored service during peak morning and afternoon travel hours. O'Neill says the agency also needs to look at whether "hub and spoke" is even the best model for the future. Even the hub itself may change: the group may look to move its base of operations from 287 Grove St. to a more suitable location. O'Neill cites the temporary parking lot land on Major Taylor Boulevard next to Union Station as one prime potential site.

It's that capital improvement money and those CMRPC recommendations that could make a big difference. The changes being considered range from significant to mundane: an automatic vehicle locator system, allowing riders to check their cell phones to see how far out buses are; automatic stop announcements; upgrading buses, including hybrids and smaller vehicles; and transit prioritization.

Transit prioritization may have the most impact. O'Neil and Blunt rave about the possibility of buses being given priority at signals, speeding cross-town commutes. The sophisticated system would require an overhaul of signals in the city; it's not the same signal override used by ambulances or public safety vehicles, but a

more integrated system.

Beyond the practical improvements brought by stimulus money, O'Neill says that the organization is doomed without more stable long-term and year-to-year funding. The current last-minute funding system is "like flying in the dark."

Unfortunately, the federal stimulus money can only go to capital improvements not operational expenditures. And details of the Patrick-plan are still yet to be released, including whether planned RTA aid will come in the form of operational stability or forward funding.

And bus service could very well continue heading down the same bad rabbit hole: less reliable service means fewer people relying on the bus on a regular basis, fewer riders means less aid and revenue, less aid and revenue means less reliable service.

"We can't keep going forward in this manner," says O'Neill. "The public expects a certain level of transportation service. And when you have to cut back on that because of funding ... they can't rely [on that service]."

The Future: Tied together, it's an enticing vision: A Union Station-based hub offering limited hub-spoke fixed service in Worcester and the ring communities, supplemented by flexible and business-centric service, depending heavily on hybrid and smaller-than-traditional vehicles. Charlie Cards will be accepted on all routes, and buses will travel more quickly throughout the city on signal optimized routes. Of course, the alternative is a drastic reduction or loss of bus service.

COME FLY AWAY

One thing is clear: MassPort taking over the airport means they have some sort of idea what they want to do with it. Andrew Davis, the newly interred Airport Director, says any improvements to service won't just be about passenger flights.

"We can't be solely reliant on commercial traffic. We're small enough [to encompass] general aviation, charters and aviation related business," he says.

"This airport could be very viable. What you want to do for an airport this size is encompass all aspects of aviation. The more you have as far as tenants or people who use the airport, the more you enhance the experience ... the more you get FAA support ... the more you get people out."

And, says Davis, that could lead to more commercial businesses and visitors utilizing the airport for aviation and non-aviation businesses.

Still, more passenger service is a much sexier goal than relying on general aviation, charters, and flight schools. It's something clearly in MassPort's long-range plans.

"We've got almost a \$16 million terminal that we'd like to see filled," says Davis. Filling it depends a lot on how Direct Air, the airport's most recent commercial carrier, does for the rest of its first year. The better Direct Air does, says Davis and MassPort spokesman Richard Walsh, the more likely other airlines would consider Worcester a viable option.

Better passenger service is almost entirely predicated on better access to the airport, something that has been a Pandora's Box every time it has been raised in the past. Just the words "access road" are enough to fill three hours of talk radio with angry callers. But the idea may once again come alive, thanks to that wide-ranging CMRPC/VHB study.

One of the main components of the final report will most likely be to improve east-west corridor access in Worcester; that will, in turn, improve airport access.

In other words, the longstanding controversial access road issue is no longer the cause for changing traffic patterns, but is being presented as an effect.

“MassPort is very much aware that their travel stream is not anywhere as big as the existing travel stream,” says Blunt. In other words, even if commercial service ramped up to a much higher level, the number of cars on the road going to the airport wouldn’t drastically affect traffic patterns beyond their already heavy levels in the Tatnuck or Webster Square areas. Conversely, improving access in and out of those areas would end up helping airport access.

“Even [MassPort] said they recognize there’s no easy fix without making the existing routes improved,” says Blunt.

Make no mistake: MassPort officials (who are participating in the CMRPC conversations) think better access is a near necessity for better service. Davis cites Newburgh, N.Y., Providence, and Hartford as airports where landings increased dramatically after authorities “invested a lot to enhance the ability to get to the airport from major highways.”

“I think anything we can do to enhance the service for someone travelling out of the airport [would be a positive] ... an improved access road would enhance that,” he says.



New Worcester Regional Airport head Andrew Davis wants to fill his \$16 million terminal, but says the airport must survive on a range of aviation options beyond commercial service.

The Future: Despite skeptics, an increased load at Worcester Airport has been the long-term plan of MassPort, FAA, and other parties for a while. It may not be the dozens of flights a day some optimists hope for, but there will be increased use as a so-called secondary airport. At this point, it’s simply a matter of how quickly the longstanding negotiations go between the city and MassPort. Earlier this week, City Manager Michael O’Brien indicated that ownership of airport parcels was one aspect still being discussed.

TRAINS, BIKES, PEDESTRIANS

Even with their notoriously glacial pace, it’s clear that the state has put a major focus on improving commuter rail across the commonwealth over the next decades. What could that look like? Look for improved handicapped access along the Worcester-Framingham line, and track improvements along the same route (one of the biggest single line items in the already-approved state list for stimulus money is \$45 million for rail improvements). Down the road, Blunt says there are high level preliminary conversations about the possibility of extending passenger rail west to the Webster Square area to capture suburban commuters.

Blunt also says the Worcester Mobility Study is focusing on bike lanes, paths, and sidewalks, and talking about how to tie them all together in certain areas to better serve commuters and casual users.

FLYING CARS AND THE FUTURE

As good as the possibilities for future service look, uncertainties remain. The WRTA simply won't be successful without stabilized funding. Commuter rail is going to require a huge investment or a miracle of an agreement with track owner CSX to see more frequent service. The airport could easily stay in the same cycle of airlines coming and leaving without any sense of longevity. And driving, biking, and walking in Worcester could continue to be a pain.

Still, Blunt says that with the pending state and federal funds, it looks like some improvements could happen more quickly than anyone anticipated.

"Things are moving fast," she says.

Soon, so may traffic.

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