



# BOSTON CITY COUNCIL

Committee on Boston's COVID-19 Recovery  
Michael F. Flaherty, Chair

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## REPORT OF COMMITTEE CHAIR

December 1, 2021

Dear Councillors:

The Committee held a hearing on *Docket #1205, message and order authorizing the City of Boston to accept and expend the amount of Eight Million Dollars (\$8,000,000) in the form of a grant, awarded by the United States Department of the Treasury, to be administered by the City of Boston's Chief Financial Officer/Collector Treasurer. The grant will fund the expansion of the fare free transit program. This grant payment is made from the Coronavirus State and Local Fiscal Recovery Fund (CLFRF) in the Treasury of the United States established by Section 9901 of the American Rescue Plan Act of 2021 (ARPA).* This order was sponsored by Mayor Michelle Wu and referred to the Committee on November 17, 2021. The Committee held a hearing on November 29, 2021 where public comment was taken.

### Summary of Docket #1205:

This grant allows the City to accept and expend eight million dollars. The grant is from the CLFRF in the Treasury of the United States established by Section 9901 of the ARPA. Under the requirements of ARPA, the grant payment will fund urgent COVID-19 reopening and recovery efforts to address systemic public health and economic challenges that have contributed to the disproportionate impact of the pandemic and will provide direct benefits to Boston's communities hit hardest by the pandemic. The funds from this grant will be used to expand the fare free transit program.

### Information Gathered at the Hearing:

The following individuals participated on behalf of the Administration: Vineet Gupta, Boston Transportation Department, Director of Planning and Casey Brock-Wilson, Administration & Finance, Director of Strategic Partnerships. The Chair provided a summary of the docket explaining that the eight million dollars will be used to expand the free fare transit program specifically for the Route 23, Route 28, and the Route 29 bus lines. The Chair explained that under the terms of the order, the grant will be used to serve communities and families most affected by the public health and economic impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic, including disproportionately impacted low-income families and communities of color impacted by exacerbated systemic health and economic inequities.

Vineet Gupta described the bus routes and reviewed the benefits. Mr. Gupta stated that the eight million dollars will be used to expand upon the free fare transit program for bus routes 28, 23, and 29. Mr. Gupta explained that these routes form the backbone for bus riders in the Mattapan, Dorchester, and Roxbury neighborhoods and are essential to the livelihood of the residents in these neighborhoods. Mr. Gupta explained that the Route 28 bus serves Mattapan Square through Grove Hall to Nubian Square and

connects with Ruggles; the Route 23 bus begins in Dorchester from Peabody Square at Ashmont Station through Washington Street, Warren Street, Nubian Square and connects with Ruggles; the Route 29 bus serves Mattapan Square, Seaver street, Columbus Ave and connects with Jackson Square. Mr. Gupta explained that the two year program will have lasting economic benefits for underserved neighborhoods by allowing for budget planning, increasing ridership, and providing access to jobs and education. Mr. Gupta stated that the two year time frame will allow the City enough time to gather and analyze economic and ridership data. Mr. Gupta explained that the City will meet with the MBTA to figure out logistics, develop a detailed framework, and a marketing campaign to inform riders of the program.

The Chair inquired about coordination with the MBTA and when the program will be rolled out. Casey Brock-Wilson spoke about the fiscal aspects of the program stating that the funds need to be used by the end of 2024 and how the City arrived at the amount of eight million dollars. Ms. Brock-Wilson explained that the City estimated over two years what the potential costs of the expansion of the free fare transit program would be and made assumptions based on the Route 28 pilot program and its ridership numbers. Ms. Brock-Wilson explained that the cost of the Route 28 program was \$500,000.00 for a three month period and was extended by one month to reach the full amount. Ms. Brock-Wilson explained that the City looked at potential ridership growth, budgeting for marketing, and evaluation of the impact of the free fare program and its impact on Boston.

Councilors inquired about the funding, the sustainability of the program at the end of the two year period, the limitations of the ARPA funds which must be used by the end of December 2024, and whether the City has current plans for funding sources at the end of the ARPA funds. The Administration stated that they will examine the data and will look at the availability of longer term funding. Councilors asked about ridership numbers, publicity, and community engagement. The Administration stated that the City will advertise the program using local media, flyers in multiple languages, outreach to community organizations, and in-person surveys to determine impact. Councilors inquired about expanding the program and if costs would decrease if ridership increases. The Administration explained that the City is starting with the pilot using the ARPA funds to determine long-term costs and that that City will examine a sustainable funding source using outside partners and available subsidies including infrastructure legislation and the Build Back Better legislation.

#### **Rationale and Recommended Action:**

Passage of this docket authorizes the use of these funds to expand the free fare program for Routes 23, 28, and 29 bus lines in order to serve the communities most impacted by the pandemic. Providing free transit service to these neighborhoods will assist in reopening and recovery efforts and will benefit the residents of these neighborhoods by providing access to transportation, jobs, education and other services consistent with the spirit and intended use of ARPA funds. Across the entire MBTA system, overall bus and subway ridership is at 53% of pre-pandemic weekday ridership. With the pilot Route 28 fare free program, ridership surged to 92% of the pre-pandemic levels making it the most popular route in the system. The 23 and the 29 bus lines serve high volume and diverse ridership with each intersecting Blue Hill Avenue which has been identified by Livable Streets Alliance as one of the corridors that should be prioritized for improvements to increase reliability and boost ridership. This two year investment will allow the City to measure the benefits of fare free bus service including increased ridership, faster buses, less traffic, and business development. This investment is consistent with the goals of the ARPA funds in supporting immediate economic stabilization for households and businesses to address the systemic public health and economic challenges that have contributed to the unequal impact of the pandemic on certain populations.

By the Chair of the Committee on Boston's COVID-19 Recovery, to which the following was referred:

*Docket #1205, message and order authorizing the City of Boston to accept and expend the amount of Eight Million Dollars (\$8,000,000) in the form of a grant, awarded by the United States Department of the Treasury, to be administered by the City of Boston's Chief Financial Officer/Collector Treasurer. The grant will fund the expansion of the fare free transit program. This grant payment is made from the Coronavirus State and Local Fiscal Recovery Fund (CLFRF) in the Treasury of the United States established by Section 9901 of the American Rescue Plan Act of 2021 (ARPA),*

submits a report recommending that this order ought to pass.

For the Chair:

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Michael F. Flaherty". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Michael F. Flaherty, Chair  
Committee on Boston's COVID-19 Recovery