

City of Worcester
Accessibility Advisory Commission
Tuesday, September 21, 2021, 4:30 PM Minutes

Virtual meeting with WebEx platform
<http://www.worcesterma.gov/video-on-demand>
ASL interpreters provided

Attendance:

Members Present: Robert Bureau, Philip Economou, John Finn, Jr., Nancy Garr- Colzie, Darya Karuna, Linda Larrivee, Elizabeth Myska, Christina Parissi Joseph Prochilo, Stephen Stolberg

Members Absent: James Delage, Fitzroy Hall

Staff: Jayna Turcek, Dawn E. Clark

Guests: John Gobis and Melissa Pattavina from John Gobis & Co.
Daniel West Cohen from Soofa Signs Inc.

Call to order, instructions for virtual meeting, introductions

Chairperson Bureau called the meeting to order at 4:30pm and requested Director Turcek to provide the technology instructions for public access to the meeting. Commissioners then introduced themselves on roll call.

Approval of August 17, 2021 minutes*

Commissioner Larrivee moved to approve the August 17, 2021 minutes as written. Commissioner Parissi seconded the motion. All approved by roll call.

Update on Street Masterplan and prioritization plan*

The following correspondence was shared from Steve Rolle, Worcester Director of Planning & Regulatory Services:

“This fall, the Division of Planning & Regulatory Services (DPRS) is initiating two major programs that will be of interest to the Accessibility Advisory Commission; a Citywide Long-range Plan (“Worcester Now|Next”) and a Complete Streets Prioritization Plan.

Worcester Now|Next will be the city’s first update to its comprehensive plan in 35 years. The Plan will identify community needs and opportunities related to subjects such as land use, transportation, and environment, and recommend specific strategies and actions to address these (recommendations may range from programmatic or policy choices to specific physical improvements). Critically, the plan will also establish processes for tracking implementation and conducting plan updates on an ongoing, recurring basis. The plan will enable the city to address needs proactively and in a coordinated fashion.

The Prioritization Plan is a specific evaluation of the street network to identify needed improvements to remake and improve streets so that they are safe and functional for all users. The plan will result in a 5-year schedule of prioritize street improvement recommendations. These may include accessibility improvements, bike and pedestrian improvements, traffic calming measures and similar types of improvements.

We look forward to meeting with the Commission in November to discuss these important planning efforts.”

Full presentation and public review/input is planned for the November 16 AAC meeting

Feedback and recommendations Soofa Signs (interactive public street kiosk)

John Gobis & Co. has contracted with the City of Worcester to help the city to improve the public realm. This company helps municipalities share information with the public and generate non tax money using signs etc. One option to bring information to the community is a public kiosk. This could bring medical information, city service information

etc. The plan is to have a demonstration of ten kiosks to understand their effectiveness.

The company they recommended to test the kiosk effectiveness is a Massachusetts based company called Soofa Signs. This company has kiosks in many Massachusetts municipalities as well as throughout the United States.

Mr. Gobis then introduced Daniel West Cohen from Soofa. Soofa is a woman founded and led company. The goal is information equity: to provide municipal information; offers opportunity for businesses to advertise and more.

Last week Commissioners participated in two focus groups to understand how their kiosks work. The following were points made as feedback from the focus groups and conversation at the meeting.

- Appreciation for the chance to review the kiosk functionality. The QR code can be read from 4ft. without zoom and further away with zoom.
- Suggestions were made increasing functionality for persons who are Deaf. The company is partnering with Perkins School for the Deaf. Focus group participants recommended partnering with Sorenson for video ASL features.
- Language can be adjusted to primary language spoken in a particular neighborhood plus English as a standard.
- Snow may be an issue. Soofa is aware and they remove the snow on a weekly basis. They have kiosks in other New England municipalities.
- Level of screen is 3 feet so it is accessible.
- Request to explore the interactivity features for VIPs. Need to opt in to receive notices by the Soofa kiosks.
- Privacy issue was raised. No personal information will be collected. The data collected is when and where people are passing by the kiosks and stays with the municipality.

- They work with the municipality following their privacy policies.
- Concern about having another object on the sidewalk as not being welcoming for some part of the population. They work with the city's sidewalk plan.
- The city will decide what neighborhoods a kiosk will be placed which has not been decided.
- Who is a typical user in Massachusetts? Depends on what municipality: Miami, Florida are people who ride the METRO and Amherst, Mass are college students and professors.
- How does Soofa consider a kiosk successful? A community engages with the kiosk and brings the community together.
- In Worcester's Request for Proposal there are criteria. There would also be an active survey on the city's website. This also needs to be supported by a public education campaign.
- There are 55 neighborhoods and about 100 languages spoken in Worcester.
- Mr. West Cohen will send a map of current kiosks to Ms. Turchek.
- You can contact Soofa at danielwest.cohen@soofa.com
- Several companies have agreed to support this project.

The Chairperson thanked everyone for the presentation.

Recommendations to city manager for vacancy on WRTA's Advisory Board Disabled Commuter Population Position

WRTA is seeking to fill the vacancy of the Disabled Commuter position of their Advisory Board. Each member town and city has a seat on the Board. Manager Augustus is requesting the Accessibility Advisory Commission make recommendation(s) to him.

This is a voting, 1-year term volunteer position and rotates thru the municipalities served. The meetings are the third Thursday of the month by Zoom and when appropriate in person at the HUB in Worcester. Commissioner Garr-Colzie holds this position thru December 31, 2021.

She said the role is significant and rewarding. The WRTA serves 37 municipalities.

There were no recommendations made. However, the Commission members are aware of the importance of this position and will continue to think of people to recommend to the manager for this position.

Update on accessible housing inventory student project with Holy Cross students

Commissioner Prochilo is leading this project. The Commission has long known there is not enough accessible housing units in the city nor the actual number of accessible units in the city. We know about 16% of the population has a disability. After looking at various reports and checking with city departments, there was no clear local list with the number of accessible housing units. The only definitive number is the 699 units at Worcester Housing Authority of over 3,000 units. The Mass Access Registry has a list of accessible units that are available for rent but no indication of the accessible features. Property owners do not always list on MassAccess registry. WHA also has a list of subsidized housing units. Given this, he is working via the Accessibility Office with a group of Holy Cross students to determine the number of accessible rental units (occupied and unoccupied) in the city.

The students will physically view housing units to determine the type of accessible unit: mobility, Deaf, etc. and exact accessible feature in each apartment. He has prepared a check-list to be used. Students will contact property manager for permission to enter. The office will prepare a letter of introduction to the project addressed to the property manager for the student to present. The student would also video the access point of the rental office, common areas, clubhouse, etc. This gives the Commission and the City knowledge and consolidation of accessible units in the city including affordability.

In addition to the survey group there is a group of students who will be doing a video on accessibly housing in the city.

Moment of silence for victims of natural and man-made disasters

After a moment of silent, the Chairperson announced that September is National Emergency Preparedness Month Check out:

<https://www.ready.gov/september>

He also provided the following legislation information for reference: Real Emergency Access for Aging and Disability Inclusion (REAADI) for Disasters Act and the Disaster Relief Medicaid Act (DRMA) passed into law.

REAADI ([H.R. 4938](#) & [S. 2658](#))

DRMA ([H.R. 4937](#) & [S. 2646](#))

Notice: MA COVID-19 vaccine

- **Walk-in Equity Clinics for COVID 19 vaccines Wednesdays at the Worcester Public Library-** Need an ASL Interpreter?
To request interpreter/accommodation call Michelle at 774-303-6976 or email mortizocasio.socialwork@gmail.com
- **Vaccine clinics** <https://www.mass.gov/covid-19-vaccine>
- **Homebound vaccination program** www.mass.gov/info-details/covid-19-homebound-vaccination-program

Review of AAB notices and applications:* (No City owned properties)

- HP Complaint at Southwest Commons, 50 Southwest Cutoff
- Variance application by 2026 Learning First Charter Public School, 50 Richland Street

No action was taken.

Suggestions for upcoming agenda items

Review with WooSox accessibility issues after the first year of operation.

Announcements:

- **Next Accessibility Advisory Commission virtual meeting:**

October 19, 2021, 4:30pm

- **White Cane Day and Wheelchair Stroll Wednesday October 20, 2021, Contact accessibility@worcesterma.gov**
- **WRTA Transportation Advisory Planning Group, Thursday, October 21, 2021 – 1-2:30pm**

Adjournment:

This is Commissioner Garr-Colzie's last meeting after serving two terms on the Commission. The Commission thanked her for the many rolls she took as a Commissioner over the years that furthered the lives of people with disabilities.

Commissioner Prochilo moved to adjourn and Commissioner Hall seconded. All approved by roll call at 6:47pm.

*Material can be viewed at the Human Rights & Accessibility Office upon request.