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Sustainable Economic Growth & Quality of Place

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March 3, 2020

The Honorable Gina M. Raimondo
Governor
State of Rhode Island
State House
Providence, RI 02903

Re: Potential Merger of RIDOT-RITBA-RIPTA

Dear Governor Raimondo,

Grow Smart RI appreciates very much your leadership in shaping a high-performance transit system as a vital component of a stronger Rhode Island. We especially admire your diligence in seeking innovative ways to bolster Rhode Island's capacity to implement the ambitious strategies emerging from the transit vision and master plan that you initiated in 2018.

We had the opportunity on February 20, 2020 to visit with Director Alviti and his team along with several other community stakeholders to better understand the potential benefits of a proposed merger of RIDOT, RITBA and RIPTA.

While we would generally support the concept of merging services to achieve efficiencies and better coordination, we believe this merger proposal and reorganizational model warrants a much closer examination of the risks and rewards.

Despite RIDOT's major accomplishment with the critical RhodeWorks initiative, we know there's legitimate and justifiable concern in the community concerning its role in matters pertaining to transit. This stems in part from the department's long stalled efforts to develop a multimodal transit hub at the Providence Train Station, the still-low rates of commuter rail ridership (and largely empty parking garage) at Wickford Junction and from its most recent proposal to nearly eliminate transit service in Greater Kennedy Plaza, including the elimination of passenger facilities. Rhode Island is also one of the few states where commuter rail and Amtrak services operate on the same tracks but lack cross-honored fares to provide more options for people commuting to Boston.

Despite claims to the contrary by some, we believe that RIPTA has the requisite transit expertise, transparency and proven data-driven management capabilities to lead the implementation of the Transit Master Plan. Although tremendously under-resourced, we believe that RIPTA provides the most effective transit service achievable within its very modest means.

The existence of RIPTA's Board of Directors also provides a valuable benefit to the public - full transparency and accountability. Through monthly meetings that are posted online and open to the public, passengers and concerned citizens can follow the agency's performance metrics, budgets, planning initiatives, etc. and can express their views when policy decisions are being made that impact passenger service.

We've studied the merger concept materials and it's not clear to us that a merger is actually *necessary* to achieve the benefits outlined... efficiencies from combining duplicative functions, increased federal funding, a seat at the influence table when state budgets are drafted, "codifying relationships that already exist", improved transparency and accountability, etc. It seems that the benefits can largely be achieved without folding RIPTA into RIDOT. For example, given the limited scope of federal transit grants for which RIPTA is currently eligible, it has had a very good success rate in securing such grants.

However, it does seem worthwhile to continue exploring a merger between RIDOT and the Turnpike and Bridge Authority. If we're not mistaken, that merger holds the greatest promise of unlocking existing state funds for new transit enhancements - at the level of approximately $125M annually. Those existing resources could be leveraged to attract millions more in federal funding for roads, bridges and transit.

This is not to say that RIDOT and RIPTA cannot benefit from improved coordination. Perhaps the organizational restructuring that would be most beneficial is to examine the division of responsibilities between RIDOT and RIPTA, which could be reconfirmed with good cause - or reassigned as appropriate.

We know, for example, that our DOT is very accomplished at building (and now maintaining) transportation infrastructure and so it seems to make good sense for RIDOT to retain the job of building and maintaining transit capital infrastructure in addition to roads and bridges.

RIPTA has proven expertise in *operating* transit, including the statewide fixed route system, the regional Flex service, the paratransit program and even Commuter Resource RI, the one-stop-shop for all commuter needs... carpool, vanpool, etc. It therefore probably makes sense for RIPTA to retain its current statutory responsibility as the state's "mobility manager".

Finally, it seems to make good sense to consider reassigning <u>all</u> transit "operating" functions that currently reside at RIDOT to RIPTA (including the related resources and personnel) which would include oversight and management of the commuter rail service agreement with the MBTA, the seasonal ferry service between Providence and Newport and the "Little Roady" autonomous transit shuttle service. Doing so, we believe, would improve significantly the coordination value and deployment of the various transit modes and schedules.

Grow Smart RI stands ready to assist you and your Administration in advancing transit-oriented prosperity across Rhode Island and we applaud you for your commitment to this critical objective.

Sincerely,

Scott Wolf
Executive Director

Cc: David Ortiz, Chief of Staff, Office of the Governor
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