Annual Report on the Fare Free Pilot Program

Submitted Pursuant to Section 1596-2406, Chapter 140 of Massachusetts Budget Act of 2025

Final Report

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Executive Summary

The Fiscal Year 2025 Massachusetts Budget Act (Act) provided $30 million in operating funds for Regional Transit Authorities (RTAs) as grants for fare free pilot programs with the following goals:

(1) Removing economic barriers for low-income individuals to use transit
(2) Increasing ridership
(3) Attracting new low-income customers.

The MassDOT Rail & Transit Division (RTD) conducted a competitive application process to distribute the available funding to RTAs. A joint proposal from thirteen of the fifteen RTAs was selected for award (two RTAs chose not to participate). The following key findings from analysis of RTA data show the impacts of fare free service provision and implications for overall transit provision:

- The funding provided in FY25 continued expansion of resources for the program ($2.5M in FY23, $15M in FY24 and $30M in FY25). This increase in funding mirrors a substantial increase in overall state contract assistance, which enabled many RTAs to add new service hours and routes.

Total fixed route ridership across RTAs exceeded pre-pandemic (FY19) totals for the first time in FY25.

By the end of FY25, thirteen out of fifteen RTAs were operating continuous fixed route fare free service for several months, with eight RTAs providing continuous fare free service for at least one year. As a result of this expansion, the total fixed route ridership statewide exceeded pre-pandemic (FY19) totals for the first time in FY25. Though such gains are not distributed evenly, and other factors have contributed to ridership growth such as improvements in RTA service, there is a strong positive correlation between duration of a fare free program and ridership recovery:

- The three RTAs providing continuous fare free fixed route service since prior to FY23 have exceeded FY19 and FY24 fixed route ridership in FY25.
- All five of the RTAs providing continuous fare free fixed route service for the first time in FY24 saw year-over-year growth in FY25. Three of these five RTAs also surpassed FY19 fixed route ridership levels in FY25.

- Four of the five RTAs providing continuous fare free fixed route service for the first time in FY25 surpassed FY24 fixed route ridership totals. Only one of these RTAs exceeded FY19 totals.

Initiation of Continuous Fare Free Service	*FY25 Fixed Route Ridership exceeded FY24*	*FY25 Fixed Route Ridership exceeded FY19*
Pre-FY23 (3 RTAs)	100%	100%
FY24 (5 RTAs)	100%	60%
FY25 (5 RTAs)	80%	20%

RTAs experience the highest rate of ridership growth in the first one to two years after introducing fare free service, after which the rate of growth slows. Although ridership increased from FY24 to FY25 among the three RTAs that have offered continuous fixed route fare free service since prior to FY23, this growth was weaker than previous year-over-year growth and slower than RTAs just introducing fare free service. RTAs also saw significant increases in ridership over previous periods of fare free operation when operations became continuous.

Fixed route ridership across all RTAs increased by more than 15% from December of FY24 to December of FY25 – showing the additional benefits of offering sustained fare free service vs. a single month.

Unsurprisingly, this expansion of fare free service led to a decline in FY25 farebox recovery ratio, or the proportion of operating costs recovered by fare revenues. Notably, the increase in costs for operating service also contributed to decline in farebox recovery ratios due to inflation and increasing tariffs. This effect was mitigated as some RTAs did not introduce continuous fare free service until several months into FY25.

Four RTAs continuously operated as fare free across all forms of demand response service for the entirety of FY25. Two additional RTAs began offering continuous fare free demand response service during FY25. The remaining seven RTAs in the FY25 Fare Free program collected fares for some of their demand response services. Due to the variety of different fare structures utilized for demand response service, fewer

conclusions can be drawn when compared to fixed route service. Total FY25 demand response ridership exceeded that of FY24 but is still below FY19 ridership. Though total FY25 demand response ridership exceeded FY24, three participating RTAs experienced decreases in demand response ridership from FY24 to FY25. RTAs offering completely free demand response service were also the RTAs with the largest year-over-year increase in demand response ridership from FY24 to FY25.

RTAs offering completely free demand response service were also the RTAs with the largest year-over-year increase in demand response ridership from FY24 to FY25.

Combined total demand response fare revenue increased across RTAs, however, this growth was largely due to a minority of RTAs that provide brokerage services on behalf of the state Human Service Transportation (HST) Office. Other RTAs experienced decreases in fare revenue for demand response services, as expected due to an expansion of fare free demand response service. Demand response farebox recovery ratios declined from FY24 to FY25, which is unsurprising given the expansion of demand response fare free service. Since demand response service is more expensive to operate than fixed route service, many RTAs are more hesitant to eliminate fare collection across premium demand response services.

Across service types, ridership has consistently increased in tandem with fare free operations – spiking after initial introduction of fare free operations and continuously growing over time. While some RTAs are seeing a plateau of growth after many years of operating fare free, growth in ridership continues to be robust (Figure 1).

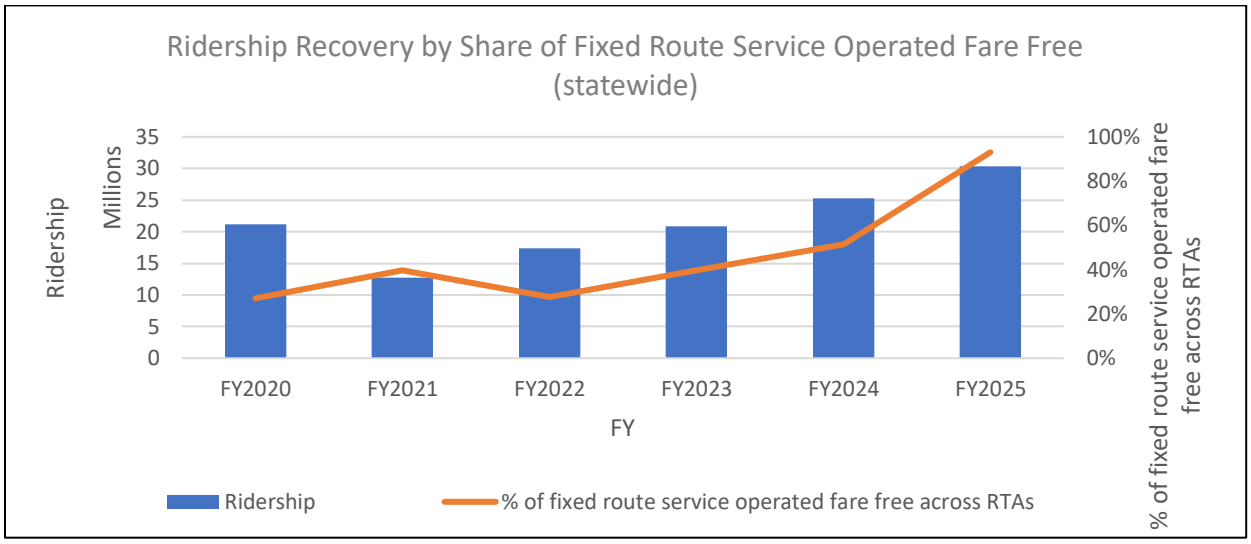

Figure 1: Ridership Recovery by Share of Fixed Route Service Operated Fare Free (statewide). For the purposes of this graph, only full calendar months of fare free service were included.

Introduction

Under Section 1596-2406 of the Fiscal Year 2025 Massachusetts Budget Act, Chapter 140 of the Acts of 2024, MassDOT RTD was directed to award no less than to $30 million in operating funds to RTAs on grants for fare free pilot programs. The Act requires that MassDOT oversee the distribution of said grants and establish grant criteria including, but not limited to, the prioritization of:

a) Ability to implement completely fare-free year-round service.
b) Ability to track ridership.
c) Opportunities for increased ridership.
d) Increased service accessibility to low-income individuals.

The Act further requires that said grants be distributed in a geographically equitable manner and that MassDOT RTD submit a report to the joint committee on transportation and the house and senate committees on ways and means including, but not limited to:

1. the grant criteria used by MassDOT RTD
2. a list of grant applicants,
3. a list of successful grant applicants,
4. summaries of successful proposals,
5. ridership and fare data for such pilot programs, and
6. details on the mechanisms being utilized to track ridership and fare data for said pilot programs.

In compliance with the requirements of the Act, MassDOT RTD submitted a status report on the grant program, detailing the grant process (requirements 1 – 4). At the time of submittal, there was not a complete dataset available to meet requirements 5 and 6. MassDOT RTD submits this final report to address the remaining requirements.

Fare Free Program Evolution

In the past five years, fare free service has been implemented with increasing frequency by RTAs throughout the Commonwealth. Starting in FY23, RTAs had the opportunity to participate in the initial Fare Free Pilot Program during the winter holiday season, known as the Fare Free program with $2.5M. Three RTAs (FRTA, WRTA and MeVa) began operating continuous fare free fixed route service prior to FY2023 due to pandemic impacts. These RTA did not receive state funding specifically to operate fare free service prior to FY23. In FY24, the RTAs participated in a second version of the Fare Free Pilot Program during the holiday season, although the program also supported operation of Fare Free Pilot Programs at any time during the FY24 fiscal year. This was the first year RTAs also had the flexibility to determine the duration of fare free pilots, with some programs lasting a month, and others lasting for a several month period. In some cases, FY24 Fare Free funding was even used to support the continuation of pilot programs into FY25. A total of $15 million was provided as part of FY24 Fare Free funding was available and shared among the RTAs.

The FY25 Fare Free program builds on the foundation of these previous programs, allowing for an expanded period of available fare free service, paired with a significant increase in funding. Participants were required to provide continuous fare free service, with most initiating that fare free service when funding became available around January of 2025. The primary focus of this report is on the impact of the program funding during FY25, although some service in FY25 was funded using FY24 dollars. This report will not cover any FY25 funding that was carried over into FY26 since FY26 ridership data is not yet available.

In FY26, an additional $35 million of fare free funding was provided by the legislature. All fifteen RTAs are required to provide fare free fixed route and ADA complementary paratransit services in compliance with FY26 enabling legislation. Continuation of fare free service among most RTAs will allow for more data collection and an even more robust analysis of fare free transit service.

Grant Criteria and Application Process

MassDOT RTD used the following grant criteria for the award selection process, with scoring based on a 100-point scale and the potential to earn 5 bonus points:

- How the applicant will be able to implement systemwide, year-round fare free service and track ridership. (40 points)
- How the project provides opportunities for increased ridership and increased accessibility for low-income individuals. (30 points)
- A complete project scope, which, at minimum, contains a funding rationale and an implementation schedule. All established local, state, and federal requirements will be applicable to the proposed scope. (30 points)
- Bonus points can be earned for A joint application with one or more additional RTAs that demonstrates joint benefits and/or can be more cost effectively achieved through a joint effort. (Up to 5 points)

Table 1: FY25 Awards

RTA	*Award Amount*
BAT	$2,582,274
BRTA	$699,733
CATA	$293,054
FRTA	$218,173
LRTA	$1,170,257
MART	$1,095,279
MeVa	$2,575,810
MWRTA	$812,331
NRTA	$484,507
PVTA	$9,511,353
SRTA	$3,230,893
VTA	$1,809,050
WRTA	$5,517,286
Total:	$30,000,000

Grant Applications Received and Awarded

MassDOT RTD received one application submitted jointly by thirteen RTAs requesting a total of $30,000,000. Two RTAs, CCRTA and GATRA, opted not to participate in the FY25 Fare Free Pilot Program, though GATRA did use FY24 funding to operate fare free for part of FY25.

RTD recommended that the joint application be selected for awards as proposed (Table 1). The proposal met the grant requirements by demonstrating the proposed pilot programs could result in increased ridership by removing barriers for low- income individuals to use public transit and by reducing logistical hurdles to both the public and the transit agencies that administer the service. The pilot was also intended for the RTAs to attract new low-income customers and demonstrate how transit may work for them. The application

demonstrates that participating RTAs will provide completely fare free year-round fixed route service and RTAs will track and report ridership data.

Data Collection

Quantitative data on fares and ridership were compiled from the monthly Service Data Reports submitted by the RTAs, as required by the FY24-FY25 SCA Performance Memoranda of Understanding (MOUs).

In addition to monthly service data, each RTA was required to submit a one-time progress report that provided a qualitative assessment of the pilot program. Using a written survey, information was collected on any operational improvements or challenges observed by RTA staff during the pilot, customer feedback received, and sample advertising materials.

RTAs collect ridership data through several means. Ridership counts are collected manually by bus drivers through a hand-held unit. More sophisticated data collection methods use either electronic fareboxes or automatic passenger counters (APCs), or a combination, to measure ridership, which is usually then calibrated by manual counts. When collecting fares, electronic fareboxes record boardings when a passenger taps their smart card or, when paying in cash, the bus operator presses a button to indicate a boarding. APCs automatically record passenger boardings and alightings using a variety of techniques, such as an infrared beam or pressure sensitive mats.

Data Analysis

The FY25 Fare Free program required all participants to operate fare free service for the duration of the fiscal year, unlike the FY23 Fare Free pilot program which generally ran from November 25, 2022 to December 31, 2022, or the FY24 Fare Free program which allowed RTAs to use funding for pilots conducted throughout FY24. Some fare free service within FY25 was funded using FY24 funding. This report will include an analysis of fare free service that was provided in FY25 regardless of the year of funding.

Throughout this report, FY19 is used as a baseline for ridership and revenue comparisons. FY19 was both the last full fiscal year prior to the COVID-19 pandemic and the last full fiscal year prior to the adoption of system wide fare free fixed route service by some RTAs. Fare free service in FY19 was limited to CCRTA and PVTA

offering fare free service to seniors (defined as people 60 years old or older) on Wednesday or Tuesday, respectively. Therefore, FY19 is a good comparison point for current fare free, post-pandemic operations.

The various fare free pilot programs have been broken into three broad categories based on length of fare free operation. As each RTA sets the parameters of their own pilot programs, the programs may not be perfect matches for the categories provided. CCRTA and GATRA have been excluded from this analysis as they did not participate in providing sustained fare free service (although GATRA did provide fare free service for one month in FY25). The categories used in the FY24 Fare Free report reflected a much more diverse set of programs – in FY25, most RTAs consolidated into offering continuous fare free service. This shift in service provision results in new categories for analysis based on duration as a continuously fare free system:

Long Term Continuous Fare Free Service (Pre-FY23 Cohort)

- **FRTA** (since March 2020), **WRTA** (since March 2020), **MeVa** (since March 2022)

FY24 Lauch of Continuous Fare Free Service (FY24 Cohort)

- **BAT, MART, MWRTA, NRTA, SRTA**

FY25 Launch of Continuous Fare Free Service (FY25 Cohort)

- **BRTA, CATA, LRTA, PVTA, VTA**

- **Long Term Continuous Fare Free Service (*Pre-FY23 Cohort*):** This category includes RTAs that have been providing fully fare free fixed route service prior to receiving FY24 *Fare Free* funding. FRTA and WRTA began offering systemwide fixed route fare free service in March 2020, at the start of the COVID 19 pandemic. MeVa began offering system wide fixed route service in March 2022. These RTAs intend to maintain fare free service once FY25 funding is depleted through other funding sources, if these funding sources are available.

- **FY24 Launch of Continuous Fare Free Service (*FY24 Cohort*):** This category describes RTAs that offered extensive fixed route fare free service starting in FY24 using Fare Free funding. Unlike the *Pre-FY23 Cohort* grouping, these RTAs were not providing fare free fixed route service (apart from during the height of the COVID 19 Pandemic and during the FY23 Fare Free program) prior to receiving FY24 funding.
- **FY25 Launch of Continuous Fare Free Service (*FY25 Cohort*):** This category describes RTAs that offered sustained (multi-month) fixed route fare free service for the first time in FY25 (RTAs may have offered sustained fare free service during the pandemic previously, but not under Fare Free).

Fixed Route Ridership

Twelve of the thirteen RTAs that participated in the FY25 Fare Free program experienced an increase in total annual fixed route ridership (UPT) in FY25 when compared with total fixed route ridership in FY24 (Figure 2), as did the two RTAs that did not participate in the FY25 Fare Free program. Seven of the fifteen RTAs recorded total annual FY25 fixed route ridership that exceeded FY19 total annual fixed route ridership (Figure 3).

Three of the seven RTAs that exceeded FY19 fixed route ridership in FY25 (the Pre-FY23 Cohort) have operated system wide fare free service since at least March 2022. Annual total fixed route ridership increased for FRTA, MeVa, and WRTA by 19.6%, 46.4%, and 60.7%, respectively, from FY19 to FY25. From FY24 to FY25 FRTA, MeVa, and WRTA's annual total fixed route ridership has increased respectively by 18.3%, 0.6%, and 6.1%. The strong ridership these three RTAs show after operating fare free continuously since at least FY22 indicates the effectiveness of fare free service in generating ridership over a multiyear period. It is worth noting that year-over-year ridership between FY24 and FY25 was more muted.

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The four remaining RTAs that recorded more fixed route UPT in FY25 than in FY19 are BAT, BRTA, NRTA, and SRTA. BRTA did not begin offering continuous fixed route fare

RTAs realized the majority of total ridership increases from FY19-FY25 in just one year of fully fare free operation after initiating continuous fare free policies.

free service until FY25, when fixed route fare collection ceased on November 28, 2024. BRTA also operated fare free fixed route service in June of 2024. BRTA's total annual fixed route ridership increased by 23.3% from FY19 through FY25. From FY24 through FY25, BRTA's total annual fixed route ridership increased by 13.8%. BAT started offering continuous fare free fixed route service during FY24, ceasing fare collection in December 2023. NRTA, likewise eliminated fare collection in April 2024 and has been operating fare free fixed route service ever since. SRTA began continuous fare free fixed route service in January 2024, also within the FY24 calendar year. For these four systems operating their first full year of fare free service, annual ridership increased in FY25 at a significantly higher rate than previous years, often making up a sizeable portion of total ridership increases from FY19-FY25 in just one year of fully fare free operation.

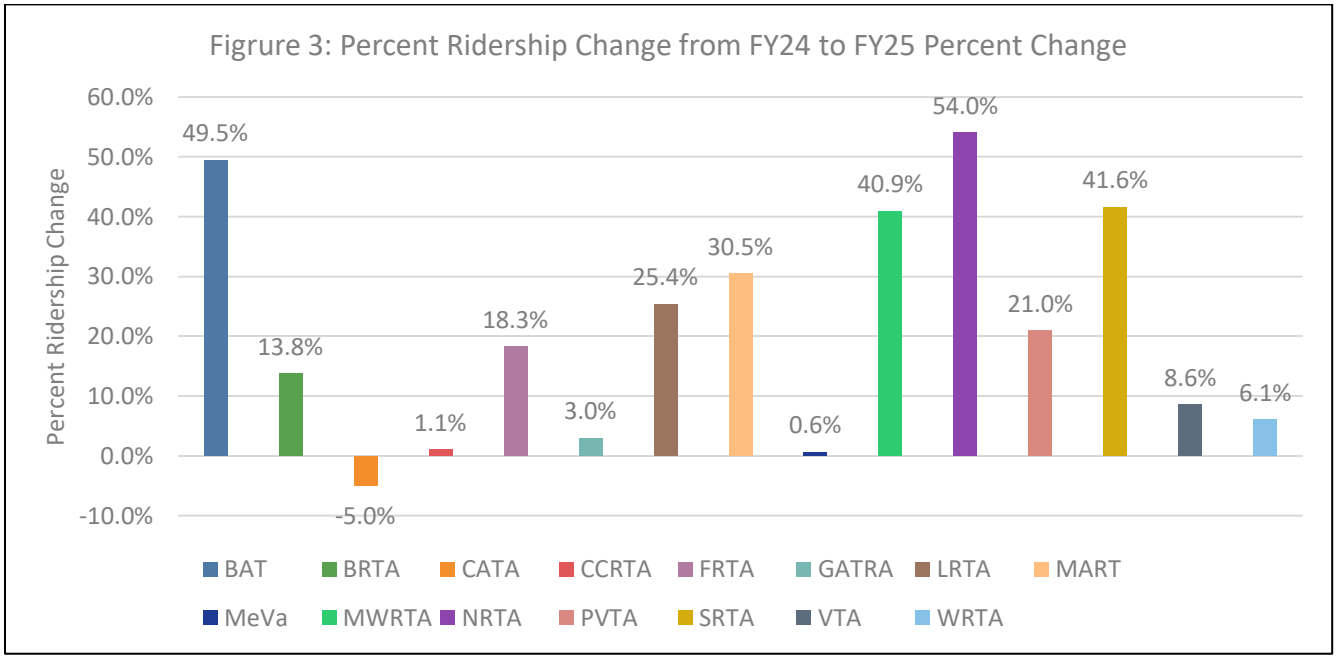

Figure 2: Percent Ridership Change FY24-25

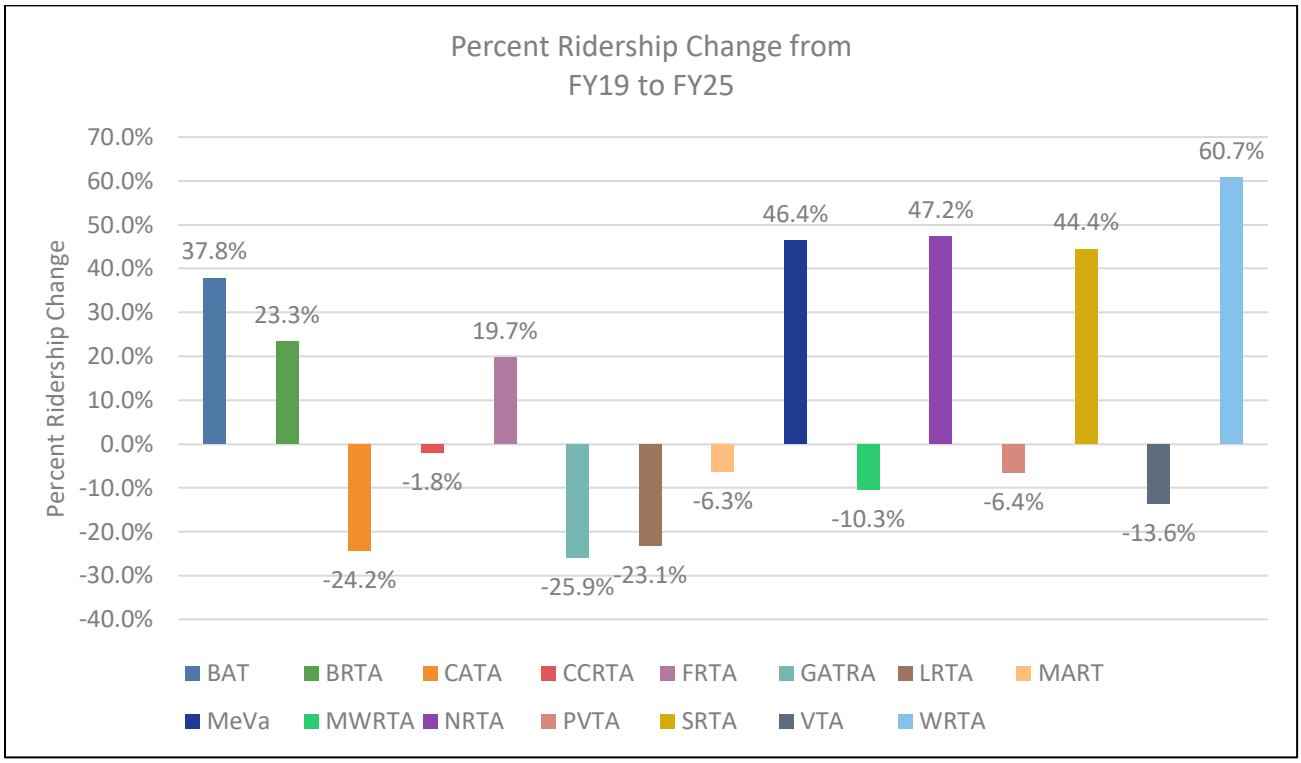

Figure 3: Percent Ridership Change from FY19 to FY25

Total fixed route UPT across all RTAs (including the two RTAs that did not participate in the FY25 Fare Free program) has been increasing since the pandemic era low in FY21. In FY25, a total of 30,363,657 fixed route UPT were reported across all RTAs, a 20.2% increase from FY24. Total fixed route UPT across all RTAs is 14.0% above FY19 totals in FY25 (Figure 4), surpassing pre-pandemic ridership. It is important to note that the introduction of fare free service is not the only factor driving this increase in ridership, service improvements and expansions are also be a contributing factor, a positive coloration between the expansion of fare free service and increase in ridership is clear.

Total fixed route UPT across all RTAs is 14% above FY19 totals in FY25 (Figure 5), surpassing pre-pandemic ridership.

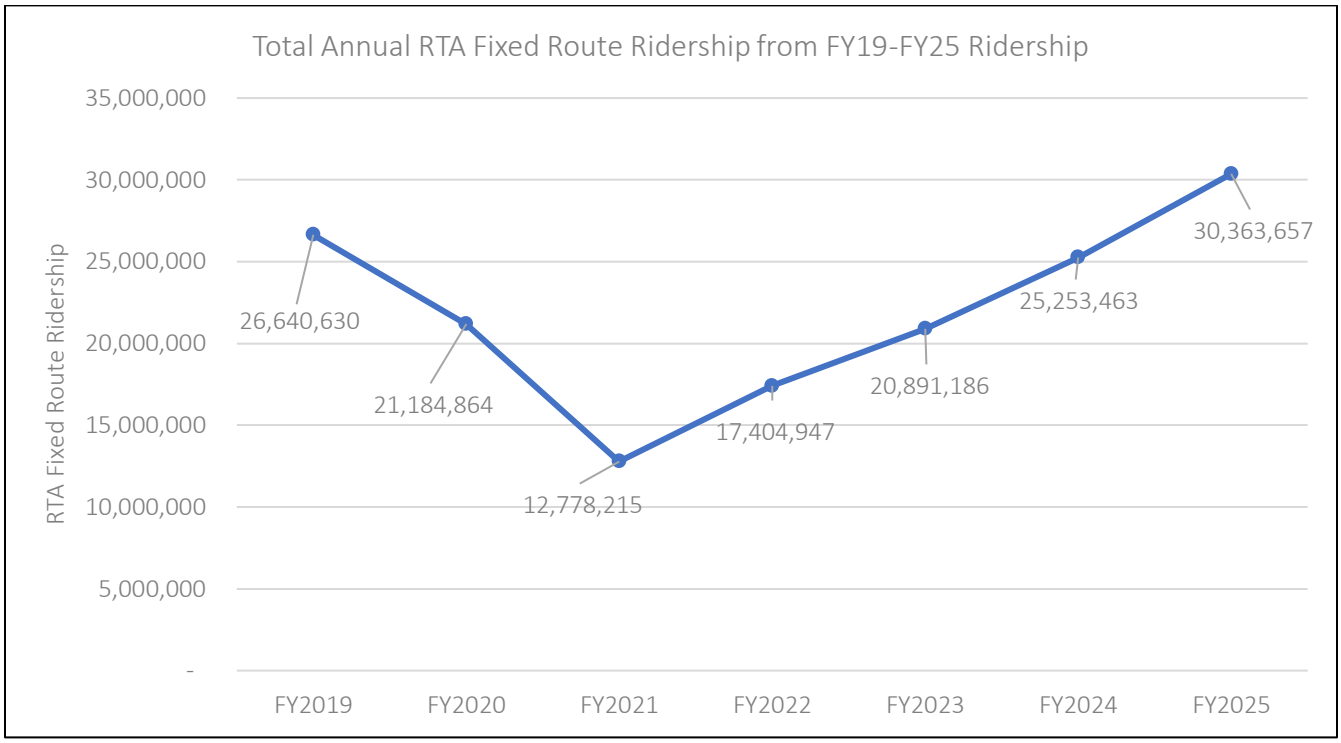

Figure 4: Total Annual RTA Fixed Route Ridership from FY19-FY25

To understand ridership trends, RTAs were broken into the three cohorts previously described. Average annual ridership for each cohort was calculated as the total annual ridership for each RTA in each respective cohort and divided by the number of RTAs in each cohort. Once average ridership was calculated for each cohort, average percent change in annual fixed route ridership between FY2024 and FY2025 was compared (Figure 5).

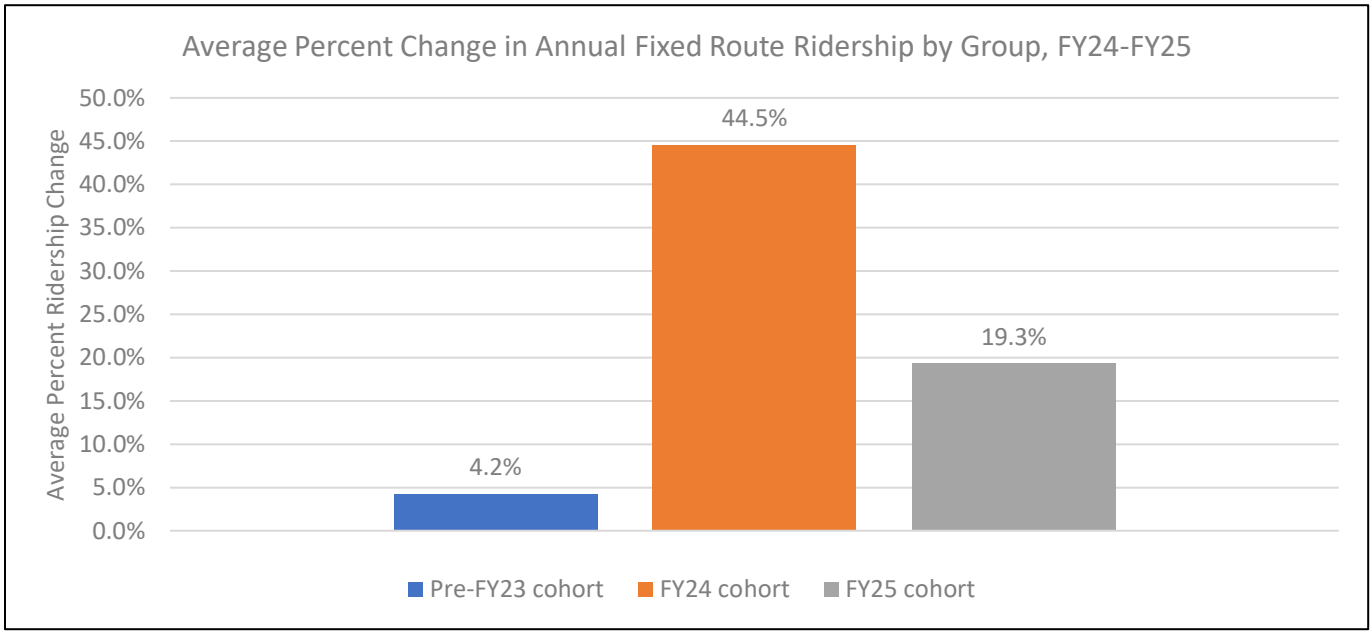

Figure 5: Average Percent Change in Annual Fixed Route Ridership by Cohort, FY24-FY25

The *Pre-FY23 Cohort* group saw an average percent increase in annual fixed route ridership by 54.2% from FY19 to FY25. Average percent change in annual fixed route ridership among the *FY24 Cohort* increased by 33.2% from FY19 to FY25. Among the *FY25 Cohort,* average annual fixed route ridership decreased by 8.0% from FY19 to FY25 (Figure 6), though the Cohort is experiencing sustained ridership growth since the pandemic. The change in average ridership between FY24 and FY25 indicates that the elimination of fixed route transit fares led to some degree of ridership increase while the change between FY19 and FY25 demonstrates a positive correlation between the duration of fare free transit and ridership growth.

Interestingly, the *Pre-FY23 Cohort* has the largest average percentage increase in ridership from FY19 to FY25 but the smallest average percentage increase in ridership from FY24 to FY25. The modest average percent increase in ridership among the *Pre-FY23 Cohort* in FY25 indicates that there is a ceiling to how much ridership can increase once service has been fare free for several years, though it could also be reflective of local conditions unrelated to fare free service. The large increase in average ridership among the *FY24 Cohort*

The modest average percent increase in ridership among the Pre-FY23 Cohort in FY25 indicates that there is a ceiling to how much ridership can increase once service has been fare free for several years

demonstrates the rapid rise in ridership that results when fare free service is sustained between one and two years. The growth in average ridership among the *FY24 Cohort* resembles explosive growth in year-over-year ridership among *Pre-FY23 Cohort* RTAs in previous years. For example, this cohort displayed a 29.6% increase in average ridership from FY23 to FY24.

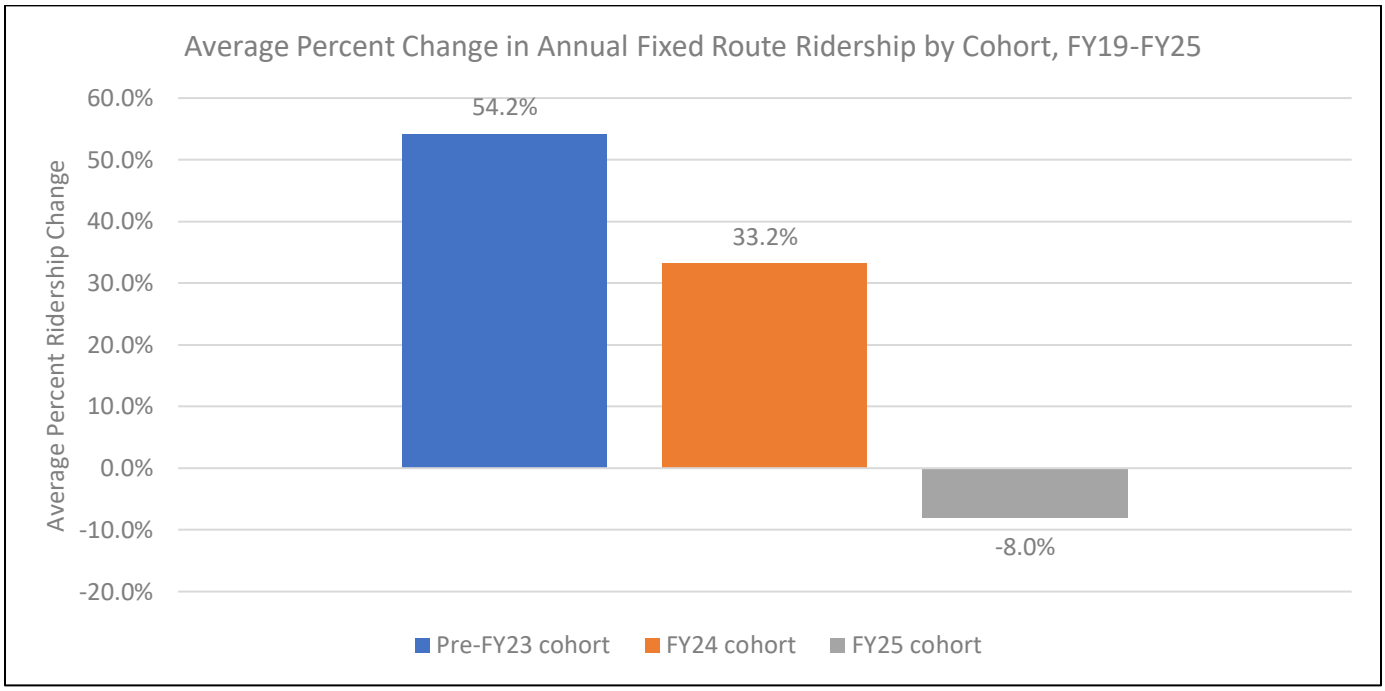

Figure 6: Average Percent Fixed Route Ridership by Cohort, FY19 to FY25

The FY25 total monthly fixed route ridership of all RTAs exceeded those of FY24 (Figure 7). In general, the ebb and flow of ridership during the year is impacted by several seasonal factors, particularly for systems whose ridership has a high tourist and/or student base. December is typically a low ridership month, for example, while January reported the lowest total ridership in both FY24 and FY25. In FY24, the month with the most total fixed route ridership was May. In FY25, highest total fixed ridership took place in August, even though four of the thirteen participating RTAs were collecting fares during that month.

The month of December is an interesting point of comparison across years. In FY23 fourteen of the fifteen RTAs operated fare free systemwide fixed route service as part of the first Fare Free pilot program (CCRTA operated fare free fixed route for seniors on Wednesday and for the public on Fridays and Saturdays). During this first incarnation of the Fare Free program in FY23, fare free pilot programs were limited to

late November and December to target holiday shoppers and support community events. Apart from FRTA, MeVa, MWRTA, and WRTA, no RTA operated completely fare free fixed route service outside of that holiday season window. As part of the FY24 Fare Free pilot program, RTAs had greater flexibility in choosing when they could operate fare free service, and ten of the fifteen RTAs chose to operate system wide fare free fixed route service in December.

In December of FY25, all participating RTAs operated fare free fixed route service, as did one of the non-participating RTAs, GATRA, which operated fare free service using FY24 Fare free funding. Fixed route ridership across all RTAs (including the non-participating RTAs) increased by more than 15% from December of FY24 to December of FY25 – showing the additional benefits of offering sustained fare free service and continuing ridership recovery post-pandemic. Fixed Route ridership increased by 68.2% between December FY22 (when only three RTAs operated systemwide fixed route fare free service) and December FY25 (when fourteen RTAs were operating fare free service). Fixed route ridership increased by 11.6% between December of FY19 and December FY25 (Figure 7).

Fixed route ridership across all RTAs (including the non-participating RTAs) increased by more than 15% from December of FY24 to December of FY25 – showing the additional benefits of offering sustained fare free service and continuing ridership recovery post-pandemic vs. a single month.

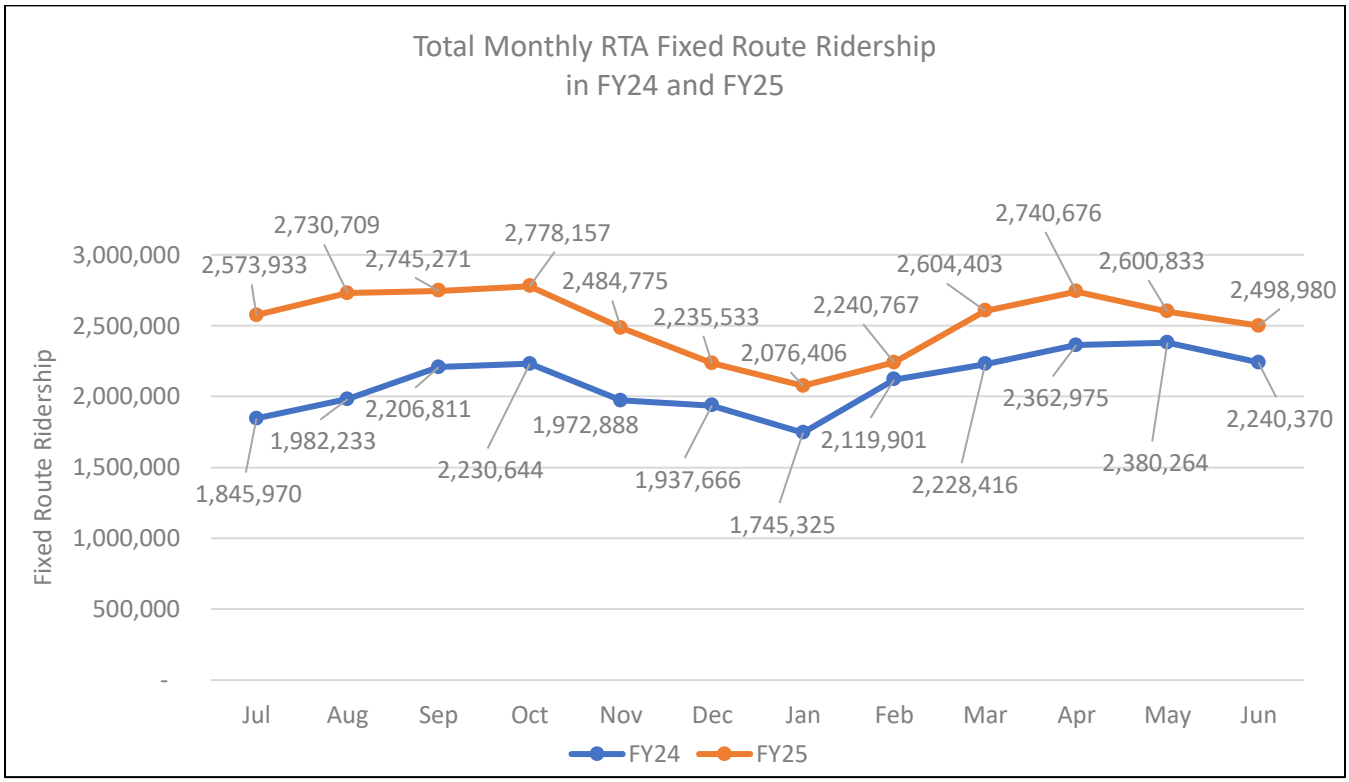

Figure 7: Total Monthly RTA Fixed Route Ridership in FY24 and FY25

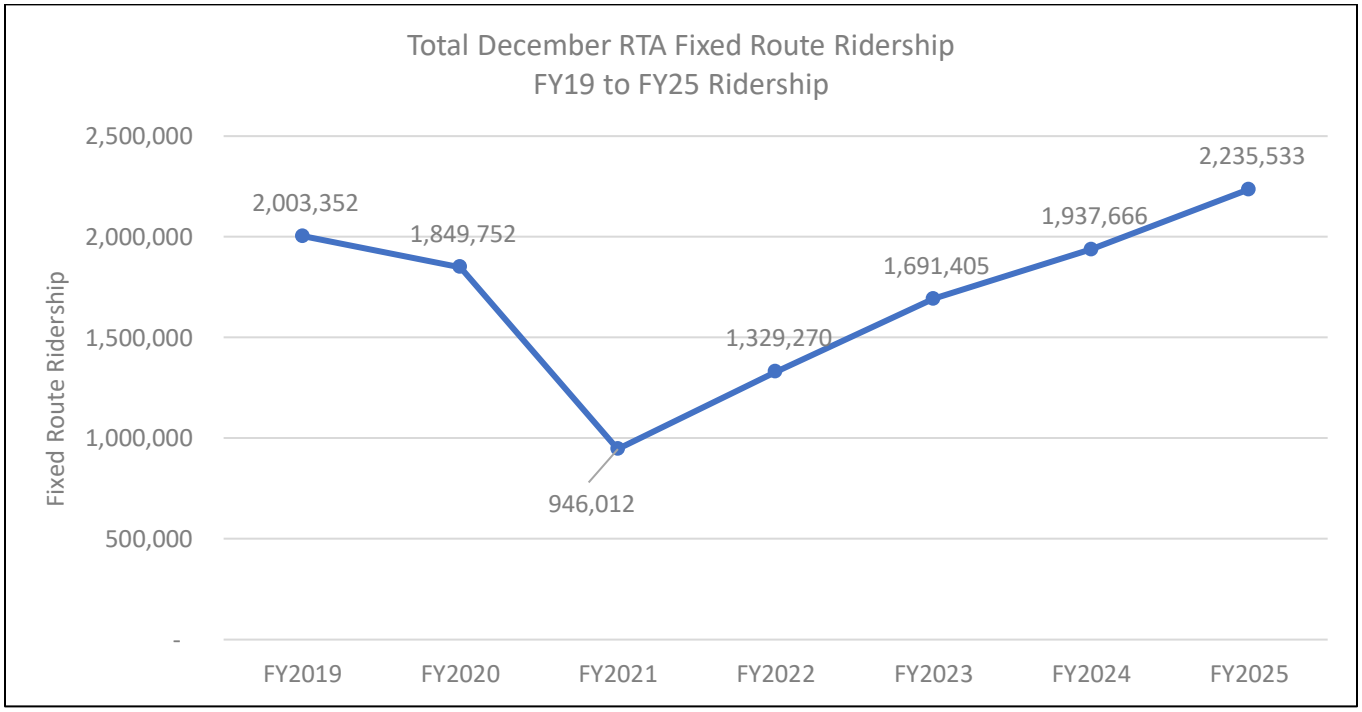

Figure 8: Total December RTA Fixed Route Ridership FY19 to FY25

Pre-FY23 Cohort

The *Pre-FY23 Cohort* had the largest increase in average annual fixed route ridership between FY19 and FY25 but the smallest increase in annual fixed route ridership between FY24 and FY25 (4.2% increase) of the three cohorts. In terms of total annual ridership, 7,548,325 UPT were made in FY24, up from 5,824,080 in FY23 and 5,103,721 in FY19 (Figure 9).

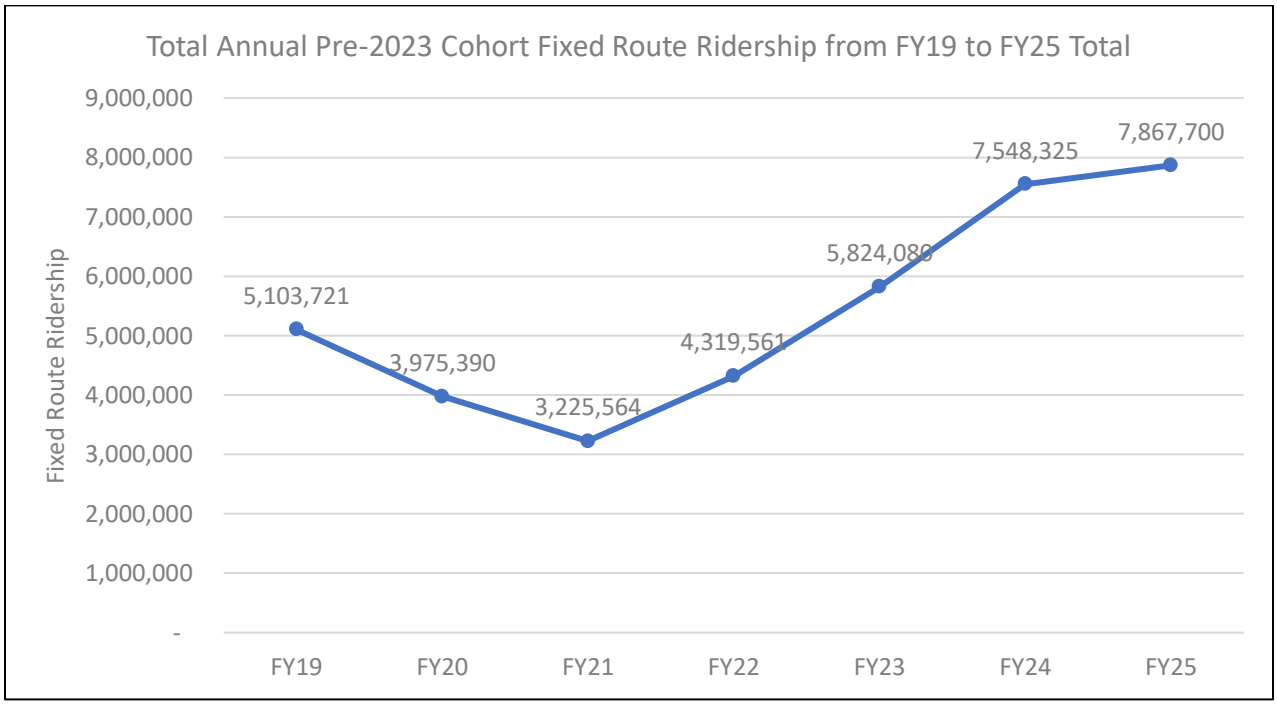

Figure 9: Total Annual *Pre-2023 Cohort* Fixed Route Ridership from FY19 to FY25

FY24 Cohort

The *FY24 Cohort* is made up of five RTAs that initiated continuous fare free service during FY24 as part of that year's Fare free Program. BAT began its continuous fare free service in December of FY24 while MART, MWRTA, and SRTA ceased fixed route fare collection at the start of the 2024 calendar year. NRTA did not begin continuous fare free fixed route service until April of FY24, ahead of the busy summer season. While all RTAs in this cohort have exceeded FY24 ridership in FY25 (Figure 2

), the first full year of continuous fare free service for these five RTAs, only three of these RTAs have surpassed FY19 fixed route ridership totals (Figure 3). While BAT, NRTA, and SRTA have each exceeded FY19 ridership by more than 35%, MART and MWRTA remain respectively at 6.3% and 10.3% under FY19 totals.

None of the RTAs in this cohort provided fare free service during the first quarter (July-September) of FY24. Comparing Q1 FY25 ridership to Q1 FY24 ridership demonstrates the impacts of continuous fare free service once it has been place for several months. Similarly to the full fiscal year comparison, BAT, NRTA, and SRTA exceed FY19 Q1 fixed route ridership in Q1 FY25, while MART and MWRTA FY25 Q1 fixed route remained below the FY19 benchmark. All of the RTAs in this cohort exceeded FY24 Q1 ridership in Q1 of FY25, while four of the five RTAs exceeded FY24 Q1 ridership by more than 65% (Figure 10). It is worth noting that all the RTAs in the cohort, excluding MART, saw a greater increase in ridership between Q1 of FY24 and Q1 of FY25 than between the total of FY24 and the total of FY25 (Figure 2). This could further indicate that ridership gains associated with fare free transit are strongest when fare free service is first introduced and then growth slows down over time, as was seen with the minimal ridership gains among the Pre-FY23 Cohort in FY25 from FY24.

All of the RTAs in the FY24 cohort exceeded FY24 Q1 ridership in Q1 of FY25, while four of the five RTAs exceeded FY24 Q1 ridership by more than 65%

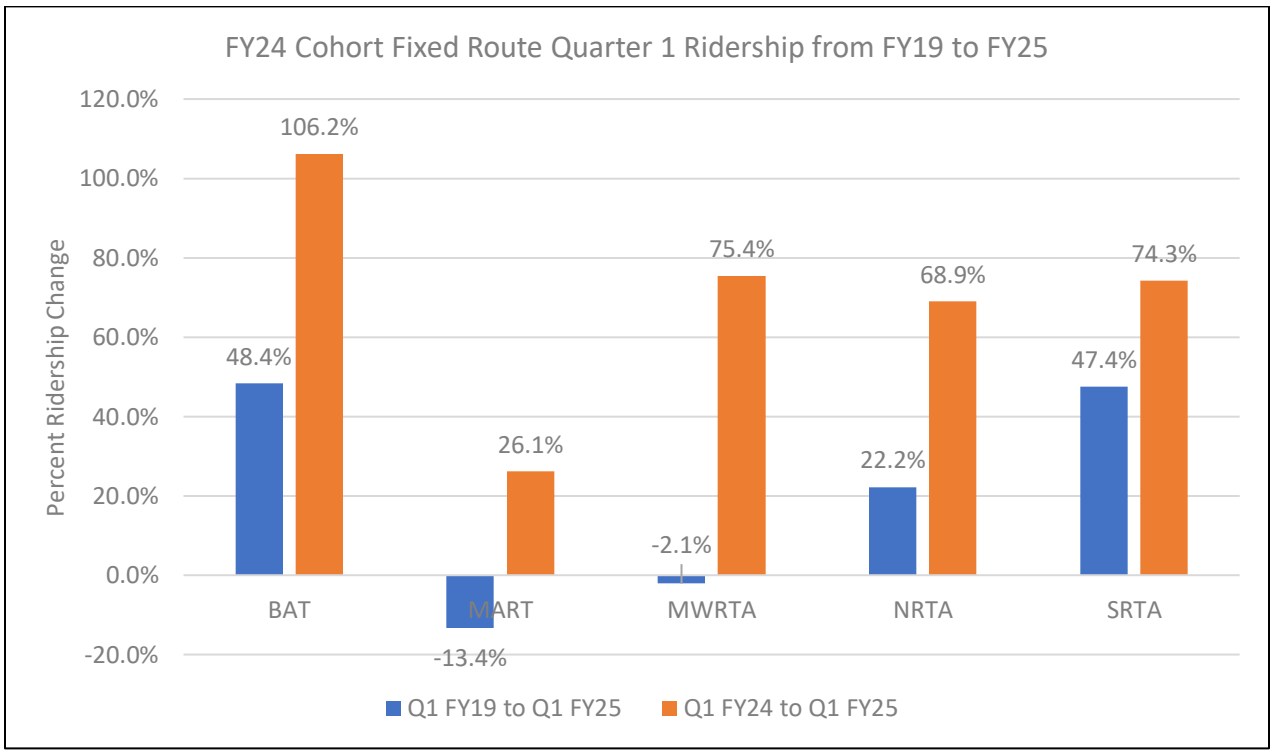

Figure 10: *FY24 Cohort* Fixed Route Quarter 1 Ridership FY19-FY25 and FY24 vs. FY25

All RTAs in the *F24 Cohort* were operating fare free fixed route service during quarter 4 of FY24. However, MWRTA required ridership to still tap a fare card while boarding

the bus even though the card was not being charged. No RTA in this cohort witnessed a ridership increase of more than 35% between FY24 quarter 4 and FY25 quarter. The only RTA in this cohort that experienced a ridership increase of greater than 25% during this time frame was MWRTA, which as noted was still requiring riders to tap fare cards in FY24. This finding further indicates that gains in ridership are strongest upon the launch of fare free service. Four of the five RTAs in the *F24 Cohort* exceeded FY19 quarter 4 ridership by FY25 quarter 4, with three of these RTAs exceeding by more than 40% (Figure 11).

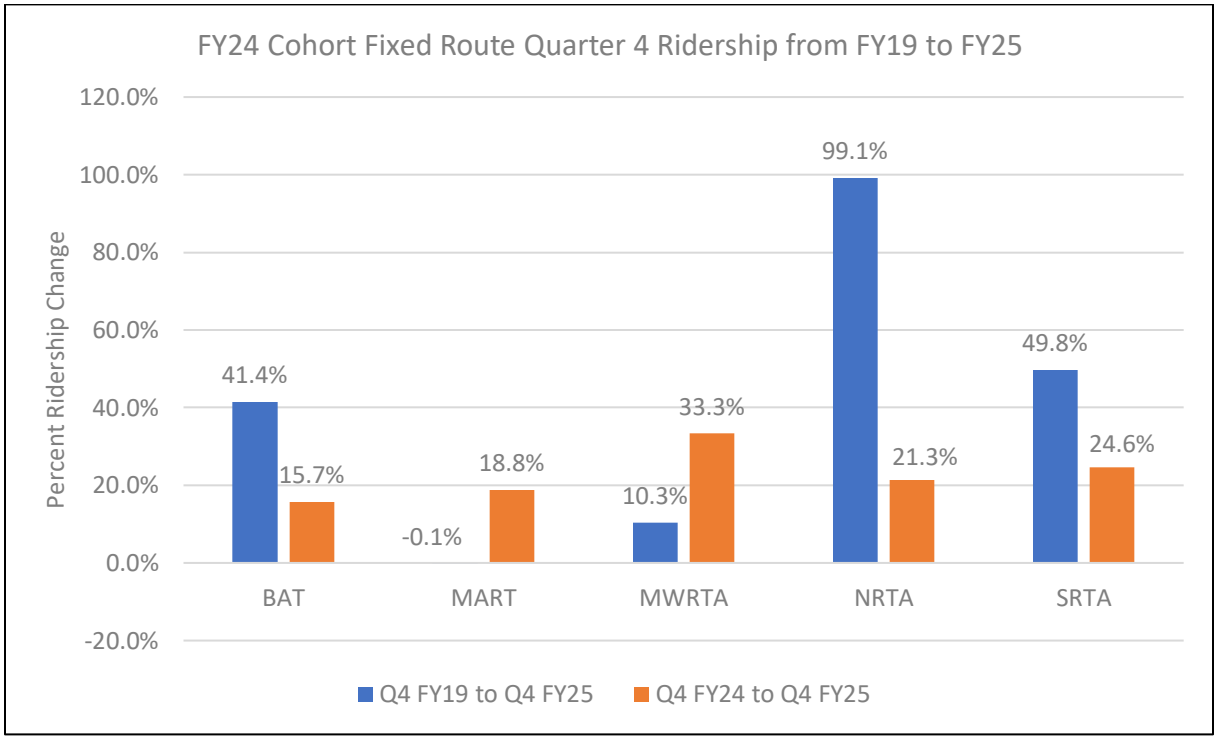

Figure 11: *FY24 Cohort* Fixed Route Quarter 4 Ridership FY19 and FY24 vs. FY25

FY25 Cohort

The five RTAs that comprise the *FY25 Cohort* have each conducted prior fare free pilot programs in FY23 but did not begin offering continuous fare free fixed route service until FY25. All RTAs in the cohort, excluding CATA, saw an increase in ridership from FY24 to FY25 (representing the change from one to four-month long pilots in FY24 to continuous fare free service in FY25). Only one RTA in this cohort, BRTA, saw FY25 fixed route ridership exceed FY19 totals, further indicating the positive correlation between ridership gains and continuous fare free service, at least in the first few years fare free service is offered.

Most of the RTAs in this cohort gradually introduced fare free service throughout the first half of FY25, with all five of these RTAs offering continuous fare free fixed route service by December. None of the RTAs in this cohort provided fare free service during the months of April or May prior to FY25. Comparing May FY25 ridership to May FY19 and FY24 ridership demonstrates the impacts of continuous fare free service (operated for several months) compared to ridership when fares were being collected. May was chosen rather than April since VTA offered fare free service from late November through March FY24 which could have impacted April ridership.

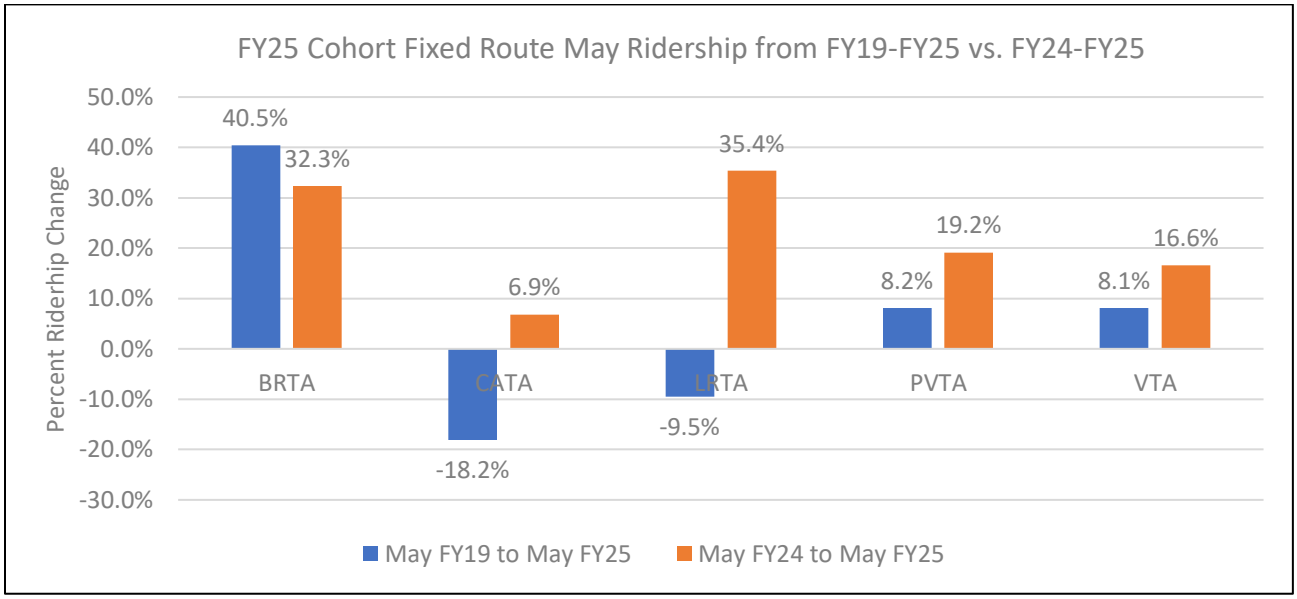

Figure 12: FY25 Cohort Fixed Route May Ridership from FY19-FY25 vs. FY24-FY25

During May of FY25 fixed route ridership increased among each of the RTAs in the *FY25 Cohort* when compared to May of FY24. Three of the five RTAs in this cohort reported May FY25 fixed route ridership higher than that of May FY19 (Figure 12), further indicating the positive correlation between fare free service and ridership growth. Total fixed route ridership across the *FY25 Cohort* increased by 20.8% from FY24 to FY25 and by 7.0% from FY19 to FY25 (Figure 13**Error! Reference source not**

found.), showing the growth rate almost tripling after the *FY25 Cohort* initiated fare free service.

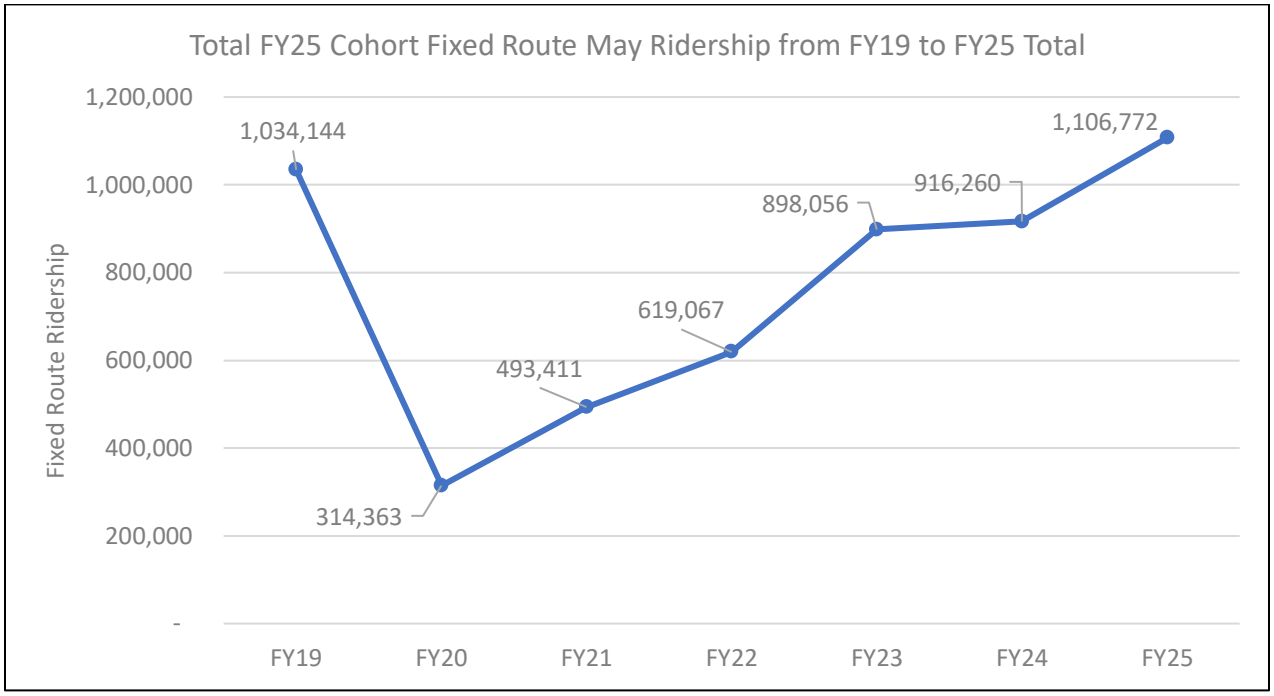

Figure 13: Total *FY25 Cohort* Fixed Route May Ridership from FY19 to FY25

Ridership growth rates almost tripled after the FY25 Cohort initiated fare free service.

Fixed Route Fare Revenues

Fixed route fare revenue continued to decline in FY25, following years of increases in funding for Fare Free programs and a decline in the number of RTAs charging fares for fixed route service. Due to this increase in fare free operation, it is unsurprising that fixed route fare revenue decreased between FY24 and FY25, despite the increase in fixed route ridership. Total fixed route fare revenue across all fifteen RTAs decreased by almost 60% in FY25 (from $11.5M in FY24 to $4.7M in FY25). When looking across the three cohorts considered for this report, the *FY24 Cohort* saw the most significant reduction in fare revenue (89%), a result of operating fare free for the majority of FY25 (Figure 14). The *FY25 Cohort* did not operate fare free the entire year and thus saw a lower reduction in fare revenue (54%). The *Pre-FY23 Cohort* saw

Total fixed route fare revenue across all fifteen RTAs decreased by almost 60% in FY25

no change from previous years as no fare revenue was collected among them from FY23 to FY25[1].

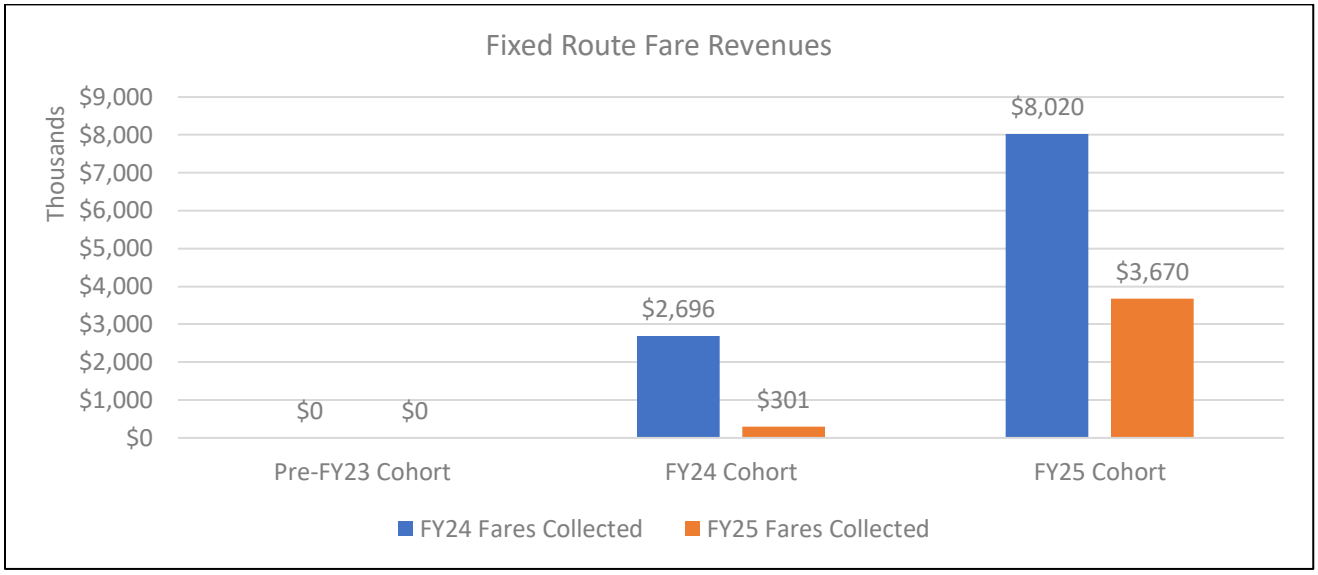

Figure 14: Reduction in Fare Revenue for Fixed Route service by Cohort, FY24-FY25

The *FY25 Cohort* of RTAs launched fare free service on a continuous basis later in the year, providing an average of seven months of fare free service, as compared to a full year of fare free service for all *FY24 Cohort* RTAs. The FY25 Fare Free program standardized when fares were collected during the year for the first time, leading to a much closer alignment of practices across RTAs, and thus a grouping of their revenue collection data. As seen in Figure 15, the *FY24 and FY25 Cohorts* have differences in the percentage reduction of fares collected for FY25.

The FY25 Fare Free program standardized when fares were collected during the year for the first time, leading to a much closer alignment of practices across RTAs.

[1] For this group, any incidental reported revenue represents annual or multi-ride fare media bulk by private/public agencies and then provided to employees or students.

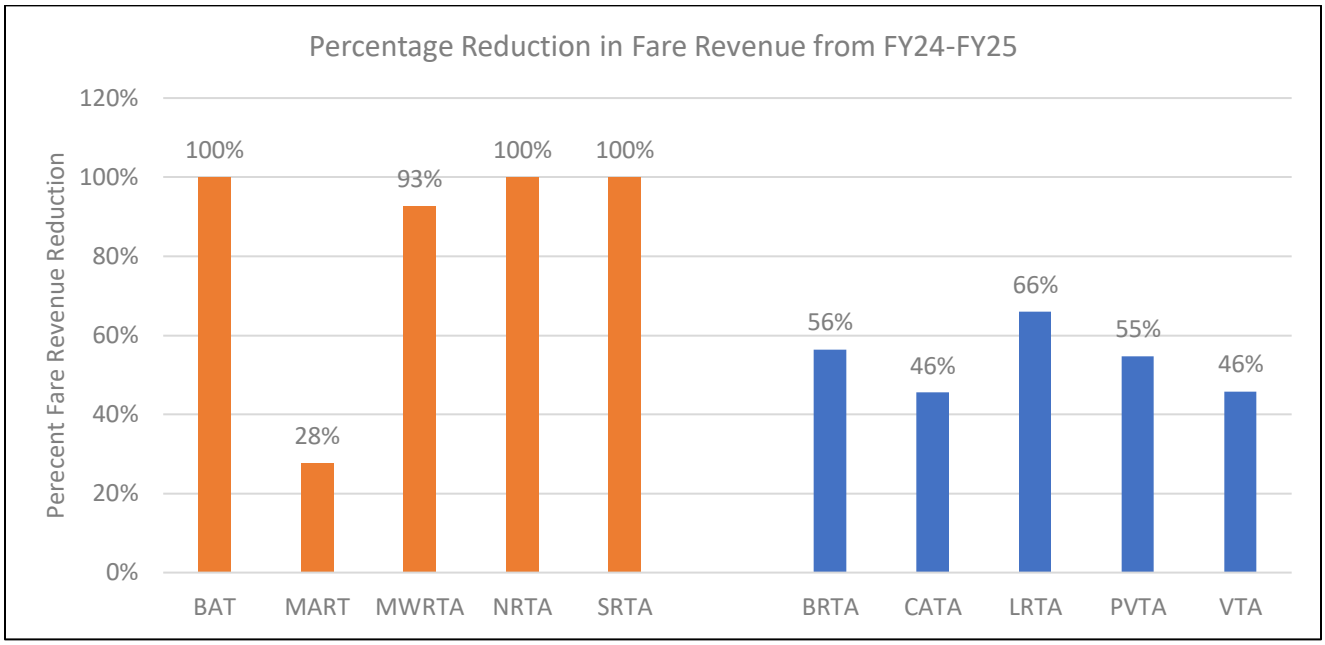

Figure 15: Reduction in Fare Revenue for *FY24 Cohort* (orange) and *FY25 Cohort* (blue)

Fixed Route Farebox Recovery Ratio

Farebox Recovery Ratio (FRR) is calculated by dividing total fixed route fare revenue by total operating expenses. Total fixed route FRR across all RTAs in FY25 was 2.6%, a reduction from 6.1% in FY24 (Figure 16). This change in FRR is attributable to both the decrease in fares collected and an increase in operating expenses due to provision of more service and rising costs of service provision. Despite a sharp increase in provision of fare free service in FY25 (rising to 93% of fixed route service months from 53%), the FRR did not fall by a proportional amount. This lack of correlation could be the result of incidental fare collection (through bulk purchased fares and university fare programs), the inclusion of PVTA as the largest RTA in the *FY25 Cohort*, and the incidence of increasing ridership (and therefore fare revenue) for those still collecting fares during portions of FY25.

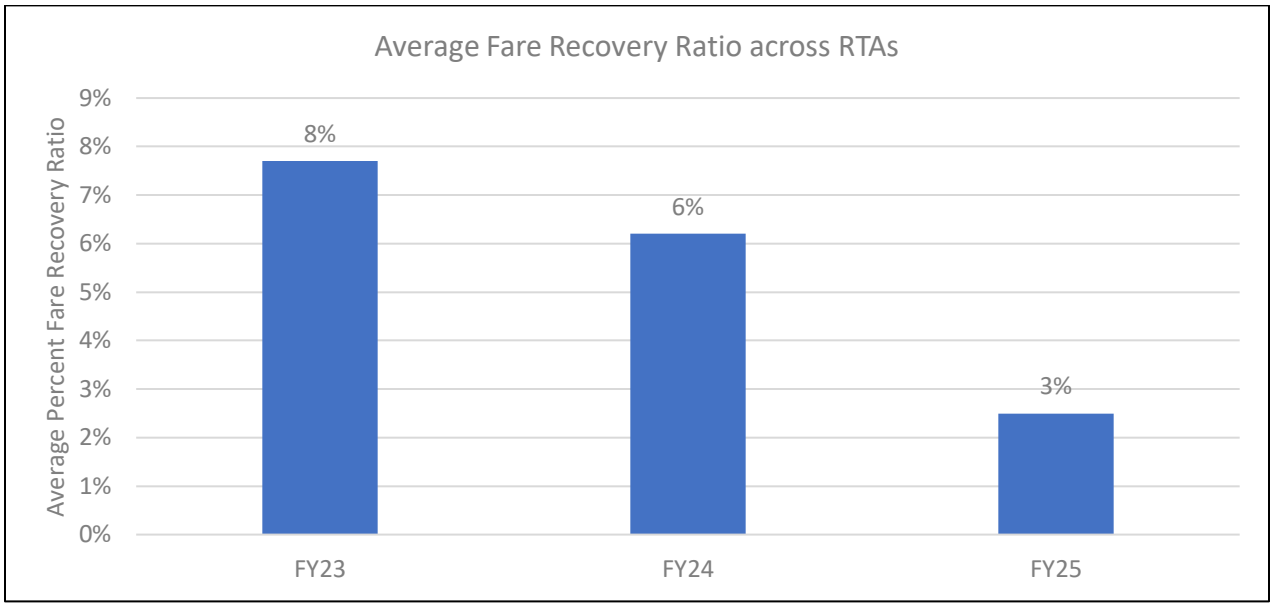

Figure 16: Average Fare Recovery Ratio in FY25 for all RTAs FY23-FY25

Demand Response Service

In addition to offering fixed route bus services, every RTA offers demand response service, a type of public transportation that uses flexible routes to take passengers where they need to go. The label 'demand response' covers different types of service, but generally encompasses not only Federally required ADA paratransit, but also demographic restricted services offered by groups like Councils on Aging (COAs) and premium services like microtransit[2]. RTAs incorporated different components of the greater demand-response umbrella into their fare free offerings, making the undifferentiated data particularly difficult to analyze. According to federal law, during the times that fixed route services were operated fare free, all ADA complementary paratransit also had to be free. The fare policies of other demand response programs differ depending on the RTA. Like all demand response transit, microtransit can be expensive to operate, and many RTAs have continued charging fares for this service to ensure revenue is sufficient to cover operating expenses.

[2] Microtransit is a premium demand response service that operates like a Transportation Network Company (TNC), flexibly taking riders from the public anywhere within a given area.

MeVa, MWRTA, NRTA and SRTA collected no demand response revenue while fixed route services were free. LRTA and VTA operated all demand response services as fare free, collecting fares until approximately halfway through FY25. BAT, BRTA, CATA, FRTA, MART, PVTA and WRTA continued to collect demand response revenue for at least some services and/or some time periods during the year, with some providing additional free demand response service like the service provided through COAs or Dial-a-Ride.

Because of these different approaches to collecting fares across types of demand response service, fewer conclusions can be drawn about the exact effects of fare free policies on demand response ridership, revenue, and farebox recovery. For the purposes of this report, RTAs have been divided into the same three cohorts to the ones used in the fixed route section: namely, Pre-FY23 Launch of Fare Free service (*Pre-FY23 Cohort*), FY24 Launch of Fare Free service (*FY24 Cohort*) and FY25 launch of fare free service (*FY25 Cohort*). These groupings are useful primarily to visualize the effects of various approaches and are not intended to elicit comparison between RTAs, especially as there are differences within cohorts in the organization of demand response fare structures.

Demand Response Ridership

In FY25, demand response ridership among RTAs generally increased, with an average increase of 11.9% across RTAs participating in the Fare Free program - just slightly lower than the increase of 14.4% for fixed route service (Figure 17Figure 17). Of all RTAs included in the report, NRTA saw the largest increase by far – exceeding a 50% increase year-over-year for demand response services, a result of moving to fare free operation for the first time and mirroring their fixed route ridership increases**.** Eleven of the thirteen participating RTAs saw positive or near zero change in demand response ridership, while two RTAs saw a decrease in demand response

Eleven of the thirteen participating RTAs saw positive or near zero change in demand response ridership in FY25.

ridership.

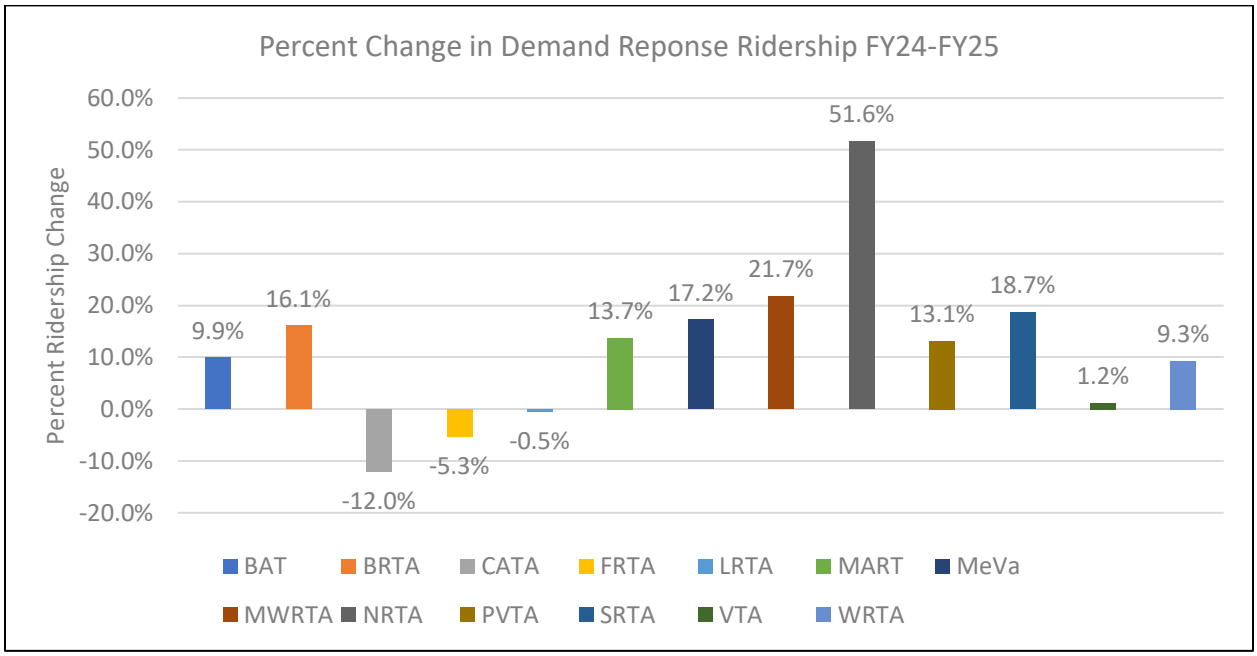

Figure 17: Percent Change in Demand Response Ridership FY24-FY25

Among the three cohorts examined in this report, demand response ridership grew most for the *FY24 Cohort* (23%), mirroring fixed route ridership increases (Figure 18).

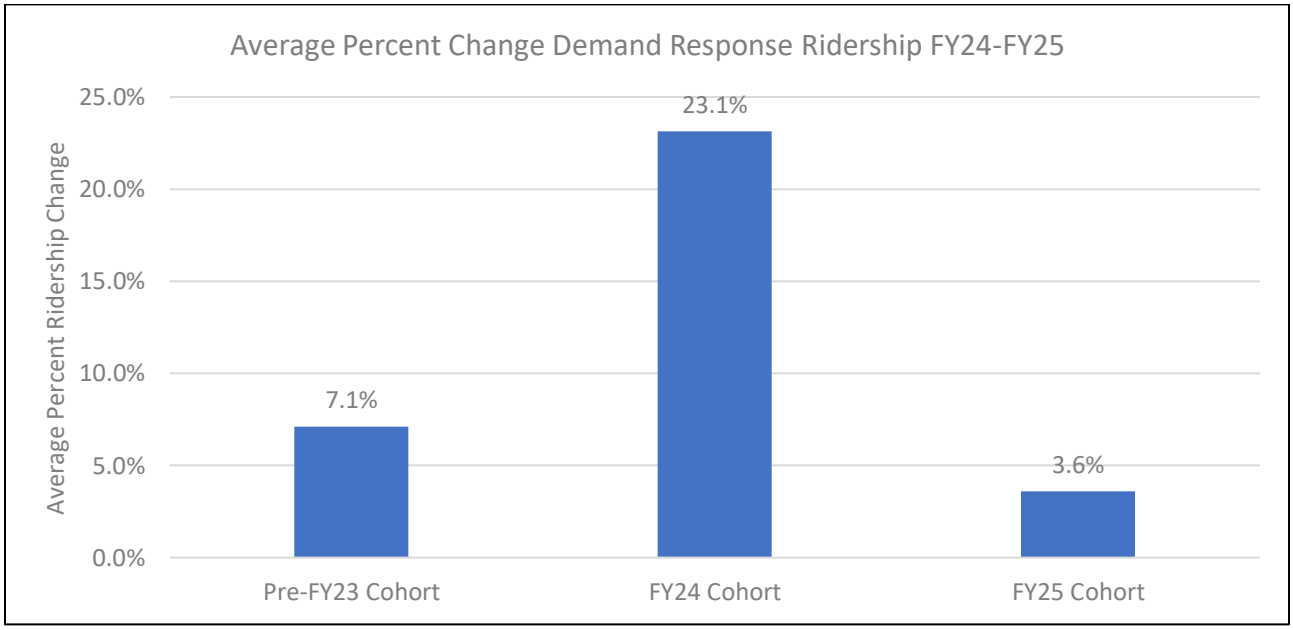

Figure 18: Average Change Demand Response Ridership by Cohort, FY24-FY25

Notably, the four RTAs with highest ridership increases this year were those who charged no fare revenues at all for demand response service, including MeVA, MWRTA, NRTA and SRTA. The average increase in ridership across RTAs operating 100% fare free demand response service was over 27% (Figure 19). This was more than four times the increase in ridership for other systems (5% average increase for RTAs only operating partial fare free demand response service, see Figure 19 and Figure 20). While this data shows a trend toward increasing ridership when fare free service is provided, many RTAs noted a concern about eliminating fares entirely for demand response service, noting the high cost of operation.

RTAs operating fare free across demand response services saw four times the growth of RTAs offering only required fare free demand response service.

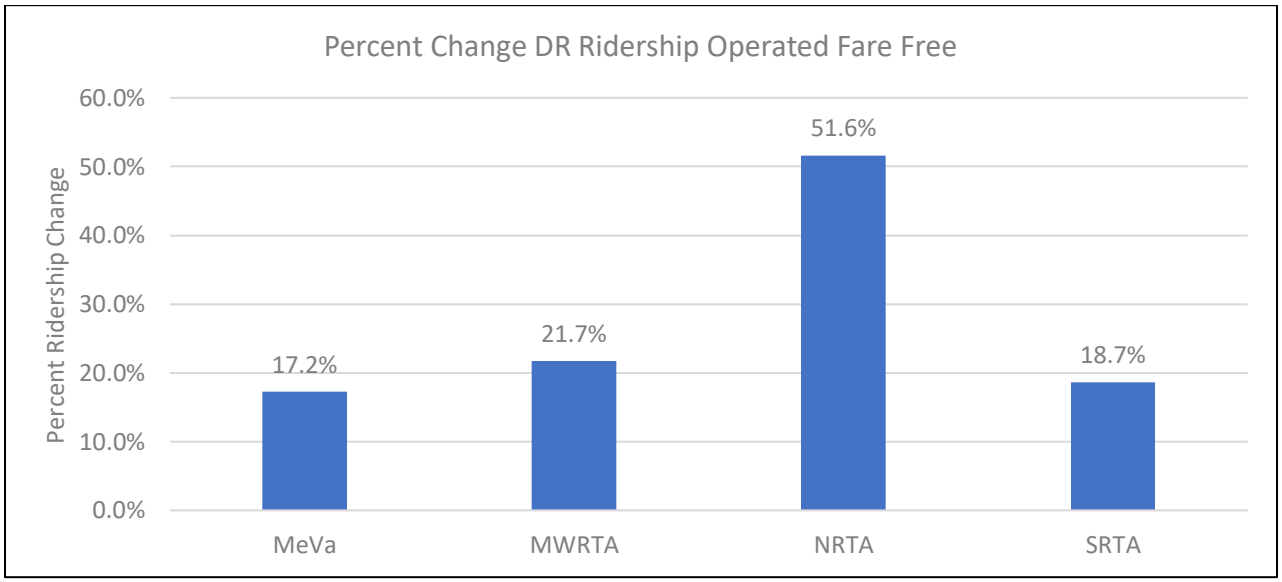

Figure 19: Percent Change DR Ridership Operated Fully Fare Free FY24-FY25

Three RTAs, CATA, FRTA and LRTA saw a decrease in demand response ridership in FY25. Most RTAs operating demand response with partial fares (excluding required ADA complementary paratransit) saw increases in ridership around 10%. As RTAs have expanded their fixed route service offerings, some of the drop in demand response trips may be the result of increased accessibility for fixed route services, although teasing out the reasons for decreases in demand response ridership is complex.

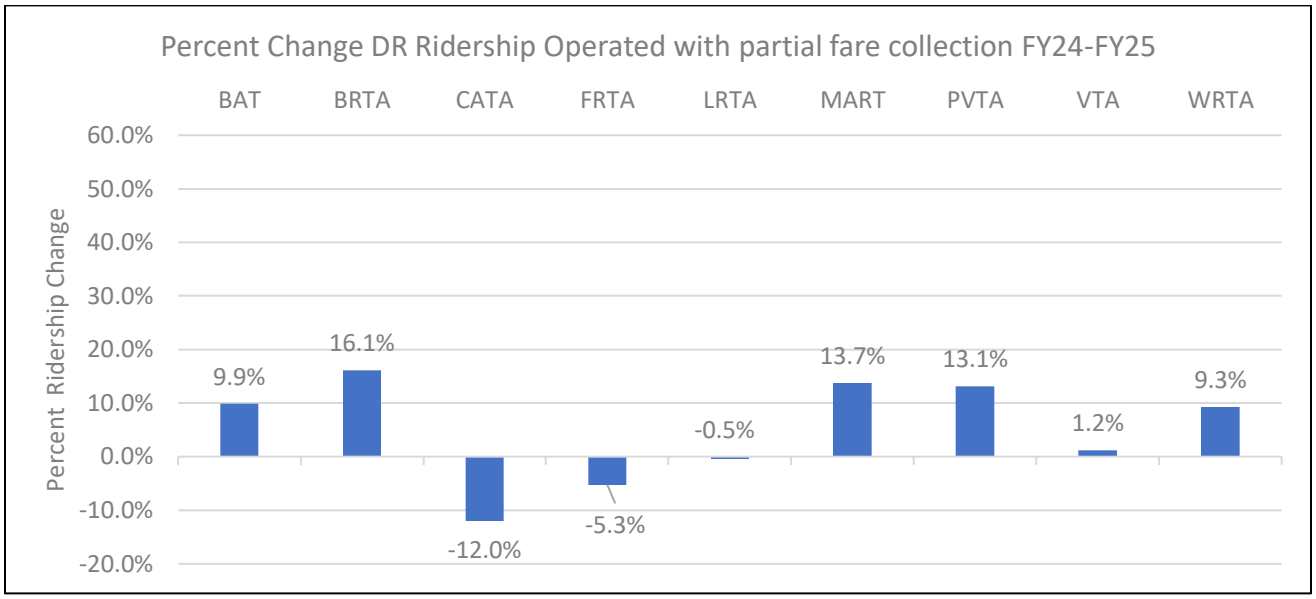

Figure 20: Percent Change DR Ridership Operated with partial fare collection FY24-FY25

Demand Response Fare Revenue and Farebox Recovery Ratio

While the introduction of fare free demand response service overall had a positive correlation with increased demand response ridership for most RTAs, fare revenue for demand response service rose more slowly. As many systems still charge fares for premium demand response service, revenue increased across participating RTAs by approximately 9% for demand response service ($4.28M in FY24 vs. $4.67M in FY25), while varying across RTAs (Figure 21).

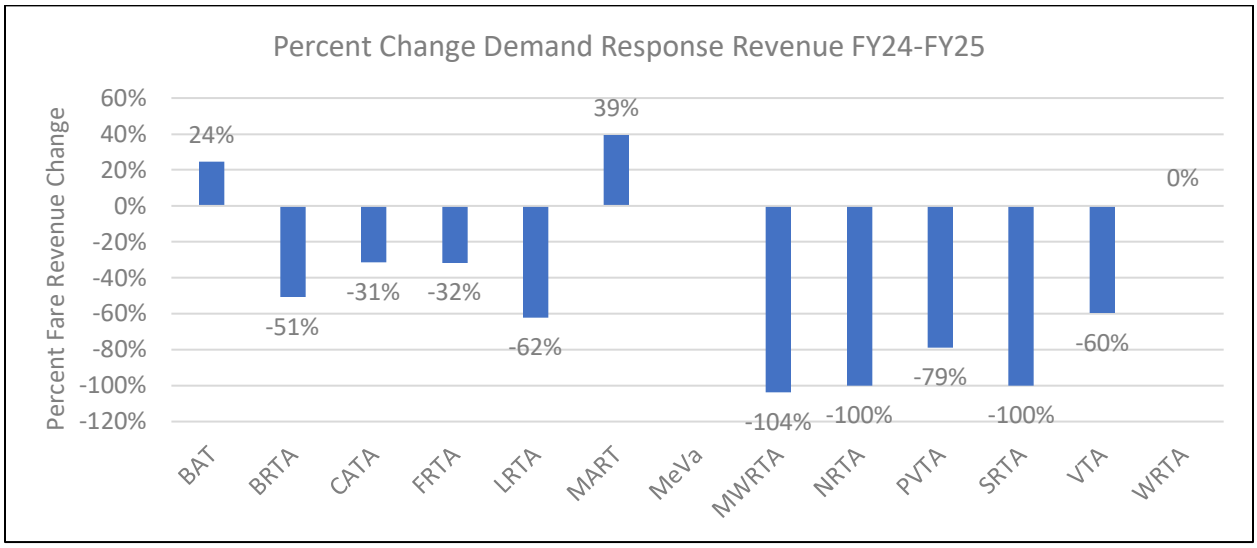

Figure 21: Percent change demand response fare revenue FY24-FY25. Note MeVa has 0% change.

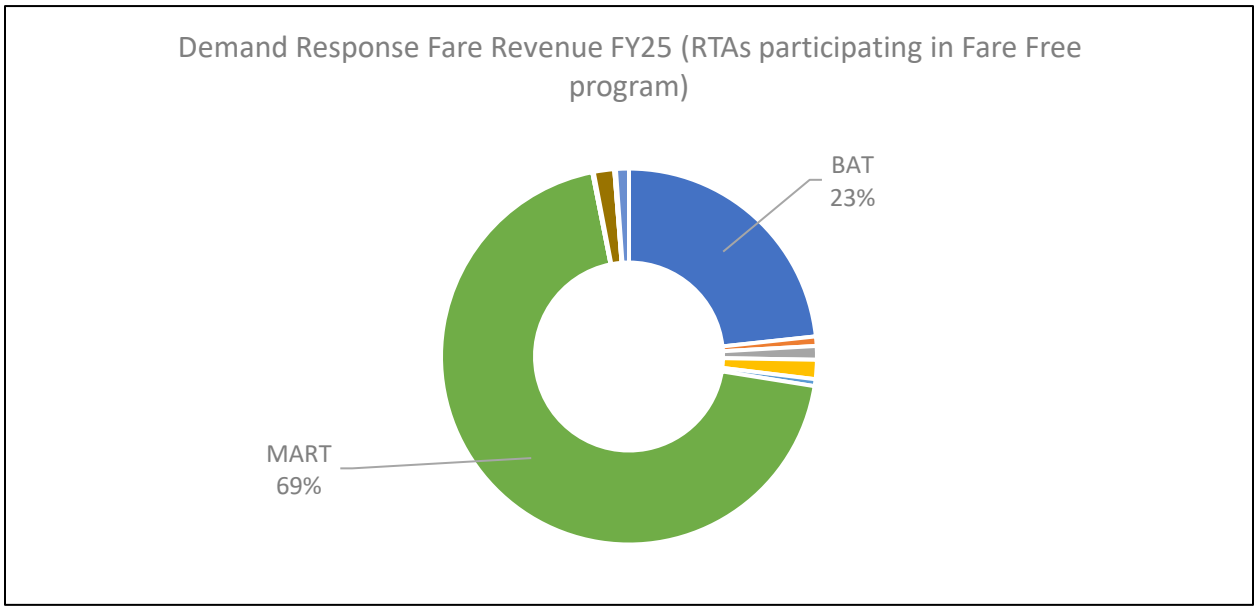

Figure 22: Share of DR fare revenue by RTA, FY25

While in FY25 most RTAs saw a decrease in demand response fare revenue, BAT and MART each saw sizeable increases in revenue. Over 90% of demand response revenue collected across the thirteen RTAs participating in the FY25 Fare Free program was collected by BAT or MART, a result of these RTAs operating Human Services Transportation (HST) rides for qualifying individuals accessing medical,

social, and day services across Massachusetts[3]. These systems each continued to receive third party reimbursement for demand response services except required ADA paratransit and senior service (BAT) or COA provided service (MART) (Figure 22). BAT also received revenue for the BAT Flex Microtransit program.

As mentioned in previous reports, one of the greatest concerns surrounding fare free operation for Massachusetts RTAs has been the cost of operating required fare free demand response paratransit. Operating costs for this mode typically go up as ridership increases. Given the increase in ridership because of free fares, operating expenses can be expected to rise more drastically for demand response service than for fixed route service, without a corresponding rise in revenue. Accordingly, the FRR for RTAs participating in the Fare Free program fell to 4.9% in FY25 (5.8% in FY24), following trends for the past few years (Figure 23).

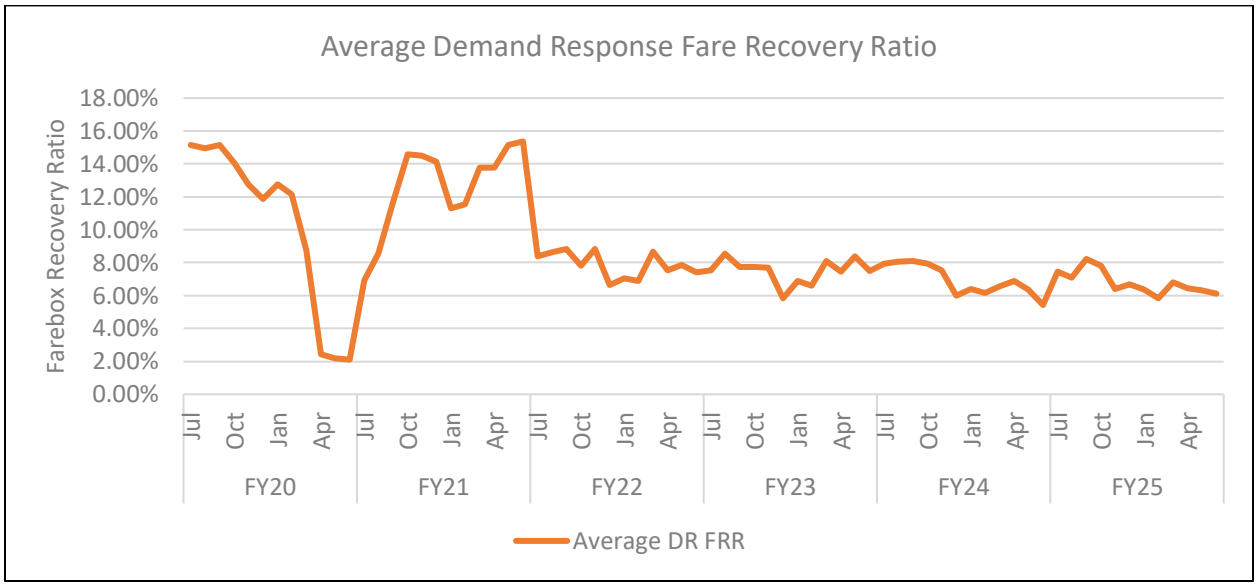

Figure 23: Average Demand Response FRR over time

Notably, FRR variation across the RTAs is comparable to fare revenue, with two RTAs maintaining a much higher FRR (BAT and MART) because of including revenues from providing HST rides. Most RTAs were below 4%, with the four RTAs with completely fare

[3] See the HST webpage for more information: https://www.mass.gov/orgs/human-service-transportation-office

free demand response service coming in at 0% FRR (Figure 24, excludes those with 0%).

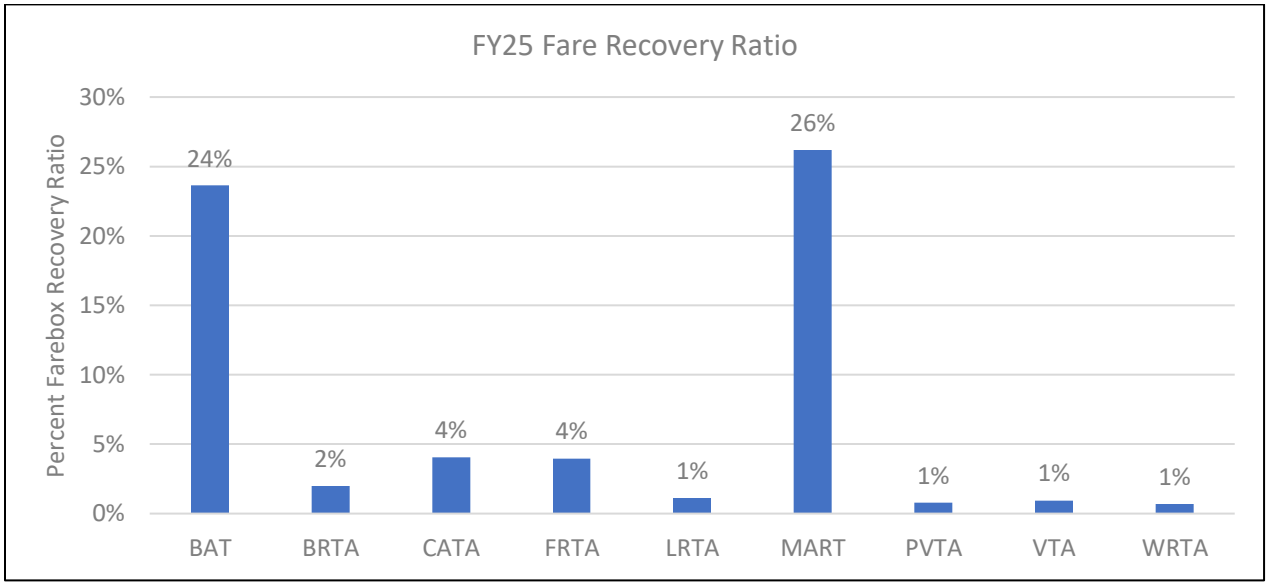

Figure 24: FY25 Farebox Recovery Ratio for RTAs in the Fare Free program and charging fares

RTA Observations & Customer Feedback

Overall, feedback from RTA drivers, administrative staff and customers has been positive. At the close of FY25, every program mentioned a positive change in ridership as a key outcome of their Fare Free programs. Many agencies saw ridership exceed pre-pandemic totals (as described above), and many that operated sustained fare free service for the first time in FY25 saw particularly large increases in ridership. Multiple RTAs noted that their increases in ridership were due to several factors – including route expansion, frequency improvements, and fare free rides. LRTA reported that 75% of its routes report ridership at pre-COVID levels. VTA exceeded FY24 ridership every month of the fare free program during FY25, except one month, showing a strong increase during their first year of fare free operation.

Riders appreciated the reduced cost and reduced complexity of taking a ride on fare free systems.

Almost all RTAs reported overwhelmingly positive public feedback on the program– riders appreciated the reduced cost and reduced complexity of taking a ride on fare free systems. CATA noted that customers appreciate not having to find cash for their fare, and SRTA noted that customers are grateful for the free fares. MART noted that

their customer feedback emphasized the important benefits of financial relief, increased accessibility, and improved convenience for riders using fare free systems. VTA noted that seniors were particularly happy with the program, as they tended to be more cost conscious when traveling. MeVa noted that rider complaints decreased by nearly half in the year the fare-free program was enacted and have since remained low, even as ridership almost tripled.

Alongside benefits to customers, many RTAs cited operational benefits of fare free transit. NRTA provided a detailed set of benefits arising from their more recent transition to operating fare free, including that their record high ridership in FY25 improved the constant traffic jams on the Island present during the summer months. NRTA's drivers feel less stress, not having to explain the fare box operation and the constant requests from tourists regarding the cost of the ride and explaining refunds and change cards. MeVa recently concluded an extensive study on the efficacy and impact of their Fare Free program, which has now been operating for many years. According to the study, fare free operation has fostered a multitude of operational, environmental, and social benefits, the monetary value of which supports a business case for the fare-free program, as they well exceed the costs of lost fare revenue. Some key takeaways from MeVa's analysis include:

- Ridership grew with fare free operation, exceeding pre-pandemic ridership
- The program induced mode shifts away from private automobiles, as nearly 20% of trips on MeVa would have been vehicle trips (taxi, rideshare, drive alone, carpool)
- Staff time at MeVa saved was the equivalent of 3 full-time employees (FTEs)
- Access to area hospitals and clinics grew above the rate of the whole system

Multiple RTAs noted benefits in the dwell time spent at each stop along routes. NRTA noted that dwell time has decreased due to quicker boarding removing the obstacle of fare collection, and that road calls have sharply decreased due to not having to deal with fare collection issues on the buses. LRTA has also reported a decrease in dwell times since drivers no longer need to wait for customers to pay while boarding the bus. MeVa found in their recent study that dwell time was cut in half during fare free operation. MWRTA also noted a reduction in running times due to decreased boarding time requirements.

Some RTAs, however, have mentioned operational downsides associated with their fare free pilots. SRTA noted that there have been some complaints from customers that buses are too crowded, and PVTA noted limited instances of youth causing disruptions on the buses. LRTA prohibits customers from riding without a destination and has faced some challenges conveying that rule to some riders. Some RTAs

noted concerns about capacity due to increased ridership since instating fare free operations. BRTA noted they are pursuing larger replacement vehicles, as they have experienced some overcrowding this year.

Conclusion

Ridership across fourteen of fifteen RTAs increased in FY25 compared to FY24. Several RTA had historic ridership in FY25 while many surpassed pre-pandemic baselines. Though several factors could have contributed to this overall increase in ridership, such as continued recovery from the COVID 19 pandemic or improved service delivery among RTAs, the expansion of fare free service was a driving factor of ridership increases, particularly for those RTAs offering their first or second year of sustained fare free service. The FY25 Fare Free program required participants to offer sustained service and produced a much large impact on ridership for systems previously collecting fares.

Ridership across fourteen of fifteen RTAs increased in FY25 compared to FY24. Several RTA had historic ridership in FY25 while many surpassed pre-pandemic baselines.

The standardization of the FY25 program provided a more consistent basis for comparison across RTAs, and the natural groupings of RTAs into cohorts based on when they initiated continuous fare free service allowed for gathering data on ridership growth by duration of fare free service operation. This report has demonstrated that there is a stronger increase in ridership growth when fare free service is sustained for a year or more – and that there is a slowing of growth some RTAs are approaching as post-pandemic recovery and ridership boosts from multi-year fare free operations have been realized. Many RTAs operating fare free for multiple years have now exceeded FY19 pre-pandemic ridership.

Feedback on the operation of fare free service shows numerous benefits – both in quantitative ridership numbers and qualitative feedback such as customer satisfaction. Customer, operator and administrator feedback on the program has again shown that fare free operation generates positive experiences, and that benefits such as reduction in dwell times and conflicts with passengers amplify already identified successes of the program. Most RTAs were eager to continue operating services fare free, provided there is funding for the program.

There is a stronger increase in ridership growth when fare free service is sustained for a year or more.

Appendices

A – RTA Fare Free Profiles

B – Glossary

C – Background on RTA Service

Appendix A - RTA Fare Free Profiles

The following profiles summarize fare free service provided by each RTA in FY2025, including a brief history of their relationship with fare free service and qualitative data about their operations.

BAT

BAT used its FY25 Fare Free funding to run fare free service on all fixed routes and paratransit services for the entire year, the first full year of fare free operation. The funding also covered fare free operation for seniors using any service. The previous year, BAT used the FY24 Fare Free program grant to run free service starting on December 1, 2023. BAT has received positive feedback on the program and intends to continue it indefinitely if funding is made available. Under BAT's program, all fixed route and paratransit services are free seven days a week. Fares continued to be collected on BAT Flex, BAT's microtransit service.

BRTA

BRTA used the FY25 Fare Free funding to provide fare free service on fixed route and ADA required paratransit from January through June of 2025, a significant expansion of fare free service compared to the prior year. BRTA previously used their FY24 Fare Tree 2.0/3.0 grant to run fare free service on all fixed route and paratransit for five weeks around the holidays (November 24-December 31) and for a nine-week summer season (June 1-July 31), in honor of their fiftieth anniversary. BRTA noted a significant increase in ridership when they commenced ongoing fare free operation, with ridership increasing 12%-26% more than comparable time periods without fare free service. BRTA intends to continue providing fare free service if funding is available.

CATA

CATA used its FY25 Fare free funding to operate fare free service from January of 2025 through June of 2025, a significant expansion over the prior year. CATA used its FY24 Fare Free program grant to provide fare free service from November 24-December 31, 2023. While fares on all fixed route, paratransit services, and senior dial-a-ride services were waived, CATA still charged for the CATA on-demand microtransit services. CATA has received positive feedback on the program and will operate fare free indefinitely if funding is reliably provided moving forward.

CCRTA

CCRTA did not participate in the Fare Free program in FY25. Therefore, no data is available on impacts to their service in FY25. CCRTA did participate in the FY24 round of funding, though they applied separately from the other fourteen RTAs to expand an existing program offering free fares specifically to older adults. CCRTA began offering fare free services on its fixed routes to older adults (defined as 60 or older) on Wednesday in June of 2017. In February of 2024, they expanded this program to provide free service every day on fixed route services for older adults and people with disabilities. They have also continuously provided free fares for the general public every Friday since 2021.

FRTA

FRTA has operated free fixed route services since March 2020. Using the FY25 funding FRTA added fare free service for their demand response service through 10/31/2025. Using money from the FY24 Fare Free program grant, they added free demand-response services for older adults (defined as 60 and older) between November 20, 2023, and December 31, 2023. During this time, FRTA continued to charge for its microtransit service, known as FRTA Access, that is open to the public. FRTA plans to offer fixed route service fare free indefinitely, in a change since FY24, but offer other services as fare free dependent on funding availability.

GATRA

In FY25, GATRA used remaining FY24 Fare Free funding to operate fare free service fixed route and ADA complementary paratransit service from November 29, 2024-December 31, 2024, although this only covered approximately a quarter of their total services, as microtransit and COA provided services were not included. In FY24, GATRA operated similar program funded service, including fare free fixed route and ADA required paratransit services from November 24, 2023, to December 31, 2023, under the FY24 Fare Free grant. Fare collection remained in place on GATRA's microtransit service, GATRA Go

LRTA

In FY25, LRTA offered free services on all fixed route and ADA complementary paratransit during the month of July 2024 using FY24 Fare Free Funding. Fare

collection resumed in August and continued until the end of November. On December 2, 2024, all fixed route and ADA complementary paratransit became fare free, as did COA service which had not been fare free in FY24 or in July of FY25 (Please note that December 1, 2024 fell on a Sunday and LRTA does not provide Sunday service). No FY24 funding was used to fund fare free service in FY25 after July 2024, nor was additional funding applied to program other than state allocated fare free funding.

MART

In FY25, MART provided fare free services on all fixed route, ADA complementary paratransit, and COA service starting on July 1, 2024. The FY25 Fare Free program immediately followed MART's FY24 Fare free program, with no interim period between the two programs. While MART had originally planned to conclude the program in June 2024, additional funding has thus allowed MART to continue the program indefinitely, provided funding from the state remains available. This report only covers free fare service within FY25.

MeVa

MeVa has offered fare free services on all fixed routes, ADA paratransit, and non-ADA paratransit services since March 2022. While they originally used COVID relief funding provided by the federal government, MeVa now funds their fare free services using MassDOT grant money. In FY25, fare free service was primarily funded using FY25 Fare Free funding beginning on August 1, 2024. FY24 Fare free funding was used to fund MeVa's FY25 fare free service during the month of July 2024. MeVa hopes to continue operating fare free service, regardless of funding availability from the state. In addition to state fare free funding, MeVa has also used state contract assistance funding, local assessment funding, and FTA capitalized operating funds to operate fare free service.

MWRTA

In FY25, MWRTA provided fare free service for the entire year across all modes (including Dial a Ride and microtransit), a significant expansion over previous years. This included an expansion of a trial of waiving fares on the Catch Connect microtransit service in summer of FY24. Expansion of service also contributed to

increased ridership, with route modifications and an increased span/days of service. In FY24, MWRTA offered free fare fixed route and paratransit services for the second half of the year under the Fare Free program grant. During FY24, MWRTA required riders to use free cards distributed by drivers to receive free fares, but no longer required this during FY25, instead using APCs for data collection. MWRTA plans to continue the program indefinitely if funding is available and has had very positive responses in ridership levels and reductions in dwell times due to the program implementation.

NRTA

NRTA provided year-round far free fixed route and required paratransit service for the first time in FY25 using their *Fare free* grant and saw a significant increase in ridership directly correlated with fare free operation. With a heavy concentration of tourists, operating fare free reduced conflicts and time spent with customers on explaining or troubleshooting fare systems, and dwell times decreased producing a positive impact on island traffic. The system is also seeing significant gains in off-season use, indicating the program is reaching lower income worker populations on the island. NRTA used funding from the FY24 Fare Free program grant to offer fare free fixed route and paratransit services from April to August 2024. As a result of the increased ridership associated with fare free service, NRTA added additional paratransit vehicles. NRTA will continue to offer fare free service, regardless of funding from the Commonwealth.

PVTA

In FY25, PVTA was fare free for fixed route service, ADA complementary paratransit service, and Senior Dial a Ride service for most of the year, except for September and October. The first two months of the year were funded using carryover FY24 funds, and the remainder of the year was funded using FY25 Fare Free funding. PVTA has seen a significant decrease in rider conflict with operators, has received good feedback on the program, and an increase in utilization of the demand-response program. They have also seen a slight rise in interpersonal conflict between passengers but are addressing this issue. In FY24, PVTA offered free fixed route and paratransit services for the holiday season (November 24-December 31, 2023) and for the months of June, July and August 2024 under the Fare Free program grant. From January to May 2024, PVTA offered free fares on weekends for all riders and free

fares for students 18 and under after 3 pm. For June, July and August 2025, all fixed route and paratransit (except the intercity B79 route) was once again fare free. PVTA is not currently planning on offering free fares indefinitely if funding is unavailable for the mandated fare free service, they will have to cut service or collect fares. PVTA also added service to several routes in FY2025.

SRTA

SRTA offered fare free fixed route and ADA complementary paratransit service for the entirety of FY25 and has thus continuously operated fare free since from January 1, 2024. Fare free service in July and August was provided using FY24 carryover funding, with FY25 funding kicking in September. SRTA reported an increase in ridership across fare free modes while also reporting a decrease in dwell times, though SRTA also reported an increase in stop frequency and more passengers riding shorter distances. In calendar year 2024, SRTA began providing express service between Fall River and New Bedford and started operating Sunday service, factors that could have contributed to an increase in ridership. State funding has been especially helpful for the high costs of operating fare free ADA paratransit trips.

VTA

In FY25, VTA offered fare free service on all fixed route and ADA complementary paratransit, as well as weekly Medivan service to Boston area medical facilities for older adults and persons with disabilities. VTA began its FY25 fare free service on November 29, 2024, and continued for the remainder of the state fiscal year. FY24 Fare Free funding was used to fund fare free service in late November and December and FY25 fare free funding started in January. Ridership exceeded FY24 figures for most months that the VTA operated fare free in FY25. Fare free service has likely sped up the time it takes to board at VTA's main terminal though fare free service likely did not have any impact on overall travel time. Fare free service likely led to an increase in routes operating over capacity during peak season, which results in passengers not being able to fit on the buses. In general, VTA stated that there was an increase of activity on the island in FY25 than in previous years and VTA felt less constrained by labor shortages. These factors could have contributed to an increase in ridership.

WRTA

WRTA has been offering fare free services since 2020 and utilized FY25 Fare Free funding to continue to support these services. In FY25, WRTA's fare-free program applied to its fixed-route service as well as its ADA complementary paratransit and demand response services operated by 10 COAs, Worcester Yellow Cab, and SCM Elderbus. WRTA's FY25 ridership was the highest this century and can be attributed in part to providing fare free service as well as increased reliability, route realignments and the restoration of full Friday schedules on certain routes. Fare free service likely contributed to delays on shorter bus routes where stops are spaced close together, while longer routes with stops spaced further apart overall had fewer delays. WRTA plans to acquire new 40-foot buses to provide increased capacity on heavily utilized routes.

Appendix B - Glossary

ADA paratransit = the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) of 1990 requires public transit agencies that provide fixed-route service to provide "complementary paratransit" service along those routes; agencies may choose to provide additional paratransit service to persons with disabilities beyond this requirement

BAT = Brockton Area Transit Authority

BRTA = Berkshire Regional Transit Authority

CATA = Cape Ann Transportation Authority

CCRTA = Cape Cod Regional Transit Authority

Commuter bus (CB) = a type of fixed route transit service that primarily connects outlying areas with a central city and is characterized by a motorcoach (aka over-the-road-bus), multiple trip tickets, and multiple stops in outlying areas with limited stops in the central city

Council on Aging (COA) = Massachusetts municipalities establish COAs that provide services to older adults, such services often include transportation.

Demand response (DR) = transit service where vehicles do not follow a fixed route, but rather follow an optimized route within a certain geographic area, based on rider requests

Demand taxi (DT) = a type of demand-based service that is operated through taxicab providers with a system in place to facilitate ride sharing; demand taxi services do not use dedicated vehicles

Fixed route (FR) = transit service where vehicles run on regular, scheduled routes with fixed stop locations, typically with a fixed schedule

FRTA = Franklin Regional Transit Authority

FTA = Federal Transit Administration

FRR = farebox recovery ratio; the percentage of operating costs covered by fares collected, calculated by the fares collected divided by the cost to operate the route[4]

Gateway City = a Massachusetts municipality with a population between 35,000 and 250,000 and with median household income and educational attainment of a bachelor's degree or advanced degree below the commonwealth's average[5], a total of 26 municipalities have officially been defined as "Gateway Cities" by the Commonwealth[6]

GATRA = Greater Attleboro Taunton Regional Transit Authority

HST = Human Services Transportation

LRTA = Lowell Regional Transit Authority

MBTA = Massachusetts Bay Transportation Authority

MART = Montachusett Regional Transit Authority

MassDOT = Massachusetts Department of Transportation

RTD = MassDOT's Rail & Transit Division

MeVa = Merrimack Valley Regional Transit Authority (previously MVRTA)

MWRTA = MetroWest Regional Transit Authority

NRTA = Nantucket Regional Transit Authority

NTD = National Transit Database

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[4] National Transit Database (NTD) Glossary (https://www.transit.dot.gov/ntd/national-transit-database-ntd-glossary)

[5] Commonwealth of Massachusetts General Law, Part I, Title II, Chapter 23A, Section 3A (https://malegislature.gov/Laws/GeneralLaws/PartI/TitleII/Chapter23a/Section3a)

[6] MassINC Policy Center Gateway Cities Innovation Institute (https://massinc.org/policy-center/gateway-cities/about-the-gateway-cities/)

PVTA = Pioneer Valley Transit Authority

RTA = regional transit authority; an authority established by section three or section fourteen of Chapter 161B of the Massachusetts General Laws[7]

SRTA = Southeastern Regional Transit Authority

UPT = unlinked passenger trips; the number of passengers who board public transportation vehicles; passengers are counted each time the board vehicles no matter how many vehicles they use to travel from their origin to their destination[8]

VTA = Martha's Vineyard Transit Authority

WRTA = Worcester Regional Transit Authority

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[7] The 191st General Court of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts (https://malegislature.gov/Laws/GeneralLaws/PartI/TitleXXII/Chapter161B/Section1)

[8] National Transit Database (NTD) Glossary (https://www.transit.dot.gov/ntd/national-transit-database-ntd-glossary)

Appendix C - Background on RTA Service

In Massachusetts, there are fifteen RTAs outside of the Greater Boston Area (Figure 25). Each RTA is locally governed by an Advisory Board and provides a combination of fixed route and demand response transit services to their member communities. Demand response service is inclusive of the complementary paratransit services that are mandated by the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), requiring that comparable service be provided to eligible persons within ¾ mile of a fixed route. Some RTAs opt to provide additional modes of service, including demand-taxi and

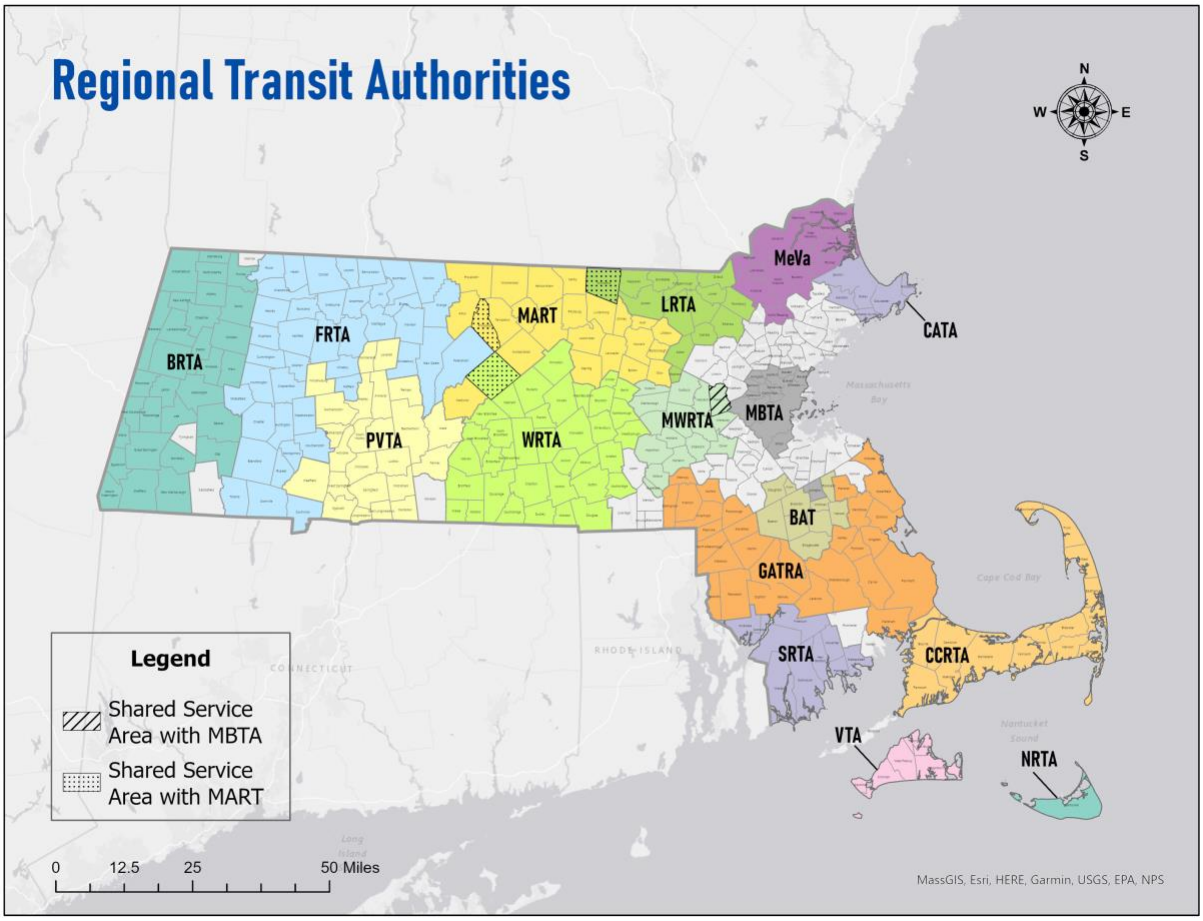

Figure 25: Map of RTA service areas in Massachusetts, including the Massachusetts Bay Transportation Authority (MBTA)

commuter bus. All these services, while managed by the RTA's administrative staff, are provided through contracted operators. In FY2025, over 31.7 million unlinked passenger trips were provided by RTAs across all modes of service. The

overwhelming majority of RTA trips in FY26 were made using fixed route service (Figure 26).

Although they have similar goals, the RTAs serve diverse areas throughout Massachusetts, including rural areas, suburbs, colleges and universities, Gateway Cities, small, urbanized areas, and areas where ridership is strongly affected by seasonal tourism. While some RTAs are predominantly defined by their seasonal tourism or college and university services, all RTAs also provide essential workforce and commuter trips, as well as medical and shopping trips for those without access to a car, including elderly and disabled riders. Given the diversity of demand, RTAs must be flexible and innovative in meeting the needs of their customers.

TThe RTAs are funded through five main sources of revenue: directly generated revenue, local assessments, state funding, Federal funding, and farebox revenue (Figure 27). Directly generated revenue is inclusive of own-source revenues generated from advertising, parking, and/or rental agreements. Local assessments consist of local contributions for service from the RTA's member communities and are based on the "loss" (operating cost minus revenue) attributable to the service provided for each town or city. The Commonwealth provides the RTAs with state operating funds in the form of State Contract Assistance (SCA), which is passed through MassDOT.

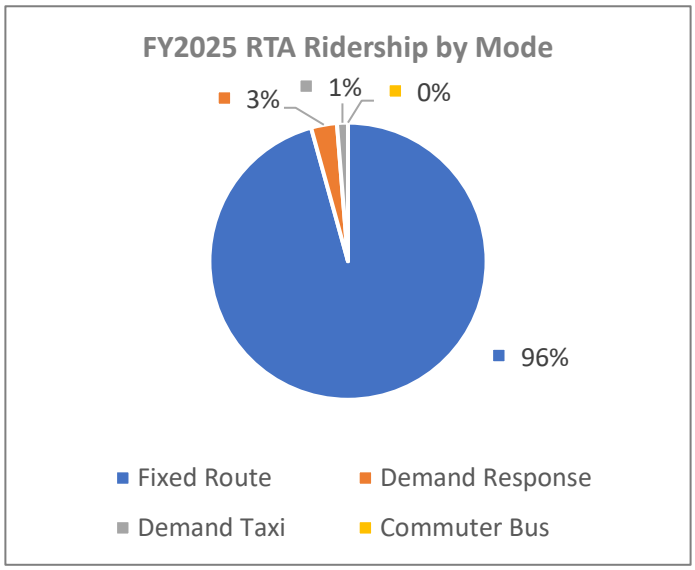

Figure 26: RTA Ridership by Mode

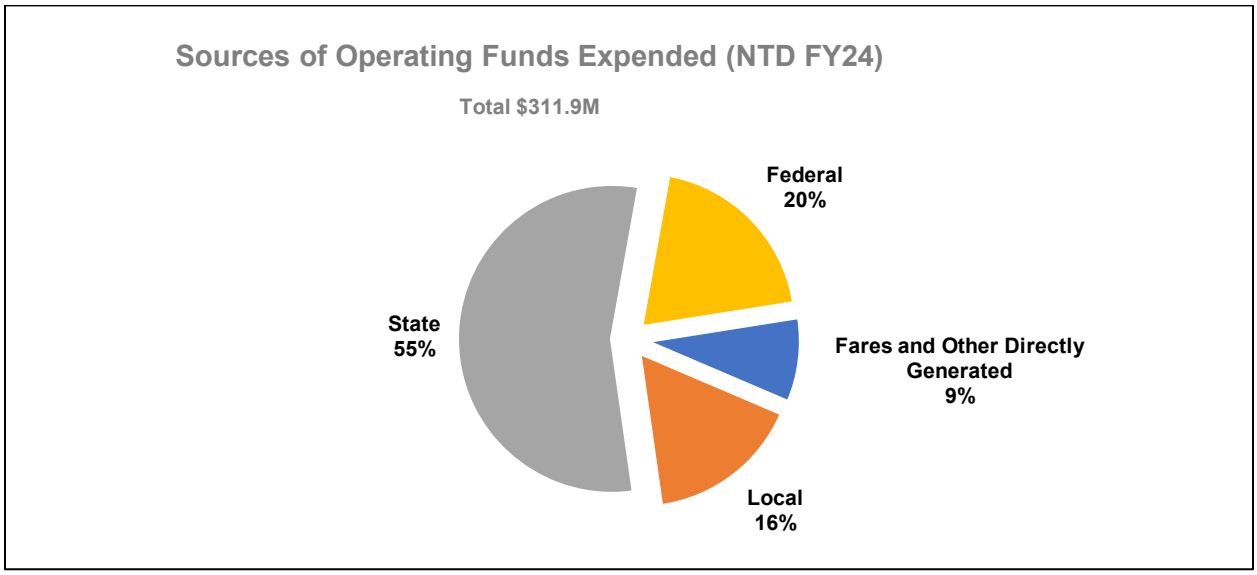

Figure 27: Sources of Operating Funds Expended (NTD FY24)

SCA is distributed by MassDOT RTD among the RTAs using a long-standing allocation formula based on ridership. Any new funding received from the state over the prior fiscal year is allocated based on a second formula that incorporates ridership, population, and service area. Federal funding is also distributed based on formulas but is distributed nationally through either the Section 5307 program for urbanized areas or the Section 5311 program for rural areas. All funding apportioned by the Federal Government to an urbanized area (UZA) or a rural area is then subject to additional split agreements negotiated by the agencies operating within each defined region. Lastly, farebox revenue is generated through the collection of fares from riders. Each RTA has their own advisory board approved fare policy that dictates the fare structure for each individual system.