September 3, 2020

Peter Alviti, Jr., Director
Rhode Island Department of Transportation
Two Smith Street
Providence, Rhode Island 02903

Re: RIDOT Providence Multi-Hub Bus System Proposal

Dear Director Alviti,

Thank you for the time you, RIPTA CEO Scott Avedisian, and your colleagues took on August 5th to present the State’s most recent iteration of the Providence Multi-Hub Bus System proposal to The Providence Foundation Board of Directors.

As we wrote to you in a prior letter on this topic dated October 8, 2019, “[t]he Providence Foundation has a decades-long history of advocating for and leading collaborative investments in downtown Providence, and as an organization we are committed to working with you and all engaged stakeholders to identify the best solutions for the City, the State, and the community at large. The Foundation played a key leadership role in successfully persuading the citizens of Rhode Island to overwhelmingly support the $35 million Mass Transit Hub Infrastructure Bond in 2014, and ensuring that those funds are well-spent towards the bond measure’s stated goals of improved access to multiple intermodal sites, key transportation, healthcare, and other locations is of utmost importance to our members. In addition to the priority we attach to modern, effective and efficient public transit, the Foundation has long advocated for and contributed to ensuring our capital city’s vital public spaces are vibrant, accessible, well-maintained, safe and secure for all Rhode Islanders to use and enjoy. Outstanding public transit and public space are equally essential components of economic development and job-creation, and the city and state we collectively envision depend on both.”

We begin our comments and position on the most recent proposal with these same words as they remain true today. In addition, our mutual awareness of and commitment to meeting the needs of all members of our community, including those who rely most heavily on public transportation, has only been reinforced by our ongoing national discussion of inclusion, equity and social justice.

The Providence Foundation Board of Directors has continued to review the various proposals that have been brought forth through the lens of four principles which we strongly believe must be met by any planned use of the bond funds:

1. Improve our public transit.
2. Improve our public spaces.
3. Be cost effective.
4. Identify and include ongoing, budgeted support for public safety, maintenance and appropriate public programming.
With regard to the proposed investments in infrastructure and the plan to develop three hubs along the route of the Downtown Transit Connector (DTC), we are supportive of the stated goals, including reuniting bus and train transit, improving transit across downtown and in areas, such as the Jewelry District, where growth is occurring, and fulfilling the jointly held vision for enhanced and connected public spaces which will better serve the citizens of Providence and Rhode Island. We remain ardent supporters of the DTC which RIPTA has to date successfully implemented almost in its entirety, the challenges of the pandemic notwithstanding. The location of necessary hubs and, most importantly, rider services and amenities which support and promote the further success of the DTC must be front and center in any approved expenditure of the 2014 bond funds.

The RIDOT proposal that was presented to us on August 5th would accomplish many positive objectives. It is centered around and supportive of the DTC, it reduces congestion and density of bus transit in Kennedy Plaza, and it connects bus transit and train transit at Providence Station. We are enthusiastic about the potential for RIPTA and public transportation in general to be enhanced through strategic investments, system and route enhancements, and increased ridership. Vibrant and economically successful cities and communities have thriving public transportation networks. The people of Providence and Rhode Island deserving nothing less and we are fully supportive of achieving those goals.

However, much of what the proposal accomplishes is proposed to be achieved by relocating approximately half of the bus traffic currently flowing through Kennedy Plaza to a small and constrained parcel adjacent to the Providence River east of Dyer Street. Providence has a finite amount of waterfront and to occupy even a small amount of it with a bus depot strikes us as not being the best and highest use of that land. In addition to long-term land use strategy and priorities, it is difficult to envision the amount of bus traffic proposed for that location being accommodated in a safe and efficient manner. The site itself is small, there is not yet any clarity about what, if any, rider services and amenities would be located in a renovated National Grid building at its center, and most importantly it is on the wrong side of Dyer Street for the majority of pedestrians who will be entering and exiting buses at that location. Dyer and Eddy Streets are already challenging from a pedestrian and bicycle safety perspective and directing 48% of Kennedy Plaza bus traffic to that side of the street will only exacerbate those challenges. We are, therefore, not supportive of the Jewelry District hub in the location RIDOT has proposed.

Fortunately, alternatives exist to achieve our collective ambitions and properly serve RIPTA riders, current and future. The first is the already proposed bus hub and commercial development on the surface parking lots west of Dyer Street and east of the Garrahy Courthouse, bounded by Clifford, Dorrance and Peck Streets. This location would make for an inviting and amenity-rich transit hub, incentivize development on and around these parcels, and be a gateway along the DTC between downtown and the Jewelry District. It is on the correct side of Dyer for a bus hub, and its adjacency to Dorrance creates further optionality for RIPTA routes now and in the years to come. It would represent a visionary investment in both public transit and in the future of our city, especially with regard to the opportunities presented by the relocation of I-195. We understand that this concept has been examined to some degree and when we asked about it at our meeting the impression we got was that those examinations had been halted in favor of the National Grid.
site currently being proposed. While recognizing that the parcels east of the Garrahy Courthouse do involve numerous challenges, other discussions we have been involved with indicate that there may still be some life in that set of ideas. We would suggest that many of the great things accomplished in Providence and Rhode Island during the past half-century initially appeared overwhelmingly difficult and would have been easy to walk away from at the time. This community has moved railroad yards, redirected rivers, uncovered waterfront, and changed the path of one of the busiest interstate highway connections on the eastern seaboard. Our sense is that this concept entails a modest set of challenges compared to those that generations before us have overcome, and we stand ready to work with RIDOT, RIPTA, and others to meet them. It is clear that a bus hub on all or part of those parcels would present a much more appealing, rider friendly, and successful solution than the proposed National Grid site.

As a second alternative we suggest further examination of Providence Station. In RIDOT’s proposal the smallest proportion of bus traffic is centered there (25%) yet it is the one location that already has many of the features we are seeking in a hub, namely connectivity to trains, rider amenities and services, covered waiting areas, and nearby opportunities for expansion on the vacant land west of the proposed extension of Exchange Street. The planned improvements secured by Senator Reed for Providence Station will further enhance its attractiveness as multi-modal transportation hub, which can be leveraged more effectively to the benefit of both train and bus riders.

A third alternative is the recently constructed Garrahy Courthouse Garage, which was considered as a bus hub when that project was first conceived. Given that it already exists, is under state control, and is not far from the DTC route we think revisiting that concept would be worth doing as well. Bus traffic and stops could be located around the exterior of the structure with rider amenities and services, including restrooms, ticketing, undercover waiting areas, food, and perhaps a police sub-station, accommodated in the interior.

An overarching concern remains ongoing budgeted support for public safety, maintenance and appropriate public programming of the hubs and related public spaces. Many of the challenges over the years with regard to Kennedy Plaza in particular and the goal of making RIPTA a public transit option of choice for more riders in general (which is essential in order to achieve the Governor and the Mayor’s stated goals to combat climate change) are due to the lack of funding for adequate public transit and associated priorities. A plan to disperse bus traffic from Kennedy Plaza to different areas of the city without a clear and sustainable funding plan for these basic needs is a fundamental planning flaw, and is likely to repeat the current failures at the I-195 park which was similarly constructed without an adequate funding plan for operations, programming and maintenance. Any investments in public transit infrastructure must be accompanied – or preferably led - by commitments to public transit operations, maintenance and safety funding led by RIPTA and with input and engagement from the public at large and RIPTA riders and stakeholders in particular. Accordingly, we make, as we have before, a strong recommendation that any plans for any and all of the sub-hubs – Kennedy Plaza, Providence Station and Garrahy Station - include explicit, dedicated budgetary and other necessary support for ongoing security, maintenance, and in some cases, programming. There are no design solutions that can supplant the need for diligent and consistent stewardship of these public assets.
Finally, as a Board of an organization that led the effort to convince the people of Rhode Island to support these bond funds in 2014 we share your sense of urgency and desire to get these important projects underway. Six years is a long time for planning, discussion, debate and direction-setting and we are committed to working with you and others to identify a path forward that can be pursued in a timely manner. This is particularly important to achieve much-needed improvements to public transportation to the benefit of riders who depend on that community asset, as well as to realizing the shared vision of a revitalized public space in Kennedy Plaza. At the same time, the investments we are contemplating will last for decades and it is critical that they be made in a manner in which we all have confidence and enthusiasm. We look forward to continuing to collaborate with you and other members of the community to do so.

Sincerely,

Russell C. Carey, Chair
Clifford J. Wood, Executive Director

cc: The Honorable Gina Raimondo
The Honorable Jorge Elorza
The Honorable Jack Reed
Scott Avedisian, Chief Executive Officer, RIPTA
Normand Benoit, Chair, RIPTA Board of Directors
Bonnie Nickerson, Director of Planning, City of Providence