



# BOSTON REGION METROPOLITAN PLANNING ORGANIZATION

Stephanie Pollack, MassDOT Secretary and CEO and MPO Chair  
Tegin L. Teich, Executive Director, MPO Staff

## **TECHNICAL MEMORANDUM**

**DATE:** October 1, 2020  
**TO:** Boston Region Metropolitan Planning Organization  
**FROM:** Sandy Johnston, Central Transportation Planning Staff  
**RE:** Review of Community Connections Program Pilot

This memorandum reviews the pilot round of the Boston Region Metropolitan Planning Organization's (MPO) Community Connections Program, conducted during federal fiscal year (FFY) 2020, and makes recommendations for the future of the program, reflecting feedback from project proponents, staff, and other involved stakeholders.

### **1 ABOUT THE MPO'S COMMUNITY CONNECTIONS PROGRAM**

The Community Connections (CC) Program (originally known as the Community Transportation Program) is the MPO's funding program for first- and last-mile solutions, community transportation, and other small, nontraditional transportation projects such as those that update transit technology and improve bicycle and pedestrian facilities. The CC Program is one of the investment programs included in the MPO's current Long-Range Transportation Plan (LRTP), *Destination 2040*, and is funded at a level of \$2 million per year in the FFYs 2021–25 Transportation Improvement Program (TIP). MPO staff worked with the MPO board to develop the framework for the CC Program during FFY 2019, and staff conducted a pilot round to evaluate the efficacy of the program, its mechanisms, and its ability to meet the MPO's goals during FFY 2020.<sup>1</sup> The MPO plans to make CC Program applications available to all eligible project proponents in fall 2020, and the MPO intends to program the resulting projects in the FFYs 2022–26 TIP.

#### **1.1 The Pilot**

MPO staff designed the first year of the CC Program as a pilot to facilitate evaluation of the draft program framework and evaluation criteria before proceeding with administration of the application cycle and program in future

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<sup>1</sup> More information about the development of the CC Program can be found at <https://www.bostonmpo.org/community-connections>.

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years. As such, staff sought to simplify the pilot round by releasing the application for the CC Program only to a pre-identified list of likely project proponents rather than as a public call for projects in October 2019. Staff identified candidate projects through evaluation of previous MPO plans and review of concepts received from other outreach. The application period was open for approximately six weeks. Staff scored applications according to the draft set of criteria approved by the MPO for the pilot. These criteria are available on the CC Program page of the MPO’s website. (See the link in footnote on page 1.)

Staff presented a recommended list of projects for funding to the MPO on February 27, 2020, as part of a larger presentation on the TIP. The projects that the MPO agreed to fund are listed in Table 1 below. The MPO has formally programmed CC pilot funding for FFY 2021 and has verbally agreed on funding in future years of the FFYs 2021–25 TIP for single and multiyear projects requested by proponents.

**Table 1  
Community Connections Projects Programmed in Pilot Round**

<b>Project</b>	<b>FFY 2021 Funding</b>	<b>FFY 2022 Funding*</b>	<b>FFY 2023 Funding*</b>	<b>Total Funding</b>
Alewife Wayfinding		\$292,280		\$292,280
Newton Microtransit	\$300,000	\$275,000	\$152,000	\$727,000
Sharon Carpool Marketing	\$42,000			\$42,000
Davis Square Signal Improvements	\$220,000			\$220,000
Concord Avenue Signal Improvements	\$160,000			\$160,000
Bruce Freeman Rail Trail Bike Shelters	\$100,000			\$100,000
Regional Blue Bikes Expansion**		\$340,000		\$340,000
<b>Total</b>	<b>\$822,000</b>	<b>\$907,280</b>	<b>\$152,000</b>	<b>\$1,881,280</b>

\*This funding is contingent on the projects’ compliance with requirements of the Congestion Mitigation and Air Quality (CMAQ) Program and the approval of funding in future Transportation Improvement Programs.

\*\* The status of this project may be updated in FFYs 2022–26 Transportation Improvement Program.

## 2 PILOT REVIEW

Staff held an internal meeting on July 29, 2020, to initiate the review of the results of the pilot round. Participants included staff from the Central Transportation Planning Staff (CTPS) and the Massachusetts Department of Transportation (MassDOT) Office of Transportation Planning (OTP) who had either managed the development of the CC Program, overseen its development, scored applications, or been involved in project implementation. The purpose of the meeting was to discuss

- who should be asked to provide feedback and how to gather the comments;
- how to balance capital and transit operating projects in future funding rounds, and how capital projects can be successfully implemented;
- the uncertain demand for transit operating projects in the immediate future, given impacts from the COVID-19 pandemic;
- the ease, efficacy, and quality of the scoring process;
- whether some of the scoring mechanisms could and should be replaced by access metrics using software such as Conveyal (for which MassDOT is working to secure a license that CTPS expects to share);
- how to better align the CC Program with the annual TIP process, both in the application process and in scoring;
- the status of project implementation for the projects funded in the pilot round; and
- details of the Federal Highway Administration (FHWA) process for verifying eligibility for projects and approving projects the MPO selects.

The meeting resulted in a consensus to conduct two informal surveys: one survey of project proponents who had applied to the program and another of staff who had been involved with scoring applications. Select results from those two surveys are presented in Section 2.1 below; full results are in Appendix A.

Other feedback and concepts that emerged from this meeting included the following:

- Staff should explore using the Metropolitan Area Planning Council's (MAPC) Collective Purchasing framework, which is already approved for federal-aid procurement, to implement small capital projects.
- While the differential in scoring between transit operating and capital projects is a concern, significant revision to the scoring criteria should wait until staff have been able to collect at least one more year's worth of data.

- Any attempt to use access-based scoring for the CC Program should wait at least another year, so that staff have the time to gain familiarity with tools such as Conveyal.

## 2.1 Survey Results

### *Project Proponent Survey*

Staff received seven responses to the project proponent survey. All responses were anonymous.

Respondents were fairly positive about the application process. The survey asked them to rate three questions on a scale from 1 to 10, with 10 being the highest. On average, respondents rated the experience as follows:

- The experience of applying for the CC Program overall: **7.9**
- The clarity of the MPO's development process: **7.3**
- Staff's responsiveness to concerns: **9.6**

Additionally, every respondent said that the CC application was a reasonable amount of work and asked for a reasonable amount of information.

The survey also gave respondents the chance to give open-ended text responses. The comments are summarized here, and the full text is available in Appendix A:

- The MPO should think carefully about whether the capital/operating categorization of projects works, and whether a great diversity of categories might work better.
- There is a need for better communication once the project application has been submitted.
- Staff could be more transparent about how scoring works and decisions are made.

### *Staff Survey*

Four staff members who had been involved in developing the CC Program and/or scoring applications responded to the staff survey. Their overall impression of the program was positive, rating the extent to which the CC Program and the projects programmed in the pilot round fulfilled the MPO's goals as **8.5 out of 10** on average.

The staff survey also asked for open-ended comments. The feedback is summarized here and the full responses are available in Appendix A:

- The amount of information provided through the application is sufficient for scoring.
- CC scoring should complement or reflect the broader TIP criteria.
- Transit operating projects seem to be favored in the scoring process.
- Ideally, all six of the investment programs defined in the LRTP should be seen as different, but related parts of one whole.
- It is a good idea to explore using MAPC's Collective Purchasing framework to ease administering capital projects.
- There is no need for a hard cap on project cost; though \$2 million per year is dedicated to the CC Program, there may be some opportunity to go above that number in some years, depending on developments with the rest of the TIP.
- Some of the proponents ignored portions of the questions, resulting in there being insufficient information for scoring a project.
- The differences between how proponents responded to the questionnaire was the trickiest part of grading the CC applications.
- Some language in the application is less specific than the scorecard that staff use.
- The point scale could be refined.
- Staff involved in scoring projects should coordinate better.

### **3 RECOMMENDATIONS**

The recommendations documented here are derived from feedback from the review meeting; project proponent and staff surveys; other feedback from staff; and personal observation by the program manager. The recommendations are divided into three sections, corresponding to three areas in which the CC Program could be improved.

#### **3.1 Structure of the Program**

The MPO's intention for the CC Program has been to fund both operating and capital projects. However, there are several barriers to funding small-scale capital projects through the CC Program: the cost of some capital projects relative to the funding available; the significant number of and complexity attached to federal funding requirements; and MassDOT's minimum administrative burden per individual federal aid project. As such, staff recommend moving the capital project "side" of the CC Program away from inviting applications for projects such as sidewalk and intersection improvements and toward smaller projects that still meet the program's goals of facilitating first- and last-mile connections but are less administratively complex.

### ***Use MAPC's Collective Purchasing Program to Facilitate Capital Projects***

One way for the CC Program to fund small capital projects of various types (see project types in the following section) without adding administrative complexity is to take advantage of MAPC's Collective Purchasing Program.<sup>2</sup> Under this model, municipalities or regional transit authorities would purchase the desired items through MAPC's procurement contracts; the purchasing entity would be responsible for installation; and the MPO would reimburse procurement costs. One limitation of the MAPC procurement process is that it can only be used to procure certain categories of items. However, several of these categories are useful for facilitating first- and last-mile connections, and staff believe they will be a good fit for the CC Program.

### ***Revise Project Categories***

In the pilot (FFY 2021) round, the CC Program invited projects in the following categories:

- Transit operations and improvements
- Parking management
- Bicycle and pedestrian improvements
- Education and wayfinding

Projects were categorized as "operating" or "capital" depending on whether they were requesting funding for an ongoing program or a one-time expenditure to purchase an object or service.

To reflect successful projects from the pilot round, and those categories available through MAPC's collective purchasing agreements, staff recommend opening the FFY 2022 CC funding round by inviting applications for the categories contained in Table 2. All of these new, more specific categories have pathways to implementation that MPO staff have identified in partnership with staff from MassDOT OTP and MAPC.

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<sup>2</sup> For more information about MAPC's Collective Purchasing Program, visit <https://www.mapc.org/our-work/services-for-cities-towns/public-works-collective-purchasing-program/>.

**Table 2  
Recommended FFY 2022 CC Application Categories  
and Paths of Project Administration**

<b>Category</b>	<b>Administration Path</b>
Transit Operating	MassDOT OTP
Transit Signal Priority (TSP)	MBTA
Bike-Supportive Infrastructure	MAPC/MassDOT OTP
Automatic Vehicle Location (AVL)	MAPC/MassDOT OTP
Parking Payment Systems	MAPC/MassDOT OTP
Education	MassDOT OTP

As of this writing, MPO staff are also actively exploring the possibility of offering funding for two additional categories in conjunction with the MBTA: bus lanes and solar-powered E Ink signs at bus stops. The probability of being able to offer these categories in the FFY 2022 funding round is not yet clear.

In the future, MAPC’s collective purchasing process may open up other possibilities that would be a good fit for the CC Program, including the possibility of supporting projects that improve road markings, bus shelters, and signage. Staff will continue to discuss this topic with MAPC and report back to the MPO with recommendations for future CC funding categories as necessary.

**3.2 Application Process**

While the application will be updated to reflect the categories recommended above, staff do not recommend serious revisions to the format of the CC Program application at this time. Staff will consider options for potentially integrating the CC Program into the TIP application as one of several funding programs designated in the LRTP and will examine the possibility of creating a website portal for project applicants.

**3.3 Scoring and Evaluation**

***Changing Evaluation Criteria to Reflect Program Structure Changes***

The CC pilot round revealed a number of challenges within the scoring and evaluation process. The basic scoring process for the pilot round, as guided by the MPO’s feedback, scored projects out of 60 points—30 for “General Criteria” applied to all projects and 30 for “Type-Specific Criteria” tied to whether the project was an operating or capital project. Staff noted during the scoring process—and heard again from both staff and project proponents during the review—that the binary division between “capital” and “operating” projects did not function as well as had been envisioned. The scores that the evaluation process

produced seemed to favor operating projects over capital projects. That inequality seems to be caused by factors within both sets of Type-Specific Criteria. The criteria for capital projects are geared toward sidewalk and roadway improvement projects, while the applications received in the pilot round did not fall into those categories.<sup>3</sup> The criteria for transit projects, while they evaluate important information, largely award points for project elements that are required for CMAQ eligibility and reporting, so any proponent who fills out the application correctly will receive the points for those elements.

Taking that feedback and considering the concept of introducing new, more exact project categories based on the feasibility of project administration into account, staff recommend reorganizing the scoring and criteria for the FFY 2022 round of the CC Program. Specifically, staff recommend weighting the General Criteria, which measure the relationship of projects to the CC Program's core goals, much more heavily while replacing the Type-Specific Criteria with budget checklists specific to each project category, similar to the one that currently exists for transit operating projects. Currently, the General and Type-Specific Criteria are equally weighted, each worth 30 out of 60 points. Staff recommend normalizing the CC scoring scale to the 100-point scale agreed upon for regular TIP scoring and allocating 90 of the 100 available points to the General Criteria. The remaining 10 points would be allocated to evaluation of the budget worksheets to be filled out by project proponents; staff would produce budget spreadsheets customized to each project category (or as many as necessary, as there is likely to be overlap in necessary information between project categories). Within the General Criteria, points will be allocated as closely as possible to their current distribution on the 30-point scale. Staff will also modify the methods used to score projects to reflect the experience of the pilot round, but anticipate doing so more aggressively in the future (see below).

### ***Aligning Criteria with TIP Criteria***

As noted above, staff propose normalizing the CC criteria to the 100-point scale used in the new TIP criteria. Recognizing the immense amount of work, including significant public input, that the MPO has put into revising the TIP criteria, staff support the principle of more fully aligning the CC Program criteria with the new TIP criteria. However, at this time, staff recommends delaying significant revision to the General Criteria for another year, until staff and the MPO have had a year of experience with the new criteria, and have had a chance to develop a strategy for integrating the criteria for all of the new funding programs.

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<sup>3</sup> One project was an exception and was ruled ineligible because the proponent asked for the funding to be split over time.



### ***Consider Access-Based Scoring***

CTPS staff have been exploring the possibility of using Conveyal, a leading software for analyzing multimodal transportation improvements through the lens of access to housing, jobs, and other resources on a regional scale (access-based scoring) or similar software for project evaluation through a technical assistance contract with Transportation for America (T4A) and the State Smart Transportation Initiative (SSTI). MassDOT is in the process of finalizing a license for Conveyal, and staff anticipate being able to share MassDOT's license. Staff have identified the CC Program as a likely candidate for using this approach to evaluate projects but have not yet gained sufficient familiarity with Conveyal to be able to apply it for the coming CC funding round. Staff's intention is to gain additional familiarity with Conveyal during FFY 2021 and potentially use it in evaluating applications for future funding rounds.

## **CONCLUSIONS**

This memorandum documents staff's recommendations for refinements to the CC Program in the short term, as well as avenues for further exploration in the longer term. Staff request that the MPO board evaluate and, if deemed appropriate, approve the approach presented here to conducting the upcoming CC round (applications in FFY 2021, funding beginning in FFY 2022), as well as provide feedback on the concepts for further refinement. With the board's feedback and approval, staff will begin to prepare the application for the CC Program's first open application release in fall 2020.

The Boston Region Metropolitan Planning Organization (MPO) operates its programs, services, and activities in compliance with federal nondiscrimination laws including Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 (Title VI), the Civil Rights Restoration Act of 1987, and related statutes and regulations. Title VI prohibits discrimination in federally assisted programs and requires that no person in the United States of America shall, on the grounds of race, color, or national origin (including limited English proficiency), be excluded from participation in, denied the benefits of, or be otherwise subjected to discrimination under any program or activity that receives federal assistance. Related federal nondiscrimination laws administered by the Federal Highway Administration, Federal Transit Administration, or both, prohibit discrimination on the basis of age, sex, and disability. The Boston Region MPO considers these protected populations in its Title VI Programs, consistent with federal interpretation and administration. In addition, the Boston Region MPO provides meaningful access to its programs, services, and activities to individuals with limited English proficiency, in compliance with U.S. Department of Transportation policy and guidance on federal Executive Order 13166.

The Boston Region MPO also complies with the Massachusetts Public Accommodation Law, M.G.L. c 272 sections 92a, 98, 98a, which prohibits making any distinction, discrimination, or restriction in admission to, or treatment in a place of public accommodation based on race, color, religious creed, national origin, sex, sexual orientation, disability, or ancestry. Likewise, the Boston Region MPO complies with the Governor's Executive Order 526, section 4, which requires that all programs, activities, and services provided, performed, licensed, chartered, funded, regulated, or contracted for by the state shall be conducted without unlawful discrimination based on race, color, age, gender, ethnicity, sexual orientation, gender identity or expression, religion, creed, ancestry, national origin, disability, veteran's status (including Vietnam-era veterans), or background.

A complaint form and additional information can be obtained by contacting the MPO or at [http://www.bostonmpo.org/mpo\\_non\\_discrimination](http://www.bostonmpo.org/mpo_non_discrimination). To request this information in a different language or in an accessible format, please contact

Title VI Specialist  
Boston Region MPO  
10 Park Plaza, Suite 2150  
Boston, MA 02116  
[civilrights@ctps.org](mailto:civilrights@ctps.org)  
857.702.3700 (voice)  
617.570.9193 (TTY)

**APPENDIX A**  
**FULL COMMUNITY CONNECTIONS REVIEW SURVEY RESULTS**

**Table A-1  
Project Proponent Survey Results**

Response Number	How would you rate the experience of applying for the MPO's Community Connections Program?	How would you rate the clarity of the MPO's development process for the Community Connections Program pilot funding round?	How would you rate MPO staff's responsiveness to questions and concerns?	How would you rate the Community Connections Program application in terms of how much work it takes to complete?	How would you rate the Community Connections Program application in terms of the amount of information and data it asks for?	Do you have any other feedback on the application process for the Community Connections Program? Please limit your feedback to the application phase alone.
1	4	6	10	Just enough work	Just enough information	The MPO should think carefully about categorizing projects as construction, implementation, community engagement, etc. - separating the application into two distinct types of projects seemed to lead to more confusion than it was worth. Perhaps a one year and two year option for implementation/ engagement and physical construction, respectively, could be a better option. *see MAPC Accelerating Climate Resiliency Grant*
2	5	4	7	Just enough work	Just enough information	The application process was fairly ease. The communication and inclusion of the person that submitted the application was my concern.
3	8	8	10	Just enough work	Just enough information	Sandy Johnson has been extremely helpful!
4	8	8	10	Just enough work	Just enough information	Our organization was thrilled to have an opportunity to apply for funding to further our mobility goals. Program staff were particularly helpful throughout the process.
5	10	10	10	Just enough work	Just enough information	
6	10	9	10	Just enough work	Just enough information	Being able to ask questions during the application process was very valuable and improved our ability to respond to the information requested.
7	10	6	10	Just enough work	Just enough information	I'm not entirely clear on what question #2 above is asking. In terms of clarity, were scores shared with applicants? It seemed like we applied, projects were presented to the MPO, and then we found out we were accepted. This was great (thank you for your help through the process!), but I'm not sure I understood how those decisions were made.

**Table A-2  
Staff Survey Results**

Staff Member	To what extent do you feel that the Community Connections pilot round, and the projects funded, fulfill the goals of the program and of the MPO?	How do you feel about the scoring process for the Community Connections Program? Possible topics include: 1) Does the CC Program application provide sufficient information for scoring projects? Too much information? 2) Based on your experience reviewing applications (if any), do the criteria for CC application evaluation provide for accurate scoring of projects? 3) Are any types of projects unfairly favored or disfavored?	Do you have any other feedback on the scoring process?	In your opinion, should the CC Program seek to fund small capital projects, or focus on "operating" projects like shuttles?	Do you have an opinion on whether the CC Program should have a cap on individual project cost? There is \$2 million/year programmed in the TIP.
1	7	Information is sufficient for scoring.			
2	9	I don't know as much about the details of the scoring process, as I didn't score any projects directly, but I would say that there's value in the criteria for the CC program complementing/reflecting the broader TIP criteria. It also does seem like transit operating projects are favored in the scoring system, so looking for ways to rectify this is probably worthwhile. On the information required, I think it's important that we request just enough to properly score the project, but not so much information that the application feels burdensome or is difficult to complete for municipalities with fewer resources.	I do think it's important that we do our best to create synergy between the more formal TIP project intake/scoring process and that of the CC program. Ideally, all six of our investment programs would equally be seen as different but related parts of a whole. We have a decent amount of work to do to make this happen, but I think it's essential for the long-term sustainability of both this program and the Transit Modernization program.	If we can figure out a way to fund small capital projects easily and sustainably, then I do think there's a lot of value in doing this. I think the idea of using MAPC's procurement process as a way to do this is compelling and should be explored. I also think that small capital projects like bikeshare expansions or small transit station access improvements are high-impact but low-cost projects and could become hallmarks of the CC program if they can be done. These are great opportunities for the MPO to make a lasting impact in more communities across the region and would be valuable opportunities to better tell the MPO's story (whenever we get to the branding/marketing revamp through our strategic planning process).	I don't think we necessarily need to have a hard cap on project cost. We have \$2 million allocated to the program per year, but that doesn't mean that we can't go over that amount if other TIP projects move around and funding becomes available. We could just add or emphasize language in the application about having a desire to fund multiple projects a year and that cost will be taken into account when selecting projects for funding.
3	8	I think that, in some cases, there was a lot of information to wade through. However, in other cases, the proponent would ignore portions of the questions so there wouldn't be information for grading a project. I would say the differences between how proponents responded to the questionnaire was the trickiest part of grading the CC applications.	I remember that it seemed as though certain types of projects scored much better or worse but I can't remember why... Sorry this isn't helpful. I've forgotten too much about the scoring process, unfortunately.	Small capital projects seem more straightforward, but both could be very beneficial to a community in need of transportation assistance. So... I don't have a strong opinion either way.	I don't know if it feels necessary to cap the cost of an individual project. I imagine if there was a year without many applicants but one really great, expensive project, we could entertain a pricier option.

Staff Member	To what extent do you feel that the Community Connections pilot round, and the projects funded, fulfill the goals of the program and of the MPO?	How do you feel about the scoring process for the Community Connections Program? Possible topics include: 1) Does the CC Program application provide sufficient information for scoring projects? Too much information? 2) Based on your experience reviewing applications (if any), do the criteria for CC application evaluation provide for accurate scoring of projects? 3) Are any types of projects unfairly favored or disfavored?	Do you have any other feedback on the scoring process?	In your opinion, should the CC Program seek to fund small capital projects, or focus on "operating" projects like shuttles?	Do you have an opinion on whether the CC Program should have a cap on individual project cost? There is \$2 million/year programmed in the TIP.
4	10	Some language in CC project application is less specific than the scorecard, like for the 'Maintenance budget and plan' category as well as the two resiliency/environmental criteria. Program seems to favor operating projects. Point scale could be refined, perhaps equal intervals for certain items.	Greater coordination with other project evaluators and GIS team for next round.	Both types of projects have value. But if i had to choose, I'd probably pick small capital projects.	No cap. But some sort of strategy needed if proponent asks for a ridiculous sum of money.