Fare Free Pilot Program for RTAs

- Submitted Pursuant to Section 1595-2406, Chapter 28 of Massachusetts Budget Act of 2024 -
Final Report

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Table of Contents

GLOSSARY 3
EXECUTIVE SUMMARY 5
INTRODUCTION 6
BACKGROUND 6
GRANT APPLICATION PROCESS 8
GRANT APPLICATIONS RECEIVED 9
SUCCESSFUL GRANT APPLICANTS 10
RTA FARE FREE PROFILES 10
- BAT 10
- BRTA 10
- CATA 11
- CCRTA 11
- FRTA 11
- GATRA 11
- LRTA 11
- MART 11
- MEVA 11
- MWRTA 12
- NRTA 12
- PVTA 12
- SRTA 12
- VTA 12
- WRTA 12

DATA COLLECTION 13
DATA ANALYSIS 13
- FIXED ROUTE RIDERSHIP 14
- FIXED ROUTE FARE REVENUES 29
- FIXED ROUTE FAREBOX RECOVERY RATIO 31
- DEMAND RESPONSE SERVICES 31

RTA OBSERVATIONS & CUSTOMER FEEDBACK 38
CONCLUSION 39
APPENDIX – RTA TRY TRANSIT 2.0 PUBLIC RELATIONS & SOCIAL MEDIA EXAMPLES 41

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[1]

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[2], a total of 26 municipalities have officially been defined as "Gateway Cities" by the Commonwealth[3]

GATRA = Greater Attleboro Taunton Regional Transit Authority

LRTA = Lowell Regional Transit Authority

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[1] National Transit Database (NTD) Glossary (https://www.transit.dot.gov/ntd/national-transit-database-ntd-glossary)
[2] Commonwealth of Massachusetts General Law, Part I, Title II, Chapter 23A, Section 3A (https://malegislature.gov/Laws/GeneralLaws/PartI/TitleII/Chapter23a/Section3a)
[3] MassINC Policy Center Gateway Cities Innovation Institute (https://massinc.org/policy-center/gateway-cities/about-the-gateway-cities/)

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

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[4]

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[5]

VTA = Martha's Vineyard Transit Authority

WRTA = Worcester Regional Transit Authority

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

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

Executive Summary

The Fiscal Year 2024 Massachusetts Budget Act (Act) included the provided $15 million in operating funds for Regional Transit Authorities (RTAs) available as grants for means-tested, discounted, or fare-free pilot programs. Based on the requirements of the Act, the Massachusetts Department of Transportation (MassDOT) Rail & Transit Division (RTD) conducted a competitive application process to distribute the available funding to RTAs. A joint proposal from fourteen of the fifteen RTAs was selected for award, as was a second application from CCRTA. Known as the *Try Transit 2.0* program, the joint proposal from the fourteen RTAs met the grant requirements by demonstrating increased ridership by removing economic barriers for low-income individuals to use public transit. Furthermore, the pilot outlined in the joint proposal enabled the RTAs to attract new low-income customers and demonstrate how transit may work for them. CCRTA's proposal stressed the need to provide free transit to older adults (defined as people over the age of 60) and people with disabilities.

In FY23, the Massachusetts's RTAs participated in a separate fare free pilot program during the 2022 Holiday Season, while three RTAs operated with permanent fare free service. Unlike the FY23 *Try Transit* fare free pilot program which operated for about one month over the November/December holiday period, *Try Transit 2.0* supported the RTAs operation of fare free pilot programs at any time during the FY24 fiscal year. Furthermore, under *Try Transit 2.0*, RTAs 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 *Try Transit 2.0* funding was even used to support the continuation of pilot programs into FY25, though the primary focus of this report is on the impacts of the program funding during FY24 only, since the data for continuing operations is not yet available.

Fare free transportation may increase ridership and promote equity by providing additional benefits to low-income individuals, youth and students, secure easier access to school and to jobs, eliminate the need to purchases a pass or find cash for a fare, streamline the boarding process, and assist in the reduction of greenhouse gas emissions and congestion. Fare free service can reduce conflicts between passengers and operators since drivers would no longer be required to enforce fare payment policy. In 2024, administrators of multiple RTAs attributed a reduction of passenger/driver conflict to the introduction and expansion of fare free service. Total ridership across all modes of service (i.e., fixed route, demand response, demand taxi, and commuter bus) increased from FY23 to FY24 among all RTAs. While total ridership increased during this time period, only six RTAs exceeded pre-pandemic FY19 ridership. Each RTA also reported fixed route ridership in FY24 that exceeded FY23 figures, thus showing a positive correlation between fare free service and transit ridership. Fixed route ridership is below FY19 figures for all but five RTAs. Three of these five RTAs (FRTA, MeVa, and WRTA) have offered fare free fixed route service prior to the launch of the FY23 and FY24 *Try Transit* programs, thus showing not only a positive correlation between fare free service and ridership but also a positive correlation between ridership and the duration of fare free pilot programs.

In FY25, an additional $30 million of fare free funding was provided by the legislature. Thirteen of the fifteen RTAs have applied to continue providing fare free service in the new fiscal year. The continuation of fare free service among most RTAs will allow for more data collection and an even more robust analysis on the impacts of the provision of fare free transit. Such future analyses would provide better understanding of the long-term impact of fare free service and post the COVID era downturn.

Introduction

Under Section 1596-2406 of the Fiscal Year 2024 Massachusetts Budget Act, Chapter 28 of the Acts of 2023, MassDOT RTD was directed to award up to $15 million in operating funds to RTAs on grants for fare-free pilot programs. The Act requires that MassDOT shall oversee the distribution of said grants and shall establish grant criteria including, but not limited to, the prioritization of:

a) Opportunities for increased ridership.
b) 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 b1 – b4). At the time of submittal, there was no data on ridership and fares available in order to meet requirements b5 and b6. As such, MassDOT RTD submits this final report to address the remaining requirements.

Background

In Massachusetts, there are fifteen RTAs outside of the Greater Boston Area (Figure 1). 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 commuter bus. All these services, while managed by the RTA's administrative staff, are provided through contracted operators. In FY2024, a total of 26,994,459 UPT were provided by RTAs, across all modes of service. This includes a total of 24,842,385 fixed route UPT, 1,753,689 demand response UPT, 397,827 demand taxi UTP, and 558 commuter bus UPT.

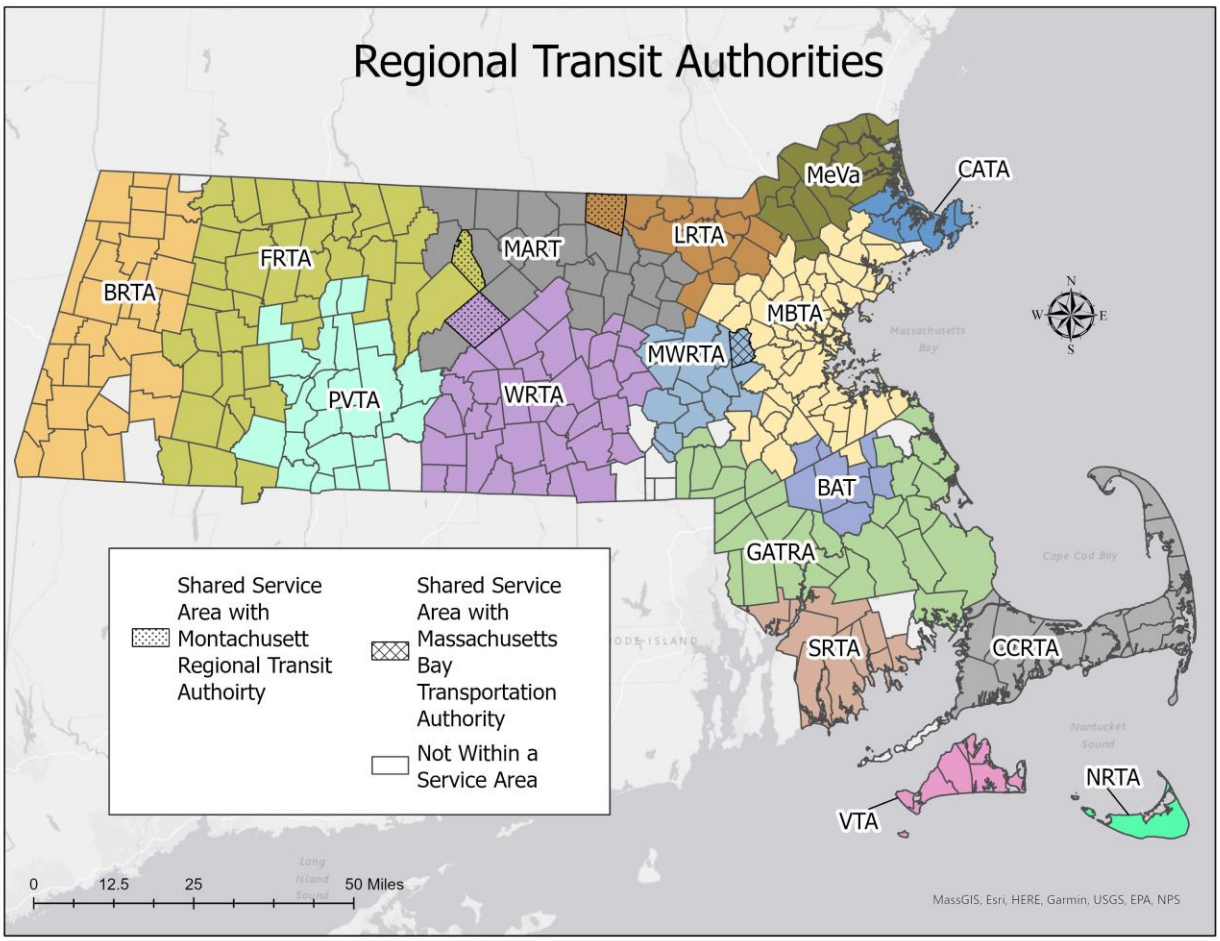

Figure 1: Map of RTA service areas in Massachusetts, including the Massachusetts Bay Transportation Authority (MBTA)

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. RTAs are flexible and innovative in meeting the needs of their customers.

The RTAs are funded through five main sources of revenue: directly generated revenue, farebox revenue local assessments, state funding, and Federal funding (Figure 2). 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. 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 formula but 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.

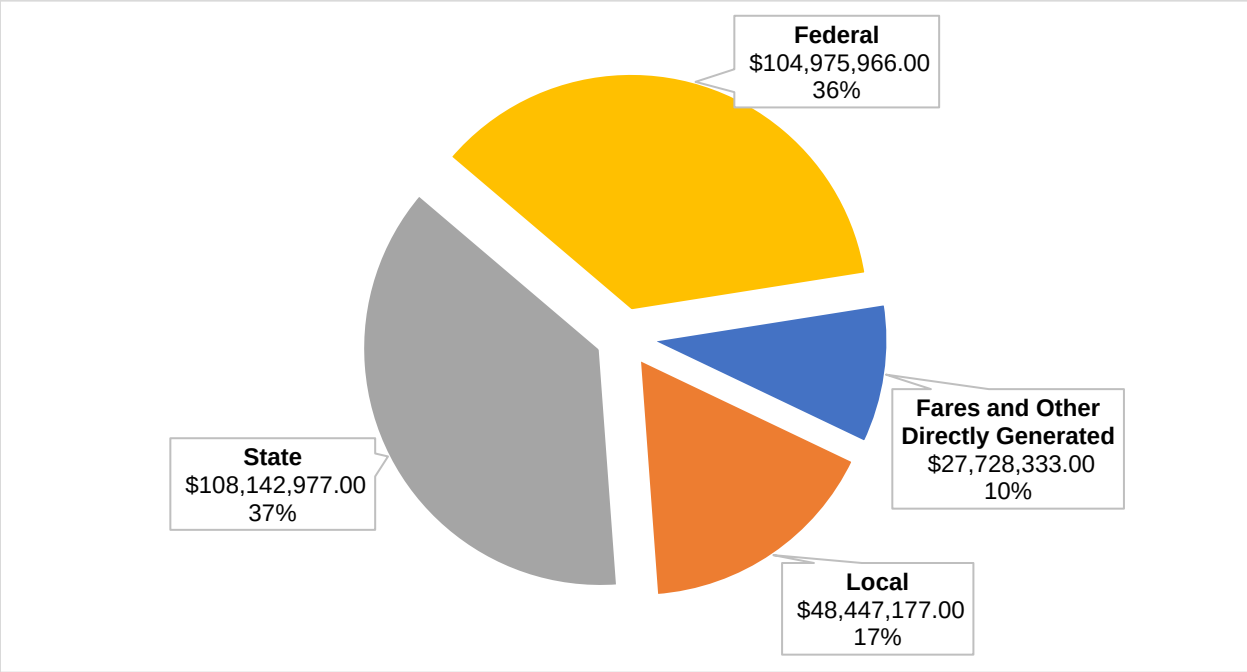

Figure 2: Sources of operating funds expended by all RTAs during SFY2023[6] [7] [8] [9]

Grant 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:

1) The application details how the project addresses opportunities for increased ridership. (30 points)
2) The application details how the project prioritizes low-income individuals. (30 points)
3) A complete project scope, which, at minimum, contains a funding rationale, assets/technical resources to be used, and an implementation schedule. All established local, state, and federal requirements will be applicable to the proposed scope. (20 points)
4) The project utilizes a methodology for tracking ridership and fare data for the pilot's duration. (20 points)

[6] 2023 Funding Sources, National Transit Database (https://www.transit.dot.gov/ntd/data-product/2023-funding-sources)
[7] Note that MART's Brokerage funding was included as part of State Contract Assistance
[8] CCRTA's Fare and Other Directly Generated Revenue was accidently not reported to NTD, CCRTA confirmed that Fares and Other Directly Generated Revenue equaled $1,167,453, this was included in the chart above
[9] Note that according CCRTA's 10-year Multi-Year Financial Plan, the FY23 budgeted federal funding was originally equal to $9,809,199, since federal funding cannot be used to pay off CCRTA's Revenue Anticipation Note (RAN), State Contracting Assistance funding and Local Assistance Funding was reallocated to pay the RAN off in full. To cover remaining operating expenses additional federal COVID funding was used increasing Federal Sources of Operating Funds to $19,135,605, which is included in the chart above.

5) Bonus points can be earned for the following: 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)

Grant Applications Received

MassDOT RTD received two applications: one application submitted jointly by fourteen RTAs requesting a total of $11,329,433 and a separate application from the Cape Cod Regional CCRTA for $506,758 (Table 1). The joint application was received on October 24, 2023, and the application from CCRTA was received on November 29, 2023.

RTA(s)	Project Description	Operating $ Requested
Berkshire Regional Transit Authority (BRTA), Brockton Area Transit Authority (BAT), Cape Ann Transit Authority (CATA), Franklin Regional Transit Authority (FRTA), Greater Attleboro Taunton Regional Transit Authority (GATRA), Lowell Regional Transit Authority (LRTA), Martha's Vineyard Transit Authority (VTA), Merrimack Valley Transit Authority (MVRTA/MEVA), MetroWest Regional Transit Authority (MWRTA), Montachusett Regional Transit Authority (MART), Nantucket Regional Transit Authority (NRTA), Pioneer Valley Regional Transit Authority (PVTA), Southeastern Regional Transit Authority (SRTA), Worcester Regional Transit Authority (WRTA).	Building off the success of the FY23 *Try Transit* Program, the FY24 *Try Transit 2.0* Program will offer free fixed route and ADA paratransit services offered at various times during fiscal year 2024 throughout the Commonwealth. *Try Transit* will allow first time riders to experience bus or van service without having to overcome any monetary or fare media obstacles. Programs range from six weeks to six months.	$11,329,433
Cape Cod Regional Transit Authority (CCRTA)	Over a multiple month transition period starting on or about January 1, 2024, the CCRTA will implement the fixed route free fare program for Older Adults and Persons with a Disability, covering all days and all hours of the CCRTA's transit operations. The existing CCRTA fixed route free fare programs will be sunset at the end of calendar year 2024, fully replaced by this expanded free fare program.	$506,758

Table 1. Project descriptions for received applications

Successful Grant Applicants

RTD recommended that both the *Try Transit 2.0* grant and CCRTA's separate proposal be selected for awards as proposed (Table 2). Both proposals met the grant requirements by demonstrating the proposed pilot 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 proposals also prioritize low-income individuals, as the majority of current or potential RTA riders are riding out of necessity. Furthermore, the pilot will enable the RTAs to attract new low-income customers and demonstrate how transit may work for them. For the *Try Transit* 2.0 application, given the differences among the RTAs for program length, timing and scope, each RTA is receiving the following award amounts:

RTA	Award Amount
BAT	$1,395,187
BRTA	$179,041
CATA	$89,156
FRTA	$15,000
GATRA	$97,673
LRTA	$120,716
MART	$299,625
MeVa	$1,834,145
MWRTA	$124,356
NRTA	$408,687
PVTA	$3,100,000
SRTA	$1,382,388
VTA	$288,836
WRTA	$1,994,623
Total:	$11,329,433

Table 2: Allocated funding for *Try Transit* 2.0 Funding to the fourteen RTA's that submitted a single application

RTA Fare Free Profiles

BAT

BAT used its FY24 *Try Transit 2.0* grant to run free service starting on December 1, 2023. Pending additional grant funding, they plan on extending fare free services until September 30, 2025, though they are not planning on operating indefinite fare free service at this time. Under BAT's program, all fixed route and paratransit services (though not microtransit) are free seven days a week.

BRTA

BRTA has used their FY24 *Try Transit 2.0* 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. During this period, BRTA also had to reconfigure routes and reduce service on two routes due to a lack of operators with commercial driver's licenses.

While BRTA considered its pilot program to be successful, and has applied for FY25 *Try Transit* funding, it currently does not plan on operating fare free service indefinitely.

CATA

CATA used its FY24 *Try Transit 2.0* grant to provide fare free service from November 24-December 31, 2023. While fares all fixed route and paratransit routes were waived, CATA still charged for the CATA on-demand microtransit services. CATA is open to waiving fares as long as it remains grant funded but is unlikely to go fare free indefinitely without a set source of income.

CCRTA

CCRTA applied separately from the other fourteen RTAs for the FY24 Fare Free funding in order to expand its 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 provided free fares for the general public every Friday since 2021, which will continue until December 2024.

FRTA

FRTA has been offering fare free fixed route services since March 2020. Using money from the FY24 *Try Transit 2.0* 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 period, FRTA continued to charge for its microtransit service, known as FRTA Access, that is open to the general public. They do not plan to operate fare free demand response service indefinitely at this time.

GATRA

In FY24, GATRA offered fare free fixed route and ADA required paratransit services from November 24, 2023, to December 31, 2023, under the *Try Transit 2.0* grant. Microtransit services were not free during this time. GATRA will also be using FY24 *Try Transit 2.0* funding to operate fare free service fixed route and ADA required paratransit service from November 29, 2024-December 31, 2024.

LRTA

In FY24, LRTA offered free services on all fixed route and paratransit from December 1, 2023, to December 31, 2023, and again from July 1-July 31, 2024, under the *Try Transit 2.0* grant. LRTA is exploring piloting longer-term fare free service if grant funding remains available.

MART

In FY24, MART provided free fare services on all fixed route and paratransit starting on January 1, 2024, under the *Try Transit 2.0* grant. While they had originally planned to conclude the program in June 2024, they applied for and received additional grant funding that allowed them to continue the program indefinitely. As a part of establishing the fare free program, MART reached out to several non-governmental organizations, nonprofits and municipalities, as well as a complete comprehensive operation analysis to streamline their services. This report only covers fare free service within FY24.

MeVa

MeVa has offered fare free services on all fixed route and paratransit services since March 2022. While they originally used COVID Relief funding, MeVa now funds their fare free services using MassDOT grant money, most recently from the *Try Transit 2.0* grant. Alongside cutting fares in 2022, they improved

services by decreasing headways in Lawrence and Haverhill, extending hours and rebranding busses and facilities. MeVa separately commissioned a firm to do a study on the effects of fare free in the area and conducted extensive public outreach; this study was not funded by MassDOT.

MWRTA

In FY24, MWRTA offered free fare fixed route and paratransit services from January 2024 to August 31, 2024, under the *Try Transit 2.0* grant. While they had initially planned on waiving fares only through March, additional funding allowed them to continue the pilot through August. They plan on continuing the program for all of FY25, though not indefinitely. MWRTA also piloted waiving fares on their microtransit service, Catch Connect, for the summer of 2024. During FY24, MWRTA required riders to use free cards distributed by drivers to receive free fares. This was intended to facilitate an easier transition back to paying fares but plans on cutting this requirement during FY25. During the free fare period, MWRTA also increased frequency of service and added evening service. MWRTA's Catch Connect service was also expanded to now serve the Town of Hunsdon on weekdays.

NRTA

NRTA used funding from the FY24 *Try Transit 2.0* 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 is considering offering fare free service indefinitely if grant funding remains available.

PVTA

In FY24, PVTA offered fare 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 *Try Transit 2.0* 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, 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 and sees it more as a ridership tool in a backdrop where fares are collected. At the time of the pilot, PVTA also added service to several routes.

SRTA

SRTA offered fare free fixed route and paratransit service from January 1-June 30, 2024, under the *Try Transit 2.0* grant. SRTA is opened to the possibility of providing fare free service indefinitely if grant funding remains available. In January of 2024, SRTA also added Sunday service, while ridership increases also necessitated additional vehicles on routes serving schools.

VTA

In FY24, VTA offered free fares on all fixed route and paratransit from November 24, 2023, to March, 31 2024 under the *Try Transit 2.0* grant. VTA also continues to explore fare systems like fare capping and transitioning away from cash in the future but is hesitant to make fares free for all riders who may have the means to pay.

WRTA

WRTA has been offering fare free services since July 1, 2023, and utilized the *Try Transit 2.0* to continue to support these services. While their original pilot is slated to end on June 30, 2025, they're hoping to go fare free indefinitely, especially in light of their recent customer satisfaction survey which indicated that riders on a fixed income placed high importance on the program.

Data Collection

Quantitative data on fares and ridership was extrapolated from the monthly Service Data Reports submitted by the RTAs as required by the FY24-FY25 State Contract Assistance (SCA) Performance MOUs. From each RTA's report, raw monthly totals for the metrics of UPT, fare revenue generated, and FRR were collected by mode of service. ADA paratransit data is collected under the "Demand Response" mode, which is also inclusive of any demand responsive services provided "beyond" the requirements of the ADA and of microtransit services. Some RTAs that provided additional paratransit services during this time period chose to continue to collect fares for these services, a decision that varied RTA to RTA and was dependent on the type of service provided. As a result, ridership and fare data were analyzed for fixed route or systemwide only for this report.

In addition, each RTA was required to submit a one-time progress report that provided a qualitative assessment of the pilot program. Using a short eleven (11) question survey, information was collected on any operational improvements or challenges observed by RTA staff during the pilot, customer feedback received, and sample advertising materials. See *Appendix – RTA Try Transit 2.0 Public Relations & Social Media Examples* for examples of RTA advertising and public relations in advance of and during the *Try Transit* program.

RTAs collect ridership data through several methodologies. At the most basic level, 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 thereof, 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

Unlike the FY23 *Try Transit* fare free pilot program which generally ran from November 25, 2022, to December 31, 2022, the FY24 *Try Transit* program allowed RTAs to use funding for pilots conducted throughout FY24, and in some cases the duration of the FY24 *Try Transit 2.0* pilots continued into FY25. This report only includes data collected before or during FY24, since FY25 data is not yet available. Each RTA's FY24 *Try Transit 2.0* program is a little bit different from the next, with some RTAs opting for short six weeklong pilot programs between Thanksgiving and New Year's Eve, while others opted for six-month long programs in the winter or summer of 2024. A few RTAs chose to split up their fare free pilot program. BRTA, for example, offered fare free service approximately five weeks in late November and December of 2023 and then a second two-month offering in June and July of 2024. CCRTA, which applied for funding separately, expanded existing fare free service, which had previously been targeted towards older adults, to include people with disabilities. Because data is submitted to RTD on a monthly basis, and is not disaggregated into weeks or days, the analysis presented in this report focuses on annual and monthly data. Additionally, the analysis focuses on the statewide impact of the pilot program. Individual analyses of each RTA's performance during the pilot can be provided upon request.

The various fare free pilot programs can be broken into five broad categories. As each RTA set the parameters of their own pilot programs, the programs are not perfect matches for the categories provided. The categories are as follows:

- Long Term/Permanent Fare Free Service: This category includes RTAs that have been providing fully fare free fixed route service prior to receiving FY24 funding through *Try Transit 2.0*. 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, though a City of Lawrance, MA funded program began providing fare free service on three routes-based routes beginning on September 9, 2019. These RTAs intend to maintain fare free service once FY24 pilot funding is depleted through other funding sources, as long as these funding sources are available. In the case of some of these RTA (FRTA), FY24 Try Transit 2.0 funding was used only to provide fare free funding to demand response service that typically changes fares.

- **Medium Term, Fare Free Service:** This category describes RTAs that offered extensive fixed route fare free service using FY24 *Try Transit 2.0* funding. In some cases, these fare free programs will be using FY24 *Try Transit* funding to pay for fare free fixed route service into FY25. Unlike the **"Long Term/Permanent Fare Free"** 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 *Try Transit* Program) prior to receiving FY24 funding. RTAs included in this category are BAT, MART, MWRTA, and SRTA. Please note that MWRTA still required riders to tap their fare payment card to ride for free, even though fare cards were not charged. Fare payment cards were available upon request on all MWRTA fixed route vehicles. Riders who did not want to use a fare card were required to pay the full fare using cash.
- **Short Term/Holiday Season Fare Free Service:** This mainly focused on providing fixed route fare free service using FY24 *Try Transit 2.0* service around the holiday season, thus operating fare free pilot programs strongly reminiscent of the FY23 *Try Transit* Fare Free pilot program. BRTA, CATA, GATRA, and LRTA operated such fare free service. Please note that BRTA provided a second one-month fare free pilot program in June, while LRTA ran a second fare free pilot program in July (within FY25 but funding with FY24 money). GATRA will also be using FY24 funding to operate a fare free pilot program between November 29, 2024, and December 31, 2024, within FY25.
- **Demographic Focused Fare Free Service:** RTAs in this category focused on providing fare free service to certain groups of people rather than across the board fare free service. This grouping would include CCRTA fare free pilot program starting in February of 2024, which focused on providing fare free fixed route service to seniors (over the age of 60) and peoples with disabilities on fixed route service on all days of operation. Fare free service was extended to all fixed route passengers on Fridays. Please note that prior to February of 2024, CCRTA was offering free fixed route service only to seniors on Wednesdays and to the general public on Fridays. PVTA's fare free pilot program focused on offering fare free service to students after 3PM, as well as fare free service to the public during the months of December and June, and on weekends during the months of January, February, March, April, and May.
- **Seasonal Fare Free Service:** The populations of Martha's Vineyard and Nantucket vary based on the season, increasing in the summer and decreasing in the winter. NRTA began its FY24 Fare Free Pilot at the start of FY24 Q3 (April 1st) and continued the pilot through the end of FY25 Q1 (September 30th), with interest in continuing the pilot further depending on available funding. NRTA's fare free pilot program corresponds with the busy season on Nantucket. VTA began its FY24 Fare Free Pilot on November 24, 2023. This fare free pilot continued until the end of FY24 Q3 (March 31st), thus VTA concentrated its pilot program on the Island's off season.

Fixed Route Ridership

All RTAs experienced an increase in total annual fixed route ridership (UPT) in FY24 when compared with total fixed route ridership in FY20, FY21, FY22, and FY23 (Figure 3). Only five of the fifteen RTAs recorded

total annual FY24 fixed route ridership that exceeded FY19 total annual fixed route ridership (Figure 4). 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.

Three of the five RTAs that have seen fixed route ridership exceed FY19 levels, FRTA, MeVa, and WRTA, offered system wide fare free service since at least March 2022. Annual total fixed route ridership increased for FRTA, MeVa, and WRTA by 1.19%, 45.47%, and 51.53%, respectively, from FY19 to FY24. From FY23 to FY24 FRTA, MeVa, and WRTA's annual total fixed route ridership has increased respectively by 38.84%, 58.94%, and 16.02%. The fact that three RTAs that have been operating fare free continuously since at least FY22 have all exceeded FY19 ridership indicates the effectiveness fare free service has in generating ridership over a multiyear period of time.

The two remaining RTAs that recorded more fixed route UPT in FY24 than in FY19 are BRTA and SRTA. BRTA has been categorized as offering "Short Term/Holiday Season" in FY24, with fare free fixed route service being provided from late November 2023 through the end of December 2023, and again from the start of June 2024 through the end of July 2024. BRTA's total annual fixed route ridership increased by 8.39% from FY19 through FY24. From FY23 through FY24, BRTA's total annual ridership increased by 10.95%. Based on its approach to Fare Free fixed route service in FY24, SRTA falls into the "Medium Term" category. SRTA started its fixed route fare free pilot program at the start of January 2024 and plans to continue fare free service indefinitely, provided funds are made available. SRTA's total annual fixed route ridership increased by 2.02% from FY19 through FY24, while SRTA's total annual fixed route ridership increased by 19.01% from FY23 through FY24.

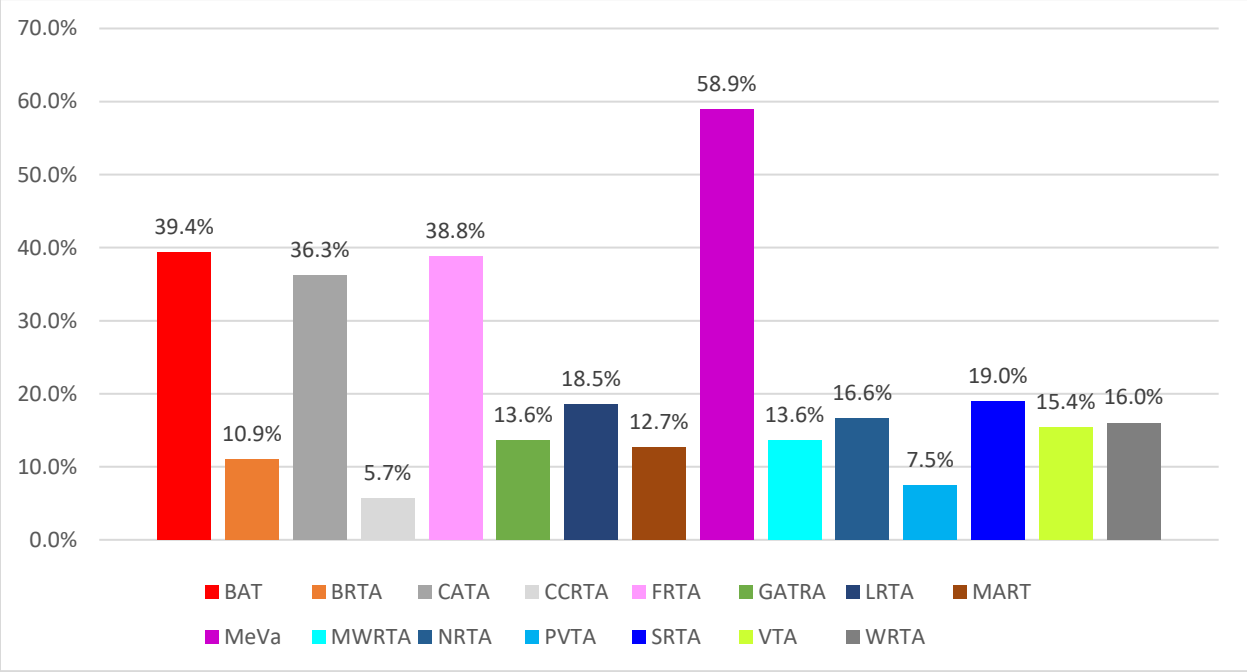

Figure 3: Percent Ridership Change from FY23 to FY24

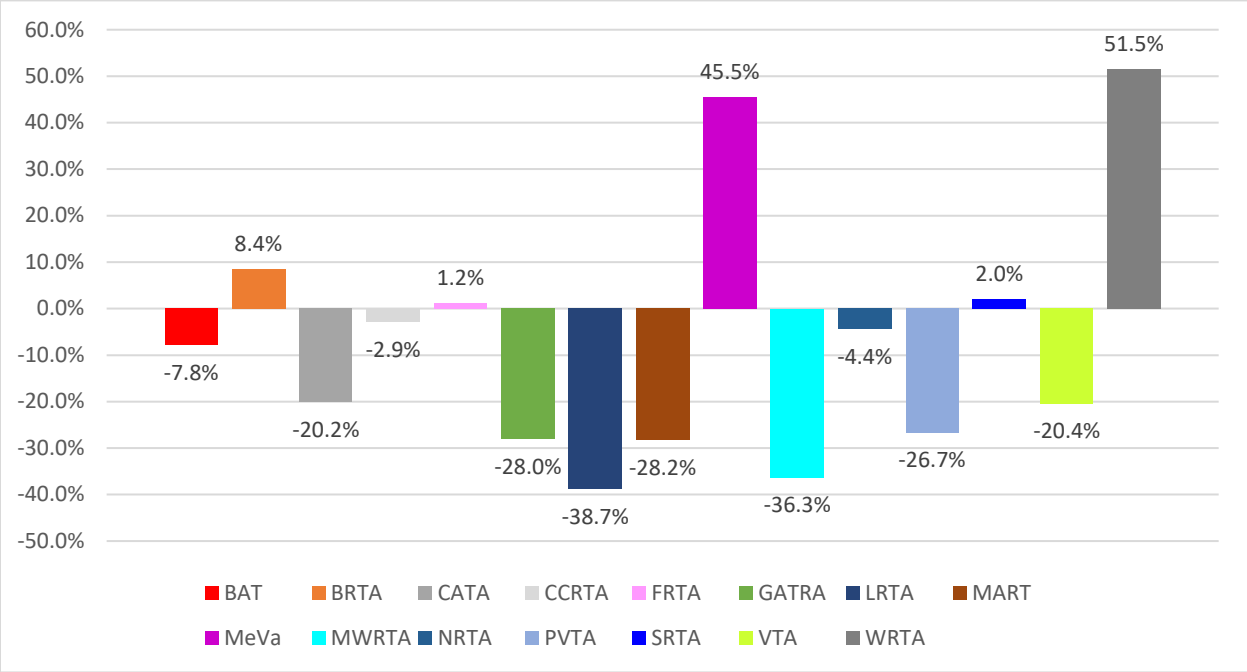

Figure 4: Percent Ridership Change from FY19 to FY24

Total fixed route UPT across all RTAs has been increasing since the pandemic era low in FY21. In FY24, a total of 24,842385 fixed route UPT were made across all RTAs, or an 18.87% increase from FY23. Total UPT across all RTAs is 6.78% below FY19 totals (Figure 5).

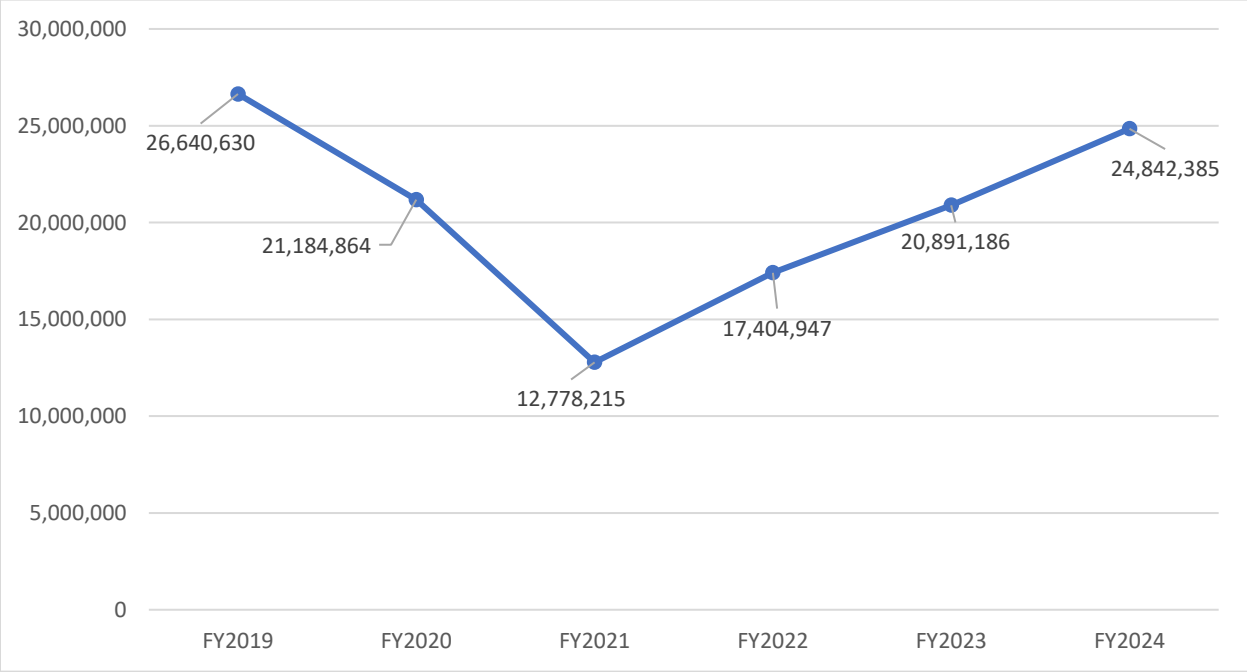

Figure 5: Total Annual RTA Fixed Route Ridership from FY19-FY24

To understand ridership, RTAs were broken into the five groups described above. Average annual ridership for each group was then taken by calculating the total annual ridership for each RTA in each respective cohort and then divided each groups total by the number of RTAs in each group.

Among the five groups, the RTAs that make up the "Long Term/Permanent Fare Free Service" group had an average percent fixed route ridership increase of 29.61% from FY23 to FY24. The average percent change of UPT among the RTAs that make up the "Medium Term, Fare Free Service" was an increase of 25.75% from FY23 to FY24. Among the RTAs that make up the "Short Term/Holiday Season Fare Free Service," average percent change in annual fixed route ridership increased by 16.36% from FY23 to FY24, while among the RTAs included in the "Demographic Focused Fare Free Service," average percent change in annual fixed route ridership increased by 7.36% during this time period. Lastly, among the RTAs in the "Seasonal Fare Free Service," average percent change in annual fixed route ridership increased by 15.69% from FY23 to FY24 (Figure 6).

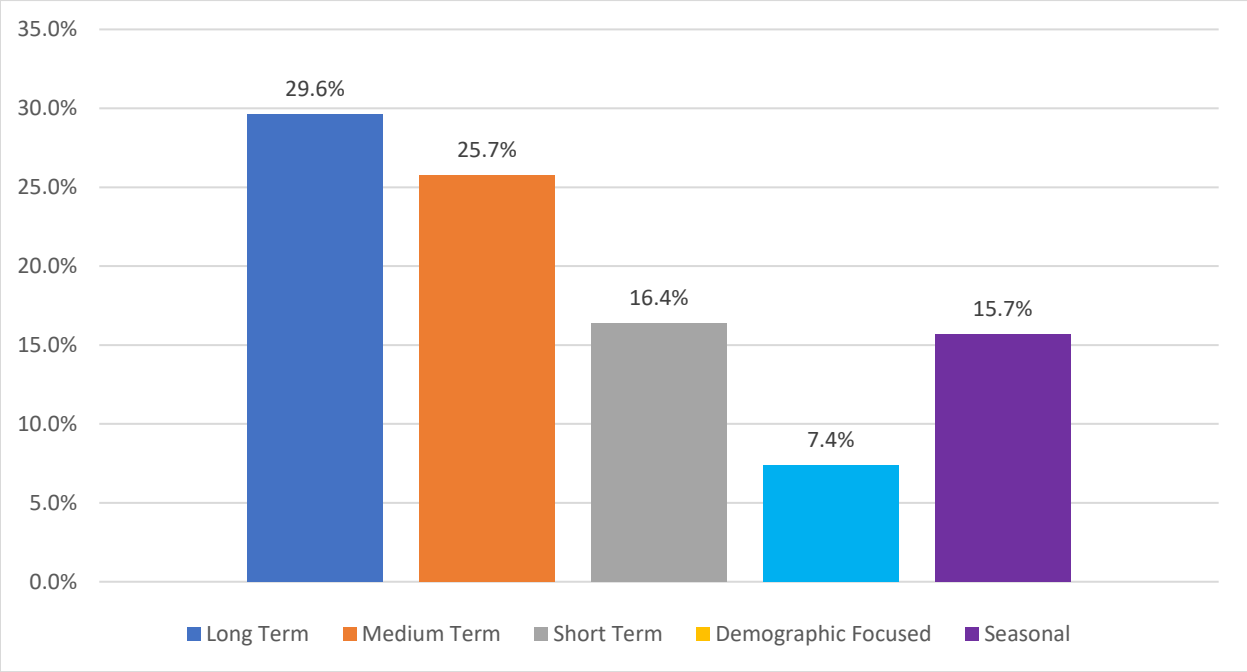

Figure 6: Average Percent Change in Annual Fixed Route Ridership by Group, FY23 to FY24

The RTAs that make up the "Long Term/Permanent Fare Free Service" group saw an average percent increase in annual fixed route ridership by 47.90% from FY19 to FY24. Average percent change in annual fixed route ridership among the RTAs that form the "Medium Term, Fare Free Service" decreased by 8.03% from FY19 to FY24. Among the RTAs that make up the "Short Term/Holiday Season Fare Free Service," average percent change in annual fixed route ridership decreased by 26.22% from FY19 to FY24, while average percent change in annual fixed route ridership among the RTAs included in the "Demographic focused Fare Free Service" decreased by 25.34% during the same period. Lastly, average percent change in annual fixed route ridership among the RTAs in the "Seasonal Fare Free Service" decreased by 17.47% (Figure 7). Though the change in average precent ridership between FY23 and FY24 indicates that the elimination of fixed route transit fares led to some degree of ridership increase, the change between FY19 and FY24 demonstrates a positive correlation between the duration of fare free transit and ridership change. The "Long Term" cohort is the only grouping that's FY24 average ridership

exceeded that of FY19. Though the "Medium Term" FY24 average ridership was still below the FY19 average ridership, but far closer pre-pandemic recovery than the remaining three groups.

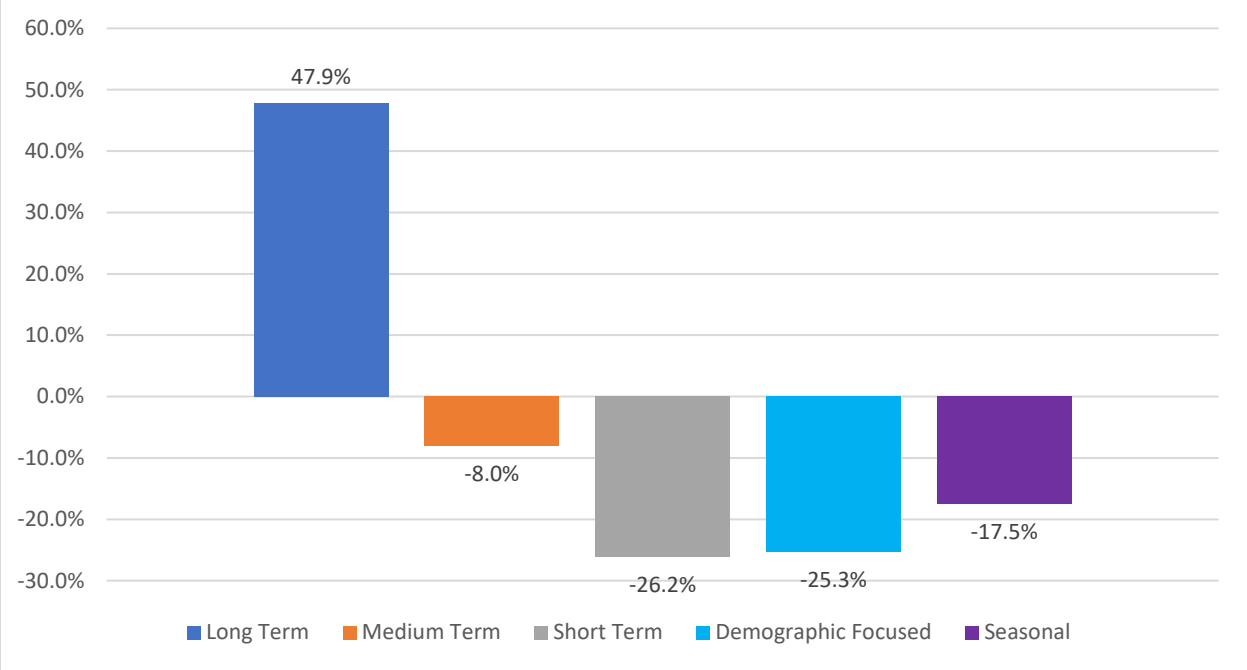

Figure 7: Average Percent Fixed Route Ridership by Group, FY19 to FY24

The FY24 total monthly fixed route ridership of all RTAs exceeded those of FY23 (Figure 8). In general, the ebb and flow of ridership during this period is impacted by a number of 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 FY23 and FY24. In FY23 and FY24, the month with the most total fixed route ridership was May. The month of December is an interesting point of comparison since in FY23, fourteen of the fifteen RTAs operated fare free systemwide fixed route service (CCRTA operated fare free fixed route for seniors on Wednesday and for the public on Fridays and Saturdays). In December of FY24 only ten of the fifteen RTAs operated system wide fare free fixed route service, yet the total fixed route UPT increased by 14.56% from FY23. Fixed Route fare free ridership increased by 45.77% between December FY22, when only three RTAs operated systemwide fixed route fare free service, and December FY24. Thus, the introduction of fare free fixed route service across most RTAs in December of FY23, and again in December FY24, has likely contributed to this increase. In December FY24, the total fixed route UPT is 4.75% above December FY20 totals (December FY20 being just prior to the start of the COVID 19 pandemic) and 3.28% below the total fixed route UPT in FY19 (Figure 9).

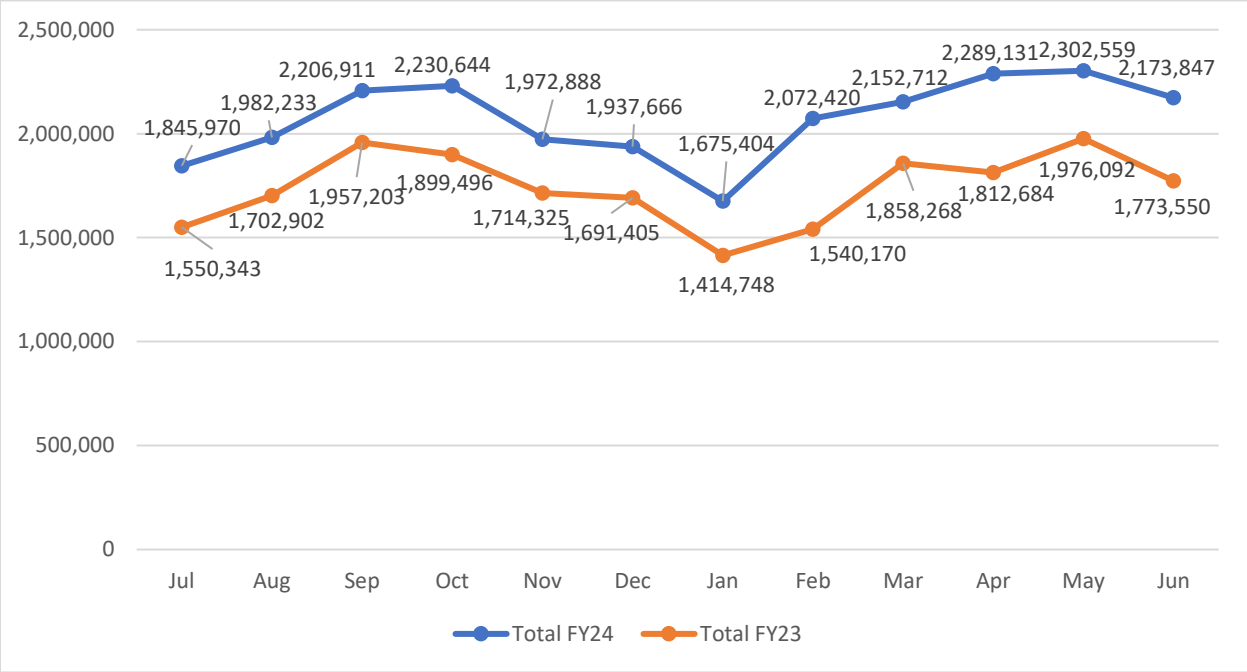

Figure 8: Total Monthly RTA Fixed Route Ridership in FY23 and FY24

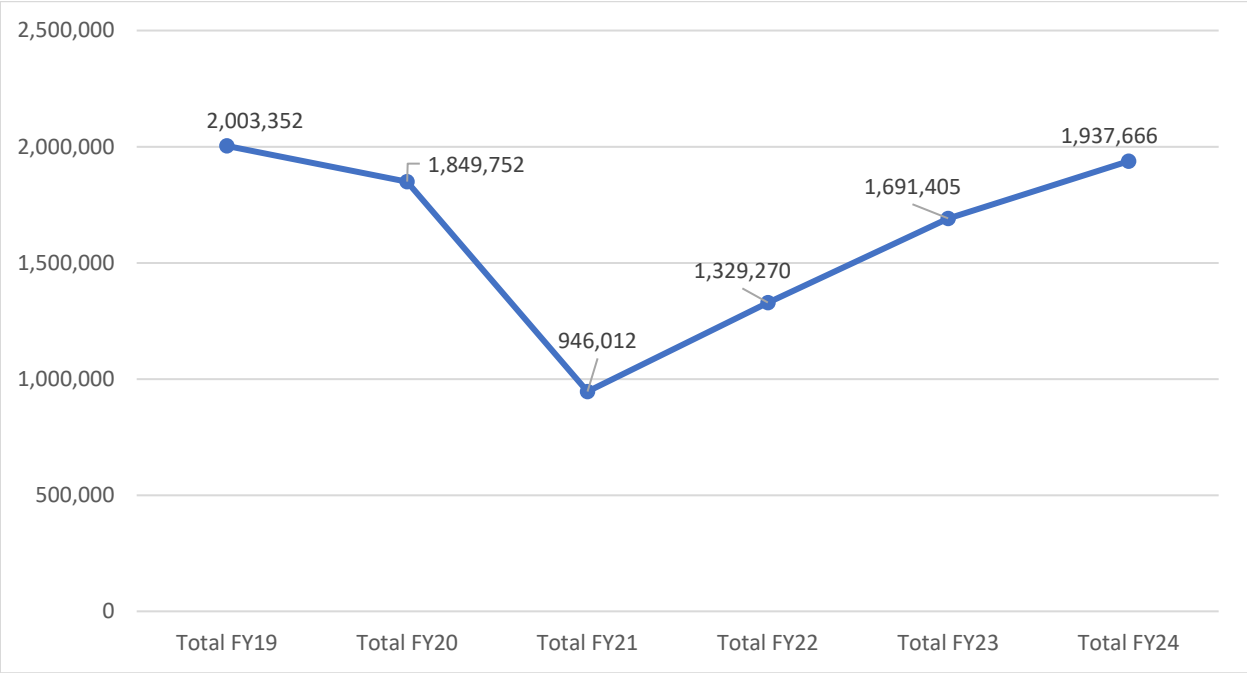

Figure 9: Total December RTA Fixed Route Ridership FY19 to FY24

Reviewing each cohort, the "Long Term/Permanent Fare Free Service" had the largest increase in average percent annual fixed route ridership between FY23 and FY24 of the five groups, a 29.61% change. 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 10).

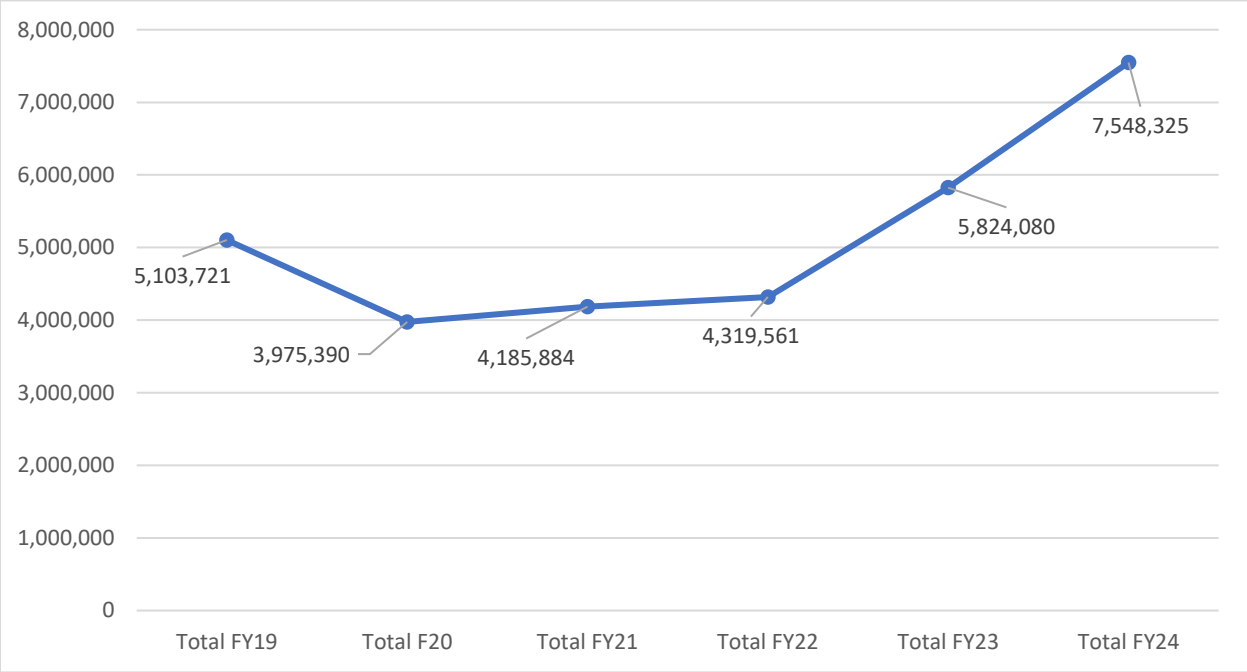

Figure 10: Total Annual "Long Term" Ridership from FY19 to FY24

It is worth noting that all four RTAs in "Medium Term, Fare Free Service" cohort provided fare free fixed route service in the second half of FY24. BAT provided fare free service for the month of December and thus was the only RTA in this cohort that provided fare free fixed route service in the first half of FY24. Since the bulk of the "Medium Term, Fare Free Service" was provided between January 2024 and June 2024, it is thus worth exploring how total fixed route ridership for the second half of FY24 compares with Q3 and Q4 of FY23 and pre-COVID Q3 and Q4 FY19 figures.

Ridership recovery within the medium-term group was stronger in the second half of FY24 when fixed route services was free, further indicating that the introduction of fare free service corresponded with an increase in ridership. During the second half of FY24, when fixed route ridership across "Medium Term" RTAs was fare free, total fixed route ridership was up 42.70% from the second half of FY23, when none of the RTAs in this cohort were providing fare free service. This was an increase from 2,404,028 fixed route UPT during the second half of FY23 to 3,430,566 fixed route UPT during the second half of FY24 Total fixed route ridership also increased by 9.68% between the second half of FY19 and FY24, an increased from 3,127,925 UPT (Figure 11). Total fixed route ridership increased by a mere 25.74% between the entirety of FY23 and FY24, from 4,702,511 fixed route UPT to 5,912,899 fixed route UPT. This smaller percent increase in fixed route ridership, when comparing the entirety of FY23 and FY24 indicates that the introduction of fare free fixed route service in the second half of FY24, was a driving factor behind the increase. Total fixed route ridership across the entirety of FY24 is still 8.03% below total fixed route ridership for the entirety of FY19, when a total of 6,429,174 UPT were made, thus indicating that the introduction of fare free service has at least helped ridership during the second half of FY24 recover from the pandemic. (Figure 12)

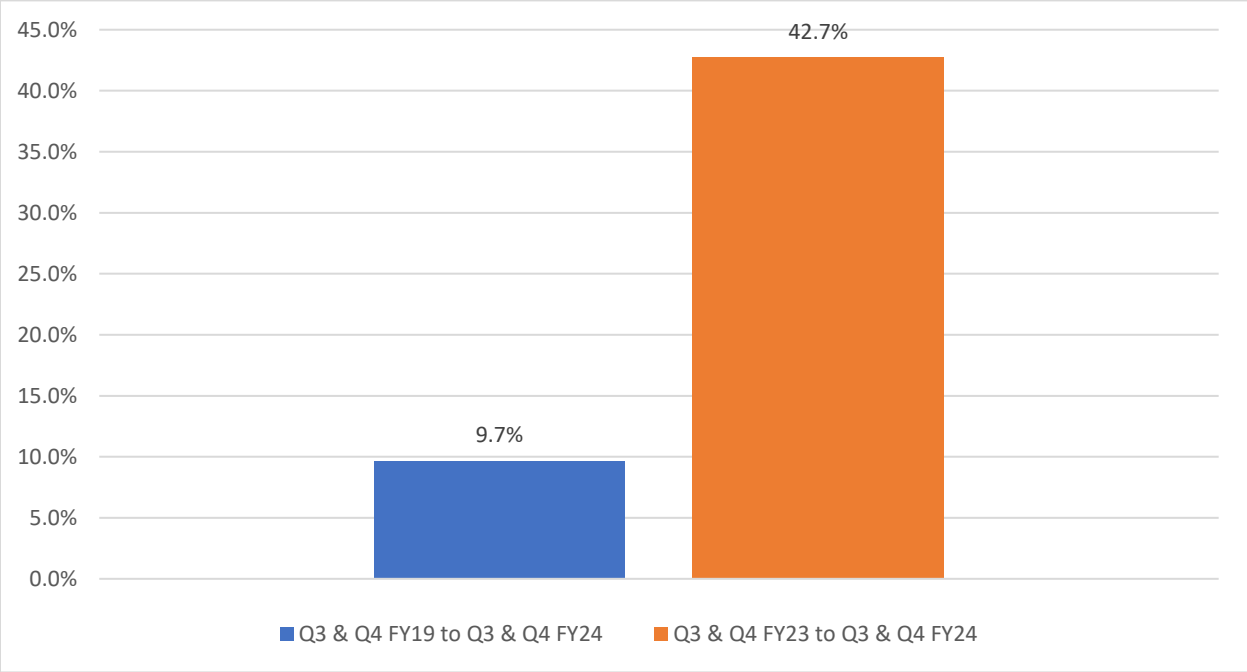

Figure 11: "Medium Term" Percent Ridership Change between second half of FY24 vs second half of FY19 and second half of FY23

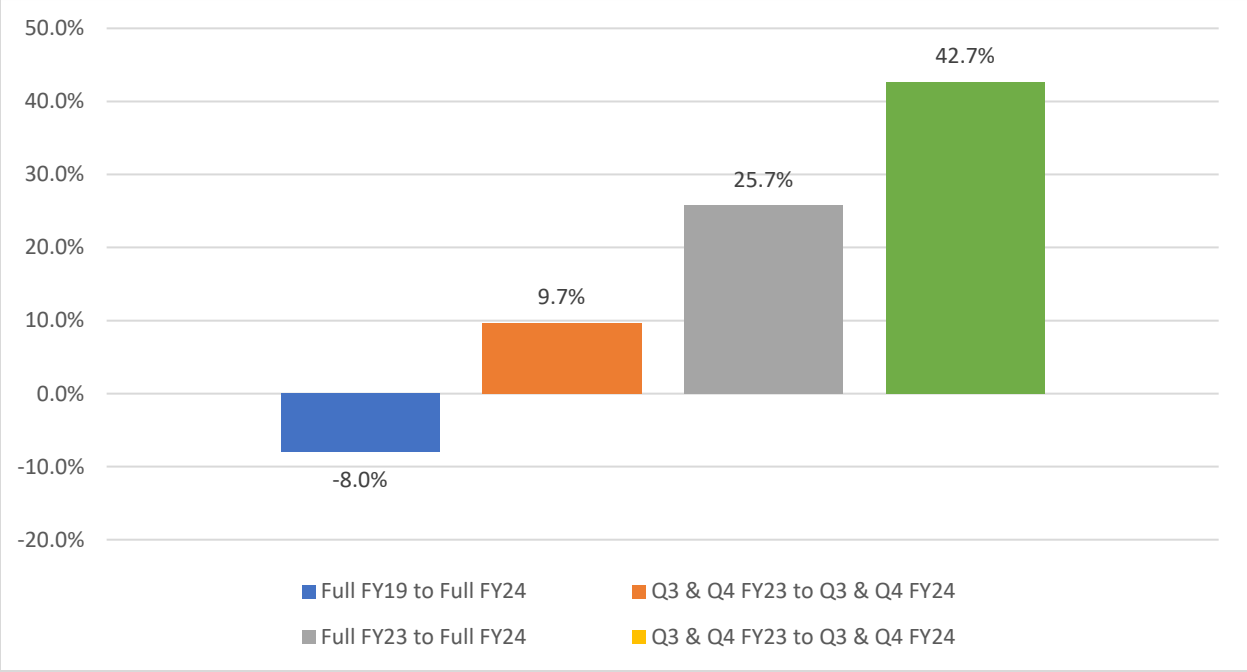

Figure 12: "Medium Term" Percent Total Ridership Change between full and second half of FY24 vs full and second half of FY19 and full and second half of FY23

As was the case with most RTAs in FY23, in FY24 the four RTAs (BRTA, CATA, GATRA, and LRTA) included in the "Short Term/Holiday Season Fare Free Service" group concentrated much of their collective efforts on operating fare free fixed route service during the month of December. Please note that BRTA also operated fare free fixed route service at the end of November 2023 (FY24) as well as in June and July of

2024; CATA operated fare free fixed route service at the end of November 2023 (FY24); GATRA operated fare free fixed route at the end of November, 2023 (FY24) and plans to use FY24 *Try Transit* funding to operate fare free fixed route service from November 29, 2024-December 31, 2024.

In FY24, total fixed route annual ridership among the four RTAs included in the "Short Term" group equaled 2,052,646 an increase of 16.36% from this cohort's total FY23 ridership of 1,764,035. Total annual ridership increased by 23.55% from FY22, when a total of 1,661,431 fixed route UPT were made among the RTAs in the "Short Term" group. From FY19, when total annual fixed route UPT equaled 2,782,120, total FY24 fixed route ridership decreased by 26.22%.

The FY24 fixed route total ridership among the "Short Term" RTAs for the month of December equaled 174,391. This marks a 13.73% increase from December of FY23, when the total equaled 153,339. All four of these RTAs operated fare free fixed route service in December of FY23. Fixed route Ridership in December of FY24 increased by 25.89% from December of FY22, when no RTA in the "Short Term" Group was offering fare free fixed route service. Though such an increase could be in part due to the post pandemic economic recovery, this also indicates a positive correlation between fare free service and ridership. December of FY22 fixed route ridership equaled 1,38,521. December FY24 fixed route ridership is 15.52% below December of FY19, when a total of 206,427 fixed route UPT were made (Figure 13).

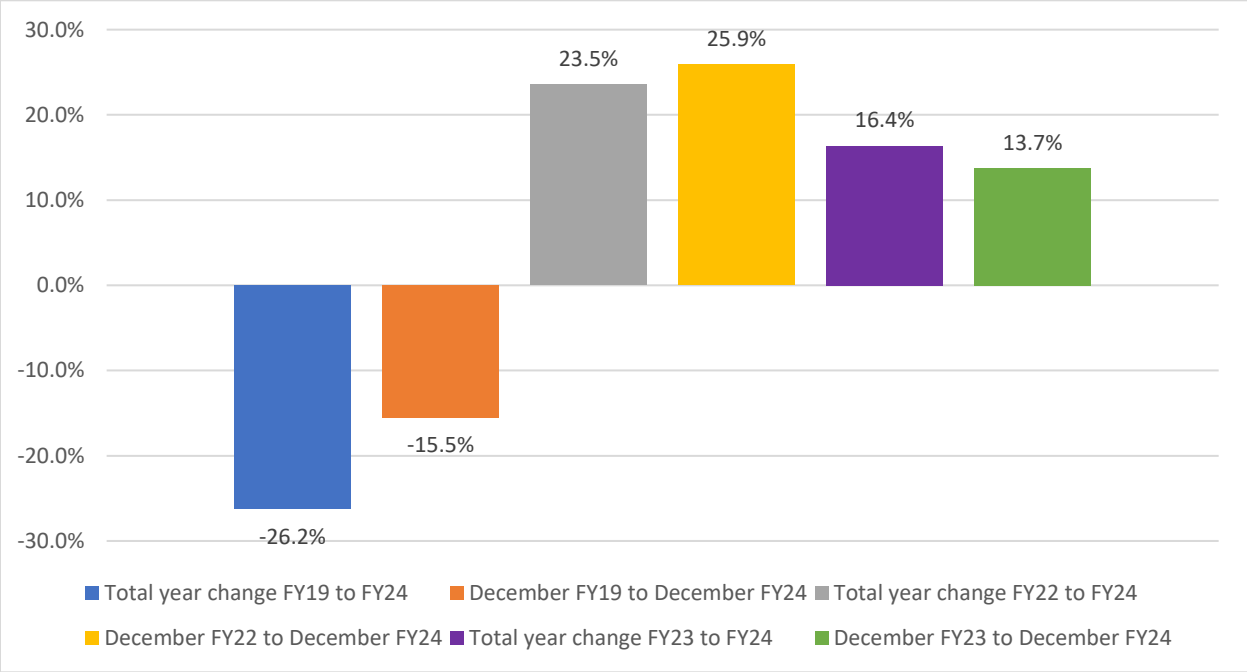

Figure 13: "Short Term" Percent Total Ridership Change between Full and December FY24 vs Full and December FY19, Full and December FY22, Full and December FY23

December and January tend to be low ridership months across many RTAs, with the total fixed route UPT within the "Short Term" group declining from 174,391 in December of FY24 by 3.84% to 167,694 in January of FY24, after all Holiday Season fare free pilot programs in the short-term group ended. In FY22, when no fare free service was being offered by any of the RTAs in the "Short Term" cohort, the number of total fixed route unlike passenger trips declined by 18.21% between December and January. The total fixed route UPT increased by 6.89% between December and January of FY19. Ultimately, though it would be interesting to know if temporary fare free service has a positive effect on ridership once fares are

reinstituted, the data within the "Short Term" group is inconclusive. The larger drop in ridership between December and January FY22, for example, may be related to changes in the COVID infection rate that was prevalent in the winter of calendar year 2021/2022, and thus it is impossible to conclude that the smaller decline between December of FY24 and January of FY24 was the result of holiday season fare free pilot programs.

CCRTA and PVTA presented a slightly different approach to fare free funding than the RTAs that make up the "Long Term," "Medium Term," and "Short Term" Groups. CCRTA and PVTA focused on providing fare free service for certain demographic groups. CCRTA was focused on maximizing it's fare free efforts on providing free service to seniors and people with disability across fixed route service on all days of operation. CCRTA began providing fare free service for older adults (defined as people over the age of 60) in June 2017. Aside from a brief period of system wide fixed route service to people of all ages during the height of the COVID 19 Pandemic (from March 2020-July, 2020), CCRTA has not offered long periods programs of fixed route service but has instead focused on the fare free service to older adults on Wednesdays, and at then at start of FY2022, fare free fixed route service to the general public on Fridays.

Through the FY23 *Try Transit* Program, CCRTA also provided fixed route fare free service to the general public on Saturdays from November 25, 2022, through December 31, 2022. CCRTA applied to FY24 *Try Transit Funding* separately from the other fourteen RTAs, and on February 1, 2024, began a program of providing Fare Free fixed route service to older adults and people with disabilities (people with disabilities were previously excluded from the previous fare free service for older adults' program) every day that service operates. The fixed route fare free Friday's program, that is opened to the general public, was extended through the end of the 2024 calendar year. CCRTA's long term goal is to end the fare free Friday program to the general public at the end of the December 2024 but continue providing fare free fixed route service for seniors and people with disabilities, during all days of operations, indefinitely.

From FY23 to FY24, total ridership increased by 5.67%, from 556,199 fixed route UPT in total for FY23, to 587,716 fixed route UPT in total at the end of FY24. A total of 233,778 unlinked fixed route passenger trips between February and June of FY24, when CCRTA's fare free program for older adults was extend to people with disabilities and to all days of operation. This marks a 15.13% increase from the same time period during FY23, when a total of 203,047 fixed route UPT were made.

While total annual CCRTA fixed route ridership in FY24 is 2.88% below FY23 annual fixed route ridership, the total ridership between February and June in FY24 exceeds ridership during that same period in FY19 by 9.91%. FY19 fixed route ridership between February and June totaled 212,695 UPT (Figure 14).

In December of FY23, when fare free fixed route Friday and Saturday service was provided to the general public (in addition to fare free fixed route Wednesday service to older adults), a total of 36,124 fixed route UPT were recorded. This was 15.28% above December FY19 ridership when no fare free service to the general public was offered. In December FY24, fare free service to the general public was only provided on Friday, and the total fixed route ridership for the month equaled 32,245, as 10.74% reduction from December of FY23 (Figure 15).

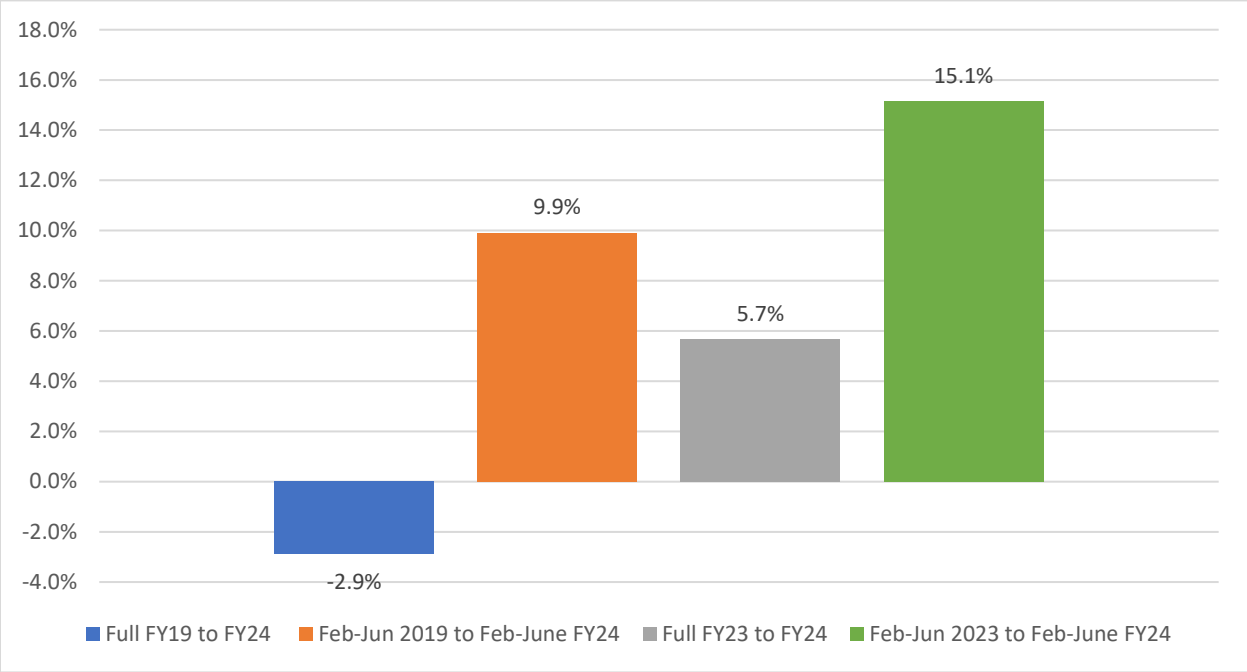

Figure 14: CCRTA Ridership Change, FY24 vs FY19 and FY23

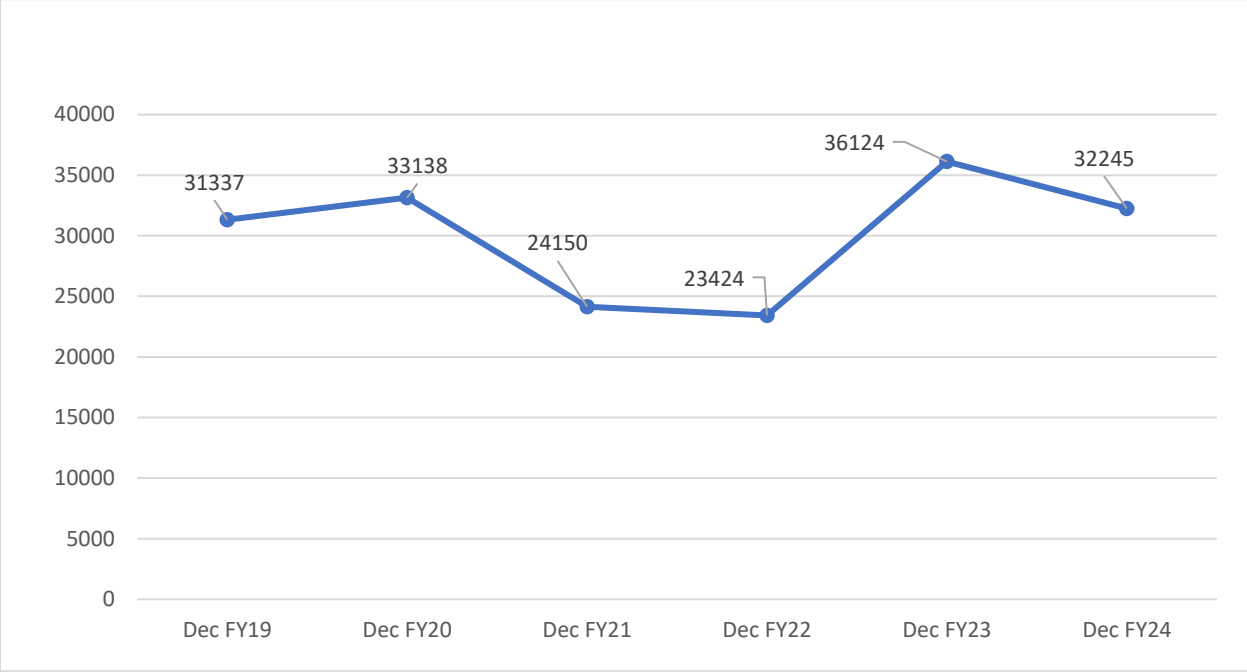

Figure 15: CCRTA Ridership, December FY19-December FY24

Like CCRTA, PVTAs approach to fare free transit was focused on providing free service to older adults (defined over 60) as well as to students, at certain days of the week and certain times of the day. Unlike CCRTA, PVTA also used FY23 and FY24 *Try Transit* funding to provide some system wide fixed route fare free service over the course of several weeks. PVTAs fare free approach thus resembles a combination of demographic approach of CCRTA and the holiday and summer fare free approach of the "Short Term" group.

Since July of FY19, PVTA has offered fare free services to older adults on Tuesdays across all fixed route service except the B79 Amherst-Worcester route. Originally a two-year pilot, this program was extended starting July 1, 2021. As part of the FY23 *Try Transit* fare free pilot program, PVTA provided fare free fixed route service for the month of December. FY24 *Try Transit* funding contributed to fare free fixed route service across the PVTA network (excluding Route B79) to all riders from November 24, 2023-December 31, 2023, and again from June 1, 2024-August 31, 2024. PVTAs FY24 *Try Transit* pilot program also included an expansion of its demographical to fare free service. From January 1, 2024, to May 31, 2024, students 18 years old and under, with valid student ideas, could ride all fixed route service (excluding route B79) after 3PM. All fixed route weekend service (excluding route B79) was also free during this time period.

A total of 7,420,128 fixed route UPT were made, across the PVTA system, this marks an increase of 7.49% from FY23, when a total of 6,902,789 fixed route UPT were made, but a 26.68% decrease from FY19 when a total of 10,120,238 UPT were made. A total of 3,099,617 fixed route UPT were made between during and between January and May of FY24, a 2.09% increase from the same time period in FY23, when a total of 3,036,109 fixed route UPT were recorded. The total number of UPT made during the January-May time period in FY24 is 29.76% down from the same time period in FY19, when a total of a total of 4,350,806 UPT were recorded (Figure 16).

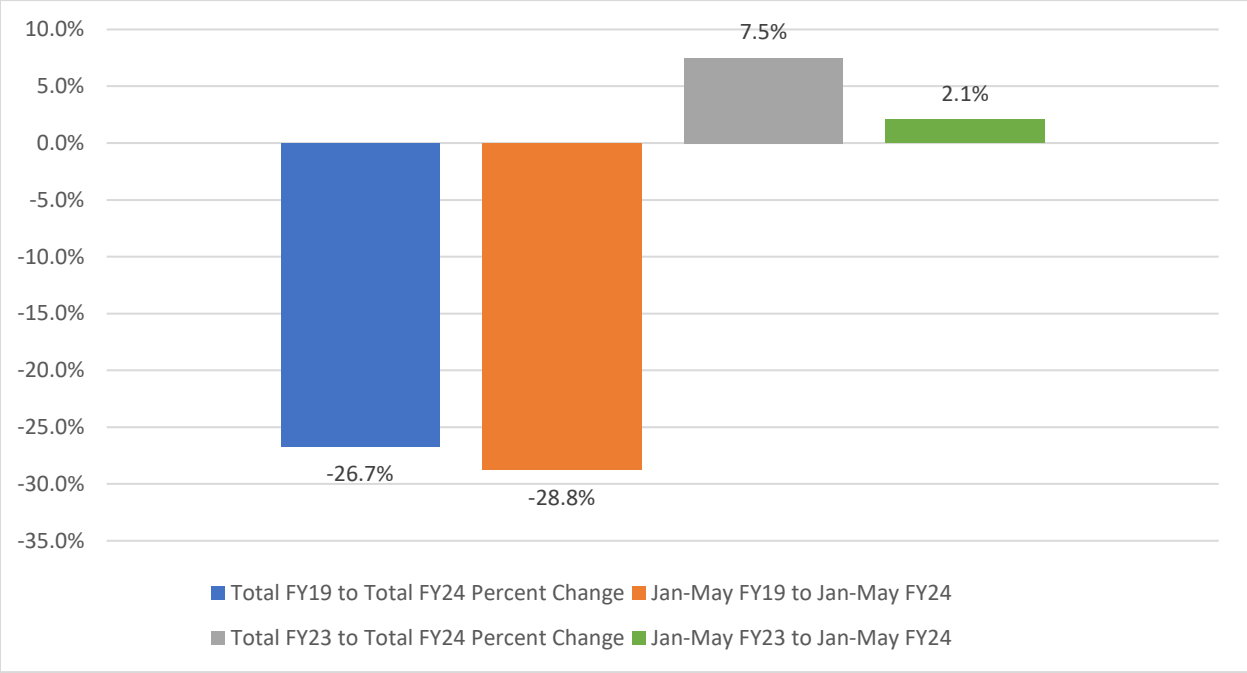

Figure 16: PVTA Percent Change from FY19 and FY23 to FY24

Fixed route ridership increased by 10.16% between December of FY24, when a total of 677,002 fixed route UPT were recorded, and December of FY23, when a total of 614,458 fixed route unlinked passenger trips were recorded, please note that fixed route service was free during the month of December for both of those fiscal years. PVTA did not offer fare free fixed route service during December FY22 (apart for fare free service for older adults on Tuesday) when a total of 467,902 fixed route unlinked passenger trips were recorded, thus ridership increased by 44.69% from December FY22 to December FY24. From December FY19, when a total of 814,699 fixed route passenger trips were recorded to December FY24, fixed route ridership declined by 16.90% (Figure 17).

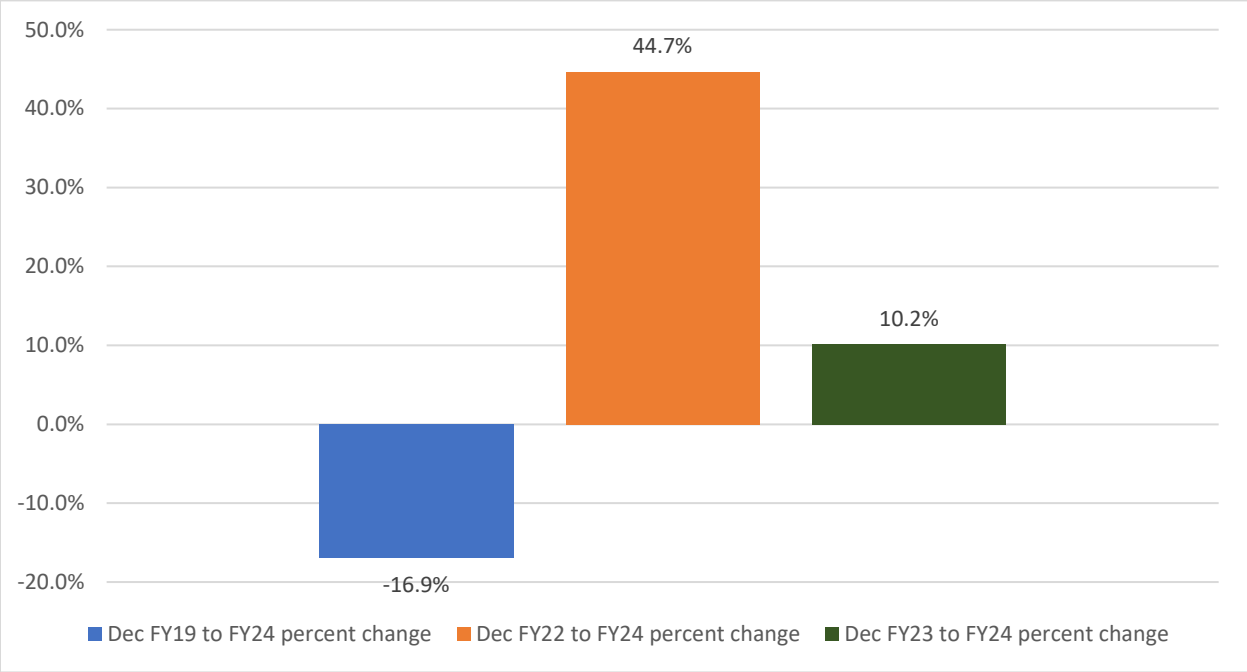

Figure 17: PVTA Percent Change in Ridership from December FY19, December FY22, December FY23 to December FY24

PVTA's fixed route ridership increased by 11.02% from 436,278 fixed route UPT in June FY23 when no fare free service was provided (apart for fare free service for older adults on Tuesday), to 484,352 fixed route unliked passengers trips in June of FY24, when near system wide (excluding Route B79) fare free fixed route service was offered. Fixed route ridership declined by 15.87% from June of FY19, when at total of 575,734 fixed route UPT trips were provided, to June of FY24 (Figure 18).

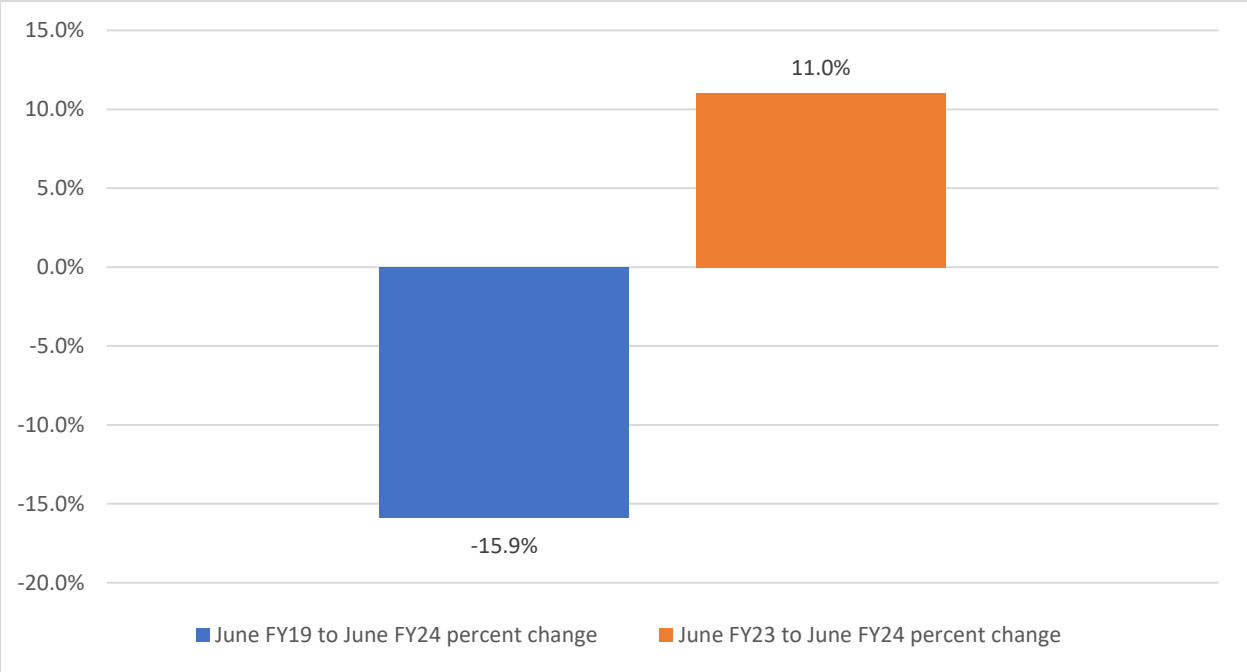

Figure 18: PVTA Percent Change in Ridership June FY19 and June FY23 to June FY24

The final category is the "Seasonal Fare Free Service" group which consists of NRTA and VTA. NRTA and VTA respectively serve the islands of Nantucket and Martha's Vineyard. Both islands are only accessible by boat or airplane and the only way a resident or visitor can bring a car to these islands is by transporting it on a ferry. Martha's Vineyard and Nantucket are both seasonal destinations, the populations of both islands' balloons during the summer months and declines during the long off season which makes up the bulk of the year.

NRTA chose to concentrate its FY24 fare free service in the Spring and Summer, when the FY24 *Try Transit* fare free pilot program was scheduled to run from April through September. VTA concentrated it's fare free service during the winter of FY24, when seasonal residents and tourist are away and the majority of the people on Martha's Vineyard are full time residents. By concentrating its fare free pilot program to the winter, VTA's administration hopes fare free service would provide to relief to year-round residents who tend to be less affluent than seasonal residents and visitors. VTA's FY24 pilot program ran from November 24, 2023 (in FY24) through March 31, 2024.

In FY24, NRTA recorded 282,031 fixed route UPT, up 16.62% from FY23 when 241,842 fixed route UPT were recorded but down 4.41% from FY19, when 295,056 UPT were recorded. Comparing the fourth quarter of FY24, when 102,189 fixed route UPT were recorded and when NRTA was providing fare free service, ridership was up 78.43% from the 57,272 fixed route UPT made during Q4 of FY23, when no fare free fixed route service was offered. Q4 FY24 fixed route ridership also exceeded Q4 FY19 fixed route ridership figures by 64.19%. Fixed route ridership in Q4 FY19 equaled 62,239 UPT (Figure 19).

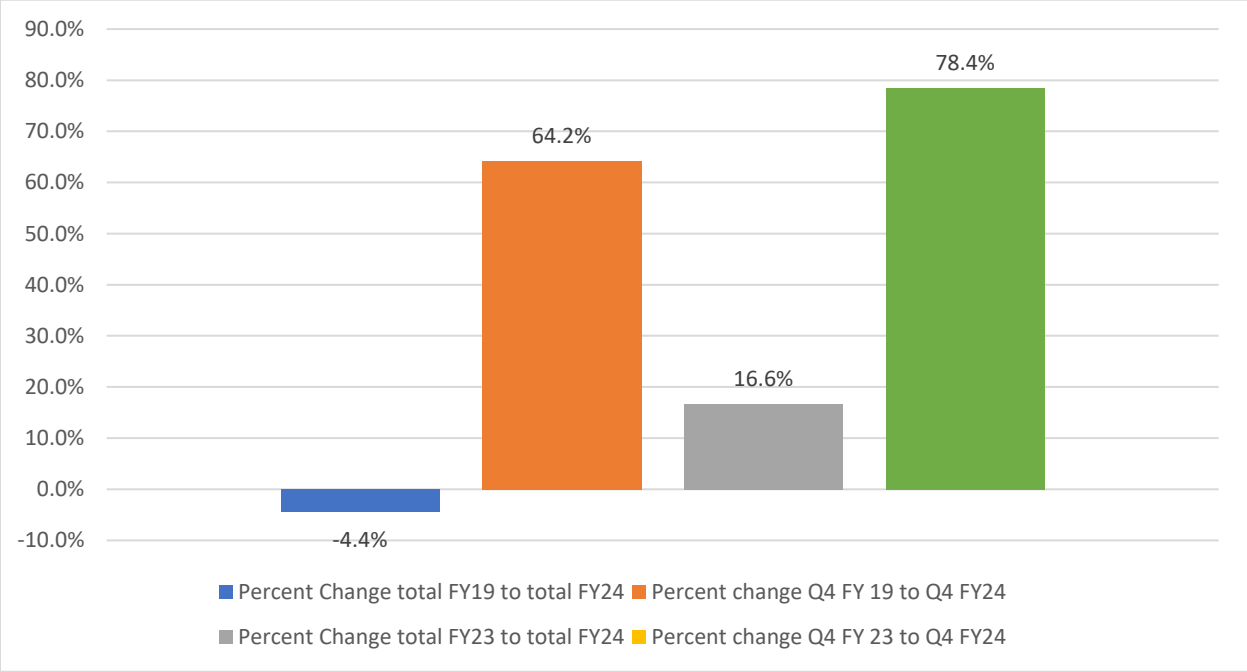

Figure 19: NRTA Percent Change in Ridership from FY19 and FY23 to FY24

In FY24, VTA's total fixed route ridership equaled 1,038,650 UPT, an increase of 15.44% from FY23, when a total of 899,699 fixed route UPT was recoded. From December through March in FY24, during VTA's fare free pilot program, a total of 139,754 UPT were recorded. This is an increase of 29.91% increase from the same period in FY23, when a total of 107,574 UPT were recorded and the FY23 *Try Transit* fare free pilot program was limited to just the month of December.

While fixed route ridership decreased from 1,305,195 UPT, or 20.42% between FY19 and FY24, ridership was up by 24.60% during the December through March period in FY24 compared to that same period in FY19, when a total of 112,165 UPT was recoded (Figure 20). Comparing April of FY24, after VTA's fare free pilot program ended, ridership was up 16.33%, an increase from 42,463 fixed route UPT in FY23 to 49,397 fixed route UPT in FY24. April FY24's ridership is 24.60% above April FY19 ridership of 44,318 fixed route UPT.

This indicates that fare free service might, at least temporarily, boost ridership after pilot programs ends. That said, by June of FY24, ridership was 9.20% below FY23 numbers, a decrease of 154,556 fixed route UPT in June of FY23 to 140,338 fixed route UPT in June of FY24. June of FY24 recorded 18.57% fewer fixed route UPT than June of FY19, when 172,349% fixed route UPT were recorded (Figure 21). It is difficult to determine if the fare free pilot program had lingering effects that boosted ridership in April of FY24 and subsided by June, or if other factors contributed. This is especially difficult given the seasonal nature of VTA ridership.

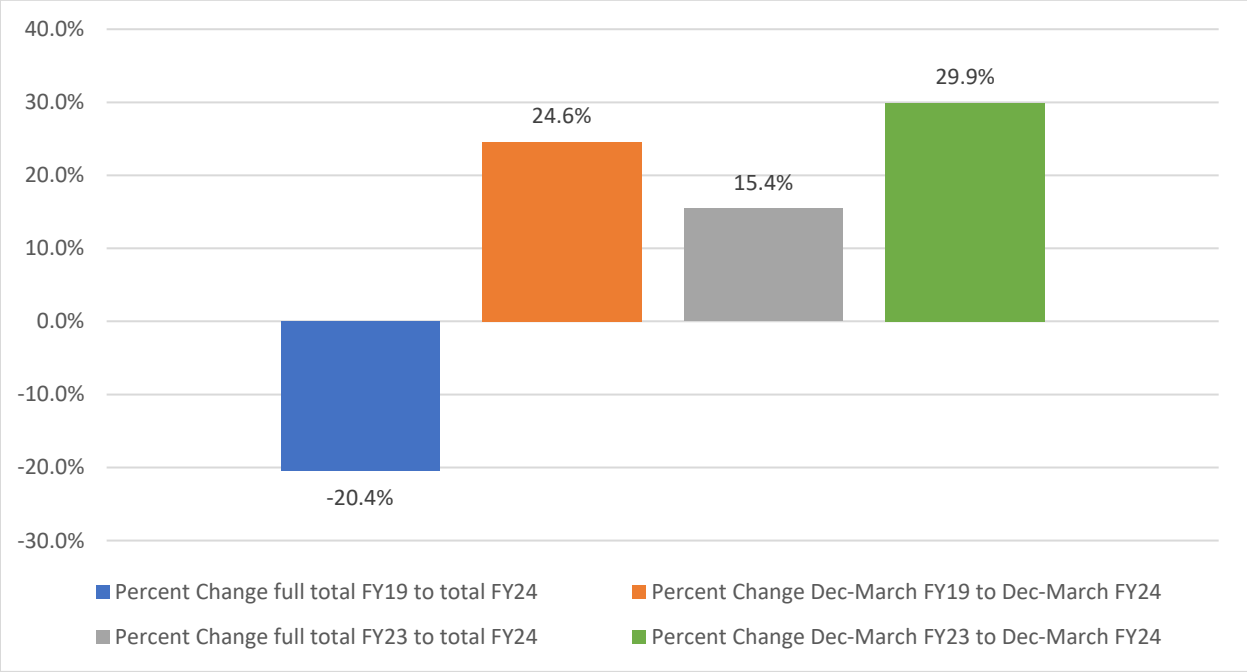

Figure 20: VTA Percent Change in Ridership from FY19 and FY23 to FY24

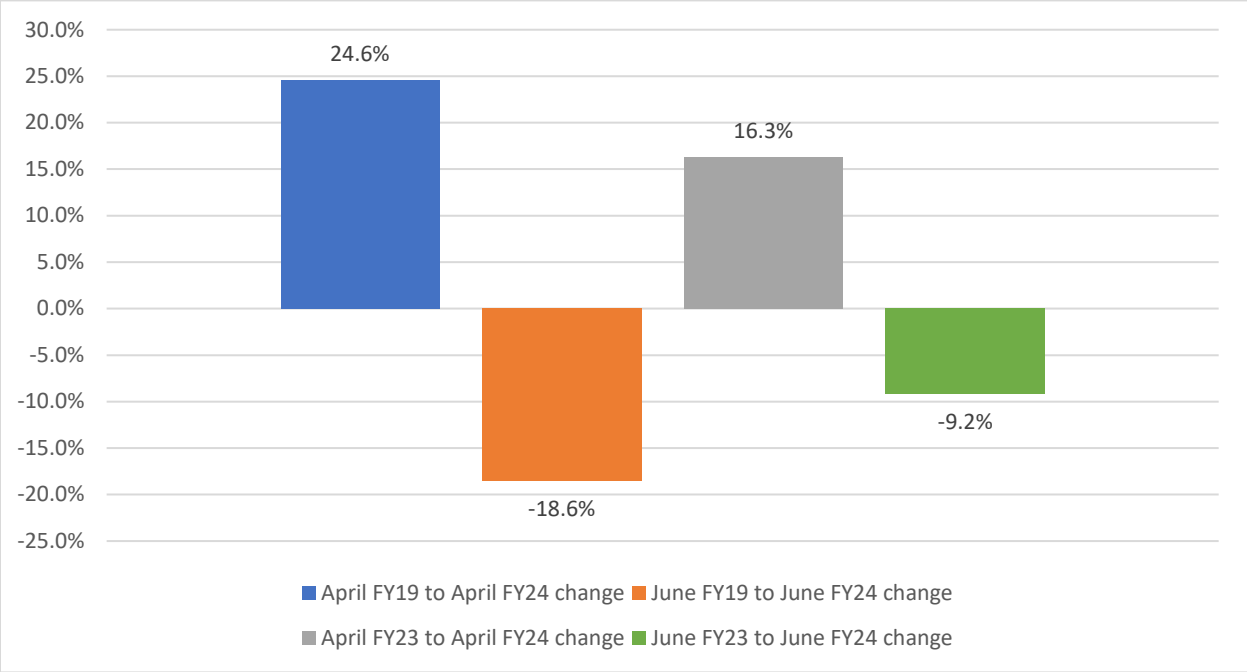

Figure 21: VTA Percent Change in Ridership in April and June FY19 and FY23 to April and June of FY24

Fixed Route Fare Revenues

Due to the expansion fare free fixed route service, it is unsurprising that fixed route fare revenue decreased between FY23 and FY24, despite the increase in fixed route ridership. Total annual fixed route fare revenue across all fifteen RTAs decreased by 11.60% from $13,019,834 in FY23 to $11,509,510 in FY24. Please note that no fare revenue from FY19 was available. No fare revenue was collected among the three RTA's that comprise of the "Long Term/Permanent Fare Free" in either FY24 or FY23. The reporting of such fare revenue is often due to the purchasing of annual or multi-ride fare media bulk by private/public agencies and then provided to employees or students.

The four RTAs that make up the "Medium Term" group (BAT, MART, MWRTA, and SRTA), generated a combined total fixed route revenue of $2,339,164, or a 40.58% decrease from the $3,936,880 of fixed route revenue recorded in FY23. During the third and fourth quarter of FY24, all RTAs in this cohort were operating fare free fixed route service, while all the RTAs in this cohort excluding BAT, were still collecting some fixed route fare revenue. A total of $208,719 of fare revenue was collected in FY24, a 95.78% reduction from FY23 (Figure 22).

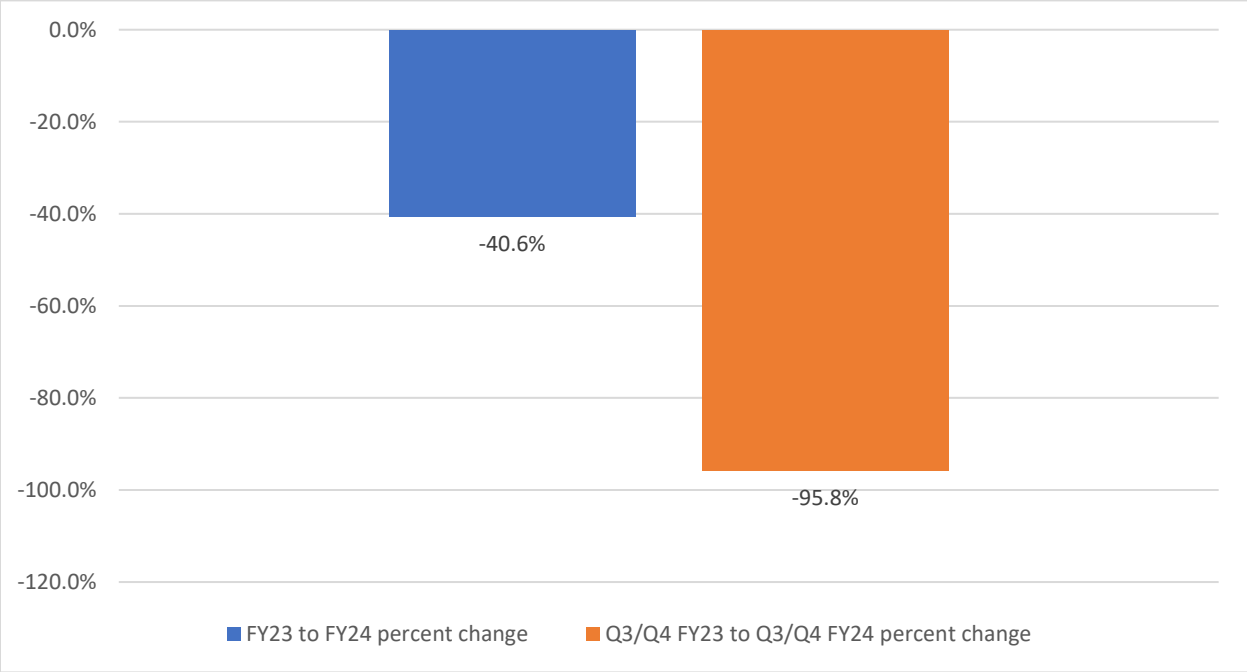

Figure 22: Percent Change in "Medium Term" Fare Revenue from FY23 to FY24

Total annual fixed route fare revenue among the RTAs included in the "Short Term" cohort increased by 15.47% from FY23 to FY24, from $1,831,076 in FY23 to FY24 $2,114,282. Since RTAs in the "Short Term" cohort primarily were only fare free for one or two months during FY24, the change in fare revenue could be related to overall increase in ridership from FY23. Total fixed route fare revenue across both RTA's in the "Demographic Focused" group decreased by 1.33%, from $5,018,089 in FY23 to $5,018,089 in FY24. Individually, CCRTA's fixed route fare revenue increased by 0.36%, from $362,581 in FY23 to $363,871 in FY24. Though CCRTA began to offered fare free fixed route service to seniors and people with disabilities across all days of service in February of FY24, as well as continued to provide fare free fixed route transit on Fridays, it did not have a month-long fare free fixed route pilot program that was opened to the general public in FY24. CCRTA was also the only RTA to not conducted a month-long fare free fixed pilot program in FY23 that was opened to the general public. PVTA did operate fare free fixed route service that opened to all riders in December of FY23 and in late November, December, as well as June of FY24. PVTA also provided fare free fixed route service to students 18 years or younger beginning in the second half of FY24. In FY23 fixed route revenue decreased from $4,587,725.10 in FY23 to $4,655,508 in FY24, a reduction of 1.46%.

Total annual fixed route fare revenue among both RTAs included in the "Seasonal Focused" cohort equaled $2,104,467.80 in FY24, a 5.79% reduction from FY23, when total fixed route revenue equaled $2,233,789. Individually, NRTA's total FY24 fixed route fare revenue equaled $356,672.80, this is a 34.35% decrease from FY23, when NRTA's total fixed route fare revenue equaled $543,328. Please note that NRTA concentrated its FY24 Try Transit fare free pilot program in the spring and summer when ridership is typically high compared to the winter off season (though FY24 Try Transit funding was used to continue funding the pilot program into FY25, we only have data through the end of FY24). VTA's FY24 fixed route fare revenue increased to $1,747,795 in FY24, up 3.39% from $2,233,789 in FY23. VTA's concentrated it's fare free pilot program during the winter off season.

Fixed Route Farebox Recovery Ratio

FRR is calculated by dividing total fixed route fare revenue by total operating expenses. In FY23 total fixed route FRR across all RTAs in FY24 was 6.18%. In FY23, total combined fixed route fare revenue across all fifteen RTAs equaled $13,019,834.05 while total fixed route operating expenses across all fifteen RTAs equaled $168,639,729. Total fixed route fare box recovery ratio across all RTAs in FY23 was equal to 7.72% (Figure 23).

No RTAs in the "Long Term" group recorded fixed route FRR in FY23 and FY24 since these RTAs did not collect fixed route fare revenue in those fiscal years. Among the RTAs in the "Medium Term group," total fixed route fare box recovery ratio dropped from 9.10% in FY23 to 4.88% in FY24. Among the RTAs in the "Short Term" group, FRR increased from 7.46% in FY23 to 7.93% in FY24. Fixed route FRR decreased from 10.33% in FY23 to 9.02% in FY24 among the RTAs included in the "Demographic Focused." PVTA's fixed route FY23 FRR was 11.55% and declined to 10.37% in FY24. PVTA's fixed route FRR declined from 23.27% in FY23 to 19.92% in FY24. NRTA's FRR decreased from 20.74% in FY23 to 10.24% in FY24. VTA's FY24 Try Transit Pilot program was concentrated during the winter Martha's Vineyard off season. Fixed route FRR increased from 24.22% in FY23 to 24.69% in FY24.

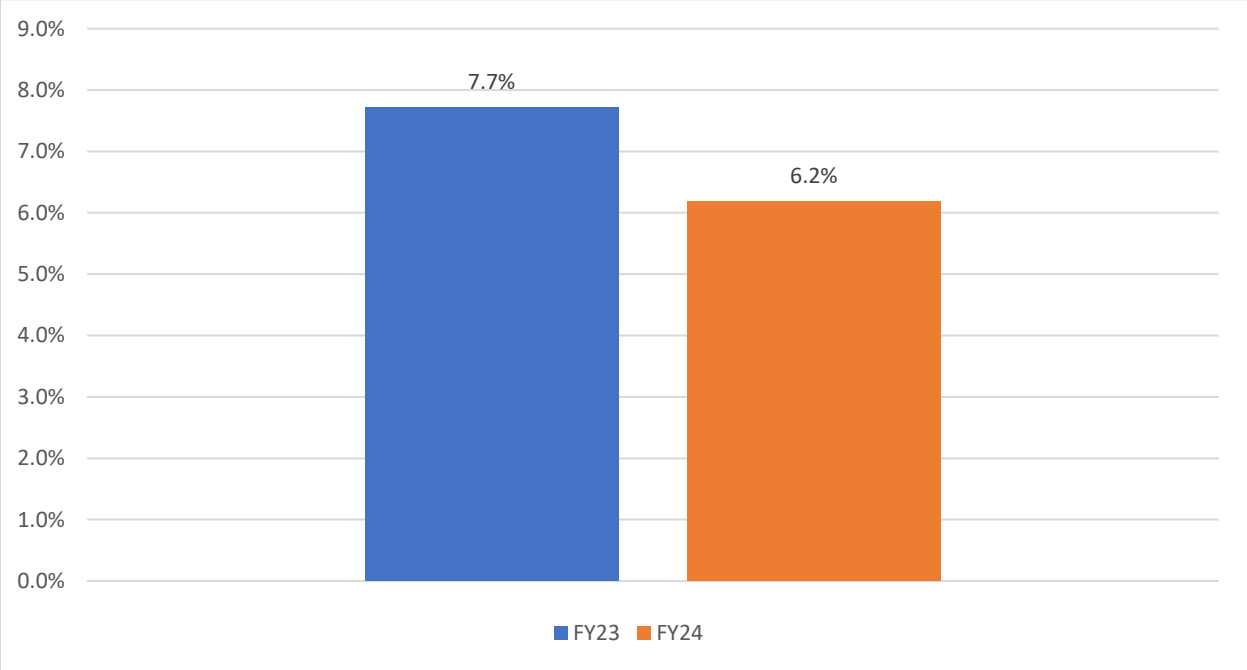

Figure 23: FRR Percent Change across all RTAs from FY23 to FY24

Demand Response Services

In addition to offering fixed route bus services, every RTA offers demand response service, meaning a type of public transportation that uses flexible routing 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 COAs and premium services like microtransit. RTAs incorporated different components of the greater demand-response umbrella into their fare free pilots, making the undifferentiated data particularly difficult to analyze. According to federal law, during the times that fixed route services were fare free, all ADA paratransit also had to be free. For this reason, the fare policies of other demand response programs differ depending on the RTA. MeVa, SRTA and NRTA collected no demand response revenue at all during

the times that their fixed route services were free. PVTA, MART, MWRTA, LRTA and BAT continued to collect demand response revenue during these periods, indicating that they still charged for other demand response services like Dial-A-Ride provided by councils on aging. CATA, FRTA, GATRA and WRTA continued to charge for microtransit during this time.

Microtransit is a premium demand response service that operates like a Transportation Network Company (TNC), flexibly taking riders from the general public anywhere within a given area. Like all demand-response transit, microtransit can be expensive to operate, and most RTAs offering microtransit are worried that cutting fares on this service will encourage an increase in ridership the program is ill equipped to accommodate. MWRTA however piloted offering free rides on its Catch Connect Microtransit from June-August 2024.

Because of these many components of demand response services with different approaches to offering fares, 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 groups to the ones used in the fixed route section: namely, "short term", "medium term", "long term", "seasonal" and "demographic focused." These groupings are useful primarily in order to visualize the effects of various approaches and are not intended to elicit comparison between RTAs, especially as there are differences within groups in the organization of demand response fare structures.

For each of these RTAs, the demand response UPT in 2024 in the months where fares were free was compared to those same months from FY 2022 and FY2023. All four RTAs saw growth in this period, though, as the chart shows below, the change in ridership for all was much higher between FY22, when none of these RTAs had any kind of fare free policies, and FY 2024 as compared to FY23, when all four of these RTAs offered free fares in December as a part of the *Try Transit* holiday drive, and FY24 (Figure 24). This suggests that riders may have been more aware of the program the second time around, but that a new fare free policy will not constantly attract new riders.

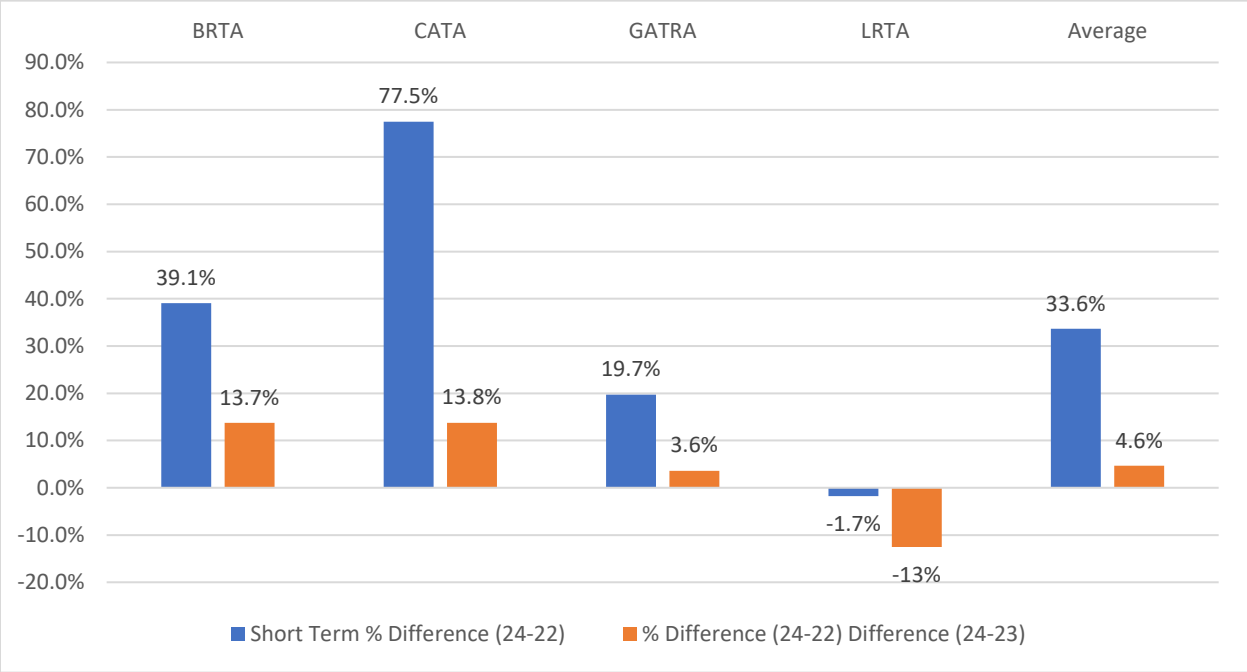

Figure 24: "Short Term" Demand Response Percent Ridership Change from FY22 and FY23 to FY24

While these programs did increase demand-response ridership compared to the same months in FY23 and FY24, they also drastically decreased the FRR compared to previous years. As mentioned earlier, one of the greatest concerns surrounding fare free programs is the necessity of providing free demand response paratransit, whose costs go up as ridership goes up. Given the rise in ridership due to the effect of free fares, operating expenses can be expected to rise more drastically than fixed route services, without a corresponding rise in revenue, the FRR can be expected to go down.

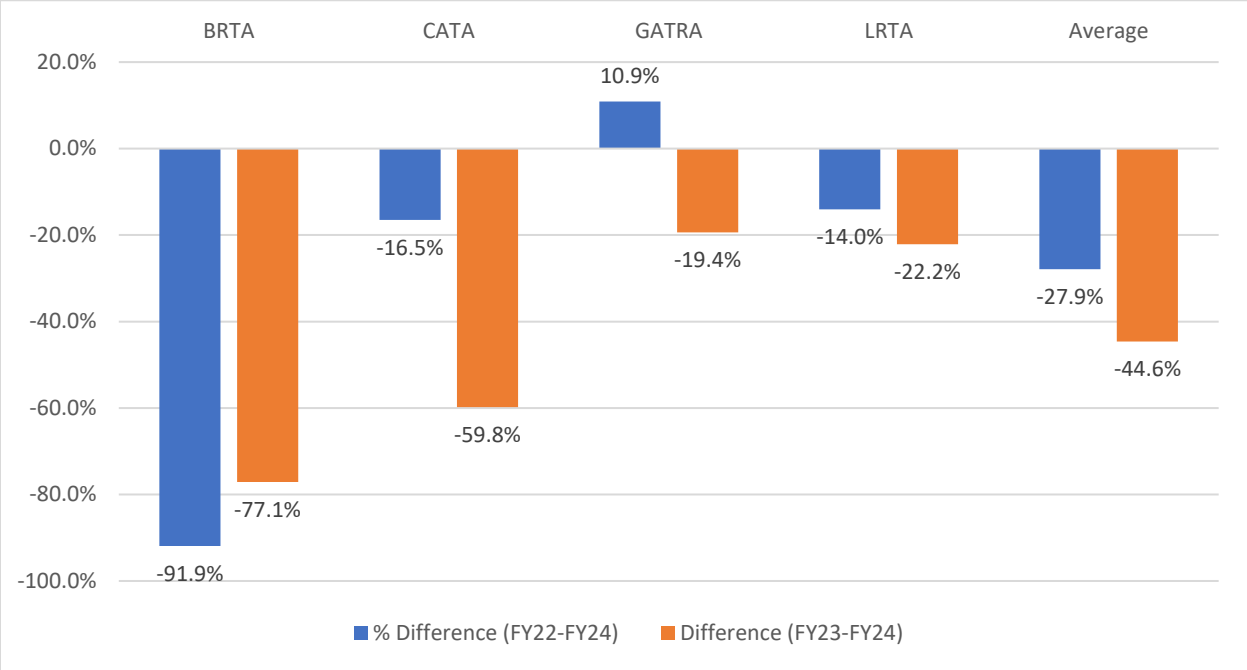

Figure 25: "Short Term" Demand Response FRR Percent Change FY22 and FY23 to FY24

Farebox recovery ratio dramatically decreased both between FY22 (prior to the introduction of most fare free service) and FY23 compared to FY24 (Figure 25). FRR themselves differ between RTAs and fluctuate from year to year according to specific factors, including the fact that two of these RTAs offer premium microtransit services. While fare revenue and operating expenses for demand response services conceivably covers COA vehicles and microtransit, none of these four RTAs offered free fares on these additional services, other than required ADA paratransit. Given that these programs were thus continuing to collect revenue and did not see fare free related ridership increases, they are unlikely to so drastically affect the FRR. Instead, this drop from year to year is likely due to free ADA paratransit's rising operating costs and lost revenue, one of the major fears of those opponents of fare free transit.

Unlike the "short term" group, whose fare free pilots for only a short time, the "medium term" group took advantage of the increased funding for fare free programs to pursue pilots for several months. Every one of the medium-term RTAs added fare free pilots in FY24 in months that had not been fare free in previous years. For that reason, this report can compare the average change in UPT between those months in FY24 and FY23 to see an approximate effect of fare free policies on demand response ridership.

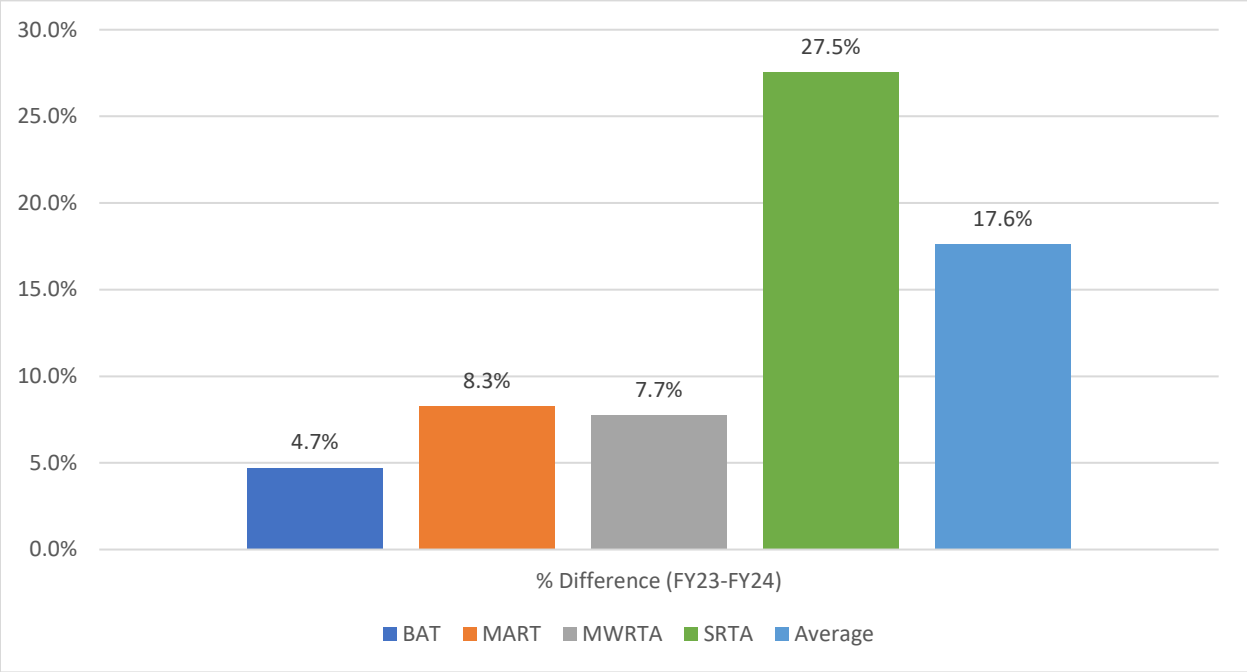

Figure 26: "Medium Term" Demand Response Ridership Change FY23 to FY24

Each of these RTAs saw an increase in ridership from FY23 to FY24 (Figure 26). While each of the RTAs within the medium-term group were fare free from January to June of 2024 (BAT was fare free in December as well), they differed in their categorization of which demand response services would be free. SRTA, for example, gathered little to no demand response revenue for the months their fixed routes were free in FY24, suggesting that both ADA paratransit and more premium services are all free. This could help account for their large gain in the ridership from the year before.

MWRTA also stands out because of its microtransit, Catch Connect, a service not shared by the other groups. For the summer of 2024 (only June represented here), they piloted making Catch Connect free for riders. MWRTA was also long in rolling back their pandemic era free fares, which stretched into FY23, so that a year-to-year comparison of those same months may be less revealing. (When compared to the first two quarters of FY24 rather than the last two of FY23, the fare free months (last two quarters of FY24 are found to have 7% greater ridership). MWRTA also operated its program using a "Catch Card", where riders could only get free fares if in possession of a card from the driver in order to facilitate the resumption of fares.

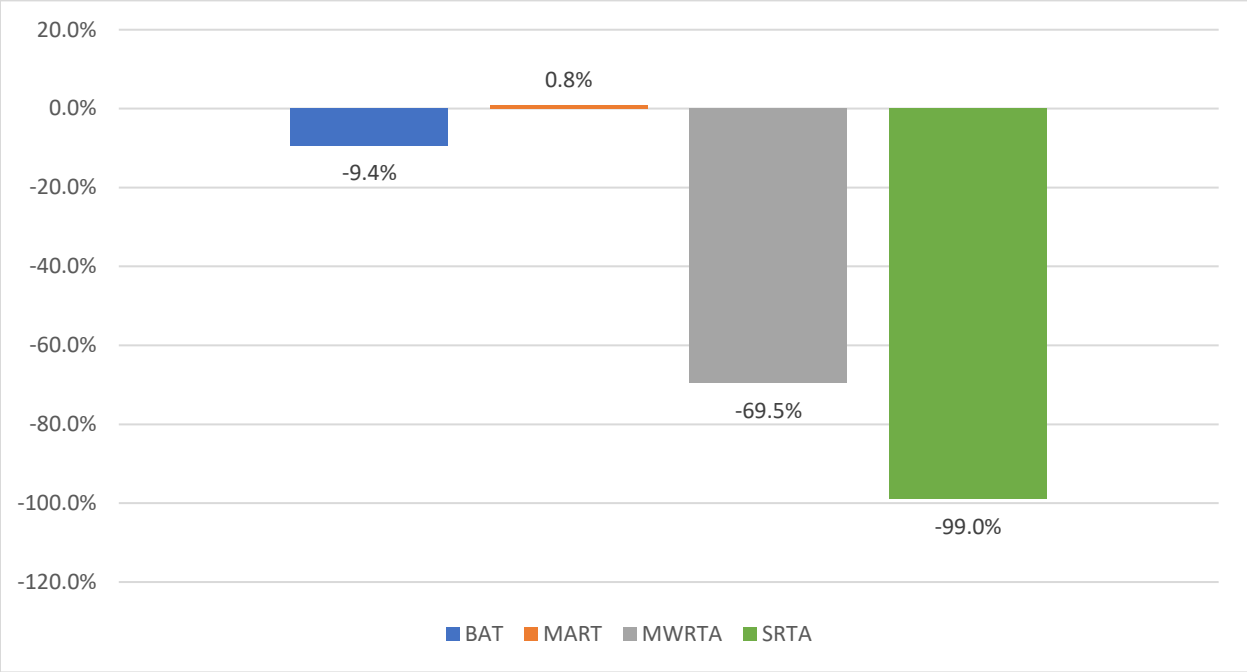

Figure 27: "Medium Term" Demand Response FRR Change from FY23 to FY24

Each of the RTAs in the "Medium Term" cohort saw different kinds of changes to their farebox recovery rates as a result of going fare free. SRTA's farebox recovery rate, for example, decreased as a result of going completely fare free on all demand response. MWRTA also had a significant drop in farebox recovery rate, but differences in weather conditions could account for this change (Figure 27).

All of the RTAs in the "long term" grouping have had free fixed route fares continuously since the at least FY22. They differ, however, in their approach to demand response service. MeVa has chosen to make all demand response services free, while FRTA and WRTA continue to collect fares on premium demand response services. Both WRTA and FRTA also have microtransit programs which they continue to charge fares. FRTA ran a pilot in FY24 in the month of December to experiment making specifically its Demand Response (but not FRTA Access) program free, but ultimately decided this was unsustainable.

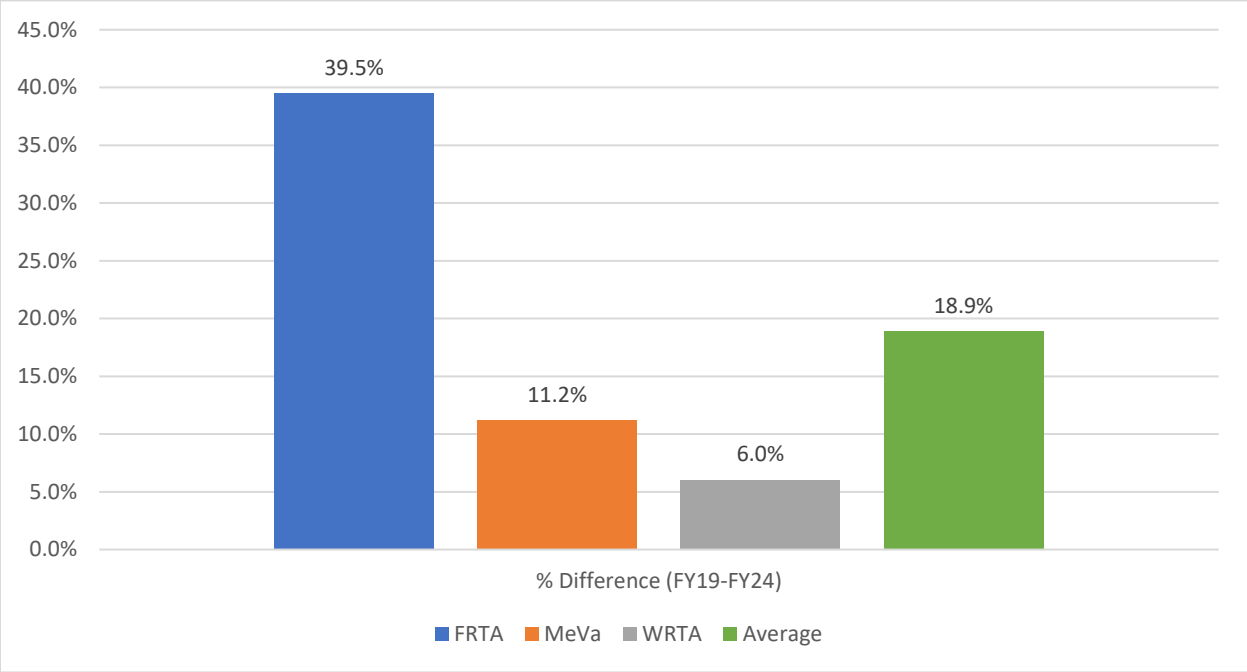

Figure 28: "Long Term" Demand Response Ridership Percent Change FY19-FY24

All three of these RTAs have exceeded their ridership numbers in FY19 (Figure 28). Another potential factor for FRTA's rise could be the launch of its microtransit program FRTA Access during the pandemic, which has expanded throughout its service area since 2019 and encouraged greater usage of demand response offerings compared to fixed route.

The last four RTAs are more difficult to compare, given both the lack of data from before 2021 and the many different approaches represented, whose effects cannot be understood as clearly as with fixed route services. Both PVTA and CCRTA have offered different versions of their current program for several years. PVTA has offered fare free services for seniors on Tuesdays since 2019, but only in FY24 did they implement a fully fare free program for the summer months. In both FY23 and 24 they also participated in the December *Try Transit* program done by many RTAs. CCRTA has offered fare free services on Wednesdays for seniors and on Fridays for the general public since July 2022, but only in January 2024 did they expand to offer free service for seniors every day, while keeping fare free services for the general public on Fridays (Figure 29).

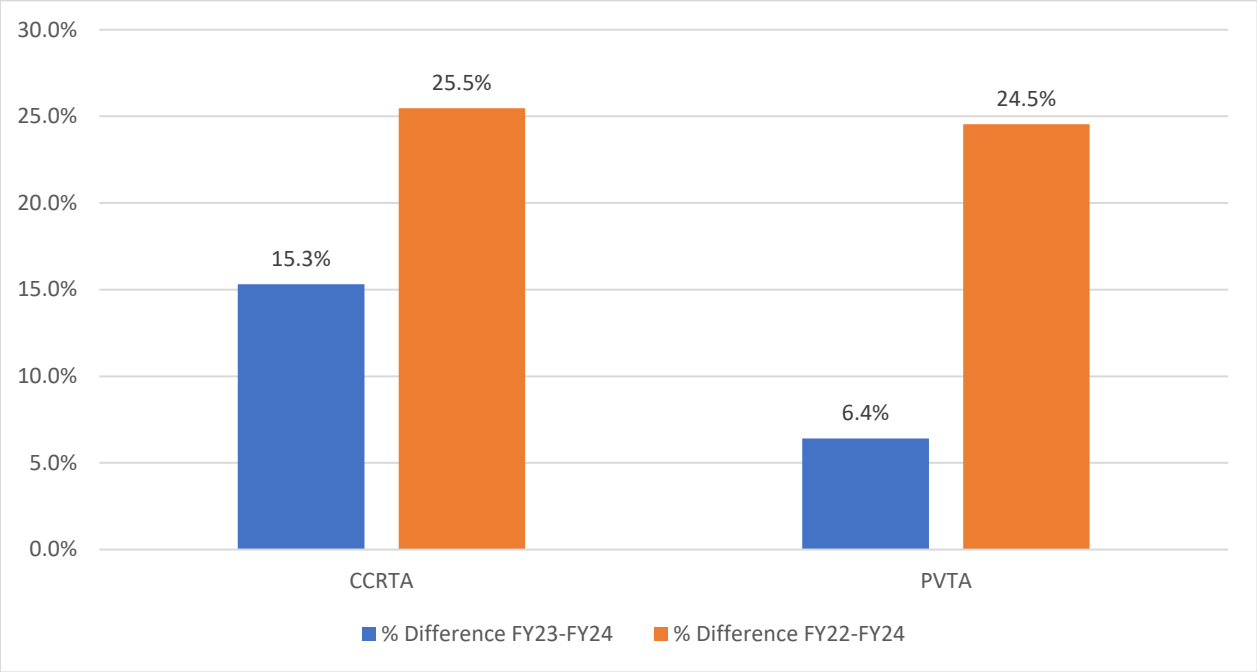

Figure 29: "Demographic Focused" Demand Response Ridership Percent Change from FY22 and FY23 to FY24

While ADA paratransit services would have been free for the target communities during the set time, both of these RTAs also offer other Demand Response transit. CCRTA's rise in Demand Response ridership since July 2024 could be attributed to the increased rollout of its SmartDART microtransit program. While CCRTA did not offer SmartDART in every town on the cape until FY25, the program still existed in FY24 in select towns and could account for some of the rise in ridership. These kinds of factors make it hard to pinpoint the exact effects of free fares on demand response transit for these two RTAs.

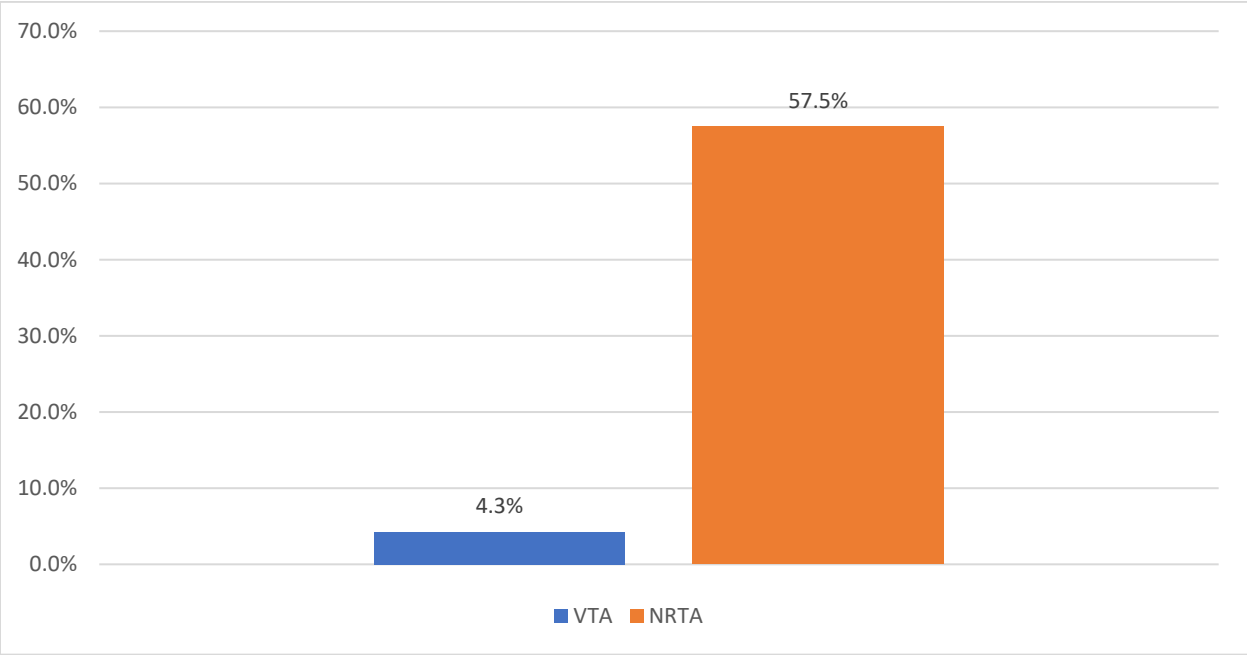

Figure 30: "Seasonal Focused" Demand Response Ridership Percent Change from FY23 to FY24

This difficulty of comparison stands as well for the two island RTAs, VTA and NRTA. Not only did their fare free pilots operate at different times of the year, but they had different approaches to which demand response services to offer for free. While VTA offered free service in the winter months, when it already typically has fewer customers (many of whom may have already been passengers, since they likely live on the island year-round), NRTA ran its pilot during the summer months, during the tourist season.

NRTA also offered fare free demand response transit, which might be expected to drive ridership even more. For this reason, while both programs saw growth from FY23 to FY24, VTA grew by 4% and NRTA by 57% (Figure 30). Both NRTA and VTA targeted their programs at specific customers, making it hard to see from the numbers alone the effect of fare free in achieving the programs goals. Both RTAs saw their FRR for demand response decline during the fare free periods compared to the year before, but because NRTA's Demand Response service was entirely free they had a 100% drop. VTA's 67% drop, however, is indicative of some of the financial effects of providing free paratransit, as seen with some of the "Short Term" and "Medium Term" groups (Figure 31).

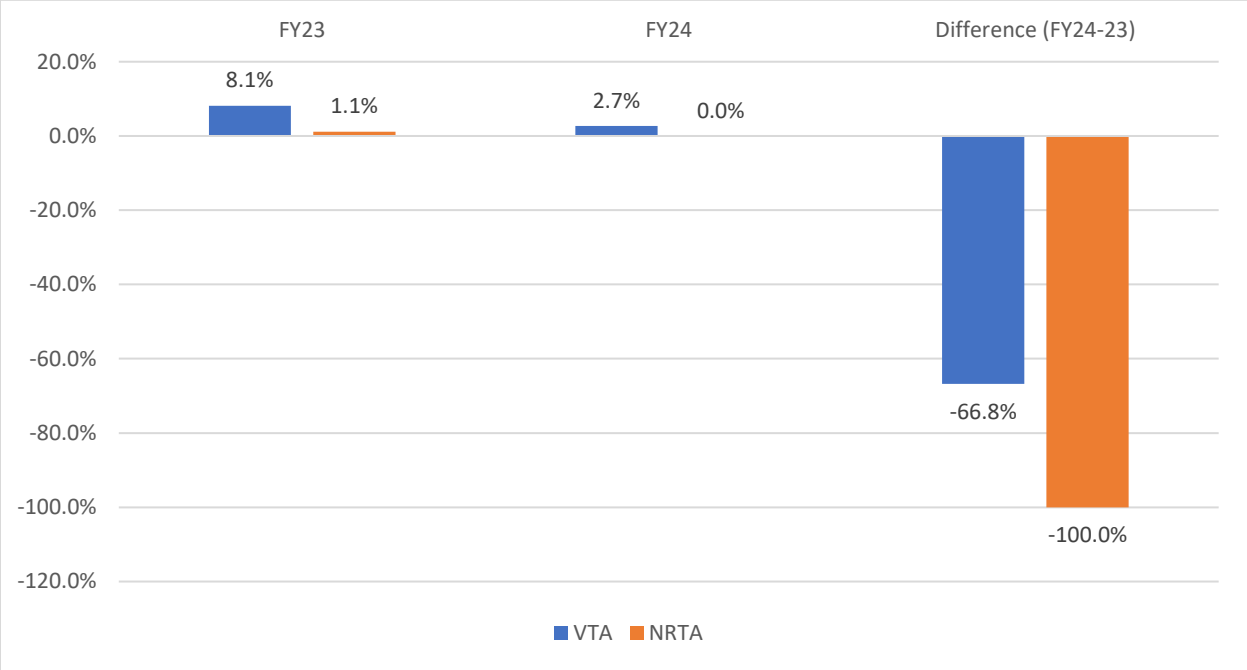

Figure 31: "Seasonal Focused" Demand Response Farebox Recovery Percent Change from FY23 to FY24

RTA Observations & Customer Feedback

At the close of FY24, every program mentioned a positive change in ridership (as demonstrated quantitatively above). Most RTAs also reported positive customer feedback about the program, either in comments on social media, word of mouth or formal studies. Customers appreciated increased flexibility and the ability to take transit more often than they might have otherwise. For several RTAs, the fare free pilot helped attract brand new riders who had never taken transit before, some of whom stayed after the pilot ended. NRTA, for example, reported that it was able to attract many new riders in their summer season and succeeded in their goals of mitigating congestion and clearing up parking on the island. Similarly, PVTA, MeVa, VTA and WRTA had success targeting underprivileged populations including low income and unhoused residents. In a customer survey conducted by WRTA, nearly half of their ridership responded that they would not ride or not ride at the same levels were fares to be reinstated. MeVa also

found that many more trips have been for leisure and shopping than previously, suggesting that riders who pay fares may cut down on necessary trips.

Alongside benefits to customers, many RTAs cited operational benefits of fare free transit. BAT, CATA and MeVa all mentioned the operational efficiently from not needing to hire an armed car or count money, which reduces staff hours and stress. MeVa has also saved money by going fare free rather than updating their fare collection system, which was due to be replaced. Many RTAs also mention better results on metrics like on time performance and dwell time during their fare free pilots, as they don't need to wait for staff to collect fares (this report does not analyze these results quantitatively due to differences in data collection between the RTAs). Some RTAs also reported that the introduction of fare free service has reduced conflict for operators, which in the case of MeVa has helped in driver recruitment.

Some RTAs, however, have mentioned operational downsides associated with their fare free pilots. CCRTA, PVTA and FRTA, whose pilots applied only to specific populations, all reported some confusion from customers over which groups could take advantage of the program over any given time, especially as this changed over the course of the pilot. The short-term nature of some of these pilots has also made messaging more difficult. A few RTAs have also been worried about capacity issues, especially in the domain of demand response, as fare free service drives up ridership. NRTA, for example, had to provide extra trip and in some cases an extra paratransit vehicle during their pilot, while other RTAs such as CATA have expressed concerns about overwhelming their paratransit programs. MeVa mentioned that fare free service has led to people making shorter overall trips as riding the bus has replaced walking, so that they may be making more stops than when they provided fares.

Some RTAs contribute increases in ridership to factors that are irrelevant to the *Try Transit 2.0* program. VTA, for example, increased some service, especially during evening hours. Furthermore, a relatively mild winter could have impacted its ridership figures during its pilot program. Likewise, BAT has also improved service and is now running with half hour headways every weekday between 6 AM and 9 PM and is operating Sunday morning service while LRTA improved service by removing COVID era combined routes and reducing headways on five routes from one hour to thirty minutes. GATRA, at least impart, contributes its increase in ridership to the introduction of Sunday service. GATRA did not apply for FY25 Try Transit funding.

Conclusion

Ridership across all fifteen RTAs increased in FY24 compared to FY23. Though several factors could have contributed to this overall increase of ridership, such as continued recovery from the COVID 19 pandemic or improved service among RTAs, the expansion of fare free service was likely a contributing, if not, in some cases, the driving factor. Unlike in FY23, when most RTAs only offered fare free service for relatively short 5-week pilot programs between Thanksgiving and New Years, FY24 saw five (5) additional RTAs (BAT, MART, MWRTA, NRTA, and SRTA) begin to offer months long semi-permanent pilot programs more in line with the fare free service that has been offered by FRTA and WRTA since 2020 and MeVa since 2022.

This report has demonstrated that while a positive correlation between fare free service and ridership likely exists, regardless of the duration of a fare free pilot program, such a correlation is strongest when fare free service is offered over a long period of time. This is evident by the fact that the three RTAs that have continuously offered fare free fixed route service since prior to the start of the first *Try Transit* program in FY23, have now exceeded FY19 pre pandemic ridership. This is further evident by the fact that the combined total fixed route ridership among the four (4) RTAs included in the "medium term" cohort

(BAT, MART, MWRTA, and SRTA) are just 8.03% below FY19 fixed route ridership totals, while the RTAs included in the "short term" group (BRTA, CATA, GATRA, LRTA) remain 26.22% below FY19 total fixed route ridership. This report also demonstrates a negative correlation between the expansion of fare free service and FRR and that such a negative correlation was strongest among the RTAs that offered more extensive fare free service such as the RTAs in the "medium term" group. RTAs in the "short term" group saw an increased in fixed route FRR from FY23 to FY24.

Due to the fact that the FY24 *Try Transit* pilot program was structured very differently than the FY23 *Try Transit* pilot program, and the fact that changes in ridership between FY23 and FY24 are still at least somewhat influenced by pandemic recovery, it is thus important that a FY25 report continue the analysis conducted in this document, and expand the analysis to included additional metrics (e.g., ridership per hour or per mile, dwell and/or travel times) that will likely be impacted by continued fare free service. In FY25, thirteen out of the fifteen RTAs operating fare free service will be plenty of room to consider factors not addressed in this report, but none the less essential in understanding the long-term implications of operating fare free service across the Commonwealth.

Appendix – RTA Try Transit 2.0 Public Relations & Social Media Examples

To advertise the *Try Transit* program, the RTAs deployed public relations materials, press releases and marketing techniques. This appendix includes several examples, including bus social media posts (Figure 32, Figure 52 – Figure 54), flyers (Figure 33 – Figure 41, Figure 43 – Figure 51, Figure 55 – 62), webpage advertisements (Figure 42). Other examples not covered by this appendix include radio ads and press releases. The materials used a consistent message to riders to "*Try Transit*" for the holiday season.

Figure 32: A CATA social media posting advertising fare free during the 2023 Holiday Season

Figure 33: A FRTA flyer advertising fare free demand response service during the 2023 Holiday Season

Figure 34: A flyer advertising GATRA's 2023 Holiday Season Fare Free Service

Figure 35: A flyer advertising LRTA's Fare Free Service in December 2023

Figure 36: A flyer advertising LRTA's Fare Free Service in July 2024

Figure 37: A flyer advertising MART's Fare Free Service

Figure 38: A flyer advertising the extension of MART's Fare Free Service

Figure 39: A flyer advertising MART's Fare Free Service

Figure 40: A flyer advertising MART's Fare Free Service

Figure 41: A flyer advertising MART's Fare Free Service

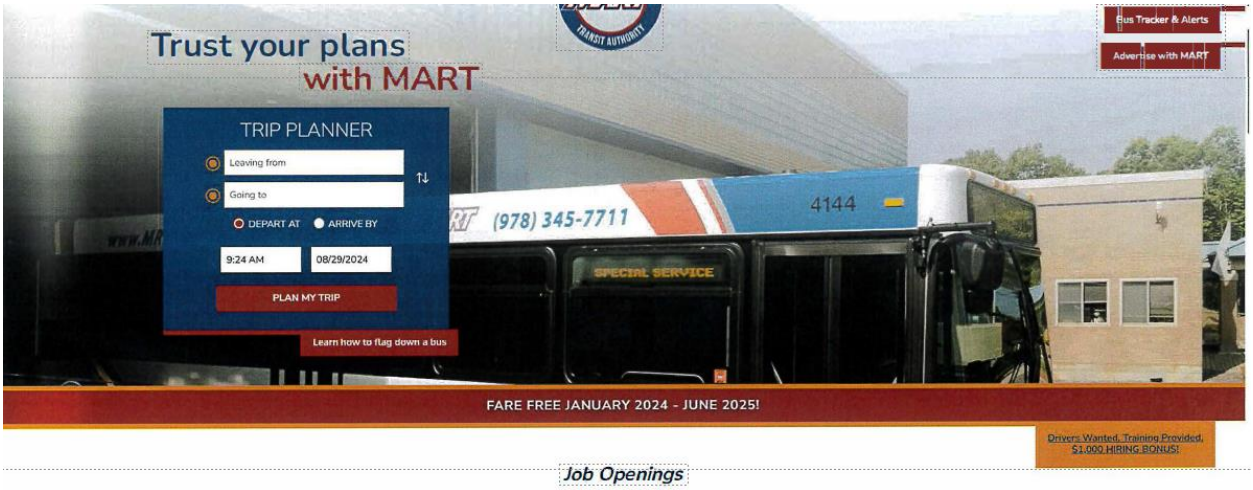

Figure 42: A screenshot of MART's website advertising Fare Free Service

Figure 43: A flyer advertising MWRTA's 2024 fare free service

Figure 44: Flyer advertising the extension of MWRTA's 2024 fare free service

Figure 45: Flyer advertising the further extension of MWRTA's 2024 fare free service

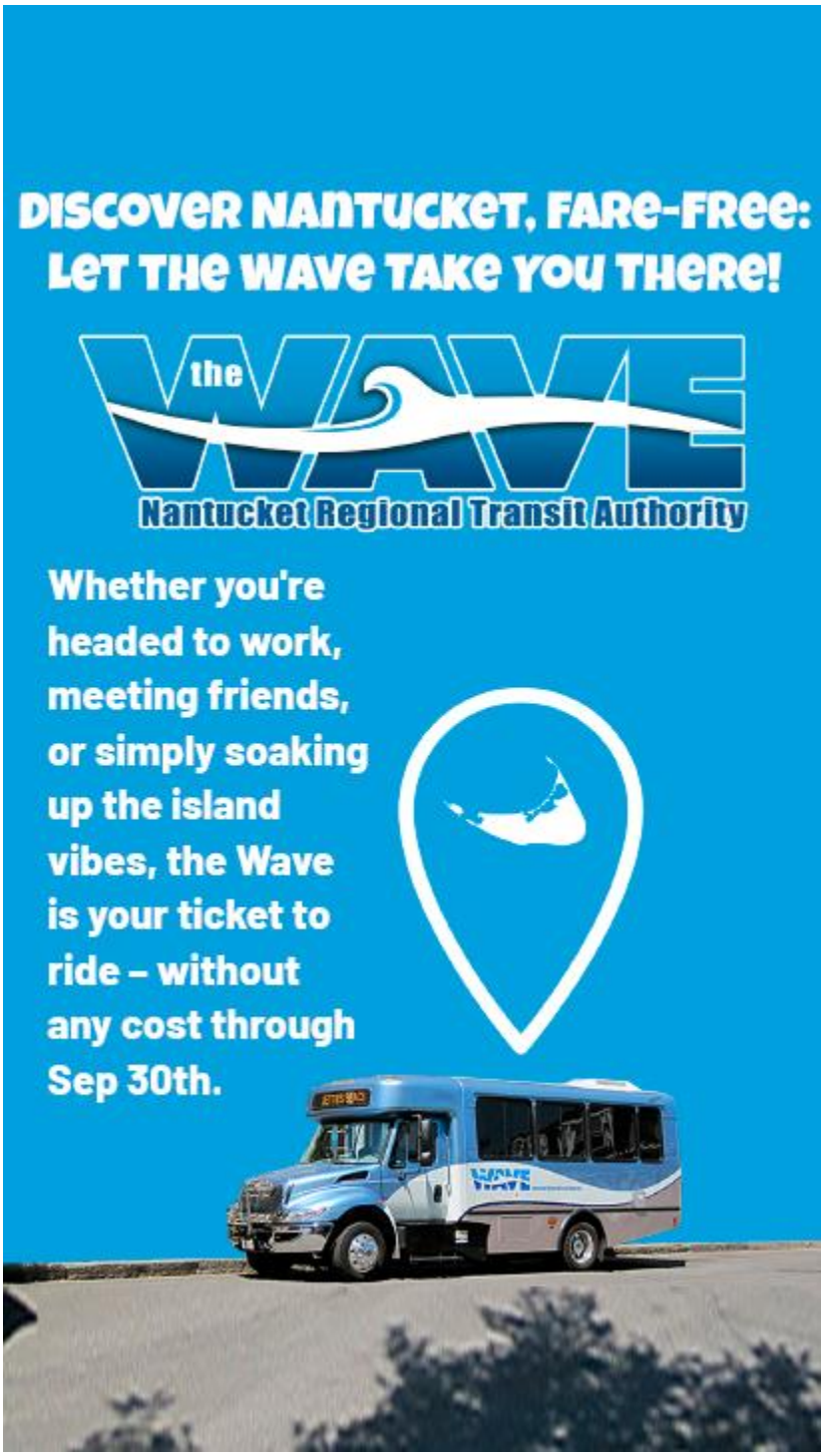

Figure 46: A flyer advertising NRTA's fare free service

Figure 47: A flyer advertising NRTA's fare free service

Figure 48: A flyer advertising NRTA's fare free service

Figure 49: A flyer advertising PVTA's fare free service for the Summer of 2024

Figure 50: A flyer advertising PVTA's fare free service for the Summer of 2024 in Spanish

Figure 51: A flyer advertising PVTA's fare free service for the Summer of 2024

Figure 52: A Facebook posting advertising PVTA's fare free weekend service in May 2024

Figure 53: A Facebook posting advertising PVTA's fare free weekend service for the Summer of 2024

Figure 54: A Facebook posting advertising PVTA's 2023 Holiday Season fare free service

Figure 55: A flyer advertising PVTA's 2023 Holiday Season fare free service

Figure 56: a flyer advertising PVTA's 2023 Holiday Season fare free service in Spanish

PVTA

TRY TRANSIT

Prepaid **After School** Transportation

Students aged 18 and under with a valid school ID: No Fares or Passes Needed AFTER 3:00 p.m.

*** Does Not Apply On B79 Amherst-Worcester Route. Regular Fare Required on B79.**

Figure 57: a flyer advertising PVTA's fare free service for students (aged 18 and under) after 3PM

PVTA

TRY TRANSIT

Transporte prepago **después de la escuela**

Estudiantes menores de 18 años con una identificación escolar válida: no se necesitan tarifas ni pases DESPUÉS de las 3:00 p.m.

*** No aplica a la Ruta B79 Amherst-Worcester.**

Figure 58: a flyer advertising PVTA's fare free service for students (aged 18 and under) after 3PM in Spanish

PVTA

TRY TRANSIT

Prepaid Weekend Service

No Fares or Passes Needed on Saturdays & Sundays thru May 2024*

*** Does Not Apply On B79 Amherst-Worcester Route. Regular Fare Required on B79.**

Figure 59: a flyer advertising PVTA's fare free weekend service in May 2024

PVTA

TRY TRANSIT

Servicio prepago de fin de semana

No se necesitan tarifas ni pases los sábados y domingos hasta mayo del 2024*

*** No aplica a la Ruta B79 Amherst-Worcester.**

Figure 60: a flyer advertising PVTA's fare free weekend service in May 2024 in Spanish

Figure 61: A flyer advertising PVTA's 2023 Holiday Season fare free service

Figure 62: A flyer advertising PVTA's 2023 Holiday Season fare free service in Spanish