

Dear Newington Residents,

This year was a year of rebuilding and of looking ahead to the future to make sure we have the finances and the facility we need to continue to serve the Seacoast for forty more years, and beyond.

As we entered FY23 (Oct.-Sept.), our focus was on recruiting and hiring additional drivers, removing temporary service suspensions, and increasing ridership, while simultaneously advancing the plans for our new facility project, which is necessary for COAST’s continued operation. As we end the year, I’m pleased to report that we have made significant gains in all these areas and are well positioned for the coming year.

In addition, we added the creation of a statewide transit coalition, which was ultimately successful in advocating for and obtaining a nearly 6-fold increase in statewide operating funding over the current biennium through the state budget. It was an incredibly successful campaign, and we continue to meet to advance the work of the Coalition and partner with other advocacy groups in preparation for a SFY26-27 state budget campaign.

In the spring, we collected a tremendous amount of data from our customers that highlighted the essential nature of our services for connecting people with their community, and the critical role we have in the regional economy. Our customers rated our services very positively as well. We conducted another survey in the late summer specific to Route 43 (Portsmouth-Newington), the results of which I’ll share later in this letter.

Our incredibly successful year was largely thanks to the dedication and commitment of our board and staff to our mission, and the continued investments of the communities we serve. We are very lucky and proud to have so many truly great people working for and on behalf of COAST.

**Connecting People and Communities**

COAST is an innovative leader in providing a broad range of public transportation services, connecting and coordinating a robust network of options for everyone. We provide equal access to opportunity for everyone through the fixed-route and demand response services we provide. Operating in the second oldest state in the U.S., COAST plays a critical role in helping seniors to maintain their independence. COAST is a critical transportation resource and driver of the Seacoast economy, contributing to over $31,000,000 in regional economic activity.

COAST’s mission is to champion and provide customer-focused public transportation with a commitment to excellence in safety and service.

**FY23 Operations**

Our regularly scheduled fixed routes consist of nine (9) local and four (4) regional routes, connecting 10 communities in New Hampshire and Maine to each other. COAST Route 43 connects Portsmouth and Newington. Connections to the rest of the COAST fixed route bus system happen at Hanover Station in downtown Portsmouth.

Our demand response services are scheduled via advance reservation and can be curb-to-curb or door-to-door focused, depending on the customer’s abilities. Customers must fill out an application to be determined eligible. These services are targeted primarily for older adults and individuals living with disabilities who need extra assistance to get to their jobs, volunteering, medical appointments, pharmacy, grocery store, or to get out to enjoy socializing with friends. There are seven (7) unique demand response services that COAST operates in the Greater Seacoast.

COAST transported customers took 291,028 trips on our buses and traveled an estimated 2,382,642 miles in FY23. By avoiding using a car for their trips, our customers avoided an estimated 1,050 tons (2,102,788 lbs.) of greenhouse gases being emitted into our air.

By the end of Q3 we had resumed most of our suspended services, including most services operating on Saturdays. As a result, ridership for the last four months of the year averaged 30% higher than the same period the previous year. On Route 43, operating between Portsmouth and Newington, the gains were over 42% during June – September.

In late spring we introduced a new discounted Commuter Benefit Program for businesses who help offset the costs of their employees’ monthly passes for commuting to work on COAST.

We replaced eight vehicles that had reached the end of their useful lives, representing approximately 20% of our total fleet.

**What our Customers Told Us**

We surveyed both our fixed route and demand response customers between April 3-14, asking a series of questions to better understand who is riding our system, why and how they use COAST, what our customers would do without COAST, and how they rated our services. A total of 299 surveys were collected, resulting in an estimated response rate of 35% on fixed routes and 66% on demand response.

* The top five places our riders live are in the region’s four cities and Farmington.
* While our riders skewed older than in past surveys due to the inclusion of our demand response customers in this survey, all age groups between 25 and 65 were fairly evenly represented.
* Annual household incomes were lower than in past surveys, again likely due to the inclusion of demand response customers. 85% of all respondents indicated they live in households with annual incomes of less than $50,000.
* Our fixed-route customers use us most frequently to go to work, for shopping, and for accessing medical services. Our demand response customers use us most frequently for accessing medical services, shopping, and going to work.
* Our fixed-route customers ride most typically 4-5 days per week and our demand response customers ride most typically 2-3 days per week.
* The top three reasons our customers choose COAST is because we are cheaper, more convenient, and/or because they have no other good options.
* If COAST did not exist most customers would need to rely on friends and family, walk, use a rideshare service, and/or many (18% - 29% depending on the service) would simply not make the trip.
* Of all respondents, 87% indicated COAST was ‘Very Important’ to meeting their transportation needs.
* Finally, 9 out of 10 customers would recommend COAST to their friends, family, and co-workers.

In late summer (September) we also conducted a customer survey specific to Route 43 (Portsmouth-Newington) to understand if riders were using the bus to get to work in Newington, and if yes, where did they work. We had a good response rate to the survey with 65 surveys collected against the 346 trips taken between September 11 and 16.

* 66% of riders, or 43 individuals, answered that they use the Route 43 bus to go to work in Newington.
* Of those who provided details on their employer (where they worked), 77%, or 31, listed a business in Newington.
* Based on details provided in their surveys (some listed the malls or streets vs. a specific employer), it is estimated riders worked at 18 unique businesses in Newington.
* Newington employers include Fox Run Mall, Crossings at Fox Run, JC Penney, Regal Cinema, Walmart, Wilcox, Savers, Shattuck Way, Spirit Halloween, Chipotle, IHOP, Michael’s, Trader Joes, Barnes & Noble, Tyco, Lids, Uta, and Dunkin Donuts.
* Multiple riders indicated that they travel on COAST buses from communities north of Newington to get to and from work, transferring in Portsmouth to use Route 43. They also indicated COAST was essential for their commuting.

**State Funding Increase**

The new NH Public Transportation Coalition COAST helped to launch in the fall of 2022 directly resulted in an effective and successful advocacy campaign to increase state funding support. The SFY24-25 New Hampshire Budget increased the state’s commitment toward public transit operations from $400,000 to $2,283,289 over the biennium, a nearly 6X increase.

COAST estimates the additional $365,000 in funding we will receive during the biennium will leverage over $527,000 of FTA funding that would not otherwise be accessible and invested in New Hampshire. This additional funding will support 7,792 hours and 126,260 miles of service, resulting in an estimated 51,200 trips being provided for accessing work, schooling, doctor appointments, grocery stores, pharmacies and for social and recreational purposes.

**Our New Facility**

The preliminary planning for a new facility at 42 Sumner Drive for COAST’s administration, operations, and maintenance functions was completed this past year. We also received the site plan approval and a conditional use permit from the City of Dover for our new facility project. Our National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) review was completed and approved by the FTA in October. We expect to be able to move to final design over the winter in 2024, with the goal of bidding for construction in the fall. Construction would start in the spring of 2025.

The benefits of a new facility with adequate, efficiently planned space will increase safety and reduce some of our current our ongoing operating costs while meeting COAST’s needs into the foreseeable future. It will also allow us to maintain a safe, affordable and efficient operation for our passengers, extend the useful life of our fleet, and improve our overall environmental impact through the incorporation of green building standards.

**Town Funding**

The funding the Town of Newington provides COAST is essential for matching Federal Transit Administration (FTA) funding targeted to our region. The $36,823 in support of COAST Route 43 and ADA services operating in the Town is a 5.4% decrease from our ask last year and will help leverage over $55,000 in FTA funding for services we provide in Newington. Without the continued support of communities like yours, we would not be able to provide essential public transit services to your businesses, residents, and the Greater Seacoast.

I look forward with optimism to the coming year and working closely with our board, staff, partners, and the broader community of the Greater Seacoast to advance our mission as a nonprofit organization and to continue to serve our multi-faceted customer base.

Sincerely,

Rad Nichols

Executive Director