



SOUTH COUNTY CONNECTOR



Tate Coleman, Director of Public Transportation Transit Department Director's Report – January 2026

Staff Recognition / Updates

Throughout January, the whole team focused on reinforcing best practices, consistency, and reliability. Through everyone's hard work and dedication, the department remained over the 2,000 monthly rides mark for the second month in a row!

For our drivers, this focus meant more consistent communication with dispatch when running behind, taking a more proactive approach to troubleshooting potential issues, and showing flexibility with covering shifts that did not fall on their usual workdays while we trained a couple new part-timers. Special thanks to Michael Harrigan, P/T Transit Team Member, for being so flexible and coming in early - and on a couple extra days - to cover when other team members were out sick. His commitment to the department is much appreciated!

For our leadership team, January was a time to prepare for and acclimate to the updated team structure which took effect in mid-January, where each Team Leader now has their own direct reports. We're all looking forward to this updated structure, which will allow increased accountability and team member recognition, clarity on each person's primary contact, and (most importantly) a dedicated weekly time for the team member and their leader to address any questions, concerns, or recognition one-on-one. A shout-out to Michael Richter, Operations Team Leader, for being so flexible throughout January—he covered all sorts of driving and dispatch shifts, often with very little notice when others called in sick. All with a smile and many compliments from riders!

We had some difficulty with our operations software, TripShot, which caused significant challenges during the first half of January. These technical issues/glitches were very stressful for all of us at times, and I am especially thankful to our full-time staff – Asa, Deborah, Mike R., Messiah, Bonnie and Ryan – for remaining calm and patient under the pressure this caused on operations. The issues remain unresolved from the TripShot side, but we have successfully developed workarounds which allow us to remain at about 80%-90% productivity.

We currently have openings for up to 3 On Demand Team Members (\$21.75/hour). See below for an overview of all currently filled and open positions. The leadership team is conducting interviews for these open positions on a rolling basis. Please refer anyone interested in joining our team to <https://www.socoride.org/employment>, and let us know you've referred them!

	Budgeted Positions	Filled Positions	Pending/ Trainees	Open Positions
Director of Public Transportation	1	1	0	0
Operations Manager	1	1	0	0
Operations Team Leader	3	3	0	0
Systems Specialist	1	1	0	0
Cash Revenue Auditor	1	1	0	0
F/T Team Members	2	2	0	0
P/T Team Members	7	7	0	0
On Demand Team Members	Min. 6 Up to 10	4	3	Min. 0 Up to 3
Total	Min. 22 Up to 26	20	3	Min. 0 Up to 3

Each of our Operations Team Leaders have a specific focus: Messiah Vision (Volunteer Driver Program Coordinator), Deborah Stile (Vehicle Maintenance & Safety Coordinator), and Michael Richter (Team Trainer). Completion of an operational restructuring has also assigned team members a specific direct leader/mentor based on who most aligns with their typical work schedule, who will be their main point person and support. Team Leaders have been working on collaboratively developing Individual Growth Plans (IGPs), first for themselves with our Operations Manager, and then with each of their direct-report team members. Set weekly team schedules begin February 1, 2026.

I believe the team is excited about these developments. It is evident that bringing more structure to operations in this way, which also lends more consistency to driver support - and therefore rider experience - is already paying dividends. I'm looking forward to seeing how we can collectively build back the South County Connector system and ridership in a better, more robust way.

Ridership

Month-over-Month (12/25 vs. 01/26)

	December 2025	January 2026	% Change
Total Ridership	2,011	2,029	+0.90%
Regular Service Hours	787.80	819.78	+4.06%
Pittsfield Service Ridership	66	67 ¹	+1.52%

Year-over-Year (01/25 vs. 01/26)

	January 2025	January 2026	% Change
Total Ridership	2,175	2,029	-6.71%
Regular Service Hours	844.25	819.78	-2.90%
Pittsfield Service Ridership	19	67	+252.63%

Ridership largely remained consistent in January, as compared to December, despite software challenges and a number of team members out sick throughout the month. We're glad everyone's feeling better now!

By focusing on the essentials - consistency, communication, and reliability - we were able to maintain our progress month-over-month as we continue to build out our service and team to prepare for the next stage of service improvements. This was only made possible through the hard work and dedication of the whole Transit team.

Capital Update

Ford E-Transit Expansion Vans – Due to an indefinite delay on delivery of the 2025 Ford E-Transit van awarded by MassDOT, I asked MassDOT whether an older model may be available more immediately. Because the 2023 Ford E-Transit accessible van model currently costs approximately half of the 2025 model per MassDOT's contract, we were able to successfully request an amendment to our award: we will receive two new 2023 Ford E-Transit accessible vans for roughly the same cost of one 2025 van in late March. Part of the justification in requesting this change to two vehicles rather than one older model was that the range is

¹ Data from some early days of the month was limited during the transition period of switching Pittsfield ride-booking from TripShot to a new system custom-built by our Systems Specialist. This is an informed estimate.

more limited on the 2023 model. We are extremely appreciative of MassDOT's support and assistance with finding a solution which allows us to increase the size of our accessible fleet in a timely manner.

Communications System – In December, we retired our CB radio system and implemented a new satellite communications system using Garmin InReach Minis, in conjunction with a Kyocera DuraForce Pro 3 Push-to-Talk Cellular-Based Radio system. This will help us reduce costs in the long run, and lifts office location constraints while filling in gaps in our current communications network using satellite technologies. The leadership team is continuously interfacing with drivers and report any pros and cons with the new system, so that we can continuously iterate and ensure communications are as seamless as possible. So far, the new communications system has been working well.

Technology Hardware Upgrade – The Transit Department was awarded funding in Fall 2025 through the Town of Sheffield's Digital Equity grant to purchase two new computers as well as new ruggedized Mobile Data Terminals (MDTs) for installation in vehicles. This upgrade work is currently underway, and will greatly improve our technological capabilities through better equipment. We are very thankful for the support from the Town of Sheffield.

FY2027 Capital Requests - In mid-November, we applied for four (4) replacement vans through the MassDOT Community Transit Grant Program accessible vehicles grant opportunity. These vehicles, if awarded, would be delivered late next year and replace two vehicles owned by the Town of Great Barrington, one owned by the Town of Stockbridge, and one owned by the Town of West Stockbridge, all of which already have or will have met their maximum useful life by December 2026. Each of the three communities committed a 15% local match share for their replacement vehicle(s) - \$18,205 per vehicle. MassDOT and Federal Transit Administration will cover the remaining 85% of vehicle cost, if awarded. We should receive an update in February 2026 on our application.

Request for Quotes (RFQ) Update:

Operations Software RFQ - In January, staff solicited quotes from four transit operations software vendors following MGL Ch 30B regulations. The department received three proposals in response. A preferred vendor has been selected, and is currently under review by Town Hall. Staff will work with the new vendor to finalize the contract in the coming weeks, with an expected start date of March 1, 2026. This is an exciting milestone—the new software will provide us with many new features that will improve efficiency of our service, including trip-booking windows, automated call/text reminders to riders the night before and when the driver is on the way, a branded smartphone app, and to automatically track the number of requests that were entered but went unfulfilled.

Operations Center RFQ - During early/mid-November, staff solicited quotes for new spaces that would better meet the needs of our growing operations and with rent that would better fit within our department's budgetary needs after our current space's rent unexpectedly increased 50% in

November. Staff selected the lowest responsible quote. However, after initially drawing up a draft lease, the Town determined that entering into an agreement with the new space's landlord would create a conflict of interest. The department will be moving its offices to the Great Barrington Town Hall basement in mid-February while we continue to search for a space that meets our needs.

Projects Update

Operations Dashboard - Daniel Rose-Levine, Transit Systems Specialist, is currently beta-testing our new operations dashboard prior to launch. A number of higher-urgency projects took priority, which delayed the Operations Dashboard project. RTAC community representatives will be receiving an email with a link to the dashboard in mid February once it goes live, and will be asked to provide any feedback they might have. Once that feedback is incorporated, the department plans to embed the live dashboard on our website for the general public to view.

Service Alerts Notification System - We have set up a Google Group based South County Connector service alerts notification system. It is now live, posted on our website, and open to any member of the public to subscribe to (with options to receive every notification, or a daily/weekly digest), as long as they have a Google Account.

Volunteers in Medicine Partnership - In late November, we formally began our partnership with Volunteers in Medicine to provide long-distance medical trips for VIM patients headed to/from Pittsfield, Springfield, Worcester and Boston, funded through a MassDOT Fair Share Amendment operating grant awarded to VIM. When possible, we are opening up available door-to-door capacity on these trips to the general public, with scheduled trips and details posted on the South County Connector website under the "Intercity" tab.

Pittsfield FLEX - The Pittsfield shuttle service remained steady in January, with 67 one-way trips provided during the month of January 2026. This is slightly up from December, which saw 66 one-way trips, and last January when we were only operating Pittsfield service on Mondays and Wednesdays, which saw 19 one-way Pittsfield trips.

On January 4, 2026 the Pittsfield Shuttle was re-launched as the Pittsfield FLEX. The service will now be open to the general public on a space-available basis, and include non-medical rides in addition to transportation to medical appointments as space allows. You can find out more about the Pittsfield FLEX at <https://socoride.org/pittsfield-flex>.

The goal of these service adjustments is to increase ridership and viability of the service as a longer-term solution, and to integrate it better within the regional transportation network.

VA Medical Rides – Per the recommendation of MassDOT during a recent coordination check-in, we contacted Soldier On (in Pittsfield) to understand what services they provide and to make sure we would not be duplicating anything they currently offer. It turns out that Soldier On already provides free rides to/from VA Medical Hospitals for veterans within Berkshire County, including all South County communities! Messiah Vision (Operations Team Leader) is working

on a one-pager, which will be ready in early February, detailing the VA-related service provided by Soldier On, and will distribute it to all SCC communities. We will not be moving forward with starting a VA service ourselves, but will be happy to refer any veteran who calls in to Soldier On.

Service Information Brochures & Business Cards - Our Volunteer Graphic Designer, Bill Cooke, is working on updating our Service Information Brochures for distribution to senior centers and other locations that would benefit from providing take-home information about South County Connector transit services. We expect this update to be complete by mid-February. Printing of materials should be complete by late February - please reach out if you're interested in receiving materials to distribute!

Vehicle Wrapping & Visibility – I have been working with Bill Cooke, our Volunteer Graphic Designer, to increase distinctiveness and visibility of South County Connector vehicles through vehicle wrapping, and potentially getting all the vehicles painted in the same solid color. This initiative has come out of feedback and suggestions from riders and drivers.

Hillsdale, NY Service Expansion - We have been working with the Town of Hillsdale, NY to plan a FY2027 service pilot, which could help increase regional coordination as well as allow us to explore inter-state partnerships, and also with subsidizing the administrative costs of our department's operation. Hillsdale recently completed a resident on-demand transit interest survey, which I assisted them with designing. They received 251 responses, 195 of which were from Hillsdale residents – or approximately 10.65% of the Town's population. Over one-third of the Town's seniors responded to the survey. Responses showed high interest in an on-demand transit service connecting Hillsdale with Great Barrington. We have collaboratively developed a preliminary service design for a 1-year pilot, which is currently under review.

Non-Profit Status – I have been working with the Town to set up a "Friends of the South County Connector" organization so that the department can receive 501(c)(3) pass-through status. This would open us up to many additional foundation grant opportunities that require 501(c)(3) status to be eligible to apply.

FY2027 Operating Grant Application – In mid-November, we submitted our FY2027 joint Community Transit Grant Program Operating & Mobility Management and Microtransit/Last-Mile connectivity grant application (\$18.2M in Fair Share Amendment and Federal Transit Administration S. 5310 funds available) with a total request of \$1,568,600.00. If fully funded, this FY2027 funding level would allow the system to expand service hours to 5 AM – 12 AM daily (adjusted seasonally), double operator capacity within existing communities, fully support open-to-close supervisor/dispatch coverage, and expand the system to three other communities. If partially funded, we would need about \$560,000 to maintain existing operations, assuming moderate personnel salary adjustments to account for Cost of Living increases and regional and industry pay rates. We should know the results of this application in February 2026.

FY2027 Draft Operating Budget - The Transit Department's draft FY2027 Operating Budget has been submitted to the Great Barrington Town Manager for her review. Exact budget

numbers are subject to change as we have not yet received FY2027 Community Transit Grant Program operating funding award information from MassDOT at this time. At the moment, we are using projected numbers for the FY2027 MassDOT operating award. The draft budget could be subject to significant staffing-level adjustments (upward or downward) based on the actual MassDOT award.

Municipal Assessments – For FY2027, the department has requested that annual municipal assessments generally remain level-funded. This approach is intended to provide budget stability for member communities while the department focuses on implementing operational improvements and pursuing state and federal funding to support system growth. Assessment notices were distributed to member communities on January 21. The assessments are as follows:

- Great Barrington: \$95,000 (cash) + appx. \$25,000 (benefits) + (2) replacement vehicles
- Sheffield: \$25,000 (cash)
- Stockbridge: \$15,000 (cash) + (1) replacement vehicle
- New Marlborough: \$15,000 (cash)
- Monterey: \$12,000 (cash)
- Egremont: \$10,000 (cash)
- West Stockbridge: \$5,000 (cash) + (1) replacement vehicle

Rural & Tribal Assistance (RTA) Grant Application – This Fall, the Transit department applied for a \$975,000 Rural & Tribal Assistance (RTA) USDOT grant application. The proposed project would document the total capital and infrastructure costs required for SCC to expand to cover all 13 communities in Southern Berkshire County, as well as communities in Columbia County, NY and destination service to Litchfield County, CT. This would include both “bought” assets—such as transit vehicles, software, hardware, and maintenance tools—and “built” assets—such as land, facilities for vehicle storage and repair, charging and fueling stations, and wash bays. If awarded, consultants will conduct demand modeling, fleet sizing, and facility siting, and will produce cost estimates that form a phased implementation blueprint. Legal assistance could establish an independent governmental entity structure capable of holding assets and receiving federal transit funds. We expect to receive an update on the status of this grant in the coming weeks.

Better Utilizing Investments to Leverage Development (BUILD) Grant Application – This Winter, the Transit department is applying for a \$20M BUILD grant from USDOT, with \$5M in potential state match pending from MassDOT, contingent on a successful application. The proposed project would fund the total capital and infrastructure costs required for SCC to expand to cover all 13 communities in Southern Berkshire County, as well as communities in Columbia County, NY and destination service to Litchfield County, CT. This would primarily include the “built” assets—including land, facilities for vehicle storage and repair, charging and fueling stations, additional vehicles, and wash bays. We will be submitting our BUILD grant application in mid-February.

Community Development Block Grant (CDBG) Application – The Transit Department is partnering with the Berkshire Regional Planning Commission and the Town of West Stockbridge to include \$190,000 in a CDBG grant to fund fare-free transit services for low and middle income (LMI) residents, with a focus on seniors, persons with disabilities and members of the local workforce. Specifically, if awarded, the 18-month grant would fund:

1. Prepayment of all LMI fares within the Transit department's full service area (100% free to ride)
2. A dedicated vehicle stationed in W. Stockbridge at certain times of day/week - to better serve as same day demand-responsive service for LMI populations in those communities
3. 2 full-time drivers (or 4 part-time drivers) added to the South County Connector service dedicated to LMI workforce riders for 12 months -- including late night service (we have seen this is a significant need for hospitality, healthcare, and service industry workers, through data collected from previous demonstration projects)

The Transit department will be facilitating public hearings in the coming weeks on the proposed project + application. We will keep RTAC members updated on this front.

Massachusetts Council on Aging (MCOA) FY2027 Grant Application – The Transit Department is exploring a potential joint MCOA grant application that would pilot a decentralized service model for seniors and individuals with disabilities across South County Connector member communities. The concept would pair communities to share a dedicated vehicle serving primarily seniors and persons with disabilities, with the goal of improving same-day availability, supporting special trips (such as grocery runs), and increasing flexibility for longer-distance medical transportation. This concept is a work in progress as we continue to evaluate potential service design options for a FY2027 MCOA demonstration project application.

Please feel free to reach out to me directly with any questions. I look forward to continuing to work with everyone, and to the exciting new developments coming our way soon. Thank you for your continued support!

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