Committee of the Whole

September 8, 2026

# MEETING MINUTES

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| **Committee Members:** | Mayor Koomar (Chair), Ms. Pacetti (Vice Chair), Ms. Elder, Mayor Gallo, Ms. Harper, Mr. Love, Ms. McPherson, Mr. Sleasman, Mayor Weiss, Ms. Whigham |
| **Present:** | Mayor Koomar, Ms. Pacetti, Ms. Elder, Mayor Gallo, Ms. Harper, Mr. Love, Ms. McPherson, Mr. Sleasman, Ms. Whigham |
| **Staff/Other:** | Shawn Becker, Nick Biggar, India Terry, Janet Burney, Louis Catalusci, Sharon Cottrell-Peffer, Nick Davidson, Scott Ferraro, Michael Fesler, George Fields, Ida Marshall, Anthony Garofoli, Kenneth Green, Sharon Jenkins, Deirdre Jones, Carl Kirkland, Jeffrey Macko, Sheila Miller, Charles Morgan, Ruben Morgan, Holly Mothes, Teresa Muti, Steve Peganoff, Norbert Reynolds, Joe Shaffer, John Togher, Donald Tereba, Chanel Steiner, Drew Dimmick, Beth Pierce, Nadine DeJesus |
| **Public/Visitors:** | Sarah Hall (Adcom) |

I. Roll Call

Mayor Koomar called the meeting of the Committee of the Whole to order with roll call. A quorum was present.

II. Adcom Financial Strategy and Strategic Approach

Presenters:

- Sarah Hall, Vice President, Account Leader, Adcom
- Chanel Steiner, Manager, Digital & External Marketing

Ms. Terry: Thanked the team. Chanel Steiner will introduce Sarah Hall, from Adcom. With the ballot initiative underway, talent is being recognized from all areas. Thanks to the team for bringing together the Board's, the teams', and now the community's feedback.

Ms. Steiner introduced Ms. Hall of Adcom, GCRTA's communications partner, noting the firm supports the Authority's annual report, brand campaign, and holiday campaign. Ms. Hall presented a communications roadmap intended to build public understanding of how transit is funded and what a modern transit system can look like, organized around a single core message: that GCRTA is critical infrastructure supporting people, opportunity, and Greater Cleveland's growth. She reviewed supporting data (ridership, trip purpose, and regional economic impact

figures), the brand campaign currently in market, six key audience segments (riders, business leaders, non-riders, and the aging population), how messaging will be tailored to each, and a phased activation approach beginning internally with employees before extending to riders and, ultimately, the broader community through public relations, leadership briefings, and paid media.

Questions and Discussion:

- Ms. Elder noted the presentation's articulation of the benefits non-riders receive from public transit and the overall ridership figures as a valuable perspective for the board's own advocacy.
- Ms. Pacetti observed that the "expanding transformation and innovation" slide largely describes work GCRTA is already doing and asked how the plan will make a clear case for why additional levy funding is needed; Ms. Hail agreed and said the team will continue refining the messaging to distinguish current efforts from future benefits.
- Ms. Whigham added that the story should distinguish what GCRTA is doing now from what a successful levy would enable in the future.
- Ms. Pacetti: We've talked before about the strategy refresh, and someone from AECOM asked the board a few months ago for a one- or two-sentence business case for RTA. I hope we keep revisiting that message. It should be something clear and crisp, so that we can all say the same thing consistently. We need a unifying message delivered the same way to the business community, nonprofits, private-sector leaders, and the riders.

III. Service Adjustments

Presenters:

- John Togher, Interim Deputy General Manager, Finance
- Jeff Macko, Manager, Service Planning

Mr. Togher reviewed GCRTA's multi-year financial forecast, including the projected shortfall to reach a one-month operating reserve by 2029 and the plan to help close that gap through approximately $13 million in administrative expense reductions over 2027–2029, higher-than-budgeted sales tax receipts, and lower healthcare costs under the new benefits contracts. He noted the Board of Trustees will need to decide on the size of a sales tax ballot initiative at its September 22 meeting, with staff recommending a 0.50% increase.

Mr. Macko summarized feedback gathered from three in-person public hearings and other comment channels held in August 2026 regarding proposed service reductions, including concern over cuts to high-ridership routes, the risk of reduced service and ridership loss, and the possibility that fixed-route riders, particularly seniors, could shift to the more costly paratransit service. Based on this feedback, staff recommended delaying the service reductions originally scheduled for December 2026 to August 2027, following the proposed May 2027 ballot initiative.

Mr. Togher stated that even with what we're doing now, we still won't meet a one-month operating reserve by year-end 2029. To help close that gap, we'll continue the administrative expense reductions we outlined — $13 million over 2027–2029. He noted that either a sales tax initiative or service cuts will still be needed. The Board of Trustees needs to decide on the size

of the sales tax increase at its September 22 meeting. GCRTA management recommends a 0.50% increase.

Questions and Discussion:

- Mayor Koomar raised the question of whether an additional board meeting on the ballot initiative would be needed before September 22, or in addition to that meeting. Ms. Birdsong-Terry asked him to clarify whether he meant an additional meeting between now and the 22nd, or one in addition to the 22nd. The point was noted for follow-up scheduling discussion, without a firm date confirmed at this time.
- Ms. Pacetti commented that the public testimony about riders shifting to paratransit if service is cut was a consideration they hadn't seen raised publicly before, and suggested staff monitor for any uptick in paratransit use as a further cost driver.
- Ms. Whigham stressed the importance of taking public comment seriously and asked that, once a final decision on delaying the cuts is made, GCRTA communicate it widely, and also asked staff to check that outdated digital bus signage for the August hearings has been removed.
- In response to board discussion, General Manager and CEO India Terry clarified that delaying the service cuts would not reduce the urgency of the ballot initiative and, if anything, increases the pressure to communicate GCRTA's funding needs before May 2027; she noted a delay would be a GM decision made with the board's guidance, and that cuts could be implemented more abruptly after May 2027 if the initiative does not pass.
- Ms. Harper: Emphasized that once a decision is made, we need to be as loud as possible about it. If we approve a resolution to delay the service cuts until next year, let's make sure people know — echoing Chanel's comments, we take this feedback seriously and want to build a system that works for our riders. She noted that some digital signage on our buses is still advertising the public hearings on service reductions from mid-August. She requested to make sure those are taken down, so we're not sending mixed or confusing messages to the public.

Ms. Terry thanked the team for leading with empathy for the customer, not just from a business perspective, public comment is taken seriously because it lets us hear voices we might otherwise miss and allows us to see how much public transportation matters to this community. She requested that the team, work through what a service-cut delay would mean: this is not a deterrent to the ballot initiative if anything, it adds pressure. We must help our community understand there is service after May, and what that looks like depends on what voters decide. We're doing everything we can to avoid cuts, but I don't want that to ease the urgency. That's why these materials matter: we are finally being proactive about explaining how we are funded and why, after 51 quiet years at the ballot box. One distinction: if I decide to postpone the cuts, that's a management decision made with the Board's guidance. But if we delay and the initiative doesn't pass, we could end up implementing all the cuts at once after May — a $30 million hit — rather than the staggered approach we'd prefer, which is easier on our riders. We need the community's support, financially and emotionally. The new healthcare contracts are projected to save close to $6 million, and we'll keep pursuing administrative savings through union negotiations and cutting "nice to haves." We're not in a freeze, but our customers come first. This delay is an option I'm considering, and I appreciate staff keeping that focus front and center.

Ms. Terry offered additional remarks honoring the late Dr. Floun'say Caver, GCRTA's Chief Operating Officer and Deputy General Manager, noting that a more formal remembrance would follow at the Board's next meeting.

IV. Executive Session

Mayor Koomar moved to enter executive session; on personnel matters, to review negotiations or bargaining sessions with public employees concerning compensation or other terms and conditions of employment, and to consider the appointment, employment, dismissal, discipline, promotion, demotion, or compensation of a public employee or official. Ms. Pacetti seconded. Following the roll call vote, the motion carried, and the Committee convened executive sessions with designated staff in attendance.

Following the executive sessions, a motion was made to end the executive session; the motion was seconded, and following a roll call vote, the motion carried.

V. Adjournment

Mayor Koomar made a motion to adjourn. Ms. Pacetti seconded it. The motion carried, and the meeting was adjourned.

John J. Togher
Interim Secretary/Treasurer

Kenneth Green
Interim Board Administrator