



Deval L. Patrick, Governor  
Timothy P. Murray, Lt. Governor  
Richard A. Davey, Secretary & CEO



March 27, 2013

Mr. Donald B. Elitzer  
Elitzer Associates, Inc.  
39 Alford Road  
Great Barrington, Massachusetts 01230

Dear Mr. Elitzer:

Thank you for your correspondence and telephone conversations over the course of the past few months regarding your proposed Ride\$hare initiative for Berkshire County. This initiative would serve to pilot an informal carpooling program utilizing a cash-substitute system as an incentive to drivers to provide shared rides to passengers with whom they are unacquainted. Your proposal points to the success of casual carpooling systems in Houston, San Francisco, and Washington DC, where drivers provide 'free rides' to passengers from known pick-up locations in order to access high-occupancy vehicle (HOV) lanes. In the case of the Ride\$hare initiative for Berkshire County, you propose utilizing postage stamps, assumed to be redeemable at a local post office, as a cash substitute and incentive for drivers to carry passengers. This letter summarizes MassDOT's literature review of casual carpooling in other parts of the United States, offers a brief assessment of challenges that your initiative might face, and concludes with a recommendation of action in response to your request for institutional support.

As we have discussed, MassDOT is actively engaged in a statewide effort to triple the person-miles traveled by non single-occupant vehicle (SOV) modes by 2030, consistent with Secretary Richard Davey's "Mode Shift Policy." This policy and accompanying goal is a direct outgrowth of MassDOT's landmark GreenDOT policy, which identifies necessary measures for each of our modal administrations to contribute to the goals of the Global Warming Solutions Act (GWSA) of 2008. As you know, GWSA requires greenhouse gas reductions in Massachusetts of 25% by 2020 and 80% by 2050. Both the GreenDOT and Mode Shift policies also support MassDOT's collaborative work with the Executive Office of Health and Human Services on the Healthy Transportation Compact, created by an act of the General Court in 2009. Taken together, these statutory and policy imperatives create a framework in which creative ideas for reducing automobile trips in the Commonwealth are not only welcome, but necessary. Innovative means for matching riders who wish to take trips to common destinations are particularly useful in areas where fixed route public transportation coverage is sparse and/or service is infrequent.

### **Findings of Literature Review**

Casual carpooling, or "slugging," in particular, originally developed in the United States as an informal system of drivers collecting passengers at pre-determined locations to travel together during heavy commute periods. In Washington, DC and San Francisco, casual carpooling was effectively a consumer response to the establishment of HOV lanes along congested corridors and bridges entering the central business district. This practice has grown in both regions to account for over 10,000 travelers a day. In Houston a smaller casual carpool system has grown to cover two road corridors with HOV

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lanes. Research has pointed to a select number of factors that lead to the establishment of successful casual carpooling within a region:

- 1) Significant reduction in travel time and increase in travel reliability for drivers to compensate for the inconvenience and lost time collecting and distributing passengers,
- 2) HOV lanes along a congested highway corridor, particularly with three person occupancy requirements during peak commute hours,
- 3) Concentrated employment centers that attract large numbers of travelers to proximate destinations – particularly those with restricted and high cost parking, and
- 4) Convenient pick-up and drop-off locations for automobiles combined with available transit service to serve as an alternative travel option (or vice-versa).

There are many metropolitan areas that claim some or all of these overlapping factors, but have not yet spawned casual carpooling programs. For example, many HOV lane restrictions require just two riders such as those on I-93 in Boston. The third passenger factor for casual carpool success is thought to be significant because of the increased challenge of arranging 3-person carpools and the perceived safety benefit, especially across gender lines. The perception of safety within the more structured community of professional commuters may also contribute to the success of casual carpooling on defined 'slugging' routes, while hitchhiking has otherwise declined in popularity.

There is very little transportation research available regarding hitchhiking beyond that which assesses pedestrian safety along limited access roadways. Most contemporary discussions on hitchhiking are in travel publications and journalism, but some limited sociological research has been undertaken. The decline in hitchhiking in the United States since the 1970's has often been attributed by the perceived danger of travelling with strangers, but is also related to increased car ownership rates. There are, however, localized rural areas where hitchhiking is a more common practice, such as along major backpacking routes like the Appalachian Trail. It has been argued that fostering a return of hitchhiking as a transportation travel option would bring both environmental and civic benefits to communities.

Dynamic ridesharing is a non-SOV travel option recently promoted by transportation demand management organizations and piloted by various levels of government. In the broadest sense, dynamic ridesharing uses communication technology – often combinations of mobile devices, GPS, and social media – to connect travelers in real time. These programs are evolving with the growing use of mobile communication technology and often depend on concentrated densities at origins and/or destinations, and limited or high-priced parking. Usually these services are most successful within a known group (employers, schools, membership organizations). In general, carpooling and vanpooling programs achieve the highest volume of users matched through some preexisting personal or professional connections between individuals. Still, ride-matching programs for use by unacquainted individuals are growing in popularity, and social media has a potential to play a role in facilitating introductions between potential customers. As noted above, ride sharing is understood to be a useful mitigation for

congestion in areas without significant transit infrastructure, but research has shown that guaranteed-ride home options through transit or taxi service are desirable for program success.

## **Assessment of Challenges**

As proposed, the Ride\$hare initiative for Berkshire County has few of the characteristics listed above that traditional research suggests are key to successful casual carpooling. However, it is also clear that the research on casual carpooling performed to date focuses primarily on examples in urban areas – not predominantly rural areas like Berkshire County. In general, rural areas lack the significant congestion or HOV benefits during standard commute times that large urban areas do. Further, fixed route transit service does not operate during evenings or on Sunday to provide a low-cost backup means of travel should Ride\$hare providers not be available during those times. (Of course, the lack of such service could also serve as an opportunity for the proposed initiative among potential customers without access to an automobile.)

The proposed initiative is in some ways analogous to dynamic ridesharing efforts, but with a low technology application. Your written materials describing the Ride\$hare proposal suggest that the use of postage stamp booklets makes the program more accessible to people with limited access to information technology, such as those in regions with less wireless infrastructure. At the same time, without utilizing mobile technology for real time ride-matching services, enrollment, and seamless online payments, other barriers to entry and participation could be encountered. For example, many ride-matching programs point to the use of electronic membership lists, credit cards, and crowd-sourced reviews as key to their success. The validation of the exact distance travelled and the calibration of mileage increments also generally requires an electronic device. Additionally, the transaction between participants, gas stations, and the post office may be difficult to implement and could present some security concerns.

These challenges notwithstanding, we still recognize this concept as an innovative approach with the potential to help meet our sustainability goals and it is possible that the initiative could successfully tap into a market niche not readily recognized by existing research in the field. In particular, most research and recommended best practices for casual carpooling rely on experiences of large urban areas where perceptions of safety risks and motives for customer participation may be very different than those of Berkshire County. Further, we acknowledge that your proposal for the Ride\$hare initiative does not include any direct financial support from MassDOT or the Commonwealth as a whole. The key institutional request you have made of MassDOT is for indemnification against any losses, claims, damages or liabilities incurred through the management of the initiative.

## **Recommendation**

I have consulted with other MassDOT offices likely to be engaged with indirect institutional support needed for the proposed Ride\$hare initiative, including the office of our General Counsel. Notwithstanding the discussion above, concerns were raised about the risks of assault between passenger and driver, along with the more documentable risk of passenger injuries from motor vehicle collisions. Also, although there is no fee for services proposed by Elitzer Associates, the requested letter

of indemnity does represent a formal relationship between the Commonwealth and the proponent, much like a contract. I have been advised that entering into any type of formal relationship with your company while providing full indemnity would violate both MassDOT policies that require substantial proof of liability coverage, as well as the Massachusetts Constitution. Specifically, there are strict constitutional limitations regarding any open-ended indemnification made by the Commonwealth that could result in the credit of the Commonwealth being given or loaned to any individual, private association or corporation.

While your proposal is consistent with a number of policy goals of MassDOT aimed at reducing SOV travel, and while MassDOT is inclined to be supportive of personal initiative such as yours to launch new healthy transportation enterprises in Massachusetts, we are not able to indemnify your company during the proposed launch phase of the Ride\$hare initiative. However, we look forward to remaining engaged with you and other advocates of non-SOV alternatives in Berkshire County to meet our common goals of improved mobility and a cleaner environment. I am copying MassRIDES, our statewide travel options program, on this letter and have provided them with the materials describing your initiative. I will request that they consider whether some of the ideas you have raised could be incorporated into our ongoing rideshare promotion work. As always, please feel free to contact me if you have additional questions or recommendations regarding MassDOT's sustainable transportation program.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'C. Bench', with a stylized flourish extending to the right.

Clinton S. Bench  
Deputy Executive Director  
Office of Transportation Planning