Boston mass transit system report exposes widespread safety dangers

John Marion
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A report on greater Boston's public transportation agency—the Massachusetts Bay Transportation Authority (MBTA)—details the near bankruptcy of the system and the dangerous effects of inadequate budget on safety and service. The review was ordered by Governor Deval Patrick and released November 1.

David D'Alessandro, the report's author, made headlines upon its release by stating that sections of the subway are so in need of repair—the tracks are separating from the underlying concrete slabs—that he would not ride on them out of fear of derailment.

The MBTA, or the "T," is the fifth-largest mass transit system in the US, measured by ridership. Each day hundreds of thousands of working people from more than 150 communities use its 187 bus routes, four subway lines and 14 commuter rail lines. According to the MBTA Advisory Board, 73 percent of Massachusetts residents live in the cities and towns served by the T.

Greater Boston's public transportation system—in the form of rail lines, streetcars, elevated rails and subways—is also one of the nation's oldest. Some commuter rail lines date to the early 19th century. Streetcar congestion in downtown Boston led to the establishment of subways. What was once the Tremont Street Subway, which opened on September 1, 1897 in downtown Boston, is the oldest stretch of subway operating in North America.

The now decrepit condition of some of the MBTA's lines—particularly the Green Line—and the drastic underfunding holding up repairs now pose real dangers to the safety of the thousands of commuters who depend on them every day.

Even with the drastic fare increases of recent years, public transportation is more affordable than owning a car for many Massachusetts residents. According to the Boston Indicators Project, working families with incomes between $20,000 and $50,000 were spending an average of 59 percent of their take-home pay on housing and transportation during the middle of this decade, and the yearly cost of insuring a car in poor neighborhoods such as Roxbury ran upwards of $2,000.

David D'Alessandro's report begins with a section titled ominously "The Outlook is Bleak." It points out that for $3 billion worth of projects needed to keep the T's capital assets in a state of good repair, only $203 million—or 6 percent—were funded in fiscal year 2010. In fact, this amount is less than one third of the money that would be needed to keep the repair backlog from growing. Only $47.2 million out of a total $590 million for "critical safety projects" was funded in FY10, according to the report.

D'Alessandro is a former chairman of the John Hancock Corporation. Although his report presents a useful analysis of the T's problems, it will, at best, lead to attempts to reform a failed system under conditions of woeful underfunding. Until recently the MBTA was a semi-independent authority, but it is now being brought more closely under state control through a reorganization of the Department of Transportation. This change will inevitably lead to increased attacks on employees' benefits and threats to reduce service.

D'Alessandro's report analyzes four expense categories and compares actual costs over the last eight years to what was predicted in the 2000 Forward Funding plan mandated by the state legislature. Contrary to the conventional wisdom that workers' wages and benefits are rising at unmanageable rates, the report finds that fuel costs were the most underestimated category in 2000. While wages and compensation were $113 million higher than projected for fiscal years 2001 through 2008, fuel and utilities costs were a whopping $256 million more than projected for the same period, and increased from 6.6 percent of the T's yearly operating budget to 10.4 percent. These increased costs were driven by the same parasitic speculators who have driven up the cost of other fuels, particularly in the period after Hurricane Katrina.

The report notes that by restructuring and postponing payment on its capital debt, the T has saved money in the short term, but that this Faustian bargain has now outlived its usefulness. The T's debt service expenditures are scheduled to increase from $342 million in FY09 to $445 million in FY10 (a 30 percent increase) and $525 million in FY14.

Two other reports issued in the last seven months bolster D'Alessandro's analysis. The first, released in April by the MBTA Advisory Board and titled "Born Broke," begins with the statement "that the MBTA is mired in a structural, on-going deficit that threatens its viability" and speaks of a "day of reckoning." The second can be found in the introduction to the

T's five-year Capital Investment Program for 2010-2014, which includes the admission that the Authority cannot afford the capital projects described in the plan because its "financial condition is precarious."

All of the reports blame the T's budget problems on a 2000 law that changed the state's subsidy to a "Forward Funding" model. Under this model, Massachusetts now gives the T a specific amount of money at the beginning of each fiscal year, instead of the previous practice of covering the T's actual operating deficit at the end of each year. The Forward Funding law transferred to the T billions of dollars of existing capital debt that was previously guaranteed by the state, and that burden has only gotten worse in the years since.

According to the "Born Broke" report, the T now spends close to 30 percent of its yearly budget on debt payments. This summer the state increased its regressive sales tax—already a burden on workers— by 1.25 percent, in part to raise revenues for the T. Municipalities, in turn, are being squeezed by declining property tax revenues and cuts in local aid from the state.

As it is currently organized, the T has little choice but to go hat in hand to the state government and bankers in an effort to put a band-aid on its problems. The looming debt service crisis has not stopped the T from selling more bonds to speculators in the financial markets. On its web site one can find offerings of bonds that would borrow against future sales tax and municipal assessments revenues. The effect of the global economic crisis on these revenue sources makes such borrowing even more tenuous.

In a separate but equally desperate attempt to do something—anything—to confront its budget crisis, the MBTA has taken to fining subway riders who sneak through the turnstiles. At a time when the state's official unemployment rate is hovering around 9 percent, "fare evaders" can be fined as much as $250 or be arrested if they don't identify themselves. In July, the *Boston Globe* reported that the number of citations for fare evasion had increased from 818 in 2008 to 1,376 in 2008 and 1,400 in the first six months alone of 2009.

The budget crisis has been having increasingly dramatic effects on safety and service. On May 21, a power outage during the morning rush hour stopped subway service for more than 30 minutes, leaving tens of thousands of workers stuck in tunnels and subway stations. On September 16, a fire caused by an aging electrical cable during the evening rush hour shut down Orange and Red Line service for hours, leaving thousands of workers to walk home or wait for overcrowded buses.

In May 2008 a train operator on the subway's Green Line died when her train ran into the one ahead of it. In May 2009 a similar accident was caused by an operator sending a personal text message while driving, resulting in a number of serious injuries. Although operator error was the immediate cause of both crashes, the National Transportation Safety Board determined that they could have been prevented by an electronic safety system for "positive train control," which is already in use on other MBTA subway lines but not on the antiquated Green Line.

After the 2007 collapse of a bridge in Minneapolis, the government of Massachusetts performed emergency repairs on a bridge of a similar design, across which the Red Line passes. During the repairs, trains that normally cross the bridge at 40 miles per hour were slowed to 10 miles per hour. In an almost surreal article in July 2008, the *Boston Globe* reported that the reduced speeds had been ordered by the Federal Highway Administration so that if the bridge did fail, "the T could stop without major injury." In other words, passengers would plunge into the Charles River at only 10 miles per hour, rather than 40.

All the while, the T has subjected subway riders to recorded announcements that "Safety is its Number One Priority," in an attempt to scare them into reporting "suspicious" people to the authorities.

Regarding service, in February 2008 then-General Manager Daniel Grabauskas admitted to the *Boston Herald* that the T had been "secretly cutting thousands of bus and train trips from published schedules to lower costs" and that T management had lied about the practice. Between 2004 and 2006 the number of dropped trips was sometimes more than 3,000 per month, and the practice was a result of a decision to "keep staffing at artificially low levels so the agency could keep … costs down," according to the *Herald.*

The T's bureaucracy is not accountable either to riders or T workers, and it has recently been riven by infighting. Both the T's general manager and the governor's secretary of transportation have quit in recent months, after accusing each other of lying about a scuttled fare increase. The general manager left with a severance package worth more than $300,000, while the average rail repairer makes around $64,000 per year and the average bus driver around $55,000.

The fiscal crisis confronting the MBTA exposes how a public transportation system beholden to private ownership of the means of production is incapable of providing basic safety and affordability for its ridership. With the decay of the T's infrastructure, and irrational management, the lives of thousands are being placed at risk every day.