

Bostonians decry transit fare hikes and service cuts

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Boston area residents are reacting with shock and outrage to Massachusetts Bay Transportation Authority (MBTA) plans for steep fare increases and dramatic service cuts to the region's transit system.

The MBTA has unveiled two proposals for slashing costs, each of which would deeply impact riders on the mass transit system known as the "T." A series of public hearings to discuss the plans began last week, and were met with widespread anger.

The move comes as T ridership has reached an all-time high, with 1.3 million trips taken each weekday on the system's rapid transit trains, trolleys, buses, commuter rail lines and ferries. Driving the cuts is a projected \$185 million operating deficit for fiscal year 2013, which begins this July.

If implemented, the proposed changes will have a devastating effect not only on residents' commute to work, but on their ability to shop, access health care and other services. People also use the T to visit the metropolitan area's many cultural institutions and to travel to beaches and recreational activities outside the city. Low-income residents, seniors, the disabled and students will be hit the hardest.

Responding to a question at a public hearing last Thursday, MBTA Acting General Manager Jonathan Davis said that an estimated 525 MBTA jobs would be axed as part of the system overhaul. The unions representing T workers have as yet made no public comment on the threatened job cuts.

The proposed changes are draconian. Under Scenario 1, fares would rise by an average of 43 percent, and 25 percent of current bus routes would be eliminated, for a gain of \$161 million in annual revenue. Scenario 2 would see fares rise by an average of 35 percent, and would eliminate a staggering 75 percent of current bus routes, gaining \$165 million in annual revenues.

Under both scenarios, commuter rail service would be eliminated on weekends and after 10 p.m. on weekdays. Service on the Green Line's E Branch and Mattapan Trolley would be eliminated on weekends. All MBTA ferry routes—depended upon by thousands of commuters, tourist

and others—would be eliminated outright.

Driving the drastic proposals are principal and interest payments on \$5.2 billion owed by the MBTA to the banks and other predatory lenders, which consume nearly 30 percent of the system's operating budget. The T's primary source of funding since 2000—a 20 percent share of statewide sales taxes—has also not netted the expected revenues.

At one of the first public hearings on the changes, held last Thursday in Roxbury, speakers were angered that residents were being asked to suffer the consequences for T's financial predicament.

Jeremy Hanson from Dorchester is a member of the T Riders Union, an advocacy group. "Quite frankly," he said, "I look at this proposal and I see nothing but pain and suffering that's promised to a lot of people who've already felt that. Folks, we're paying twice. We pay taxes, and we pay again at the fare box. Every dollar that we pay goes to pay off the debt. They're not doing anything for services for us with that money."

"These proposals before us today—these are false choices. We know that there are businesses out there that are flush with cash, that get vital services from the T. They benefit every day that the T runs and carries people to their businesses. I'm saying they have the money. These two proposals?—neither of them is good."

Ralph Walton of Jamaica Plain said, "Legislation says that the T has to have a balanced budget, which is having the impact which is being described tonight. Massachusetts is a commonwealth. A commonwealth is an organization that pools its resources to take care of its needs."

"But these proposals mean that we will be balancing the budget on many of the people that can pay the least. We need to correct the big problem that was created more than a decade ago when funding for the T was packaged into a fraction of the sales tax."

One of the steepest fare hikes will hit THE RIDE, which provides services for the disabled. Fares will jump from \$2.00 to either \$4.50 (Scenario 1) or \$3.00 (Scenario 2). Under Scenario 1, users of THE RIDE would be charged a

\$12 “Premium” fare for trips outside the fixed route service area, or for trips before or after hours, or those booked the same day. The fare increases amount to an elimination of services for those who depend on THE RIDE, as many people would be unable to pay the new rates.

Louise Beach spoke at the Roxbury meeting, denouncing THE RIDE fare hikes and the other cuts in service. “We’ve got our soldiers coming home with disabilities. We are not handicapped, we are people with different abilities.

“I’m here to represent mothers who are disabled, Bay State Council for the Blind, the T Riders Union … all those who are not here to represent themselves. We ride that RIDE to get to work every day.”

Student fares will rise by 25 to 83 percent under the proposals, and monthly student passes would almost double in price. “We’ve got our children in public schools,” Ms. Beach added. “Are you going to try to take that pass from them, and put them on these rotten streets where there’s so much murder going on? For a dollar? You’d sacrifice our children in Roxbury, Dorchester, Mattapan, Mission Hill, Hyde Park?

“Well, I’m one mother, one grandmother, one wife whose husband has worked all his life, hard, and is now retired, and should be able to ride a bus in Boston, with a fair fare. To ride that RIDE, with a fair fare. If you increase that RIDE by 100 percent, how are we as people with disabilities going to get to work, who make minimum wage or below, or do piecework? I ask you this evening to please consider the rates.”

Those attending the hearing in Roxbury were particularly upset over the proposal to halt weekend service on the Green Line E Branch. In addition to serving residents in Mission Hill and other neighborhoods, the E Line runs by Northeastern University, the Museum of Fine Arts, and numerous cultural institutions. It also transports workers, patients and visitors to hospitals in the congested Longwood Medical Center.

Addressing the audience, Justin Benson said, “I’m a Northeastern student and I’m with the group Students Against T Cuts. I was back home on break and as soon as I got back I heard about these T cuts, and the extent of these fare changes and service reductions. It was just shocking to me that this was ever proposed.

“I know that Northeastern is particularly concerned about the E Line. But there are five hospitals and many, many thousands of residents—everyone should be concerned about the E Line. Boston students, we’re not just students, we’re part of this community. And these fare increases and cuts mean so much more than just filling a budget gap.

“I know the MBTA is in a very difficult situation. But I just want to know why we were not going after the

transportation funding policy that is faulty. Because transportation is not just infrastructure, it’s an actual resource that many of us depend upon. Many of us do not have cars, and many of us would like to do our duty to the environment and to the city by taking public transportation.”

Victoria Valencia became emotional as she addressed the audience. “I’m a lifelong Mission Hill resident,” she said, “I’ve never driven a car. I always ride the T or walk or find another way to get places. I now work in Waltham. I get up at 6:00 in the morning so that I can get to work by 9:00. And I ride the buses and I ride the train in peace. And I like the fact that I can get to where I need to go, even if it takes me two extra hours, because I’m proud that we have a system that works for people like me.

“And I’m also proud to be a Bostonian where we have amazing institutions, amazing innovations. We have the first public transit system in this country based on one that was introduced in England and in France. I read up on this, because I’m proud to be a Boston citizen. However, I’m really, really sad that we are not taking this as an opportunity to innovate. Why are we not looking forward to growing our system?

“We need to work hard to make sure no one is left behind. When we have people graduating from MIT, people graduating from Harvard; when we have mechanical engineers like myself who can’t get jobs in the field that we care about—that’s not OK.”

Lorraine Humphrey from Dorchester said, “I’m very disappointed with the proposal the T is giving us tonight. I feel that we should not have to pay more money on the T, because as it is we are already paying a lot of money and the service is terrible. The trains are always late, and we have to wait forever and ever. I’m a citizen and I pay my taxes, and I don’t think it’s fair.

“Why are you doing this to us, the T riders that ride the T every day? You know that the T riders are not the ones who have you guys in this state. You should find other ways, because this is not right.”



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