

Boston, Massachusetts storm-related crisis deepens at MBTA

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The breakdown of the Greater Boston public transportation system, triggered by recent snowstorms but caused by years of grossly inadequate maintenance funding, has deepened in the wake of another storm that hit on Sunday and Monday.

The MBTA (Massachusetts Bay Transportation Authority), which carries more than 1.3 million riders on a typical weekday, announced on Monday afternoon that all rail service would be shut down at 7:00 p.m. that evening. The closure, announced only hours ahead of time, lasted through Tuesday night.

Buses continued to run, but subways, light rail and heavy rail (commuter rail trains that service outlying cities including Worcester, Haverhill and Lowell) were closed precipitously. These services carry more than 900,000 people on an average weekday. In the midst of this crisis, the MBTA's general manager abruptly announced her resignation on Wednesday.

Governor Charlie Baker issued a "partial snow day" for non-essential state employees on Tuesday and urged businesses to allow their employees to "work from home." However, for many low-paid workers in retail, restaurant, custodial and other hourly employment, missing days or hours of work due to lack of transportation has translated into financial hardship in the form of lost wages. Many workers and their families cannot afford the high rents for housing near downtown Boston and must rely on public transportation or a long commute to get to work.

Since the beginning of the first storm on January 26, more than six feet of snow, most of it fluffy and powdery, has fallen on the area. This snow tends to get sucked into the filters of older Direct Current (DC) motors on subway cars, clogging them with moisture and ice. Newer Alternating Current technology, which is not as susceptible to such problems, exists but costs

slightly more when installed on existing cars.

Rail service reopened on Wednesday morning, but above-ground sections of subway lines remained closed. The Red Line, for example, provided no subway service between JFK/UMass and Braintree. Workers in Quincy who needed to get into the city were forced to stand in line for up to an hour in parking lots just to catch a shuttle bus to the JFK station where they then had to wait with hundreds of others for the subway. The closure of this part of the Red Line will continue through the weekend.

Large sections of the Blue, Orange and Red Lines run underground but were completely shut down on Monday night and Tuesday nonetheless, demonstrating the crisis atmosphere. On the commuter rail, frozen switches and unplowed tracks led to the cancellation of service, despite a loan of track-clearing equipment from New York.

With hundreds of thousands of riders unable to get to their jobs, the crisis has led to infighting among state politicians. At a rambling press conference on Tuesday, MBTA General Manager Beverly Scott revealed that she and Governor Baker have not talked face-to-face in the three weeks since the crisis began.

The following day Scott received a unanimous vote of confidence from the Board of MassDOT (the state's Department of Transportation), only to announce her resignation a few hours later.

Baker, while mouthing frustration at the MBTA, will do nothing to raise corporate taxes in a state where they account for only 14 percent of total tax revenues. In a nod to his corporate supporters at a Tuesday afternoon news conference, he said, "We need to start from the premise the taxpayers have been taxed enough." He has shown no such sympathy for workers whose sales and meals taxes account for an equal share of state

revenues.

While it was unclear as of Wednesday evening why Scott was resigning, at the Tuesday press conference she maintained that no matter who is general manager of the MBTA, the system is so old and poorly maintained that the crisis is unavoidable.

A November 2009 report commissioned by then-Governor Deval Patrick found that the system's maintenance backlog was \$3 billion and that, for the following year, the MBTA had not set aside even one third of the funding needed to keep that backlog from growing.

While making paper promises in its Capital Investment Plans, MBTA management has been silent since 2009 about the growing size of this backlog. However, the *Boston Herald* reported this week that it might be as high as \$6 billion. The *Herald* also reported that MBTA management has not even set up a database for tracking maintenance costs, despite having received a \$1 million grant for that purpose several years ago.

The "state of good repair" (SGR) standard used to calculate these maintenance costs is not even the most stringent used in the industry. A June 2012 report published by the Dukakis Center for Urban & Regional Policy at Northeastern University found that, nationally, the \$44.5 billion needed to keep up with growing mass transit ridership was 2.5 times the size of all SGR needs. It is an indication of the extreme negligence of maintenance by the Massachusetts government that the MBTA's SGR gap was at least one sixth of the national total of \$17.5 billion at the time.

The MBTA carries workers for many of the biggest employers—both for-profit and not-for-profit—in eastern Massachusetts. It is a lie to claim that the resources needed for its maintenance cannot be contributed by these organizations.

State Street Corporation, for example, had revenues of more than \$10 billion in 2014 but paid only \$434 million in income taxes across all of its operations. The tax amount dropped from \$550 million the previous year. Fidelity Investments had nearly \$14 billion in revenue for the fiscal year ending December 31, 2013. Both companies are headquartered in Boston.

There are more than 50 colleges and universities in the Greater Boston area, including several with endowments in the billions of dollars. Most of these

pay no taxes, although some make a much smaller "payment in lieu of taxes" to the municipality in which they are located.

Local hospitals also employ tens of thousands of people and are exempted by state law from paying any income taxes. Nonetheless, they are rich in resources. Partners Healthcare, which employs more than 41,000 people at Massachusetts General Hospital, Brigham and Women's, Faulkner, McLean and other area hospitals, had more than \$10 billion in revenue in 2011 and ended the year with nearly \$7 billion in net assets.

Partners reported 14 executives with compensation of more than \$1 million in 2011, along with another 21 who earned more than \$500,000. In the Lobbying section of its IRS filing for that year, it reported that "the corporation may on occasion review proposed legislation for the purpose of determining the effect upon its tax-exempt purposes."



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