

# Boston “ghost train” incident exposes decay of public infrastructure

John Marion  
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Just after 6 a.m. on December 10, a six-car Red Line subway train left the Braintree, Massachusetts, MBTA (Massachusetts Bay Transportation Authority) station with no operator onboard. The train, carrying about 50 passengers, traveled through four stations in nine minutes before MBTA staff in a control center stopped it by cutting electricity to the third rail.

After the train was stopped, another was used to push it to JFK/UMass station, the next on the line, so that the riders could get off. Until then, they had received no explanation about the fate of the operator or why the train wasn't making its normal stops.

Noting how much she pays to ride the T, as it is known, to work, one rider said to the *Boston Globe* afterward, “Why isn't there another conductor, or some other MBTA person available?” Another told the *Boston Herald*, “There was no communication. The speakers are in pretty rough shape. It was a bit unnerving.”

As the train approached Quincy Adams station, another train was stopped to let passengers board at Wollaston, only two stops ahead. An accident between the two, which could have been deadly, was prevented only by improvised measures taken by a dispatcher and supervisor in a central control station.

During the day on Thursday, details explaining the incident emerged. The train, which is nearly 50 years old, is accelerated or decelerated by means of a lever that must be pushed down before being turned. The driver, who has more than 20 years of experience, had tied the lever down but then climbed out of the train to address a signal problem that required a manual override. He was slightly injured by the train when it took off without him.

Human error caused the incident, and the driver has been suspended with pay. According to Secretary of

State Stephanie Pollack, he is cooperating with the investigation.

Nonetheless, Governor Charlie Baker went on *Boston Herald* radio within hours of the incident to make provocative allegations of sabotage. Before other details had been publicly reported, Baker said the train “was tampered with, and it was tampered with by somebody who knew what they were doing.”

In part, Baker was reacting to an already panicked atmosphere on the Red Line during a week in which it had been shut down twice because people had jumped or fallen onto the tracks. However, he is also looking for any opening he can find to privatize portions of the system and reduce salaries and benefits for workers. The biggest initiative taken by MBTA management since Baker appointed a Financial Management Control Board after last winter's crisis is the hiring of more human resource personnel to track the use of Family and Medical Leave Act time by T workers.

Until the spring of 2012, it was standard practice to have two employees on each Red Line train, one serving as operator and the other as an attendant. The elimination of attendants in 2012 reduced the system's operating budget by only \$1.3 million. Operators were given only three days of training to prepare them for the additional work and rules.

Announcements cannot be broadcast onto MBTA trains from outside, and the speakers are often poorly maintained and barely audible. Signal problems like the one the operator was trying to override manually are among the many serious consequences of years of deferred maintenance system-wide.

Because of underspending, more than \$7.3 billion will be needed to return the entire MBTA—including subways, buses and commuter rail trains—to a State of Good Repair (SGR). Over the past seven years, an

average of \$389 million has been spent on SGR each year, much less than the \$472 million needed just to keep the backlog from growing. The total needed for the subway system is \$3.2 billion.

In its Capital Investment Program (CIP) for fiscal year 2016, which began on July 1, the T budgeted more than \$1 billion for capital spending. However, \$322 million of this was set aside for expansion projects while \$724 million was given to SGR and modernization. While more than \$1.5 billion is needed to return subway revenue vehicles to SGR, only \$214 million is set aside for that purpose in the fiscal 2016 CIP.

According to the weighted SGR formula used by the T, a score of less than 2.5 for any item or category means that it is not in good repair. The system-wide average for all subway signals is only 2.57, meaning that many are in a dangerous condition. The spending needed to bring all subway signals up to SGR is more than \$1.3 billion. While riders are subjected to life-threatening conditions, the T pays more than \$400 million per year in debt service to bond investors.

Despite the system's antiquated equipment and risks to riders' safety, Baker's Financial Management Control Board is considering new fare hikes. Meanwhile, municipal governments, the T, and large employers are pushing for "transit-oriented" residential development, which will lead more workers to rely on the system for their commute.

The MBTA web site advertises surplus real estate available for sale to developers, while the Boston Redevelopment Authority promotes a program of "strategic development" around public transportation. Thousands of new apartments and condominiums are being planned along the Red Line in Dorchester. Reporting on the phenomenon, the *Boston Globe* noted that developers "can increase profits because the city allows denser development and requires fewer parking spaces."

The lie that society does not have enough wealth to provide safe and affordable public transportation has become threadbare. The 2014 *Forbes* list of the world's 400 wealthiest people included six Massachusetts residents, including the billionaire owner of the New England Patriots, Robert Kraft. Fidelity Investments President Abigail Johnson, in whose 401(k) plans millions of workers have been

forced to invest as traditional defined benefit pension plans are replaced, is worth more than \$13 billion.

In its 2010 program, *The Breakdown of Capitalism & the Fight for Socialism in the United States*, the Socialist Equality Party put forward transportation, utilities, and decent and affordable housing as inalienable rights of the working class. We call on working people to "secure these rights through the mobilization of their strength as a class, independent of and in opposition to the corporate-controlled political parties and the institutions of the capitalist state."

The woeful state of the MBTA public transit system, which endangers the lives and livelihoods of T workers and riders alike on a daily basis, underscores the correctness of this demand and the need to place public transportation, a basic social right, under the control of the working class.



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