

Massachusetts: Public transportation infrastructure in advanced state of decay

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In eastern Massachusetts, where the total investment needed to bring the public transportation system back to a “state of good repair” is still more than \$7 billion, recent incidents have demonstrated again the consequences of years of budgetary negligence. While riders on the MBTA (Massachusetts Bay Transportation Authority, the “T”) are confronted by daily delays and regular safety risks, Republican Governor Charlie Baker continues to blame workers for the problems.

It has been nearly two years since a series of February 2015 snowstorms shut down the MBTA multiple times. But while raising fares and privatizing jobs since that crisis, the Baker administration has not provided adequate resources to assure basic safety for subway riders.

While the jobs and benefits of MBTA workers are under attack, upper management is clamoring for large raises. According to the *Boston Globe*, the new project manager for an extension of the Green Line will be paid \$280,000 in salary, \$57,000 “in lieu of benefits” and \$45,000 in bonuses. Seven other “key leaders” for the project would each be paid more than \$175,000, according to hiring plans. MBTA CEO Stephanie Pollack makes \$210,000 per year.

On October 26 the motor on an Orange Line subway train overheated at Back Bay Station in Boston, filling the train and the platform with smoke. Riders had to break train windows to get out, and three people were hospitalized. A Twitter video posted afterward by a rider showed dozens of people coughing as they climbed smoke-filled stairwells. Northbound service at the station did not resume for more than an hour after the incident began, leaving hundreds of people stranded during rush hour. The *Boston Globe* reported that the train doors did not have emergency exit handles.

Baker sought to blame the October 26 panic on the driver, whom he claimed did not “make an announcement about it and explain to people what’s going to happen next.” The governor, whose main aim is to privatize the public transportation system by means of a Fiscal and Management Control Board which he appointed, has a history of blaming MBTA workers for such incidents.

In December 2015, a Red Line train left Braintree Station with no driver, a dangerous incident that could have been prevented with newer equipment or more operators on board. Baker went on the radio within hours and made an unfounded and provocative allegation of sabotage. The accusation was disproven by that evening.

The crisis has become so bad that T management is staging drills to practice evacuating riders from smoking trains. The Saturday after the Orange Line fire such a drill was held at Alewife Station, which was already scheduled to be closed for track maintenance. The mock incident involved the resources of the MBTA and the Cambridge, Somerville and Arlington fire departments.

On November 15 a “small trash fire” on the tracks of the Red Line caused delays around 5 p.m., leaving station platforms full of commuters. Riders complained on Twitter of exorbitant rates being charged by Uber because of high demand. One, whose commute would ordinarily consist of a subway ride and then a bus to Belmont, was quoted a price of more than \$92 for the 8-mile trip. The following morning, a disabled Orange Line train at Haymarket Station in Boston caused delays during the morning commute.

In October, the *Globe* reported on the high number of canceled trains on the Fairmount commuter rail line, which is only about nine miles long but is relied on by

students and low-income workers. The cancellations occurred because Keolis, which runs the MBTA's commuter rail service, does not have enough coaches for all its trains. Nineteen trains on the line had been cancelled in September, and 17 in the first three weeks of October.

On the night of October 3, a Green Line trolley derailed at Copley Station, with no explanation given other than that the wheels "slipped off the rail." While no one was injured in the accident, normal service was not restored until the following morning.

The MBTA has a deferred maintenance spending backlog of more than \$7 billion. According to its current plans, \$3.7 billion will be spent over the next five years on maintenance and the purchase of new equipment, giving the appearance of substantial progress. But because of inflation and the aging of existing equipment, spending at this rate (approximately \$740 million per year) would need to continue for 25 years to completely eliminate the backlog. In the fiscal year ending June 30 of this year, the agency spent only \$502 million on maintenance and equipment replacement.

A major infrastructure purchase scheduled over the next six years involves the manufacture of 152 new Orange Line cars and 132 new Red Line cars. The China Railroad Rolling Stock Corporation (CRRC) is building a factory for this purpose in Springfield, Massachusetts. This enterprise could be threatened by geopolitical tensions, which could be exacerbated by the incoming Trump administration. Months before the election, 55 US congressmen were already accusing CRRC of undercutting other bids because of subsidies from the Chinese government.

The contract between the MBTA and CRRC was arranged by Baker's predecessor, Democratic Governor Deval Patrick. Baker, who sought to distance himself from Trump by not attending the Republican National Convention this summer, is nonetheless a Republican and will be under pressure to toe the administration's line.

According to the *Springfield Republican*, CRRC is promising to pay production workers no more than \$60,000 per year. Springfield, located about two hours west of Boston, has more than 16,200 unemployed workers.



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