

Boston transit: “Safety is not the priority” at the MBTA, panel finds

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In a scathing report released earlier this month, an official safety panel has found that “safety is not the priority” at the Massachusetts Bay Transportation Authority (MBTA). The panel of experts hired by the Fiscal and Management Control Board (FMCB) that oversees Greater Boston’s transit system describes an operation whose intense focus on slashing day-to-day costs under Governor Charlie Baker has sacrificed safety at the “T,” as the system is known.

The official safety review finds that despite the T’s claims that riders’ safety is its top priority, “the reality is that on a tactical level, the priorities and resources of the agency have been dedicated to capital acceleration,” i.e., servicing its debt.

The safety review panel (SRP) was convened June 27, 2019, by the FMCB due to a rapid degeneration of safety, service and frequent derailments in the system. It reviewed MBTA policies, procedures and accident reports, as well as conducting visits to many construction projects and derailments sites.

“The FMCB has put a significant focus on fiscal control of operating expenses, while at the same time increasing the throughput of the capital program,” the report notes. “As a result of supporting the accelerated Capital Program, many of the maintenance and engineering personnel are being pulled from their normal day-to-day functions that are necessary to deliver reliable passenger service.”

One of many ramifications the panel identified from this focus on the Capital Program was “that a select portion of Preventative Maintenance and Inspections activities were intentionally no longer being performed on the transit side of the agency, which agency personnel attributed to human resource and track access challenges.”

The T’s focus on financial solvency has resulted in

the cutting of staff in recent years. Lack of personnel has not only been seen in current administrative employees’ time being reallocated to finance. In 2016, with the agreement of workers’ unions, the MBTA implemented a program offering buyouts to employees, compensating them if they voluntarily left their jobs. The unions have also agreed to repeatedly extending contracts to accommodate the concession demands of the T.

MBTA Chief Administrator Brian Shortsleeve said the agency was more focused on achieving the goal of cutting \$25 million in salaries and \$12.5 million in pensions than on the number of people leaving the agency. The funds saved account for but a mere 15 percent of yearly interest due to bondholders.

“In almost every area we examined,” the panel writes, “deficiencies in policies, application of safety standards or industry best practices, and accountability were apparent.” This has been strikingly manifested in an increase in derailments, which have gone from a yearly average of 2.75 between 2005 and 2009 to 10.75 between 2014 and 2018. These derailments have caused numerous injuries and led to millions of dollars in repairs.

The SRP was especially concerned with the clearing of vegetation and debris around tracks, “which on the surface may sound minor,” it writes, “but can have serious consequences.” For instance, the commuter rail line that experienced a mainline derailment on March 8, 2018, was due to a train striking a tree or log during a weather-related incident.

At the onset of the SRP’s assessment of the vegetation control program with transit management, they were informed that it had been suspended. They were told, “The funding for this activity had been exhausted as it was tied to other contractor support

functions, such as snow removal.” The SRP described vegetation control as “low hanging fruit” ripe for the picking. Last year’s derailment, however, “should have raised red flags on the transit side of the house and provided ample justification for funding of the vegetation control program,” the panel wrote.

While bare minimum costs for safety are sacrificed and derailments skyrocketed, the MBTA decided in 2017 to award a \$720 million contract for the implementation of an all-electric fare collection system to Cubic, a company working in technology for transit and military services. This project has currently been delayed, with an anticipated new price tag of nearly \$1 billion. This contract no doubt springs from the T’s fixation on savings from stopping “fare jumpers” and uncollected fares, which account for a minuscule portion of the system’s financial shortfall, as leverage for securing more funding from predatory lenders such as JPMorgan and Wells Fargo.

Beyond these and many other safety implications, an enormous backlog of repairs forced the MBTA in the final months of 2019 to shut down services on its Red, Orange and Green Lines on weekday nights for repairs. These closings extend beyond the MBTA’s initial estimates of already inconvenient weekend closings, fulfilling the MBTA’s forecast of possible weekday shutdowns in 2020 ahead of schedule.

In a poll given to full-time employees by MassINC polling group on the impact of delays in past months on roads and public transportation, 82 percent of public transit commuters said they leave earlier or later to avoid the busiest transit times, and 63 percent have been late for work.

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Typical were the comments of Devon, a commuter from Boston, who described his experience to this reporter. “The T directly affects me. You know the Red Line is always going out of service every weekend, and it’s very predictable,” he said. “I have to wait for a shuttle bus and then it’s usually either going to be delayed, the time in the app is wrong for the bus, and the prices just keep going up. It’s terrible. Their service is F and we’re paying A+.”

Shuttle buses, which are used in place of out-of-service trains, mean riders must prepare for 20- to 30-minute average delays, adding even more time to

the strenuous workday, accompanied by the possibility of being fired for being late. Repairs on the closed train lines occasionally block off lanes on main commuting roads, slowing traffic and even further delaying displaced T riders and local traffic.

Transit systems play a significant role in modern life. The MBTA averages 1.24 million passengers per weekday. Workers pushed further and further away from the city by rising rents and other costs heavily depend on these public services. In the fourth wealthiest state in the US, with an astounding level of technical and productive development, a reliable transit system is surely possible. Only a parasitic mechanism that subordinates public need to profit—and not just management negligence—could bring the MBTA to the point of trains literally falling apart and off the tracks.

Of the near \$500 million in debt payments to bonds previously issued by the MBTA skimmed off the top every year, half is interest to bondholders alone. Meanwhile, fares are continually rising. In 2003, the Green Line fare was \$1 inbound, 50 cents for students, and free going outbound on many lines. As of July 1 this year, a date coinciding with the issuing of new bonds, fares hikes were pushed through against commuter opposition to \$2.90 each way with a ticket, or \$2.40 with a Charlie Card.

Through a process following the same laws, Massachusetts officials are proposing a 15 cent raise in the gas tax, phased in over three years. This would generate approximately \$450 million a year to be used as collateral for issuing more bonds for transport projects. Like the fare increases, the elevated gas tax would fall disproportionately onto the shoulders of the working class and commuting workers displaced from the city.



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