



Seeking fare solutions

Transit group lobbies for funding alternatives

By Marjorie Nesin
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Massachusetts's public transportation system, facing its usual heap of debt, is leaning again toward fare hikes and service cuts to fill the gap, but a coalition of state organizations is eyeing alternatives to providing help for the MBTA and also to boost long-term highway and other transportation maintenance.

The Massachusetts Bay Transportation Authority cites a drop in ridership numbers as a motivation behind considering cutting all weekend commuter rail trains from the schedule. But Transportation for Massachusetts, a coalition of organizations in the state focused on creating and improving transportation options, says that any idea of parking many trains for the weekend and cutting less-frequented weekday trips will simply push commuters back into their vehicles.

"It's the wrong incentive. It's literally moving backwards," said the coalition's advocacy director, Elizabeth Weyant.

Cape Ann's Rockport/Newburyport line on the rail has seen ridership hold steady over the years, usually clocking in around 5.2 million rides annually. The line clocked 5.1 million rides in the fiscal year 2012, only a slight decrease from the five-year annual high of 5.4 million rides in 2009.

Even since the last fare hike in July, when the price of a monthly zone nine pass, for example, jumped \$64 from \$265 to \$329, and a zone one pass shifted from \$135 to \$173, commuters to and from Cape Ann have kept paying. Ridership on just the Rockport section of the line during the beach-traffic-heavy month of that July hit 194,622, and hovered at about 178,178 in January.

Rockport resident Bob Delaney sat on a Railroad Avenue bench Friday afternoon, waiting for a local CATA bus as the 1:19 commuter rail train pulled into the Gloucester station. Though Delaney utilized local buses Friday, rather than the train, he frequents the commuter rail and depends solely on public transportation and the occasional rental car.

"I haven't needed a car for years. I just use the trains and buses," said Delaney, a self-described "semi-retiree" who previously commuted by train to a job as the Director of Admissions at a craftsmanship school in Boston.

Delaney recalled the last set of service cuts and fare hikes in July — and said he hopes not to see more of the same.

“It’s a service that’s really needed by the people and hopefully they find a way to fund it, and maybe even clean the toilets once in a while,” Delaney said.

Another man who stood nearby Friday afternoon, a motorcycle helmet hanging from his fingertips, said he rarely commits himself to public transportation, opting instead for rides on his fuel-efficient moped. George Anderson waited for a friend to arrive via train from Salem Friday, before the two headed off down Railroad Avenue on the sky blue moped. He noted that for others, like his friend, the transportation system might be sorely missed.

“Massachusetts transportation is lacking already so badly,” Anderson said.

The coalition group Transportation for Massachusetts — pointing to our continued dependence on the public transportation system, but also highlighting some of the decreased usage of the commuter rail and more so of Boston’s subway system — has narrowed at least three potential methods for setting the MBTA on the track of an eventual balanced budget.

Among its suggestions, the coalition is plugging a tax on vehicle mileage, a tax on vehicle sales, or a gasoline tax, with two potential methods for taxing vehicle mileage and suggested flexibility for lower taxes on miles driven in areas further from the reaches of public transportation. The taxes on vehicular transportation could encourage those with public transportation options handy to leave the car keys at home and opt toward the train.

“We want to make it harder for people to choose driving,” Weyant said, emphasizing the importance of creating more viable public alternatives. She was joined in a visit to the Times last week by fellow coalition members Marc Draisen of the Metropolitan Area Planning Council and a former state representative, and Peter Webber, vice president of the Cape Ann Chamber of Commerce.

The suggested mileage tax could be easily tailored to Massachusetts drivers, according to Weyant, since vehicle inspectors record the odometer mileage on a vehicle at each inspection.

The state could either tax vehicle owners on that number annually, or could require transmitters like the E-Z PASS system in each vehicle. The transponder system would allow the state to tax at different rates, depending on what areas of the state the vehicle travels through, and eliminate tax on any out-of-state road miles. But the transponder system would likely bring discomfort to residents not wanting to be tracked by the state.

None of these solutions would be enough alone, said Weyant, but paired with generous state aid, the programs could bring the MBTA above water or at least help it begin treading.

The transportation funding plan proposed last week by Gov. Deval Patrick suggests that the state allot \$19 billion for transportation projects over the next ten years, acts as another key element for funding public transportation, according to the coalition, though they say the funding is not quite enough.

“We knew we were going to be here six years ago, we probably knew we’d be here 10 years ago. And what do you know, now we’re here,” Weyant said. “It’s time to do more.”

Patrick must call on the Legislature to approve the increased taxes that would make up \$8 billion of the transportation investment. Federal reimbursements will cover 82 percent of the \$2.4 billion out of \$19 billion earmarked for transportation construction projects. Patrick’s proposal includes a dedicated \$604 million to regional transit.

“The transportation investment bill, to be funded by both existing revenues and additional revenues through passage of tax reform, is a reflection of choice,” Patrick continued. “To support the transportation system our residents and the economy need and deserve, we must finance it honestly and sustainably.”