

# Dorchester Reporter

## Route 28 bus: It takes you the long way home

By Samuel Wohlforth, Reporter Correspondent  
May 3, 2018



*The 28 bus makes its way up Blue Hill Avenue— slowly. Samuel Wohlforth photo*

Congestion on the streets of Dorchester and Mattapan - and an antiquated fare collection that will be upgraded over the next two years - has slowed bus travel and contributed to a nine percent decline in ridership over a recent three-year period (2014-2016) on the most heavily used bus route through Mattapan, the 28. According to an analysis of MBTA data published by the transit advocacy group Livable Streets Alliance, the 28 is among the most used, but slowest bus routes in the city, subjecting

Mattapan and Dorchester residents to long rides from Mattapan to Ruggles Station in Roxbury.

As the most important bus route in a part of the city with limited rapid transit options, the 28 serves as a crucial connector for the communities it serves. Mattapan, in particular, has one of the lowest rates of car ownership in the city, so bus service is crucial to getting many residents to their jobs, school, church, doctor's appointments, and more.

For all of these reasons, the 28 has the highest ridership rates out of the MBTA's 163 bus routes - more than 12,000 riders use it every day. On the other hand, it ranks as the 19th-slowest route in the system.

"The 28 bus is at the bottom of the list," said Pamela Bush-Miles, who rode the 28 for many years as a resident of Hyde Park and, later, of Mattapan. One of the major causes of the delays is the lack of off-board fare payment options on bus routes, except the Silver Line at South Station and the Seaport.

It's a sight familiar to many bus riders: With a half-dozen riders waiting to board at each stop, a rider trying to pay a cash fare has to feed individual bills into a fare machine. It's a process that can be agonizingly slow for riders with places to be and things to do. One study done in 2015 by BostonBRT found that 66 percent of Silver Line delays were because people were lining up to pay fares as the bus arrived, rather than before.

There are also significant disparities racially in delays along bus routes, driven in part by the lack of direct access to the subway in Mattapan and parts of Roxbury. Livable Streets Alliance says that black bus riders in Boston spend 64 more hours per year on buses than white riders.

The overall problem is made worse by the lack of Charlie Card refill stations in Mattapan where only certain stores are equipped to refill Charlie Cards. The refill process requires a teller or cashier to manually handle the Charlie Cards rather than allowing residents to refill their cards themselves, as is the case at all T stations.

A quick search on the MBTA's website showed only four retail locations in Mattapan equipped to refill Charlie Cards: two PLS check cashing locations and the River Street Premier Petrol gas station in Lower Mills. Beyond that, just getting a Charlie Card isn't easy for everyone; the two closest locations where residents can get a Charlie Card are the Ashmont T station and the Dudley Square bus terminal.

The MBTA has recently taken concrete steps toward modernizing the system. In March, the agency finalized a contract worth \$723.3 million that will phase in a new Automated Fare Collection '2.0' system on all bus routes by 2020. The new deal,

according to T officials, will include all-door boarding and “tap and board” payments using a fare card similar to the existing CharlieCard, which will be discontinued.

In addition, riders will no longer be able to pay with cash on buses or on the Green Line, eliminating transactions that cause delays and frustration for other passengers.

Bush-Miles says that the changes cannot come fast enough. “We’ve been telling them to put fare vending in our communities since 2007,” she says. “And now they’re telling us they’ll have it by 2020? Are you kidding?”

Joe Pesaturo, a spokesman for the MBTA, said in an interview that the plan is for AFC 2.0 to be rolled-out all at once. But, he added, “there may be some earlier pilots, with specific routes and stations to be determined.”

It is not yet clear if Route 28 might be one of them. “The MBTA will be conducting a comprehensive public outreach effort for all of the policy changes associated with AFC 2.0 starting this spring,” Pesaturo said. “This outreach will help T staff create the policies to support the operational improvements from allowing customers to board at all doors. This will end the delays associated with customers having to queue at the front door. There will also be an education campaign for customers as the roll-out of the new system approaches.”

Along with the Route 19 bus from Fields Corner and the 23 from Ashmont, bus riders account for 46 percent of the northbound traffic along Warren Street during the morning rush. And during rush hour, a 28 bus leaves Mattapan Station every 6 to 7 minutes, goes up Blue Hill Avenue through Grove Hall and down Warren Street to the Dudley Square terminal before making its way to the Orange Line’s Ruggles Station on Tremont Street in Roxbury.

“The 23 bus is crowded from one end of the route to the other,” Bush-Miles said, and the data back her up. In 2016, the 23 was the 10th-slowest route in the city and had the 4th-highest ridership. In fact, the Warren Street corridor has some of the most-delayed buses in the city, with Blue Hill Avenue north of Franklin Park not far behind.

As part of his effort to tackle bus congestion and delays, Mayor Martin Walsh has included funding for a team of transit planners focused on bus travel as part of his proposed 2019 budget, which is now in the hands of the Boston City Council. As part of their report, the Livable Streets Alliance has called for dedicated bus lanes along Blue Hill Avenue and Warren Street, corridors that Mayor Walsh said would get special attention from his new transit team.

City Councillor Michelle Wu told the Reporter that she agrees with the strategy. “It’s a really important priority for the city to prioritize bus service for low-income neighborhoods and communities of color,” she said.

Other elected officials are also calling on the agency to engage with the community about the planned fare collection changes. “It’s really important to me,” said state Rep. Dan Cullinane,” who represents Mattapan, “that the MBTA go first to the community, particularly communities of color like Mattapan and Roxbury, whenever they’re about to make a change,” like eliminating cash fares. When it comes to transit equity, I want Mattapan to be front and center for the MBTA.”

Wu said that she and Councillor Ayanna Pressley have been speaking with the MBTA to ensure that the transition to cashless fare payment happens with input from the community. “We’ve talked a lot about what cashless means for people experiencing homelessness,” she said.

“We’re seeing such fast-paced change in the Boston area,” said Livable Streets Alliance community engagement manager Andrew McFarland. “We have to be making fast investments that are producing results just as quickly, and the bus system is a crucial part of that.”

The Livable Streets [“Getting Boston on Board” report](#) on bus use - and suggested reforms - was published in March. It reported that all of the top ten bus routes that operate primarily in the city saw “substantial ridership decline between 2014 and 2016.” The report’s summary noted: “Over the past few years, we’ve witnessed a rising trend of Boston riders ditching the bus in favor of other modes. Between 2015 and 2016 alone, there was an eight percent decrease in overall bus ridership - the highest rate of decline across MBTA services.”

One factor that could be related to the drop in the 28 route specifically is an increase in use along the Fairmount commuter rail line, which has seen a three-fold increase in ridership since 2012, according to a study released last year by the Boston Foundation. The 9.2 mile rail line between Readville and South Station parallels part of the Route 28 line, and offers a far quicker trip into the city, but with less frequency. Some 2,260 people use the weekday Fairmount service, according to the Boston Foundation. Three new stations - Newmarket, Talbot and Four Corners - have joined the line in recent years. A fourth is now under construction near Mattapan Square.