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New MBTA fare collection system is delayed

By [Adam Vaccaro](#) Globe Staff, May 3, 2019, 6:58 p.m.



The all-electronic system is designed to increase fare collections on the commuter rail.(CRAIG F. WALKER/GLOBE STAFF/FILE)

The MBTA's \$700 million effort to convert to [all-electronic fare collection](#) is behind schedule, a blow to a high-profile project that the agency has

cast as a near silver-bullet solution to many of its service problems and pricing limitations.

Officials declined to specify how long it will now take to implement the fare system, originally scheduled for completion in 2021, nor are they saying exactly what has gone wrong. But the delays apparently involve technology issues with the T's vendor, as well as difficult policy decisions, such as how to conduct random fare checks that the new system will require.

“It’s a complicated system that literally touches every customer every time across every location and every vehicle,” Steve Poftak, the general manager of the Massachusetts Bay Transportation Authority, said in an interview Friday. “We believe that right now, more time is going to be required to deliver the project that we want for our customers.”

On Thursday, the vendor the MBTA hired to implement the system, a San Diego-based company called Cubic, told investors it would “probably adjust some of the milestones” for the MBTA project. Matt Cole, a Cubic senior vice president, said the company is confident the project will get done eventually.

“These systems are highly sophisticated and there are always technical challenges that need to be overcome in order to successfully deliver the project on behalf of the customer and their riders,” Cole said in a statement.

Both Cubic and the T declined to outline a new schedule, with Poftak saying the agency is working on that with the vendor, which built similar systems for London and Chicago and is installing one in New York.

The new system is largely modeled off the London system. It will allow riders to use a smartphone or credit card at fare machines, in addition to issuing a new version of the electronic CharlieCard. It is also expected to speed up bus service by [allowing boarding at all doors](#). Officials have said the new system should increase fare collections, especially on the commuter rail, where crowded trains often prevent conductors from checking every ticket.

But it is far more than just a convenience. The T sees an integrated payment system as the technological linchpin for a radical change in the agency's fare pricing, allowing it to, for example, offer [discounts to low-income riders](#), or charge [different rates based on distance or time of day](#) or put a cap on the amount of money riders pay each month. It would also facilitate single fares between the subway and the commuter rail, or even with outside services such as the BlueBikes program or non-MBTA buses.

The project is designed to replace the time-consuming collection of cash payments on buses and trains with a vast network of CharlieCard vending machines across the region, including in public spaces and convenience stores, [to serve low-income riders who rely on cash](#).

Unlike many major transit projects, all of this was supposed to come relatively quickly, with test programs in place this year, the system partially installed next year, and the work complete by mid-2021.

The cause of the delay appears to be twofold. There is some sort of technical problem, which MBTA officials have refused to describe in detail; Cubic said it involved a problem with how the system communicates with a mobile network. Poftak stressed the MBTA will not pay the company until it has fully installed the multimillion-dollar system, adding that the contract with the company has other “tools within it that allow us to work toward a remedy.”

Secondly, Poftak said, the agency may need more time to resolve thorny issues raised by the new system, such as [how to conduct random fare inspections to ensure riders paid](#), or where to put new vending machines.

Some transit activists welcomed the delay. Stacy Thompson, director of the Livable Streets Alliance, said she always felt the T’s schedule was too aggressive and risked going into place without the big policy decisions being fully thought through. She said the T should factor in time to sort through policy issues when it sets deadlines on big projects.

“From day one, we didn’t actually think that the T did enough public outreach before they did the contract with Cubic,” Thompson said. “We think it’s going to take more work or more time than they were saying. Let’s learn from this and do better with the next major project.”

The MBTA had hinted at a problem in April, when officials said they would install fare gates at some key commuter rail stations by the end of

2020 — even though the new electronic system was scheduled to come online just a few months later. It confirmed the delay Friday after Cubic discussed the setbacks during its investor call the evening before.

Cubic has said its New York project is on schedule. That contract is worth about \$540 million, but involves less change than the MBTA job. For example, Cubic is putting new fare readers on existing gates for now, rather than replacing the gates outright.

The New York transit agency has begun testing Cubic's technology at select stations, and plans to slowly roll it out and replace the old system over the next four years, whereas the T is planning a more abrupt transition from old to new.

Cubic's 2013 installation in Chicago was troubled, with scores of [fare readers crashing](#) during commutes, [escalating costs](#), and delays of several months before it was finally completed.

At the MBTA, the fare system is one of several major improvement initiatives the T has struggled to roll out on time, even as it has stressed the need to get better at managing big, expensive projects. For example, the first of [more than 150 new Orange Line cars](#) are delayed due to a software issue, and another major initiative — a collision avoidance system on the commuter rail — [is at risk of falling behind](#) because of a problem with equipment installed by a subcontractor.

Poftak said the way the T has handled the fare project shows it has gotten better with big jobs, noting the contract is structured to withhold payments from Cubic until the work is finished.

The MBTA said the delay won't add any further costs to the contract, about half of which pays for infrastructure and half pays Cubic to operate the system for a decade.