

New cars and new promises, but it's the same old Orange Line

By [Adam Vaccaro](#) and [Matt Stout](#) Globe Staff, December 5, 2019, 7:34 p.m.



It was a tight squeeze Thursday on the Orange Line at Downtown Crossing. Breakdowns and delays have been common all week. JESSICA RINALDI/GLOBE STAFF

At a celebratory event in Medford just four months ago, Governor Charlie Baker pledged a new era of transit service as his administration introduced the first Orange Line cars since 1981.

“It’s about time,” Baker said, boasting that the long-awaited new trains will “dramatically improve the system’s reliability.”

Try telling that to riders this week.

In the first snowy period of the season, Orange Line passengers have been besieged by breakdowns and service interruptions: five trains suffered mechanical failures over Wednesday and Thursday, leading to delays of nearly a half-hour between trains one morning and causing considerable overcrowding; on Tuesday, part of the line was shut for an hour midmorning due to power problems.

As for those flashy new trains that Baker promised would begin solving the line's many problems? So far, only two six-car sets have been deployed since August — and neither has been seen for 17 days. In the second problem to surface in their short tenure, the trains were taken out of service because of an issue in the way the subway cars' two main structural components interact. It's likely a short-term issue, officials say, but they have not given a timeline for when the cars will return to service.

The glitches with both generations of Orange Line cars alike have some riders worried that they're stuck in a time warp between the old and the new.

"It's becoming really obvious that the current fleet is on its last legs," said Matthew Lawlor, a regular Orange Line rider from Roslindale. He urged the T to bring as many of the new cars into service as quickly as possible: "The Orange Line is disintegrating before our eyes."

On Thursday, Baker said that he, too, is "frustrated" by the recent Orange Line breakdowns, but stuck to a familiar line that riders will eventually see years of work result in better service.

"The bottom line is, the T needs to perform and people need it to perform," Baker said. "And over the course of the next several years, as those new trains come in, they're going to add 100,000 seats to the system, which we desperately need. And those seats better be there for people."

MBTA officials have said they expect all 152 new Orange Line cars to be in service by the end of 2022, their rollout rate increasing over time. However, MBTA spokesman Joe Pesaturo said there is no scheduled date for the next six-car set to serve passengers. Baker added that he expects all Orange Line cars to arrive by the end of 2022, even with the recent glitches.

The Red Line, which has even older subway cars, is also due for a full fleet replacement by the end of 2023. The 404 cars between both lines are being assembled by the Chinese company CRRC at a factory in Springfield, for about \$1 billion.

Also Thursday, MBTA general manager Steve Poftak said the agency will take a close look at problems with the current Orange Line trains, which are approaching their fifth decade of use, to determine how to better maintain them until they are replaced. T officials said they do not believe the recent problems with the old trains are weather-related.

“We’re going to take a look at the last 30 days at the various failures in service to try and find out if there are some common threads here,” Poftak said.

Poftak stressed that it’s better for the MBTA to address the issues rather than rush the new cars into service, for reasons both of safety and the long-term durability of those vehicles.

“I know it’s frustrating because we got a taste of the new cars,” he said.



The MBTA said it will take a close look at problems with the Orange Line trains, which are approaching their fifth decade. JESSICA RINALDI/GLOBE STAFF

Indeed, the problems this week have only made it more apparent how badly the Orange Line needs those new cars. At least one-third of some 4,500 service alerts on the Orange Line between July 2013 and July 2019 were about disabled trains, according to agency data analyzed by the Globe.

“I’ve lived in Boston for almost 10 years now and I’ve noticed a huge decrease in the MBTA’s ability to function,” Orange Line rider Kate Dillon said Thursday. “I have to wait for two to three cars to pass when I head to Forest Hills in the morning.”

The delays also highlight how long it is taking to modernize a system virtually from one end to the other, after decades of neglect.

Boston commuters are now nearly five years removed from the miserable winter of 2015, when subway and commuter rail service seized up under the weight of historic snowfall

— a cataclysmic event that prompted the freshly elected Baker to launch a series of reforms at the T. While the T has raised fares twice since then, service has improved only incrementally, largely on the handful of bus routes that now have dedicated lanes, and on several commuter rail lines.

The new Orange Line trains were ordered before that winter breakdown, back in 2014 under former governor Deval Patrick.

“They promised the trains would be running by this year but they keep having issues,” said Jamaica Plain resident Ben Gregg, who is still unhappy the T raised fares on July 1 by about 6 percent. “For what little service we are offered, it doesn’t seem that the fare hike is justified. We have a price increase and a service decrease.”

Some activists understand why the T is being cautious with the new cars, but wish officials would be more forthcoming with information.

Stacy Thompson, director of the transportation advocacy group Livable Streets Alliance, said the event with Baker back in August may have raised expectations on how quickly — and frequently — the new trains would provide service. Moreover, [officials only acknowledged](#) they had removed the new trains from service after the Globe asked about them.

“If the T thought this would be a testing phase, they should have said it over the summer. They should have said we may put these on the tracks and need to take them off,” Thompson said. “Just tell the public. . . . Without really clear and consistent communication, it’s easy to be frustrated.”

Similarly, the T offered little warning to riders that they would experience temporary speed restrictions on the Orange Line after underground tracks were replaced earlier this fall. The restrictions have since been lifted except for one stretch of rail, according to the MBTA.

Rail car experts say it is not unusual for new trains to be temporarily pulled from service to address issues that wouldn't be noticeable until they are regularly serving passengers. When it brought out the second set of new cars in September, the T did note that the trains would not run full time while the agency monitors their early performance.

But this is the second time the new cars have been pulled from service; they were out briefly in September to fix a component after a door on one unexpectedly opened midtrip.

The current outage is owed to a problem with a pad that fits between the upper and lower parts of the train car. The small rubber pad has been "wearing irregularly," officials say, causing a strange noise that alarmed inspectors.

The situation has prompted some activists to question the state's decision, under Patrick, to require the winner of the T contract to build a factory for the new cars in Massachusetts.

CRRC spent \$95 million building the Springfield facility before it could assemble and deliver new Orange Line cars. Ted Pyne, who is a board member of the advocacy group Transit Matters, wondered how much faster new trains could have been put into service if that didn't have to happen first.

"Getting the new cars a year earlier would make a huge difference," Pyne said. "A single day of delays is hundreds of hours of lost time, of people being late for their jobs. That's really bad."

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