

Governor Charlie Baker says he doesn't need to ride the T. He's wrong

By [Yvonne Abraham](#) Globe staff, Updated November 23, 2019, 7:52 p.m.



Governor Charlie Baker appears to have taken the T only once in all five years as governor, and the commuter rail not at all. PAT GREENHOUSE/GLOBE STAFF/GLOBE STAFF

“I’m not a virtue signaler.”

[So said Governor Charlie Baker](#), batting back the notion that he should ride the MBTA from time to time.

When Boston Public Radio host Jim Braude — prompted by [last week's Spotlight series on our traffic woes](#) — asked him about it on Thursday, Baker indicated plainly that he thinks hopping on the commuter rail near his home in Swampscott to get to work would be a purely symbolic, and empty, public gesture: virtue signaling.

In an interview for the series, the Globe's Andrew Ryan asked Baker if he'd ridden the Tube on a recent trip to London, and Baker got prickly: "I did. So what?" he replied.

Baker, who appears to have taken the T [only once in five years as governor](#), and the commuter rail not at all, told Braude he rode it plenty before he was sworn in.

But that's not good enough. And it reflects a view of our transit woes that simply isn't expansive enough.

"Using the system your voters take every day is not virtue signaling, it's doing your homework," said Stacy Thompson, head of [LivableStreets Alliance](#), a transportation advocacy group.

Besides, isn't it kind of a governor's job to send virtuous signals from time to time?

As the series vividly demonstrated, our soul-destroying traffic congestion is not like the weather — beyond our control, immutable. It is not the cruel act of some capricious God. We did this to ourselves.

We've all made choices that ensure the car is still king. [Baker and other leaders](#), including a majority of legislators, take cars to work each day. That insulates them from the daily indignities of the public transit system over which they preside. Corporations that have helped grow the region's economy (and traffic) [incentivize car commuting](#) with perks like free or cheap parking. And, thanks to the fact that we now feel entitled to

on-demand everything, [drivers are plowing through traffic more clogged](#) by Uber and Lyft rides, and delivery drivers for Amazon, DoorDash, and umpteen other vendors. All of this before the scourge of self-driving cars is upon us.

You don't change a car-first culture without considerable effort and, it must be said, some discomfort. Baker believes the answer to our traffic woes lies in improving the public transit system, making it so attractive that even the most inveterate car commuters will be coaxed away from the wheel.

That is a big part of the solution. But it's not sufficient to make the T irresistible or (let's not get crazy here) less awful. We also have to make driving less attractive for those who have choices.

Yet Baker and others have consistently resisted measures that would do that: congestion pricing, for example, which would make it more expensive to drive into the center of the city at certain times; raising the gas tax; charging residents for parking stickers; upping fees on ride-sharing services.

Meanwhile, T fares have been raised twice since Baker took office in 2015. Why, it's almost as if the votes of drivers matter more to our politicians than those of other commuters.

When Braude asked why Baker hadn't asked more of motorists, the governor responded, "keep in mind that everybody in Massachusetts who never uses the T spends a billion dollars a year on it, or more."

But that kind of binary thinking — drivers vs. T-riders — is how we got into this mess in the first place.

Having great public transit isn't just good for T riders. It's good for drivers, too, who enjoy less clogged roads if those who can take the T do so. And a better MBTA helps propel our entire economy, which benefits every resident -- even those who never set foot on a trolley.

Raising costs for drivers isn't just about raising much-needed revenue to help fund transit: It's also about shifting behavior. Because the forces that keep drivers in their cars are formidable.

To be fair, Baker does sometimes talk in terms of moving people, rather than cars, which is exactly the right way to look at it. And obviously, it's not practical for him to take the T every day, or even frequently.

But his dismissiveness does signal something: that Baker, at heart, remains as mired in car culture as the rest of us.