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# Free the Bus: A step toward making buses faster and more accessible

Bus ridership has been decreasing across Massachusetts over the past several years,[1] at the same time traffic congestion has been getting worse.[2] **Making fares on local buses across Massachusetts (MBTA + RTAs) free is an important step towards building a more efficient, cost-effective, and equitable public transportation system.**

However, this is just one of the many strategies needed to fix our bus system including; (1) procuring more buses and maintenance garages to allow for more frequent service; (2) adding more dedicated bus lanes and other bus priority features to key bus routes across the state (3) overhauling MBTA fare policy and implementing low-income fares before transitioning to a new fare collection system.

Without addressing these challenges head-on, riders will continue to be underserved by public transit at a crucial moment in our region's history. In the meantime, making local buses free across the state is an important first step towards increasing ridership and ensuring all Massachusetts residents can get to where they need to go.

| | |
|---|---|
| **What** | **Free local buses statewide for $60M.** This is the total annual fare revenue collected by local buses across the MBTA and all Regional Transit Authorities. Special routes, such as RTA-run buses to hospitals, response demand service, the Silver Line, and commuter buses are excluded. |
| **Why** | Faster boarding leads to faster, more efficient bus service. **For every second saved by a boarding passenger, the agency saves approximately $5 million dollars.**[3] In the all-door boarding pilot on the Silver Line (SL4/ SL5) buses on-time departure and boarding times were significantly improved.[4] Fare collection times average one to two seconds per passenger, but have high variability.[5] It costs $3/minute to operate a bus, so if a passenger spends 60 seconds paying a $2 cash fare, the T loses $1 during that transaction.[6]<br><br>When free fares were implemented in Lawrence, MA bus ridership increased.[7] Other cities are also experimenting with free fares including Kansas City[8] and Salt Lake City.[9] Fare costs hold many back from riding the bus or can make driving a more attractive choice. |
| **Benefits** | **Faster boarding and service, reduced fare collection costs, lower rates of driver assault, and increased access.**[10] Bus fares are paid mostly by low-income people and People of Color[11] -- meaning this benefit would go directly to those who need it the most. |
| **How** | **Implementation is quick and free: simply stop collecting fares.** To cover the revenue gap, we recommend the State Legislature include funding for statewide free local buses in any new transportation revenue package. |

## Resources and References

MBTA ridership and revenue by mode[12]

| Mode | Fare Revenue (% of total revenue) |
|---|---|
| **Local Bus** | **$33,665,457 (5%)** |
| Exp. Bus | $10,277,332 (2%) |
| BRT | $17,889,210 (3%) |
| Rapid Transit | $327,091,505 (49%) |
| Comm. Rail | $263,460,574 (40%) |
| Ferry | $10,180,461 (2%) |
| Total ridership revenue | $662,564,539 |

**RTA fares account for approximately another $22 million dollars in revenue**, not including longer-range shuttle trips to hospitals run by some RTAs, nor demand response fares.[13]

MBTA minority and low income use, by mode[14]

| Mode | % Minority | % Low Income |
|---|---|---|
| Commuter Rail | 15% | 7% |
| Rapid Transit | 31% | 27% |
| Local Bus | 48% | 42% |
| **Bus-only fares** | **50%** | **49%** |

References:

1. https://www.mbtabackontrack.com/performance/#/detail/ridership/2019-09-01/Bus///all
2. http://inrix.com/scorecard/
3. Assuming ~100 million passengers, $180/hr operating costs (from NTD data)
4. No fares were charged during this pilot, to allow for all-door boarding. https://www.mbtabackontrack.com/blog/74-all-door-boarding-pilot-on-the-silver-line https://vimeo.com/219129681
5. https://nacto.org/tsdg/better-boarding-better-buses/ https://usa.streetsblog.org/2017/01/04/all-door-boarding-can-save-time-for-bus-riders-if-transit-agencies-embrace-it/
6. Data from NTD: $437m bus opex / 2.2m veh-mil = ~$190/hr = ~$3/min
7. https://www.bostonglobe.com/2019/12/18/metro/just-make-it-free-lawrence-paid-all-fares-three-bus-routes-ridership-is-up/
8. https://fox4kc.com/2019/12/05/kc-council-unanimously-approves-proposal-for-free-bus-service-starting-next-year/
9. https://www.rideuta.com/Fares-And-Passes/Free-Fare-Zone
10. http://equitytransit.mit.edu/wp-content/uploads/2019/06/whitepaper_v8.pdf
11. https://www.metro-magazine.com/security-and-safety/article/732995/multi-tiered-response-key-to-preventing-operator-assaults
12. Fare revenue data estimated based on MBTA SFY 2020 fare change report (https://cdn.mbta.com/sites/default/files/fares/fare-proposal-2019/equity-anlaysis-sfy20-fare-changes-march2019-FINAL.pdf) with "fare multiple" rates for passes estimated. Data was cross-referenced with other fare data analysis which found similar results.
13. https://bit.ly/2tsFaBF, note that the MBTA numbers in this document do not account for fare payment type split
14. https://www.ctps.org/apps/mbtasurvey2018/#