



Advocates call for T control board extension

Aloisi: 'It's a mistake to change horses in midstream'

BRUCE MOHL Jan 6, 2020

SOME OF THE STATE'S leading transit advocates are calling for extending the life of the existing MBTA Fiscal and Management Control Board for six months to a year and making buses free across the state.

On the TransitMatters Codcast hosted by CommonWealth magazine, Jim Aloisi, the former transportation secretary and TransitMatters board member; Josh Fairchild, the co-founder and president of TransitMatters; and Stacy Thompson, the executive director of Livable Streets, looked back at 2019 and forward to 2020. They predicted the Legislature would pass a transportation revenue package and assembled a wish list of fairly predictable initiatives they would like to see action on.

But they also debated whether buses should be free to ride and raised the issue of T governance. Aloisi, for example, said the existing five-member control board, which is set to expire at the end of June after five years of operation, should remain in place for at least the remainder of 2020 and possibly half of next year. Aloisi said retaining a couple of the existing board members while replacing the rest would not provide sufficient continuity.

"It's a mistake to change horses in midstream," Aloisi said.

A three-member group of outside safety experts issued a report in December that blamed the absence of a strong safety culture at the T partly on turbulence at the top of the agency, particularly the high turnover of general managers. The report also criticized the control board for holding too many meetings each month and drawing the attention of top managers away from the jobs that they need to be doing.

After the release of the report, Gov. Charlie Baker promised to file legislation this month creating a successor to the control board. He said the measure would address two of the safety panel's concerns – reducing the number of monthly meetings (current law requires three a month) and appointing one member with safety and operations experience.

Aloisi, however, said it would be a mistake to bring on a new control board at such a critical juncture, particularly if the number of meetings is reduced. "We would be violating one of the

key cautions of the safety review report,” he said, referring to the report’s call for continuity at the top of the agency.

“This board has won the confidence of the public, the Legislature, the advocacy community, and the business community,” Aloisi said. “It just doesn’t make sense to change it.”

Fairchild also touched on another potential reason why transportation advocates may favor retaining the existing board – because it is starting to exercise more independence from the Baker administration.

“This was the year that the control board got more than comfortable in their position and began to feel comfortable showing some guts and going out on a limb and demanding things at the agency whether or not the administration was in favor of it,” Fairchild said.

The board recently pushed for means-tested fares and an ambitious rail vision plan despite concerns raised by Transportation Secretary Stephanie Pollack. Several board members also say the state needs to raise additional transportation revenues.

Aloisi, Fairchild, and Thompson all favor new revenues for the MBTA and transportation projects in general. But they also bought into the idea of giving up some revenue by allowing passengers to pay reduced fares or in some cases ride for free.

The idea of eliminating fares is gaining some traction. First broached by Boston City Councilor Michelle Wu, the idea has been embraced in one form or another by an odd assortment of advocates, including the Worcester Regional Chamber of Commerce, Lawrence Mayor Daniel Rivera, and the Boston Globe.

Thompson backed lower fares for passengers who meet income limits and free fares on the buses operated by the state’s regional transit authorities. Aloisi said he had become a convert to the idea of eliminating bus fares. “Free bus across the state, and that includes the T,” he said. Aloisi made the case that eliminating fares on T buses wouldn’t really cost the authority that much, since bus fare revenue currently totals roughly \$30 million. A check of the authority’s audited financial statements for fiscal 2019 indicates bus fare revenue totaled \$109 million, but TransitMatters officials say most of that money is collected as part of passes that include other modes of travel. The LinkPass, for example, provides unlimited bus and subway travel. Removing those linked trips, TransitMatters says, reduces the bus-only fare revenue to just over \$36 million.