

## Marty Walsh says he likes the idea of making the MBTA free. But he has one big concern.

"It's easy to throw ideas out there."



Mayor Marty Walsh waits backstage as he is introduced before the start of his annual State of the City address at Symphony Hall. (Jessica Rinaldi/Globe Staff)

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Mayor Marty Walsh likes the idea of eliminating fares on MBTA — in theory.

But he does have some questions about how it would actually work, specifically, “Who pays?”

“Not that I don’t support it,” Walsh said Friday during his monthly appearance on WGBH’s Boston Public Radio. “The issue is how do we pay for it.”

The mayor was asked about making at least MBTA buses fare-free, a once-fringe proposal that has picked up momentum since last year’s systemwide fare hikes. Advocates say eliminating fares makes public transit more accessible and reduces both traffic congestion and emissions, assuming that drivers convert to the cost-free option.

Officials in Kansas City, Missouri recently voted to eliminate fares for all of the city's buses. And closer to home, Lawrence is in the midst of a two-year pilot program, in which the city eliminated fares for three bus routes. Citing the early results of Lawrence's program, The Boston Globe's editorial board wrote last week that Boston should follow suit and at least try making a few local bus routes free.

However, Walsh said that such an effort would be far more expensive than the \$225,000 cost of Lawrence's pilot.

"In Boston, how do you pay for it? Who pays for it? That's my concern," he told WGBH. "My concern is if you're taking the bus system off the line, I've heard figures — it's in the ten of millions of dollars. I've heard one figure as high as \$100 million a year to run this."

As the Globe recently reported, the Livable Streets Alliance estimated that making MBTA buses free could cost as little as \$36 million a year. The Boston-area transit advocacy group also reportedly estimates that making public buses free across Massachusetts could be covered by a 2-cent increase in the state's gas tax (Walsh, for his part, supports a 15-cent increase in the tax).

Still, the cost question isn't just how much, but also who pays, as Walsh repeatedly emphasized. According to the Globe, state officials are wary of devoting resources to lowering fares, as the MBTA focuses on improving and expanding service.

In Lawrence, Mayor Dan Rivera tapped into a \$15 million municipal budget reserve to pay for the free bus program. Walsh said Friday that his administration is at least "looking into" what it would cost in Boston.

"We're going to do that now, because we want to find out," he said. "But that's an expense that the T today can't afford."

Walsh noted that some European cities — from Dunkirk, France to Tallinn, Estonia — had eliminated fares for all public transit. Boston City Councilor Michelle Wu, who some speculate could challenge Walsh in next year's mayoral race, has called for the MBTA to do the same.

"If we could come up with free public transit, that's the way to go," Walsh said Friday, before reiterating his concerns about funding.

"We have to have that conversation," he said. "It's easy to throw ideas out there. But when you put ideas out there, we have to back it up with how do we actually pay for it. And that's going to be the key point to this."