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Cash-strapped MBTA could be hit hard by service cuts

By [Adam Vaccaro](#) Globe Staff, Updated October 5, 2020, 11:10 a.m.



The 110 MBTA bus on Chelsea Street in Everett. Jim Davis/Globe Staff

Facing a financial crisis, Massachusetts Bay Transportation Authority officials are planning wide-ranging service cuts that could reach \$255 million and impact the entire transit system, a prospect that public transportation advocates say could be devastating.

MBTA officials have warned for weeks that they are preparing major spending cuts, but new details presented to the agency's governing board on Monday indicate the agency could cut service on all modes of transportation.

The potential reductions reflect the competing pressures the MBTA has navigated since the system largely emptied out at the start of the pandemic. On the one hand, ridership remains low on the commuter rail and subway, as well as some buses, causing a steep drop in fare revenue,

and [federal assistance](#) that has so far staved off cutbacks is expected to expire by next summer. Meanwhile, some services, especially popular bus routes, have maintained much higher rates of their prepandemic ridership, [providing lifelines](#) for essential workers and low-income riders.

Transit officials have said they want to maintain service on busier routes where riders are most dependent on transit: communities of color, low-income areas, and routes where fewer people own cars.

That would include all subway lines, the Mattapan trolley, about two-thirds of MBTA bus service, the Charlestown ferry, and the Fairmount commuter line.

Focusing on these parts of the system could permit social distancing on the most popular routes, and improve the fairness of a transit system that has long seen Black riders endure long delays on buses. But even these services could see reductions. For example, subway trains may run less frequently, and end earlier each night.

Other less-used parts of the system could see much greater reductions or even elimination of service. Parts of the commuter rail could see trains stop running at 9 p.m., midday and weekend trains could be eliminated, and stations could be closed.

Transportation interest groups were alarmed by the scope of the possible changes.

“We are beginning to experience a transportation catastrophe,” said Staci Rubin, a senior attorney with the Conservation Law Foundation.

The MBTA expects to finalize its plan in December, and the changes would likely go into effect next spring and summer.

Joseph Aiello, the chairman of the T’s board, said officials must consider the need to reduce crowding during the pandemic. One option would be to keep some trains or buses on standby to add service if the system gets too crowded, he said.

Cutting service now could allow the agency to rebuild the system more efficiently, focusing on where buses and trains would be best utilized, officials said.

But the cuts wouldn’t necessarily be short term. “Once implemented, it could take months to years to re-add service depending on mode, scale of reductions, actions taken, and financial certainty,” the presentation to the board stated.

Cuts that extend beyond the pandemic could stifle economic growth and cause a return to the heavy traffic congestion that has long plagued the area, some advocates said.

“Is it a cut, or an amputation?” asked Mela Miles, director of the T Riders Union.

While the MBTA has said it could seek up to a quarter-billion dollars in cuts, or more than 10 percent of the agency’s budget, officials have said they’ll also consider packages that total \$150

million or \$60 million, depending on how the system's finances evolve. Fare revenue in July and August outpaced projections from earlier in the pandemic.

The T is planning to shift some funds from long-term construction projects to plug the operating budget gap. But the agency would likely be forced to pause some of these projects in the coming years.

The T has also said some bus service could be cut if it's within a reasonably close walk to another transit route. South Shore ferry service could also be reduced or eliminated, with riders directed to nearby commuter rail lines.

Miles worried some riders may go overlooked if the T's approach is purely driven by numbers. Buses in more distant suburbs, for example, may have low ridership now, but that only emphasizes the lack of alternatives for riders still onboard, she said.

"There are people who live outside Boston who were forced out due to gentrification," Miles said. "I'm concerned about them."

The commuter rail, which mainly serves office workers who have been working from home for months, has seen ridership rebound slower than the bus or subway. Its cuts could vary line by line or even station by station.

Commuter rail is run by the private company Keolis, but the MBTA can reduce its payments if Keolis runs less service. There is no set per-train fee; under the contract, the MBTA and Keolis must agree on a price based on the costs of operating the service, according to the contract.

Keolis does not seem eager to reduce service, saying in an e-mail that it will be important to maintain service levels to ensure social distance during the pandemic and grow ridership in the future.

Marc Draisen, director of the Metropolitan Area Planning Council, a regional agency, said commuter rail cutbacks must be reversed after the pandemic to entice riders back.

"The last thing we want to do is tell those folks, 'You should go out and buy another car,'" he said.

But it's difficult to match service levels to long-term ridership, because it is unclear how people will travel once the pandemic is over, said Monica Tibbits-Nutt, a member of the T's board.

"We're focusing on the services we need now," she said.

There is still an outside chance Congress could ease some of the budget crunch. House Democrats have already passed legislation that includes \$32 billion in funding that transit agencies, [including the MBTA](#), say would prevent deep cuts and layoffs, though negotiations with the White House have been rocky.

Stacy Thompson, director of the Livable Streets Alliance in Boston, said the MBTA also should be pressing the state Legislature for more assistance.

“I just wish they were significantly more explicit about how bad it is,” Thompson said. “It’s really hard for the public to grasp just how truly catastrophic a level of service cuts we could have.”