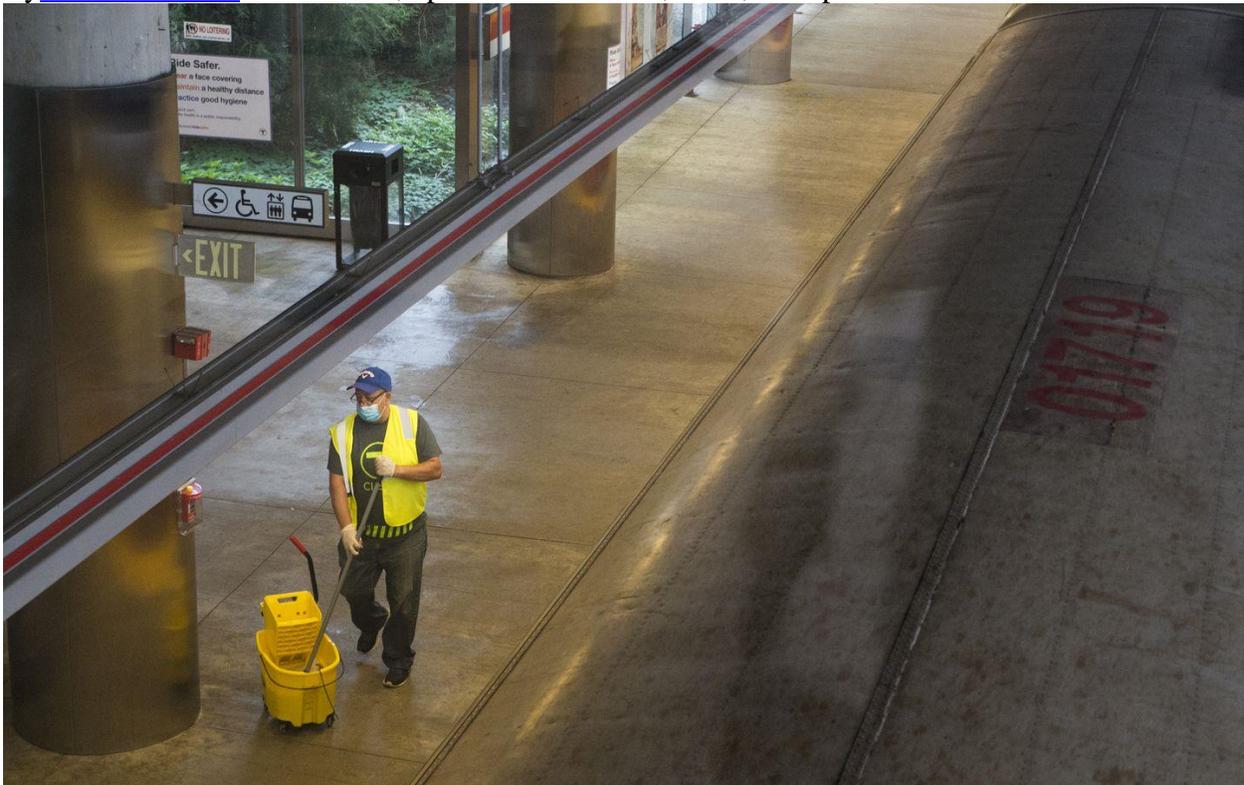


The Boston Globe

Subway trains every 10 minutes? Even ‘essential’ MBTA services could see significant cuts

The T is trying to balance service levels to avoid overcrowding while facing as much as a \$600 million budget shortfall.

By [Adam Vaccaro](#) Globe Staff, Updated October 10, 2020, 2:33 p.m.



Ashmont Station on the Red Line, where transit service could be cut amid MBTA budget shortfalls. Blake Nissen for the Boston Globe

Reeling from a steep drop in fare revenue, the Massachusetts Bay Transportation Authority is trying to find a balance between service cuts of up to a [quarter-billion dollars](#) while preserving routes that have proven most crucial during the pandemic.

The math, though, may be too much for the agency to overcome, as even some of these bus and rail services could see dramatic cutbacks.

It's possible, for example, that subway trains during rush hour could run as infrequently as every 10 minutes, instead of every 5 minutes or so. That would reduce service on Boston's expansive transit system to levels more common on smaller systems, such as those in Cleveland and Baltimore.

Boston isn't alone. Transit agencies across the country are bracing for cuts as the chances of a federal bailout for transit systems grow remote and President Trump vacillates wildly over negotiating with House Democrats on a stimulus package.

At the MBTA, officials expect to make decisions on new service levels in December as the agency grapples with an upcoming budget gap that could be as high as \$600 million. Riders would likely begin to see any changes next spring.

The T has said it will prioritize service on the subway, along with most bus routes, the Fairmount commuter line, and the Charlestown ferry. The T considers these parts of the system "essential" because they have either maintained higher ridership throughout the pandemic or are more likely to see ridership bounce back in the coming months, and [serve riders who rely the most on public transit](#).

But that doesn't mean those routes and lines will continue to run at the same level as now. Instead, the agency has promised it will keep these services "at or above" minimum frequencies outlined in an agency policy that, in many cases, the T already exceeds.

In other words, preserving these services may really just mean they get hit less than everything else.

"We don't want to see the T under a death spiral of reduced service, higher fares, and lower ridership, meaning even less service . . . and it essentially implodes," said Chris Dempsey, director of Transportation for Massachusetts. "It's really hard to contemplate how anybody thinks Massachusetts is going to work if we let the T fail, and we should be very careful about taking steps that let it happen. Those of us following it are afraid that is possible."

Take the subway system, where on paper, the policy is to run trains every 10 minutes during rush hour and every 15 minutes off-peak. But in practice the T runs rush hour trains every five to six minutes. If it were to simply revert to the minimum as outlined in its policy, that could as much as double the time between trains at a given time.

Some bus routes also run well above their minimum frequencies as outlined in T policy. Though it differs by route, at their most some buses are required to run every 10 minutes during rush hour, while others are every half-hour.

The forecast for parts of the system that are not labeled essential is even darker: Some bus routes could see service levels below the policy, or be outright eliminated. The Hingham ferry is also on

the chopping block, as is weekend and midday service on parts of the commuter rail. Some commuter rail stations could even be closed.

These are parts of the system, particularly the commuter rail, that have had much lower ridership during the pandemic, likely because many riders are office workers who have been able to work from home.

The cuts will also likely unfold as T officials continue to manage through the virus, a strategy that has so far focused on running trains and buses often enough to avoid crowding and [ensure riders have enough social distance onboard](#).

Joseph Aiello, chairman of the T's oversight board, said the agency must keep those needs in mind as it develops new schedules.

“While we have the freedom to go to 10 minutes or 15 minutes, we also have to know what that does with respect to the social distancing element,” he said at a recent public meeting.

Transportation Secretary Stephanie Pollack agreed, but said the T could afford to cut service levels on the subway even if its current ridership — still well below prepandemic levels — recovers to about half its normal load.

T officials have said they will adjust schedules route by route, depending on ridership, time of day, and even location. For example, the MBTA could run more service on the Blue Line, which has seen ridership return more quickly than other parts of the subway.

Maria Belen Power, deputy director of the Chelsea nonprofit GreenRoots, said every route will need careful consideration, arguing that any lost service on [popular lines such as the 111 bus](#) could be devastating.

“We’ve always been concerned about overcrowding, and the 111 being one of the most overcrowded buses in the entire system,” she said. “That has an entirely different meaning now with COVID, and you apply that to all the buses that are going to be cut.”

There is some possibility the pandemic will be nearing its end or an effective vaccine will be in use by the time the cuts go fully into effect next summer, mitigating health concerns over crowded vehicles.

But in that case, the reduced level of service could stymie efforts to get the economy fully back, with frequencies far below what riders were used to before the crisis, said Stacy Thompson of the Livable Streets Alliance, a transit advocacy group.

“You’re basically setting up a scenario where you potentially have a vaccine, you have a low enough rate [of transmission] that employers are asking employees to come back to the office at a time when we cut service,” she said.