

MBTA Cuts Threaten Vital Transformation Efforts

Legislature Must Step Up with New Resources

By Stacy Thompson | Special to Banker & Tradesman | Nov 8, 2020 | [Reprints](#) | [Print](#)



Stacy Thompson

Since March the MBTA has served as a critical lifeline, allowing essential workers to get to and from their jobs and enabling thousands of people to access health care, grocery stores and economic opportunities – it has kept the economy moving, even as many people continue to stay home.

However, the MBTA is facing a \$300 million to \$600 million shortfall in the fiscal year that begins July 1, 2021. This means that we could be facing catastrophic service cuts and years-long delays in planned capital projects beginning the summer of 2021 – exactly when we hope we’ll be moving beyond COVID and getting our economy back on track.

July may seem like a long way off, but MBTA officials have stated that they plan to make decisions about service cuts in early December, just a month from now. And these proposed service cuts will not be temporary cuts that might take place for a few weeks or months while ridership is low – these cuts will have long term and wide-ranging impacts.

During a recent [presentation](#), MBTA officials stated that once these cuts are made “it could take months to years to re-add service depending on mode, scale of reductions, actions taken and financial certainty ... changes will be permanent.”

In addition to reducing or eliminating service, the [MBTA also plans to reallocate up to \\$150 million in capital funds to mitigate the operating budget shortfall](#). In order to shift funding from

the capital to operating budget, the MBTA will need to identify an equivalent amount of currently funded capital projects to stop, slow or scale down.

Stalling vital projects like the Better Bus Project – the effort to redesign the agency’s bedrock network for a low-car future – Rail Vision and Regional Rail – a plan to bring trains with subway-like frequency to many suburbs – won’t solve the MBTA’s short-term budget shortfall. Continuing to invest in these important initiatives will help build a 21st-century transit system – and aid our economic recovery. This is why more than [30 organizations](#) have banded together to call on the MBTA to delay making any permanent decisions before the end of the year and to call on the legislature to step up with additional resources for the MBTA and transit statewide.

Long before the pandemic, our transit systems were chronically underfunded. The MBTA needs immediate support – but it also needs more than a short-term fix. There is also continued uncertainty around how and when ridership will return, what that ridership will look like, and what financial resources, if any, will be available from the federal government in 2021. For the foreseeable future, the MBTA should continue to run increased service that allows for physical distancing with operational flexibility where it is most needed – and the legislature should ensure the MBTA has the resources it needs.

We don’t know what the future will hold, but we do know that we need the T. The legislature and the MBTA must support recovery today, be prepared for the return of riders in 2021, and be there for all residents of the commonwealth when we return to the robust, dynamic state we had pre-pandemic.

Stacy Thompson is the executive director of the LivableStreets Alliance.