

# The Boston Globe

## Cash-strapped MBTA details planned service cuts, would take effect next year

By [Adam Vaccaro](#) Globe Staff, Updated November 9, 2020, 12:59 p.m.



Under the MBTA's plan, commuter rail would no longer operate on weekends and would stop at 9 p.m. on other days. Lane Turner/Globe Staff

The commuter rail would stop running at 9 p.m., ferry service would go on indefinite hiatus, a smattering of bus routes would be eliminated, and subway trains would run less frequently under a new MBTA plan to scale back service during the coronavirus pandemic.

With ridership and fare revenue buckled by the virus and its economic disruptions, the Massachusetts Bay Transportation Authority's proposed slate of service cuts would save \$142 million by summer 2022.

"This is obviously something we don't want to do, but we have to do right now as a means of addressing a significant budget gap," MBTA general manager Steve Pofatak told reporters Monday.

Released shortly after news broke that Pfizer Inc.'s coronavirus vaccine has shown [promising trial results](#), the budget-cutting plan raised the possibility that transit service will be curbed just as the region eyes a return to commuting normalcy — though even with a vaccine, travel and work habits may remain locked in place for many months. It's a scenario [playing out across the](#)

[country](#), as cash-strapped transit systems call on the federal government for aid in a coronavirus relief package to offset dwindling revenue.

The MBTA's plan will [go out for public comment](#) over the next month, before the agency's oversight board votes in December. If approved, the cuts would take effect between spring and summer.

Transit ridership collapsed at the beginning of the pandemic and remains far below normal levels. Commuter rail and ferry ridership is down around 90 percent, subway trips are down about 75 percent, and bus rides are down about 60 percent, [though rates vary from line to line](#).

MBTA officials say they took a data-driven approach in determining where to cut service, focusing on routes and times of day when ridership has been low. The goal is to maintain service on parts of the system that have remained in heavier use, such as bus routes in lower-income areas and communities of color.

But the prospect of cutbacks is stirring opposition from riders, advocates, elected officials, and other stakeholders across the region. At an event protesting the cuts Monday, Stacy Thompson, director of the Livable Streets Alliance advocacy group, said those still using the low-ridership services are the riders who need public transit the most.

"They say, 'We'll cut the service no one is riding,'" Thompson said. "Well, the one or two people on that bus are going to homes to make sure your children are being cared for, or are going to the hospital to make sure you are being cared for."

Mayor Martin J. Walsh, in a Twitter post Monday evening, said the planned cuts "will impact us all, and will disproportionately hurt Greater Boston residents & workforce who depend on public transportation, including neighborhoods that are home to the highest populations of people of color and immigrants."

The plan includes several major changes:

- Bus and subway service would end at midnight each night, up to an hour earlier than usual.
- Subway frequency would decline about 20 percent, adding about a minute or two between arrivals, Poftak said.
- The most frequent bus lines would see availability reduced by an average of 5 percent, though that would vary from route by route. The busiest routes might see no cuts, but less popular routes could see greater reductions.
- A number of bus routes with lower ridership or other nearby transit options would be consolidated or shortened, and 25 would be eliminated, including some in suburbs such as Dedham, Melrose, and Beverly.
- Trolleys on the Green Line's E branch would end service at Brigham Circle rather than continuing to Heath Street.
- All ferry service between downtown Boston and Hingham, Hull, and Charlestown would stop operating as soon as March.

- Commuter rail service would no longer operate on weekends, [a proposal that was floated a few years ago](#) during a previous budget crisis but was quickly rescinded after public opposition.
- Six commuter rail stops with especially low ridership during the pandemic would be closed: Plymouth Station, Plimptonville Station in Walpole, Cedar Park Station in Melrose, Prides Crossing in Beverly, Silver Hill and Hastings stations in Weston.

Information about specific routes is available online at [mbta.com/forging-ahead](http://mbta.com/forging-ahead).

Overall, the MBTA would maintain about 85 percent of normal bus service, 70 percent of subway service, and 65 percent of commuter rail service. Even accounting for riders' social distancing needs, it's a reasonable level of service given the sharp ridership declines, Poftak said.

“We will be operating 70 percent of pre-COVID service hours on a system that ... is carrying anywhere between 20 percent and 37 percent of customers,” Poftak said of the subway.

Poftak said the service cuts would likely result in job losses, though their extent was not clear. The MBTA is not planning to raise fares.

Public transportation advocates are calling for the MBTA to delay the plan, noting that the federal or state government could provide funding to help offset the lost fare revenue. An amendment filed in the state House of Representatives' latest budget proposal, for example, would provide the MBTA with an additional \$300 million or so compared to past years, though it's unclear whether that will be approved. And a newly elected president and Congress could open an opportunity for a new federal stimulus package that might include transit funding.

“As you all know, the political situation is quite dynamic and at the moment looks more promising than it did a month ago,” said Jarred Johnson, director of the local group Transit Matters.

Service cuts are among several maneuvers the MBTA is considering to address its budget gap, which could surpass \$575 million depending on ridership trends in the coming months. The agency is planning to use money that is [usually reserved for long-term improvement projects](#), which officials on Monday said could delay the purchase of commuter rail cars and station improvements in Winchester and South Attleborough. Major ongoing projects, such as [the Green Line extension](#) and delivery of [new Red and Orange line trains](#), won't be delayed.

The MBTA's financial performance was better than expected between July and September, possibly mitigating the worst budgetary projections.

The planned service cuts underscore the pandemic's effect in a region that, until March, was clamoring for more public transit — a push that could resume if and when transit ridership and auto traffic return to normal.

Reducing service next spring could slow an economic recovery if a vaccine were to become widely available next year, said Eric Bourassa, transportation director for the Metropolitan Area Planning Council, a regional agency.

“If you do make these cuts, it will be harder to bring that service back quickly,” he said. “There would be an increase in demand for public transit if the coronavirus isn’t such a threat, and I think the fear is that the T isn’t nimble enough to bring it back quickly.”

On Monday, officials said the cuts would not be permanent, and service could be restored as ridership grows and funding becomes available. But even a quick infusion of federal funds would not necessarily stave off the cuts, because it may be more prudent to wait for demand for transit service to return, they said.

“The question is, if you got the federal package this spring but were still seeing 25 or 30 percent of the pre-COVID ridership, whether it would make sense to immediately add service or whether it would make sense to hold onto those federal dollars until we need it for more ridership,” said Stephanie Pollack, the state’s transportation secretary.