



MBTA plans to eliminate 25 bus routes, ferry service

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All weekend commuter rail service, 25 bus routes, ferry service, any rapid transit after midnight, and far more would be eliminated next year under a package of service cuts that MBTA officials will propose Monday.

Pressed into a difficult and unpopular decision by the evaporation of ridership and fare revenue during the pandemic, T leaders will unveil a [formal package](#) after extensive deliberation and kick off a month-long public comment period.

Altogether, their plan would shave roughly \$130 million from spending on service, trimming current offerings by about 15 percent on buses, 30 percent on subways and 35 percent on commuter rail.

The steepest cuts are aimed at routes that have seen the lowest use during the pandemic and where commuters can access alternative forms of transportation, but the vast majority of the public transit network — which, before the public health crisis, hosted more than 1.1 million rides a day — would feel some impacts.

While officials said they will monitor commuting trends and crowding and alter levels accordingly, the changes are likely to remain in place for years after taking effect next spring and summer.

The plan will also result in layoffs, though their scope and timing remains unclear. Fare hikes are not currently under consideration.

“This is a big and difficult day for the MBTA,” T General Manager Steve Poftak said on a call outlining the proposal. “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.”

The agency’s Fiscal and Management Control Board, which could amend the plans, is set to vote on the service reductions on Dec. 7.

All of the T’s core subway lines would run 20 percent less frequently during peak hours and 40 percent less frequently when off-peak under the proposal. The Green Line’s E Branch would also stop running trolleys at the Brigham Circle stop in the Mission Hill neighborhood, replacing the final five stops with bus service.

Both subway and bus service would also stop at midnight, no longer running beyond that point until the start of service the next day.

The proposed changes to the bus network, which has had the highest level of pre-pandemic ridership and serves a significant portion of commuters deemed “essential workers,” vary significantly by route.

Essential bus routes would see an average reduction in frequency of about 5 percent, while non-essential routes would cut trips by an average of 20 percent.

The T would eliminate 25 of its 169 bus routes, seven of which are within a quarter-mile of another route or subway, six of which have transit-critical riders but low ridership, and 12 of which have exhibited low demand and serve less dependent populations, officials said.

Another 14 routes would be consolidated and five would be shortened. Officials also proposed eliminating the suburban subsidy program partially funding additional service in Bedford, Beverly, Burlington, Lexington and Mission Hill, plus hiking fares on about 1 percent of trips using the RIDE paratransit service.

On the commuter rail network, T leaders will suggest cutting more than a third of pre-COVID service, largely by shutting the system down on weekends and after 9 p.m. on weekdays. The exception would be the Fairmount Line, which would be replaced by buses on the weekend and close up to an hour later than other lines during the week.

Weekday service at both the peak and midday would be trimmed, too, with the T cutting the number of trains per day from 505 to 430.

The MBTA’s ferries would all cease completely if the plan is implemented.

“We are very aware of how anxiety-producing the conversation about service adjustments is, but we’re confident that making the changes now to avoid spending money on service that people are not using is the best prescription we have for having the money we need to run fuller service when our riders come back, whenever that may be,” said Transportation Secretary Stephanie Pollack.

The T had faced significant financial pressure before the pandemic struck, but [like many other](#) transit agencies across the country, it is now staring down an outright budget crisis.

Ridership across all forms of transit dropped sharply in the spring when businesses were ordered to close and most public activity screeched to a halt. Nearly eight months into the state of emergency, only a small chunk of pre-pandemic crowds — an average of about 40 percent on buses, 25 percent on subways, and 13 percent on the commuter rail — has returned.

Those declines punched an enormous hole into fare revenue, which typically makes up about a third of the agency’s budget. Officials now expect they will face a \$579 million gap in fiscal year 2022, landing on the most pessimistic end of earlier estimates.

Subsequent years will also likely have shortfalls of hundreds of millions of dollars, though the specific amounts depend on difficult-to-forecast health and commuting trends. Under Department of Transportation planning scenarios, pre-COVID ridership is unlikely to return for several years.

Officials prepared a menu of service packages that the agency could choose to reintroduce, such as weekend commuter rail service or subway frequency, when it finds itself on stable footing.

Poftak stressed, however, that he wants to wait until revenues are “durable” to add onto service, effectively ruling out the chance that a new round of onetime federal stimulus funding could stave off the imminent cuts.

The T already exhausted about \$827 million from the CARES Act to close gaps in fiscal years 2020 and 2021.

“I want to avoid a situation where we make an FY22 problem go away and we all gather back here again for FY23 having to make a similar set of difficult choices,” Poftak said. “If there is indeed a second round of funding, my mildly educated guess is that there wouldn’t be a third one and we surely wouldn’t want to plan for a third one.”

Transportation activists already launched a vocal “Transit is Essential” opposition campaign, gathering Monday ahead of the board meeting to protest service cuts as unfair to low-income riders and as damaging to the state’s attempts to rein in greenhouse gas emissions.

In a press release, they joined with business and union leaders to warn that cutting T service will hinder the state’s economic recovery and pose risks to commuters who depend on it.

“A reliable public transportation system is essential to keeping businesses operating safely, efficiently, and profitably during and after the pandemic,” Chenelle Brown, director of government affairs at CMBG3 Law and a member of the Alliance for Business Leadership’s Board of Directors, said. “We cannot allow public transportation, the lifeline of Greater Boston, to become a casualty of COVID-19. Pulling the rug out from under the MBTA now will put us further behind in meeting the long-term infrastructure and service improvement goals that are key to making Massachusetts a desirable and affordable place to do business.”

Last month, a coalition of 30 groups [urged lawmakers](#) to revive a roughly half billion-dollar package of transportation tax and fee increases the House approved right before the state of emergency began and use the funding to support the T.