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The T may get millions from Congress. Will service still be cut?

By [Adam Vaccaro](#) Globe Staff, Updated December 27, 2020, 4:41 p.m.



Reduced service could be difficult to restore promptly because of complexities involved in scheduling so many different routes, which usually takes place months in advance, transit advocates have argued. Lane Turner/Globe Staff/file

The new federal coronavirus relief bill includes \$14 billion to help transit systems fill huge gaps in fare revenue, a lifeline to agencies planning service cuts because of the financial crisis brought on by the pandemic.

But don't expect to see that money at work at the MBTA just yet.

Just a few days after joining a nationwide lobbying campaign urging Congress to approve aid for public transit, Massachusetts Bay Transportation Authority officials indicated yet again they do not plan to use the money to immediately reverse service reductions planned for early 2021.

[Instead, officials have said](#) they plan to bank any new federal aid as a sort of savings account, using it to restore service when the public health crisis subsides, the economy revs up, and ridership returns.

Agency officials affirmed last week that, as they review the terms of the congressional bill, they are proceeding with service reductions scheduled to take effect mostly from January to March. The MBTA would probably receive at least \$250 million — far more than the savings expected from cutting service.

The agency has presented a shifting and at times confusing rationale as it developed the service cuts over the past several months. [At first](#), officials argued the reductions were a necessary budgetary measure in the face of a massive fiscal deficit; later, [officials cast the cuts](#) as primarily in response to the deep drop-off in ridership, which remains at about a quarter of pre-pandemic levels.

A coalition of transportation, environmental, and business groups said the funding approved by Congress would negate the need for cutting service and called on the MBTA's oversight board to rescind the plan.

“Relief funds provided by Congress will allow the MBTA to stave off cuts that would be devastating for frontline workers and others that rely on transit,” the coalition, called Transit Is Essential, said in a statement.

It had been unclear through the weekend if the MBTA and other transit agencies would even receive the money. After Congress passed the measure a week ago, President Trump raised objections, including calling for larger checks to individuals, before finally signing the bill Sunday night.

[The MBTA service changes](#), meanwhile, are aimed at preserving transit levels on routes that have higher ridership during the pandemic, such as parts of the bus system, while reducing frequency on lower-ridership buses and most of the subway. Most commuter rail lines will lose weekend service, as well, and ferry service will be sharply reduced.

The MBTA said these cuts are a short-term measure for the remainder of the fiscal year, which ends June 30. The federal funding, then, may play a greater role in planning for the second half of the 2021 calendar year.

The T would say only that the use of federal funds is likely to be discussed at a meeting of its oversight board in January. The Massachusetts Department of Transportation is also expected to receive a separate block of money from the bill, and plans to publicly review its use next month.

General manager Steve Poftak has previously said that the MBTA postponed decisions about long-term service levels in part because of the uncertainty about federal aid. The implication was that the T may take dramatically different steps in its next fiscal year depending on whether it received aid, and how much. The MBTA has also previously said federal funds could be used to “restore some service sooner than anticipated” or to invest in system improvements.

It's not clear how much money the MBTA would receive because it depends on a complex formula, but industry analysts estimate \$250 million to \$300 million.

The MBTA has not put an exact figure on the expected savings from the short-term reductions. The figure may depend on whether drivers and operators are laid off — a decision that has not yet been made, spokesman Joe Pesaturo said.

Labor costs would account for most of the savings in any service cut. But layoffs would also hinder the T's ability to quickly bring back service; officials have suggested it could take months, if not years, to restore parts of the system if workers must be hired and trained.

Even without layoffs, reduced service could be difficult to restore promptly because of complexities involved in scheduling so many routes, which usually takes place months in advance. Some MBTA board members have said they are hopeful that process could be expedited in recovering from the pandemic.

Jim Evers, president of the Boston Carmen's Union, which represents drivers and operators, argued the T is making a penny-wise, pound-foolish decision.

“Cutting the routes adds costs, because of the expenses of rehiring and retraining,” Evers said, adding that federal funding “is one more reason to delay these premature cuts.”

And Stacy Thompson, executive director of the transit advocacy organization Livable Streets Alliance, said the MBTA is essentially choosing between cost savings and the ability to quickly restore service. The service cuts “really put us at risk of not having flexibility or increasing service when we need it.”