

A New York Subway car is seen in New York City. (Photo by ANGELA WEISS/AFP via Getty Images)

Michelle Wu  
Jan 07, 2021

# PUBLIC TRANSPORTATION SHOULD BE FREE

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The COVID-19 pandemic has made it impossible for us to ignore this any longer.

Public transportation is a public good. When transit is the most reliable, convenient, and affordable option, everyone benefits—transit riders pursuing economic opportunity across town, drivers enjoying unclogged streets, and city residents breathing cleaner air. And in cities like Boston, where deep racial inequities are embedded in geographic segregation across our neighborhoods, public transportation is the foundation for economic and racial justice.

But our nation has historically neglected public transportation systems, with inadequate funding leaving low-income communities, people of color, and those living with disabilities without the dependable transportation they need. Every year in Boston, Black bus riders spend 64 more hours on average on stalled buses compared to white passengers, choking off opportunities related to education, employment, personal development, and civic engagement. And these transit inequities are exacerbating environmental injustices, accelerating the climate crisis and disproportionately burdening communities of color with dangerous levels of particulate matter from tailpipe emissions.

The COVID-19 pandemic has made it impossible for us to ignore this problem any longer. Our nation's public transit is in crisis. To secure an equitable post-pandemic recovery, we must take meaningful steps toward a fare-free transit system.

Since the start of the pandemic, transit ridership across the country decreased by nearly 70%. This decline in ridership has created a steep financial shortfall for jurisdictions that rely on fare revenue to support their operating budgets. Lower ridership and a general economic downturn have devastated the common financial support systems upon which transportation authorities depend. In Massachusetts, fares from bus and subway riders contribute only 20% of the Massachusetts Bay Transportation Authority's revenue. Even so, when ridership decreases, budgets soon follow. Earlier this month, the MBTA board approved a package of massive service cuts, including a 20% reduction in subway service and the elimination of evening and weekend commuter rail service system-wide. These changes could result in more than 125,000 people across Greater Boston losing access to high-frequency transit, with a ripple effect on the businesses losing employees who no longer have a way to get to work.

Boston is not alone. Across the nation, cities have begun making significant cuts in service, reducing weekend and late night service, closing stations, and eliminating bus routes. In Washington, more than 20% of bus routes will be suspended. In Atlanta, more than 60% of bus routes have already closed. New York, the country's largest transit system, may slash more than 40% of its service.

Compounding pre-existing transit inequities, this year's service cuts have disproportionately harmed Black and brown communities. In a TransitCenter study, researchers found that service cuts in 9 major cities would result in more than two million people losing access to frequent full-day transit. More than half of those stranded would be people of color. These service cuts are particularly short-sighted when we consider that essential workers, the majority of whom are people of color, disproportionately rely on transit to get to their jobs. In Boston and around the country, health care providers, hospital workers, and others on the frontlines of the pandemic will find themselves with longer commutes and skeletal options.

It doesn't have to be this way. During this unprecedented crisis, our federal government must allocate enough funding to support and sustain transit agencies and ensure that every person in our community has access to reliable transportation. That is why I joined Representative Ayanna Pressley and Senator Ed Markey in support of the federal Freedom to Move Act, which would invest in the public transportation system critical to low-income communities and people of color and incentivize state and local systems like the MBTA to offer fare-free transit.

The momentum toward fare-free transit is already underway. Nearly 100 cities around the world have abandoned user fees in favor of alternative funding streams that remove financial barriers for public transit riders—including a growing number of cities in the U.S. Last December, Kansas City became the first major American city to have fare-free public transit. Around the same time, Lawrence, Massachusetts did away with bus fares on three downtown routes popular with low-income residents—and saw a 20% increase in ridership as a result. This past summer, the Los Angeles Metro Rail—where fares account for only 13% of the transit system's operating budget—rolled out an initiative to study the possibility of eliminating all rider fares. And right here in Boston, we've been pushing for fare-free transit to promote economic mobility, racial equity, and climate justice, already securing free MBTA passes for all 7th to 12th graders in Boston Public Schools.

Cities need the support of our partners at the federal level to pursue transit justice, but unfortunately, the recent Congressional proposal for pandemic relief only allocates \$15 billion for public transit agencies—less than half of what the American Public Transportation Association says is necessary just to ensure that public transit agencies can survive. Meanwhile, the Republican alternate includes zero funding for public transit. Neither option gets us anywhere near the future we need to ensure every person has access to safe, reliable and affordable transportation.

President-elect Joe Biden recently announced his intention to nominate Pete Buttigieg to lead the US Department of Transportation. Mr. Buttigieg would be stepping into this role at a time of tremendous precarity. But this critical time also presents an opportunity for bold and courageous leadership—an opportunity to meaningfully acknowledge the crucial role that public transit plays in our lives. As we enter a new year and a new administration, we must continue to advocate for federally funded zero-fare transit systems across the country, building a foundation for public health, shared prosperity, and justice for all.

*Michelle Wu is member of the Boston City Council and a candidate for the Mayor of Boston. ■*

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OPINION

# Business as usual is hurting Boston

The city's outdated zoning code must be updated to make the development approvals process transparent, accountable, and equitable.

By Michelle Wu Updated September 2, 2020, 3:00 a.m.



Boston City Hall. PAT GREENHOUSE/GLOBE STAFF

When it comes to fighting for progress in Boston, there's a long history of people in power trying to label advocacy and hard work as being political in order to avoid accountability and distract from community demands for better leadership.

The Boston City Council recently [voted to exercise our oversight authority to reshape the Zoning Board of Appeal for the better](#). This action has been criticized as being "about politics" and "pointless obstructionism." But the misleading dismissals distract from necessary policy conversations about [how business as usual harms our city](#). With a system characterized by broken promises, insider deals, and bribery and corruption charges, it's Boston's development approvals process that is [political through and through](#).

Boston's outdated zoning code [hasn't been comprehensively updated since it was written, in 1965](#). As such, nearly every new construction project requires multiple waivers for zoning violations from the zoning board. Just [within the last year, the board granted 900 variances](#) from the height, density, open space, and other land-use restrictions of the zoning code, and in recent years has [approved more than 95 percent of variance requests](#) on the agenda. The largest projects go through the Boston Planning and Development Agency so as to bypass zoning altogether.

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The ZBA and BPDA create tremendous profit for those who know how to secure special development approvals or have the financial resources to hire a well-connected team to guide them through the complicated and sometimes arbitrary process. Each exception and waiver to the zoning code also contributes to configuring displacement, climate vulnerability, and traffic congestion across the region. Without consistent rules or accountability, the status quo of development in Boston [continues to exacerbate racial and economic disparities across our neighborhoods](#).

In the past 12 months, Boston's development process has been at the center of a [federal corruption investigation implicating the zoning board](#). In the meantime, developers have been [released from commitments to finance affordable housing in Chinatown](#), originally made in [exchange for the sale of public land downtown](#) to build a luxury tower without any onsite affordable units. Longstanding promises for parks and civic spaces in the Seaport District, established through years of planning meetings, have continued to evaporate. A [small pocket community in Mattapan has been devastated](#) as connected developers have used questionable technicalities to secure permits with no recourse from city agencies. East Boston continues to face a [rush of new development that skirts affordability requirements](#), even as residents [struggle against ever greater forces of displacement](#) and [the highest coronavirus rates in the city](#).

But calls to delay structural changes and dismiss community concerns have been emboldened by unchecked inaccuracies and a false narrative — that a flood of homeowners seeking minor approvals for home improvement projects will be stuck without relief unless the City Council immediately votes to reinstate the status quo. In reality, the majority of variance requests are from for-profit developers and investors, not homeowners undertaking minor renovations. Some have deceptively [cited a backlog of requests](#) after COVID-related meeting cancellations, but the wildly inflated number includes hundreds of projects that have yet to go through community process and are not ready for ZBA consideration.

No one should face undue delay from city bureaucratic processes. But when the ZBA struggles to approve specific projects due to the frequency of board members [recusing themselves](#) for conflicts of interest, and with four sudden board member resignations in the last year, that adds urgency for change, not business as usual.

Aligning private development with community needs for equity and resiliency is one of the most powerful roles of city government. By setting clear and consistent land-use rules defined through community planning and codified into an updated zoning code, cities can shape development to advance affordability, health, resiliency, and opportunity in every neighborhood.

The pandemic has underscored that we can no longer afford business as usual. When we fall short of meeting community needs — for stable housing, safe streets, open space, reliable transportation, food access, a healthy environment — everyone faces greater vulnerability. More than ever, we need to plan better and take action to reshape systems.

We won't be deterred by attempts to block change through delay and fear-mongering. Boston must take every opportunity to move toward transparent, accountable, equitable development for public health and shared prosperity. That starts with using our votes and our voices to fight for a development approvals process that serves our communities.

Michelle Wu is a Boston city councilor.

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<b>BEN VOLIN   ON FOOTBALL</b> <b>It's just business between Patriots and Stephen Gilmore, plus a deeper dive on N'Keal Harry and Mac Jones</b> Gilmore believes he deserves a raise, but it appears the Patriots have not made a suitable offer yet. 	<b>THE GREAT DIVIDE</b> <b>'I have never seen a Black superintendent retire ... There's a systemic problem'</b> There's a lack of racial diversity among the state's educators, particularly superintendents of color whose numbers and tenure are low. Especially at a time of national racial awareness, education advocates are pushing to cut down on that disparity, saying it is critical for Black, Latino, and Asian students to see themselves reflected in their teachers and school leaders. 	<b>Group disrupts flight from Boston to Bahamas, refuses to wear masks</b> A group of more than 30 people who were traveling from Boston to the Bahamas refused to wear masks and became disruptive Monday when they were catching a connecting flight from Charlotte, North Carolina, American Airlines said. 
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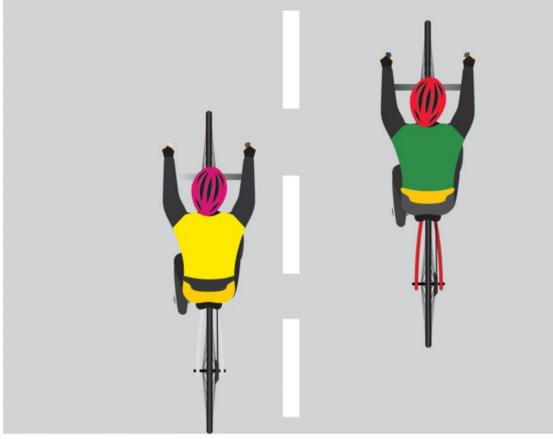
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OPINION | MICHELLE WU

# The road to fear-free biking in Boston

By Michelle Wu · July 11, 2016, 9:52 p.m.



SHUTTERSTOCK/GLOBE STAFF ILLUSTRATION

I DON'T OWN a bicycle. But I recently reclaimed my inner cyclist as part of the Boston Green Ribbon Commission's Climate Innovations study tour to Northern Europe. Our agenda included experiencing sustainable mobility with a bicycle tour of Copenhagen, voted world's best city for cyclists.

You might expect Cycling City to be a mecca of Lycra on wheels. But among the hundreds of riders on the road, no one looked like a Boston bicyclist, suited up for commuter battle.

Our tour guide, Niels, was helmet-less and dressed in a sharp blue suit. Spandex and gear, he explained, are for exercise cycling in the countryside. On the daily commute to work or school, the Danish take it easy, with relaxed, stress-free city cycling.

Stress-free city cycling? Never heard of it.

My head filled with flashbacks to the two previous bike tours I've joined in Boston: sweaty hands gripping handlebars where Massachusetts Avenue meets Columbia Road in a six-way intersection; silent prayers as cars zoomed by too close for comfort on River Street in Mattapan.

Crash fear is all too often justified in Greater Boston. In the first four months of 2016, 8 people were killed and 307 injured from crashes on Boston streets, up 20 percent compared to the same period in 2015. Last month, another fatal crash in Cambridge underscored the urgency of VisionZero and making our streets safe for all.

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Many of these crashes are entirely preventable with street design that puts a buffer between cars and bikes — called "protected bike lanes" or "cycle tracks." Separating cars from cyclists also makes pedestrians safer, with less sidewalk riding, slower vehicle speeds, shorter crossing distances, and safer intersections.

Pedaling through Copenhagen, I saw that safety is just the baseline benefit of world-class cycling infrastructure. When every street has bike lanes shielded from cars by a curb or median, cyclists ride without fear, and more people become cyclists: women, seniors, even kids riding alongside their parents. Safe infrastructure means cycling becomes an affordable transportation option open to all.

In Copenhagen, cyclists make up 45 percent of all commuters, and city planners have quantified the benefits. Adding up costs avoided by reducing traffic congestion, noise, crashes, wear and tear on infrastructure, and air pollution, they estimate 64 cents of net social gain from every mile traveled by bike instead of car. More residents getting regular exercise drives down health care costs by an estimated 61 cents per mile cycled.

But fitness and sustainability won't motivate commuters to abandon their cars. To get nonprofessional riders on bicycles, cities must make bike commutes safe and convenient. In Copenhagen, cycle tracks receive top priority for snow clearance, followed by pedestrian sidewalks, then car lanes. Every detail of street design accommodates cyclists, from separately timed bicycle signals to plentiful bike parking at train stations.

Boston's streets, on the other hand, are designed for conflict. Painted bike lanes function as space for double-parked delivery trucks, pushing cyclists into traffic. Posted signs and "sharrows" unrealistically ask drivers and cyclists to get along. The result is that only 1.9 percent of Boston commuters are willing to risk a bicycle trip — the bravest and most aggressive cyclists, who often provoke anxiety and rage in drivers.

We can do better.

Mayor Walsh and the Boston Transportation Department are leading a comprehensive effort to engage residents in planning our transportation future. We must reimagine our streets as spaces for all, not just cars.

For Boston, the urgency goes well beyond safety. Our continued economic growth depends on solving our transportation crunch. With a struggling public transit system that won't be expanding service anytime soon, already gridlocked roadways will have to absorb many of the more than hundred thousand additional commuters projected by 2030. Carving out space for protected bike lanes is the most cost-effective way to increase our transit capacity and move more people on our streets.

To be clear, building a seamless and convenient network of protected cycling infrastructure will require trade-offs. On many streets, adding a cycle track means narrowing or removing car lanes, or eliminating on-street parking — scenarios that bring panic to car and business owners. Although research suggests that retail sales actually increase after switching parking for protected bike lanes, the proposals rarely see support from abutters. Yet we must acknowledge that our current transportation situation isn't working for all residents, and it will worsen unless we take bold action to empower more affordable and sustainable options.

We can solve the car-bike conflict, and the solution unlocks a brighter, more inclusive economic and environmental future for Boston.

Michelle Wu is president of the Boston City Council.

Due to an editing error, a previous version of this piece misstated the number of deaths and injuries related to crashes. It has now been updated.

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## BOSTON GLOBE VIDEO

Whale caught on camera breaching near Plum Island



A hungry whale was spotted breaching off the shore of Plum Island Thursday morning. (Video courtesy of Craig Jesiolowski)

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#### Masking indoors in the age of the Delta variant

It's confusing. So who's right and how are Americans to navigate this?



#### Tour organizer says graduates from Boston-area high schools were wrongly blamed for delaying an American Airlines flight

The organizer said American Airlines wrongly punished 47 recent high school graduates from the Boston area who were heading to the Bahamas, adding that the flight delays in question were caused by the airline itself.



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#### It's just business between Patriots and Stephon Gilmore, plus a deeper dive on N'Keal Harry and Mac Jones

Gilmore believes he deserves a raise, but it appears the Patriots have not made a suitable offer yet.



### THE FINE PRINT

#### Recall of sleep apnea machines leaves many in the lurch, and worried

Philips Respironics says the foam used in its machines for noise reduction can break down and be ingested by users, causing serious, even life-threatening, injury.



### RI CRIME

#### After the armed standoff with Rise of the Moors: The spectacle is the point

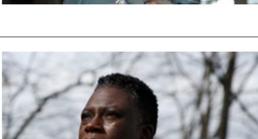
The Moors are exercising their rights as sovereigns, following a philosophy that's been around for decades, the leader of Black Lives Matter Rhode Island said. They're not terrorists, he said. They're not against America. They are for their own people.



### THE GREAT DIVIDE

#### 'I have never seen a Black superintendent retire ... There's a systemic problem'

There's a lack of racial diversity among the state's educators, particularly superintendents of color whose numbers and tenure are low. Especially at a time of national racial awareness, education advocates are pushing to cut down on that disparity, saying it is critical for Black, Latino, and Asian students to see themselves reflected in their teachers and school leaders.



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#### Unmasking the truth: The saga of American Airlines Flight 893

There is really only one side of the story that matters.



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OPINION | MICHELLE WU

# Municipalities need a seat on the T

By Michelle Wu June 19, 2019, 2:42 p.m.



An MBTA Red Line train derailed at the JFK/UMASS station on June 11. BOSTON FIRE DEPARTMENT

As shocking as it was to see two MBTA derailments in the span of a week, the aftermath of yet another major failure of our public transit system has felt all too familiar. An angry region struggles to adjust as traffic thickens with commuters abandoning public transportation, and riders who can't afford alternatives are punished with ongoing delays and impending fare hikes. To reverse the decline of our public transit system and [end the transportation disparities](#) that divide our city and region, we must channel calls for change into changed governance.

A year from now, the MBTA's temporary oversight board, the five-member Fiscal and Management Control Board, or FMCB, is scheduled to dissolve. Born in the aftermath of the snowpocalypse winter of 2015 that [crippled our decrepit public transit infrastructure](#), the FMCB replaced the [MassDOT Board of Directors](#) as the governing body for the T. But in carving out T oversight from MassDOT's larger agenda, the FMCB also eliminated direct municipal voice. The 175 municipalities within the T's service area used to have a weighted vote on the T budget through the [separate MBTA Advisory Board](#), but cities and towns lost that leverage under the new structure. In other words, the goal was to concentrate accountability and action in the governor's office.

Riders have seen little change and no urgency under Governor Baker's stewardship of the T. The double derailment spotlighted a deteriorating system that has only seen more crowding and strain since the FMCB was established. We need communities and stakeholders who are directly impacted by the T to have a direct voice in the agency's governance and push for the scale and pace of change our region deserves.

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The City of Boston and the T need each other. From designating [bus-only lanes](#) to implementing [transit signal priority](#), the MBTA and Boston Transportation Department must work together like never before to unclog roads and keep riders on buses and the Green Line moving — for the health of the entire region. This month, a new designated bus lane will be added on Brighton Avenue in Allston, and Boston needs to double down on these improvements, expanding bus lanes rapidly to all city streets where bus riders are chronically delayed by congestion. Every municipality in the MBTA's service area has a role to play in driving expanded transit access and equity.

Yet we are one of the only major transit systems in the United States where municipalities have no role in decision-making. Mayors in New York, Chicago, and Los Angeles have the power to appoint multiple seats to their state-based transit boards, and in the Bay Area, BART's board has four appointments that [are publicly elected](#).

Our neighbors in Worcester have a Regional Transit Authority board composed of municipal representatives from service area communities, with the number of representatives based on population. The [Pioneer Valley Transit Authority board](#) is composed of the municipal executives of each of the 24 service area communities.

We need a T governance structure capable of responding to the depth of our regional transportation crisis while tearing down silos that keep municipal leaders and state officials from working together with urgency on shared goals. Along with MassDOT board members, the new oversight board should include a rider representative, a permanent seat for the City of Boston, a rotating seat for municipalities in the T's inner core service area, and a rotating seat to represent communities served by commuter rail.

To make the most of this restructuring, the Commonwealth should also revisit the contribution from ride-hailing companies such as Uber and Lyft, whose growth directly erodes transit ridership and further strains our traffic-clogged streets. Massachusetts led the way as our statewide legislation on ride-hailing companies was among the first in the country, but today the [state tax of \\$0.20 per ride](#) is among the lowest in the country and does not match the impacts on our roads. Amid a booming economy, the region's debilitating congestion and skyrocketing housing prices show the irresponsibility of forgoing infrastructure investments needed to accommodate our growth.

The state should match increased funding and more accountable governance so that our public transit system will be not just a lifeline, but a direct connection to opportunity and shared prosperity.

Michelle Wu is an at-large Boston city councilor.

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## BOSTON GLOBE VIDEO



A hungry whale was spotted breaching off the shore of Plum Island Thursday morning. (Video courtesy of Craig Jesiolowski)

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Whale caught on camera breaching near Plum Island

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- After the armed standoff with Rise of the Moors: The spectacle is the point
- 13 top places to eat on Cape Cod 🍕🍷
- It's just business between Patriots and Stephon Gilmore, plus a deeper dive on N'Keal Harry and Mac Jones
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It's confusing. So who's right and how are Americans to navigate this?



Group disrupts flight from Boston to Bahamas, refuses to wear masks

A group of more than 30 people who were traveling from Boston to the Bahamas refused to wear masks and became disruptive Monday when they were catching a connecting flight from Charlotte, North Carolina, American Airlines said.



### THE FINE PRINT

Recall of sleep apnea machines leaves many in the lurch, and worried

Philips Respironics says the foam used in its machines for noise reduction can break down and be ingested by users, causing serious, even life-threatening, injury.



The money could transform their lives. But thousands of eligible kids may not get the new child tax credit

Both the IRS and local community groups are warning that a significant number of families who most need the relief risk falling through the cracks because they are not known to the IRS.



Tour organizer says graduates from Boston-area high schools were wrongly blamed for delaying an American Airlines flight

The organizer said American Airlines wrongly punished 47 recent high school graduates from the Boston area who were heading to the Bahamas, adding that the flight delays in question were caused by the airline itself.



### TRAVEL

13 top places to eat on Cape Cod 🍕🍷  
Discover these tasty places on your next trip over the bridge.



### RI CRIME

After the armed standoff with Rise of the Moors: The spectacle is the point

The Moors are exercising their rights as sovereigns, following a philosophy that's been around for decades, the leader of Black Lives Matter Rhode Island said. They're not terrorists, he said. They're not against America. They are for their own people.



### BEN VOLIN | ON FOOTBALL

It's just business between Patriots and Stephon Gilmore, plus a deeper dive on N'Keal Harry and Mac Jones

Gilmore believes he deserves a raise, but it appears the Patriots have not made a suitable offer yet.



### THE GREAT DIVIDE

'I have never seen a Black superintendent retire ... There's a systemic problem'

There's a lack of racial diversity among the state's educators, particularly superintendents of color whose numbers and tenure are low. Especially at a time of national racial awareness, education advocates are pushing to cut down on that disparity, saying it is critical for Black, Latino, and Asian students to see themselves reflected in their teachers and school leaders.



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