



Commentary: Boston needs to have a seat on the T's management board

By Jon Spillane
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Amid the suddenly open Boston mayoral race and the precipitous decline in Covid-19 cases, a long-awaited decision on Beacon Hill about whether Boston residents will have a seat at the table on major public transportation decisions has disappeared from the public debate.

A plan for what comes after the existing Fiscal Management and Control Board (FMCB) was supposed to be made last year, when the T board was originally scheduled to close. Instead, with the pandemic raging, a last-minute deal extended the term of the existing FMCB for another year. That extension is coming to an end on June 30, and there has been no information released about what is next for MBTA governance.

Since the collapse of the T during the winter storms in February 2015, the FMCB had been directly supervising the T, meeting weekly with a goal of improving Greater Boston's public transit system. Last year, a bill proposed by Sen. Nick Collins to set one seat aside for the city of Boston to appoint was put forward, but didn't happen. Beacon Hill needs to continue on the path they began last year and give the communities that support and use the MBTA seats on the new FMCB - one for Boston and one for the surrounding communities.

The next version of the FMCB is going to have a major impact on how our city and our state experience the return from Covid. Making big investments like finally constructing the Red Line-Blue Line connection during MGH's massive planned expansion and electrifying the Commuter Rail line would improve the experience of many residents, whole neighborhoods and huge numbers of suburban commuters.

Smaller decisions, like new dedicated bus lanes, new bus stops, and whether those new Orange Line cars are ever going to see consistent service, will also have a big impact on people's lives.

As a Boston City Council At-Large candidate, I have been talking to voters on zoom, over the phone, and in-person more and more over the last several months, and a major issue that has re-emerged for them is traffic. After a few months of little traffic last March and April, it is now taking even longer than before Covid to get from one end of most neighborhoods to another and it feels even more dangerous to ride your bike through much of the city.

The voters I talk to expect traffic to get worse as pandemic concerns leave most people's everyday lives and workers return to their offices.

As someone who has grown up in Boston and never owned a car, I have spent the last few months masking up and riding on buses and trains to get to campaign appointments. I do not have a lot of company while I do that; ridership is way down. Getting it back up must be a top priority for the next FMCB.

When at month's end, the MBTA moves out of the emergency governance structure it has been under for the last six years, the interests of the communities whose residents rely on the agency, and whose scant local budget dollars pay for its operations, must be directly represented in the new governance setup.

The legislative proposal last year recognized the outsized contributions and interest Boston has in the MBTA and proposed giving our city one seat. Now we need that proposal to become law. In addition, the MBTA Advisory Board that represents the 175 communities that contribute to the T's budget also needs a seat.

In order to make sure that this issue gets the attention it deserves before the annual end-of-session scramble, I am launching a petition drive calling on Boston's Beacon Hill delegation to fight for our city's voice in MBTA governance. Last Saturday, I started canvassing in neighborhoods and at train and bus stations across Boston to ask folks to sign the petition and tell their legislators they want to see one seat for Boston, and one seat for the other MBTA communities. Those who want to sign can also do so on-line at jonforboston.com/representBoston.

The Legislature is going to take some kind of action by the end of the month. I hope other candidates for City Council and for mayor will join me in asking our Beacon Hill representatives to ensure that we have a voice in how the T is run.

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