

Summary of Public Comments: Public Engagement Plan

Background

The MBTA drafted a Public Engagement Plan to outline the goals and priorities of the Authority regarding public engagement. The draft Plan was released for public comment on January 21, 2020. In order to get feedback from across MBTA riders, staff conducted outreach through numerous mechanisms. We held three public meetings (a fourth, which was planned for Framingham, was cancelled amid coronavirus concerns). The first meeting was live streamed, recorded, and posted on the MBTA website. The meetings were advertised on our system (e.g. car cards and digital displays) and in local newspapers. Two of meetings had Spanish interpreters present. In addition, we created a new website for public engagement and hosted the draft document and online comment form there. Finally, we also translated the draft Plan and feedback form into seven languages, including braille.

Over seventy people attended the three meetings in person. We received feedback online and via email as well. All totaled, we received 228 comments during our two months of outreach, from January 21, 2020 through March 13, 2020. Public comments closed on March 20, 2020.

Summary of Public Comments

MBTA staff have summarized the public comments received on the draft Plan below. The sections below represent a high-level overview of the feedback we heard. Staff has incorporated feedback regarding the draft Plan into the revised document. Feedback outside of the scope of the draft Plan has been share with MBTA leadership and relevant departments.

1. Service needs to be improved

The greatest number of comments received were related to service quality. Riders submitted feedback on service quality on all MBTA modes (except Ferry). This feedback has been shared with relevant departments and MBTA leadership for review.

2. The MBTA needs to listen to riders regarding fare increases

We received numerous comments from the public that they feel the Authority does not listen to riders when conducting public input on fare changes. Riders indicated that this devalues the public input process, and makes them untrustworthy of other MBTA public input processes.

3. Transparency is critical to improving trust in the MBTA

It was clear from the public comments received on the draft Public Engagement Plan, that riders are seeking more transparency from the MBTA. Riders indicated that it is often difficult to engage with the Authority, because there are disparate amounts of information provided. Riders suggested that more information should be provided on the MBTA budget, decision-making structure, and governance.

Further, riders indicated that during public engagement events, the MBTA should be clearer about what the Authority is trying to learn from the public and provide enough information for the public to be able to give informed feedback.

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In addition, riders are requesting additional transparency about the causes and severity of service disruptions.

4. Priority should be given to frequent, on-system, low-impact engagement tactics

Many riders felt that the MBTA should ask for feedback more regularly from riders, maybe in the forms of an app, other data gathering options, or even better in person, from the regular riding public during their trips or at stations. Asking people to attend meetings is too high of a burden. Riders shared that, frequently, the most underrepresented groups are the communities that cannot attend public meetings. Therefore, alternatives formats or options should be enabled to gain input from these communities.

5. New governance structure should maintain access for the public

There were several comments regarding MBTA governance – in particular the FMCB. Currently, the Board acts as one of the few public areas where riders can give feedback directly to leadership. There is interest in maintaining this access, and perhaps growing representation to include riders and/or municipalities.

6. The MBTA should explore new models of engagement, while maintaining accessibility

Riders shared that the MBTA should explore new models of engagement, including online virtual meetings, survey tools, virtual town halls, variable messaging boards, apps, and other tools to get feedback from the riding public. However, the public also shared that using these tools should supplement other methods of engagement, in order to ensure that riders who do not have or prefer not to use smartphones and computers are still able to access meetings.

In addition, riders suggested that when the MBTA does seek to have in-person meetings we do it in a manner as flexible as possible for the public. This means more flexible hours and days (including weekend meetings), and providing food, childcare, and transit passes.

7. The MBTA should leverage its existing resources to share information with riders

The MBTA has a plethora of resources to communicate with its riders, including the MBTA website, in-station ad space, on-vehicle ad space, in-station digital screens, T-Alerts, etc. The MBTA should leverage these resources to be more transparent with riders. For example, the MBTA could alert riders about the date, time, and live-stream of FMCB meetings on in-station digital screens.

8. The MBTA should clarify how public input is managed and information is shared with leadership

Riders shared concern that social media feedback from the public is not treated as “real” feedback and worthy of response, as compared to, for example, coming to the FMCB in the middle of a workday. Many, therefore, feel that the MBTA is not listening to this feedback.

In addition, riders shared a belief that those engaging with the public are not decision-makers, or worse, do not communicate with those who do decide, and therefore riders are concerned as to whether feedback actually matters.

9. Opportunities need to be given for different types of riders to influence the MBTA

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Because the experiences of riders vary based on many different factors, the MBTA should create spaces in which different groups can influence the Authority. This could include, for example, youth and students, older riders, low-income, and riders of color. This may mean the creation of affinity based advisory groups, similar to R-TAG, to allow consistent feedback to leadership rather than on a singular project specific basis.

10. Budget line items should exist for public engagement across the MBTA

The public wants to ensure that a budget line item exists to support public engagement so there is continuity of the practice throughout the Authority's work. While Capital projects already include a line item for public engagement, in order to assure accountability regarding public engagement Authority-wide, the MBTA should have a dedicated line item for engagement.

Next Steps

Based on these and other comments received, the MBTA has updated its Public Engagement Plan. The Plan can be found online at www.mbta.com/public-engagement. The next steps include:

1. Share comments received related to service and other items with relevant departments;
2. Conducting a review of public engagement processes at the MBTA to determine where improvements need to be made to meet Public Engagement Plan principles;
3. Developing guidance for Authority staff and contractors on how to implement the Public Engagement Plan;
4. Implementing "quick-wins" identified through the public input process on the draft Public Engagement Plan, to make early, near-term improvements to public engagement.