

DECEMBER 2020

PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT SUMMARY REPORT

FORGING AHEAD

Summary of Public Comments: Forging Ahead

Background

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, transit agencies across the country have experienced dramatic decreases in ridership. Before COVID-19, the MBTA served an average of 1.3 million trips each weekday. Currently, there are approximately 330,000 trips taken each weekday.

This change in ridership is concerning for many reasons. First, the drop in ridership has significantly decreased fare revenue, which has an overall impact on our operating budget. Second, it is unclear how much of this change in ridership reflects longer-term changes in travel patterns in the region (as rates of telework increase, for example). To address these issues, staff and leadership at the MBTA launched the Forging Ahead initiative as a means to preserve transit services for essential riders. We recognized that our projected budget deficiencies would not allow us to continue operating all transit service and aimed to mitigate the effects of any service reductions on transit-critical communities.

However, to preserve as much service as possible, we turned to other parts of our budget and proposed service cuts as a last resort. Forging Ahead was composed of the following three key processes:

1. Evaluating all internal spending to reduce expenditures
2. Assessing the capital program and proposing reallocation of a limited amount of funds from the capital budget to support our operating budget
3. Defining a core of essential transit services to prioritize and determining the costs needed to run them

Essential services are those services that have high ridership propensity and serve transit-critical populations. We define transit-critical populations as the following, in no particular order:

- Low-income households
- Communities of color
- The disabled
- Households who have few or no cars and no other alternative
- Elderly populations

To preserve access for transit-critical populations using these essential services, the MBTA proposed maintaining these routes and lines at or above the baseline standards set in the MBTA's Service Delivery Policy. The essential services include the Fairmount Commuter Rail Line, all Rapid Transit (incl. Mattapan Line), ~80 bus routes, and the RIDE. In addition, the MBTA proposed a reduced level of non-essential services based on demand and alternatives.

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Overview of the Public Engagement Process

On November 9, we announced the service-related proposals as a part of the Forging Ahead initiative as well as a public engagement process to hear from riders, elected officials, and community members about the proposals.

The Forging Ahead Community Engagement team collected comments from official public meetings, online surveys, “office hours,” phone calls, and the MBTA public engagement email. In addition to virtual meetings, a new team of Community Liaisons conducted supplemental, targeted outreach to communities and groups to ensure broad-based feedback. Throughout this process, the team spoke with many everyday MBTA riders about how the proposed changes would impact them.

In total, there were 11 public virtual meetings (nine regional meetings and two system-wide meetings), with 2,010 attendees and 407 comments collected. Recordings of the meetings are posted on the [Forging Ahead website](#).

Riders were able to provide comments through an online form on the Forging Ahead website. The team received 6,723 comments on the form. Riders were also invited to submit their comments to the MBTA public engagement email inbox. The team received 1,463 emails.

The Community Liaison team reached out to 266 community organizations in the MBTA service area and collected 179 comments from 30 community meetings. Among these, three meetings were held in Chinese and two in Spanish. An additional 39 organizations agreed to spread information to their constituents.

Summary of Feedback

Throughout this process, there have been several comments that the Forging Ahead Community Engagement team have heard repeatedly, across modes and routes.

Frequently Heard Comments

1. **Prioritize span and access over frequency**

The majority of riders indicated a preference for span (the time a service was running) and maintaining access over the frequency at which the service runs. These comments primarily came from workers who relied on late night and weekend service.

2. **Decreasing transit service would disproportionately affect vulnerable communities and stifle the state’s economic recovery**

Many commenters stated that these cuts would hurt vulnerable and low-income populations and communities of color. Further, commenters mentioned that if MBTA service was not available, Massachusetts’s economic recovery would be slowed.

3. **Decreasing transit service will cause more people to drive, which is counter to our**

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state climate goals

Many riders were concerned that decreasing transit service would cause an increase in single-occupancy vehicle trips, increasing congestion and worsening our environmental impact.

4. Service changes would be going into effect as riders return to the system

There were many concerns over the potential lack of service as riders are returning to work and using the system more regularly once a vaccine for COVID-19 is available.

5. Massachusetts has been encouraging transit-oriented development but is removing transit service

Riders and elected officials expressed concerns over the MBTA's commitment to transit-oriented development and whether or not the organization has taken development patterns into account when developing service proposals.

6. Any changes in frequencies should align with essential work schedules

Riders indicated that if frequency were to decrease, the route schedules should coincide with the needs of the riders who use the service (especially essential workers, reverse commuters, students, and standard commuters).

7. This service will never come back

Even though all proposals to service are temporary, many riders expressed doubt that services would ever return once they were suspended.

Key Themes

Forging Ahead Methodology

A key theme of the feedback we heard revolved around the methodology used to identify which services to include in the base service. Many riders acknowledged the financial difficulties the MBTA is facing but urged the T not to make any cuts until learning more about the possibility of federal stimulus funding and vaccine availability. People voiced concerns around why the cuts are projected to take place in Spring/Summer 2021, when the pandemic may have subsided and people may be returning to work.

Furthermore, many people have questioned how the MBTA will measure demand, especially on routes that were proposed to be suspended. Some riders expressed frustration with the current inability to demonstrate demand for services that were suspended at the beginning of the pandemic and urged the T to develop concrete metrics for the resumption of service. Additionally, some commenters proposed that the MBTA examine its service levels more frequently, especially for the Commuter Rail and Ferry, which only update schedules twice a year. Riders repeatedly stated that if robust

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service is not provided when demand begins to return, many will be forced to buy cars and permanently change their commuting habits. This could worsen the region's congestion.

Impacts on Accessibility for People with Disabilities

A key theme from rider feedback included the accessibility of the MBTA, primarily where our service proposals suggested that riders divert between modes. Riders asked the MBTA to consider the accessibility of routes and stops on the streetscape as well as in stations. It was also widely mentioned that the proposed decrease in span will affect access to aids who work for the disabled, as their jobs are not confined by the traditional 9-5 work hours.

Many riders urged the T to continue accessibility projects that have already begun or are in the planning stages. Lastly, a few comments stressed that the RIDE needs to be ready to handle increased demand once certain bus routes are eliminated.

Fare Impacts of Transfers or Alternative Transportation

The service proposals may force riders to divert between modes which have different fare levels. Commenters indicated that this fare differential may be difficult for riders who were already struggling to pay their MBTA fares. Alternatively, riders mentioned they may need to buy a car, or an additional car, to get around the Greater Boston region, which has significant financial implications.

Route Elimination, Consolidation, or Shortening

There was a large number of comments about the potential elimination, consolidation, or shortening of routes. Riders highlighted the negative impacts that these changes would have on commutes and the importance of these services to the local community. Several comments in this theme highlighted that while particular routes or lines may not have very high ridership, there are riders who rely on that service who would be affected by any changes.

Impacts on Personal Travel Patterns

Riders commented that decreases in span and access along with frequency would cause potential changes in personal travel patterns. Riders may not be able to make all the trips that they want or need to make, or additional time must be budgeted in to account for longer headways and less reliable transfers. Riders also mentioned that employment decisions may have to be reconsidered due to decreases in frequency and span.

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Lack of Access to Destinations

Due to the proposed elimination of the ferry service, shortening of the E-branch, suspension of Commuter Rail weekend service, and suspensions/consolidations of bus routes, riders are concerned that they may not be able to access desired locations such as work, schools, grocery stores, doctor's offices, and more. Some suggestions from riders to decrease inaccessibility include diverting nearby bus routes to accommodate local key locations and preserving peak service on routes/lines that were proposed for elimination or span reduction.

Concerns about Frequency Changes

It has been noted in public feedback that frequency changes, unlike decreases in span, can be worked around to get to desired locations. However, during peak hours, frequency has been noted as essential. Not only do riders say that less frequency will increase their travel time, but concerns about social distancing, health, and the role frequency plays in safety have been mentioned throughout the process. In addition, some riders have mentioned that their office is planning on implementing a staggered work day and that there will be demand for increased frequency outside of the normal peak hours in the near future. Lastly, a few riders wrote that with decreased frequency, making transfers between modes will be harder.

Increase in Travel Time

Because the Forging Ahead proposal diverts some riders to other routes and modes (i.e. E-branch riders to the 39 bus or ferry riders to the Commuter Rail) and/or decreases frequency of service, riders have pointed out that this can cause minor to drastic increases in their commutes. For example, many Hingham/Hull ferry riders shared that their commute times would at least double if they had to drive or take the Greenbush Line. In addition, the reduction of span forces those who do not work traditional hours to look for alternative methods to get to and from work, which can increase their commute.

Decrease of Span on Bus/Subway and Commuter Rail, including Weekend Service

Essential workers were most vocal in comments tagged with this theme. Riders who commented on the decrease of span in the proposal noted that many essential workers do not work traditional 9:00 A.M. – 5:00 P.M. schedules. Thus, the proposed 12:00 A.M. stop of bus and subway service does not allow workers to get to work or home. There have been multiple comments that a 1:00 A.M. stop in service works better with non-traditional schedules. In addition to this, a 9:00 P.M. stop of Commuter Rail service strands essential workers who rely on the train to get home after working the 3:00 P.M. - 11:00 P.M. shift (among other late shifts). Lastly, riders voiced concerns about lack of access to entertainment due to the decrease in span as vaccines for the coronavirus

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become available and more leisure activities are safe again. Riders have asked the MBTA to partner with large employers and entertainment centers in the Greater Boston region to develop a schedule that can accommodate both work and play.

COVID-19 Concerns

Many riders are worried about the health and safety implications of a decrease in frequency and service. Many questions centered around how the MBTA would ensure that riders can socially distance with a decrease in service provided on each route.

Equity Concerns

Many riders wanted to make sure that the MBTA was thoughtful in their process and was not harming historically marginalized groups by decreasing service. Most noticeably, comments mentioned that frequency is not the same on each route, and communities of color and low-income neighborhoods tend to have low frequency or unreliable buses. Thus, decreasing frequency on routes in these communities may disproportionately affect riders.

Summary of Online Service Package Prioritization

As part of our outreach, we created an online feedback form that was open to responses from November 9 to December 4, 2020 at 5:00 P.M. and received slightly over 3,000 responses. The feedback form provided space to offer comments about the base service levels proposed for specific routes, provide general comments about the Forging Ahead process, and answer questions about which service packages should be prioritized as additional funds become available. The questions about service package prioritization asked respondents to rate the importance of each service package both for their own personal transportation needs as well as for the transportation needs of the region.

Prioritization **between** modes was assessed using respondents' ratings of service packages' importance to the region. MBTA riders consistently prioritized the restoration of services that they personally used before the COVID-19 pandemic. For example, Commuter Rail riders were more likely to believe that restoring weekend service and evening service to Commuter Rail was extremely important to the region than they were to believe that any other service package was extremely important to the region. However, besides the preference for services personally used, respondents generally prioritized services with high ridership and high transit criticality (e.g. rapid transit and essential buses), while very few respondents who didn't personally use these services prioritized services with low ridership and low transit criticality (e.g. ferry), indicating broad agreement with the general principles of Forging Ahead. It was most common for respondents to report that it was extremely important to restore frequency to essential buses (68%) and rapid transit (67%) and to restore evening service to rapid transit (59%) and bus (56%); there was also high importance placed on restoring evening service (50%) and weekend service (48%) to Commuter Rail as well as frequency to non-essential buses (43%).

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Respondents reported comparatively less urgency around investing in new services and connections, restoring E-branch service to Heath Street, and restoring partial ferry service.

Prioritization **within** modes was assessed using respondents' ratings of service packages' importance to their personal transportation needs if they used the mode either before or during the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. Riders tended to prioritize restoration of frequency above the restoration of span¹ and all service restoration over investments in new connections and service. For example, 68% of respondents who were currently riding essential buses believed that restoring frequency to essential bus routes was extremely important, 53% believed that restoring evening bus service was extremely important, and 40% believed that investing in new connections and service, based on Bus Network Redesign, was extremely important. This preference is unsurprising given that changes to span have a larger impact on a smaller number of riders (and are more likely to emerge as a dominant theme in places like public comment), while changes to frequency affect a larger number of riders (and are more likely to emerge as a dominant theme in places like a broader feedback form).

Next Steps

The MBTA is using the comments gathered in this process to better understand how the proposed service changes will affect riders and how to modify the proposals to better meet the needs of riders. The input and concerns voiced in this process will be reflected in the revised version of the proposal presented to the Fiscal and Management Control Board on December 14th.

Additionally, the Forging Ahead team has learned a few important lessons during this outreach process, which will be useful during the next round of engagement focused on implementation in the spring. This public engagement process should have been longer, as there have been concerns over riders having enough time to present their feedback. The short window has also been interpreted as a lack of intent on the part of the MBTA to truly take public feedback into account. Some riders believed this process to be disingenuous and simply undertaken to fulfill a legal requirement. However, the main adjustment will be to enhance our non-digital outreach. In addition to continuing our working relationship with many community groups, we plan on posting flyers in bus and subway stations, using other forms of media like radio, and, depending on COVID-19 levels, potentially gathering input in person.

This document has been provided to MBTA leadership, the Fiscal and Management Control Board, and the Secretary of Transportation to inform their decisions in advance of the December 14th FMCB vote on Forging Ahead. We appreciate all the time riders took to share their feedback with us.

¹ It is important to note that this finding of frequency over span is at odds with the findings from other forms of outreach conducted on Forging Ahead.

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Appendix

Comments by mode:

- Commuter Rail: 1,297
 - Haverhill Line (including Cedar Park Station): 238
 - Framingham / Worcester Line: 130
 - Fitchburg Line: 123
 - Kingston/ Plymouth Line (including Plymouth Station): 100
 - Newbury / Rockport Line: 98
 - Providence / Stoughton Line: 79
 - Greenbush Line: 58
- Bus: 1,562
 - 43 Bus Route: 365
 - 131 Bus Route: 198
 - 136 Bus Route: 185
 - 214/216 Bus Route: 171
 - 55 Bus Route: 63
- Ferry: 956
 - Hingham / Hull Ferry: 479
 - Charlestown Ferry: 293
- Rapid Transit: 793
 - E Line: 371
 - Red Line: 200
- The Ride: 28

Comments received by theme:

Theme	Comments
Route Elimination, Consolidation or Shortening	2,785
Forging Ahead Methodology	593
Decrease of Span on Bus/Subway and CR, including Weekend Service	437
Equity Concerns	787
Concerns about Frequency Changes	286
Lack of Access to Destinations	540
Increase in Travel Time	349
COVID-19 Concerns	197
Impacts on Personal Travel Patterns	110
Environmental Concerns and Climate Change	135

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Impacts on Accessibility for People with Disabilities	84
Fare Impacts of Transfers or Alternative Transport	54