



COLUMBUS AVE, BOSTON

PHASE I AND PHASE II REVIEW

February 2025

Executive Summary

The Columbus Ave Phase I Transit Priority project has been a successful and impactful project delivering substantial travel time, safety and accessibility benefits to thousands of daily riders. A review of the corridor's performance found the following impacts:

- Reliability has improved for over 11,000 daily riders
- Ridership on the Route 22, the most frequent route traversing the corridor, has increased 24% since 2022 – nearly double that of the MBTA bus network as a whole
- Travel times savings are approximately 3-4 minutes during peak periods – a savings of up to 25% - 40%
- Trips by car are taking between 20 and 40 seconds longer to complete
- 10% reduction in speeding cars along the corridor
- Of the 180+ bus riders who responded:
 - 78% of riders were satisfied
 - 74% reported perceived faster trips and more consistent service
 - 24% said they ride the bus more because of the bus lane lanes; 57% of these respondents said they were previously taking a car
 - 81% felt safe crossing street
 - 82% found it easy to reach platforms

Columbus Ave Phase II will extend these benefits one mile north of the current project's terminus. It is expected to reduce travel times and improve reliability for 55,000 daily riders and deliver similar speed and reliability benefits once constructed. The project is fully funded and is expected to break ground in 2026.

Background

The Columbus Ave Transit Priority Corridor is a center running bus lane which consists of two parts: Phase I between Walnut Avenue to the south and Jackson Square to the north, and Phase II from Jackson Square at the south to Ruggles at the north. Phase I opened for operation in 2021, and Phase II is currently at 75% design and is expected to break ground in 2026. The currently operating segment between Sever Street and Jackson Square serves the 11,000 daily riders who ride the 22, 29, and 44, saving them 3-4 minutes during peak periods. Both projects involve upgraded passenger facilities including real-time arrival signage, security cameras, Transit Signal Priority (TSP), upgraded and fully accessible ramps and crossings, and level boarding platforms.

Phase I was designed and constructed during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic for a total of \$14.5 million. \$13.5 million from the MBTA Capital Improvement Program (CIP), and an additional \$1 million from the City of Boston. Phase II has a larger scope and scale and has been impacted by the rapid increase in both construction labor and materials prices that followed the pandemic. The current project budget is \$37.3 million. \$34 million from the MPO (which includes a 20% or \$6.8 million MBTA match) and \$3.3 million in local match from the City of Boston. The MBTA will again be the delivering agency, and the City of Boston has been the leading agency in outreach and design review.

Phase I Performance

Transit benefits

Before the project was implemented, riders experienced peak-period travel times of up to three times higher than off-peak. A 2023 City of Boston program evaluation found the travel times savings are approximately 3-4 minutes during peak periods. Reliability has improved for over 11,000 daily riders who ride bus routes 22, 29, and 44, which traverse the project area. Route 22, the route primarily serving the corridor, has seen a 24% increase in ridership since 2022—far outpacing the MBTA's post-COVID bus ridership recovery rate of 13% during this same period.

Accessibility and Safety

The project replaced 49 wheelchair curb ramps at intersections, restoring them to ADA compliance. The project rebuilt cracked sidewalks, implemented near-level boarding at center-located platforms, and installed Rapid Flashing Beacons (RRFBs) at the Egelston Square Boston Public Library Branch.

Following the project's completion, there was a 10% reduction in speeding cars along the corridor, greatly improving pedestrian safety. EMS use these unobstructed lanes to speed to incidents, avoiding traffic along this major north-south corridor. General traffic impacts have been mild, a 2023

study led by the City of Boston demonstrated that on average motor vehicle trips are taking between 20 and 40 seconds longer to complete as compared to the period prior to construction.

Public outreach

The project was initiated just before the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic and the majority of the community engagement was conducted during a period of significant social distancing. The project team hosted well-attended multi-lingual virtual meetings during the design stage. Once the lanes became operational in Fall 2022, the project team has hosted Community Site Walks to engage with community members on the project and design. In 2024, the MBTA together with the Center for Independent Living and the City of Boston hosted blind and disabled user testing on the project corridor. Feedback from their user testing is being incorporated into Phase II and other major transit priority corridor and MBTA Green Line project designs as we continue to refine the accessibility features of these center-located platforms.

Public reception

The City of Boston together with LivableStreets Alliance conducted rider surveys six months after the lanes opened for use: Of the 180+ bus riders who responded:

- 78% of riders were satisfied
- 74% reported perceived faster trips and more consistent service
- 24% said they ride the bus more because of the bus lane lanes; 57% of these respondents said they were previously taking a car
- 81% felt safe crossing street
- 82% found it easy to reach platforms

MBTA operators have consistently supported the lanes and said they are less stressful for operation. Today, many point to the Columbus Ave Phase I facility as an example of what should be done to improve the operations of other major transit corridors throughout the region.

Accolades

As the first center running bus lane in New England, the Columbus Ave Phase I project has been an incredibly important example of what bus priority can deliver. The project was selected as the TransitCenter 2021 "Best Transit Street Upgrade" and as the ACEC 2022 Massachusetts "Gold Award" Winner. The project has also catalyzed support for this design across the region. Phase II will deliver a one-mile-long extension of the busway to the north and is expected to break ground in 2026. In 2021, the City of Boston was awarded an FTA RAISE grant for a center-running bus concept as part of the Blue Hill Ave Transit Action Plan. In 2022, MassDOT was awarded an FTA RAISE grant for their center-running bus proposal on the Lynnway in Lynn. In 2024, the MBTA was awarded an FTA RAISE grant for its transitway project on Lower Broadway in Everett. The grant application for each of these projects references the successful precedent established by the Columbus Avenue project.

Phase II Expansion

Transit Benefits

The northern segment of the Columbus Ave project carries significantly more transit service than the Phase I segment, there are 55,000 daily weekday riders on the routes operating through the corridor (key routes include 15, 22, 23, 28). Riders are currently experiencing peak period travel times of 8-10 minutes higher than off-peak and buses traveling at walking speeds. Based on Phase I improvements, we expect Route 22 riders to save 5 – 7 minutes over the future Bus Network Redesign alignment while Routes 15, 23, and 28, which traverse the north half of the project area, are expected to see 3-4 minutes of travel time savings.

Accessibility and Safety

The one-mile project corridor saw 140 crashes in a four-year period; in addition, a fatal crash included in December 2024 as well as other serious crashes in recent weeks. During traffic data collection, speeds above 50 miles per hour were measured in all 24 hours of the day. The current roadway configuration includes six and seven lane-wide crossings, non-compliant ramps, narrow crosswalks, and cracked and uneven sidewalks. The Southwest Corridor, an important bicycle and pedestrian facility, has dangerously narrow crossings at several intersections within the project area, which results in avoidable conflicts for people walking and biking. This segment will be widened and better street lighting at intersections and platforms will increase pedestrian and bicycle safety.

The project will address the corridor's barriers to accessibility and install two new center platforms with the enhanced passenger amenities like real time arrivals and security cameras at Cedar Street and Prentiss Streets. Phase II will also convert the Jackson Square busway from one to two-way traffic which will eliminate today's circular routing and contributes precious minutes to the project's projected run time savings.

Public outreach

The City of Boston and the MBTA together have hosted multiple public meetings in Fall and Winter 2022, in Summer 2023 and held design workshops in Winter 2023/2024. The team has also had continuous outreach and engagement the length of the design process with key institutional stakeholders/abutters Roxbury Community College, Boston Police HQ, Boston Public Schools, Islamic Society, Parcel P3 Developers, and the Whittier Health Center.

Future MBTA Bus Service

Beginning in 2025 and continuing through 2026, the MBTA will increase service frequencies on the 15, 22, 23, and 28 as part of Bus Network Redesign Phase II. These service changes include span and frequency promotions specifically bringing Routes 22 (+52% service, +16 operators) and 28 (+20% service, +8 operators) to High Frequency status, and increasing Route 23 service (+8% service, +3 operators). These bus lanes are critical to the success of this plan, without the protection, the MBTA will be unable to deliver on the frequencies with buses mired in gridlock.

Figure 1. Diagram of Columbus Ave Phases I and II Geographic Extent

