

MBTA Rail Vision Non-Rider Survey Results Summary

In February and March 2019, the Rail Vision team released a survey aimed non-riders, people who do not regularly use the Commuter Rail system, to elicit information about why they choose other modes and what they would like to see in the rail system. The survey was designed around questions of preference (e.g. cost/convenience; local/express service) to understand where non-riders' preference lie given the inherent trade-offs to consider in rail service and operations. The purpose of the survey was to raise awareness about this important effort and collect informal, anecdotal data to supplement the technical efforts.

The team delivered the survey via a mobile-enabled website and promoted it through social media, a press release, emails to relevant listservs, and handing out post cards at community engagement events.

Nearly 3,000 non-riders responded to the survey. About 64 percent of respondents live in the inner region of the Greater Boston Area, with the remaining 36 percent living in the outer parts of the region. The following sections detail the insights from the survey.

Inconvenience Outweighs Cost as a Barrier

One question on the survey asks respondents to select between cost of fare and convenience (which covered lack of parking, schedule, etc.) as the primary barrier to using rail service to commute. More than three-quarters of all respondents selected convenience, rather than cost, as a barrier. This breakdown of responses did not differ among respondents living in the inner or outer region.

Slightly more than half of the respondents indicated that they commute by car. Of these respondents, 82 percent indicated inconvenience over cost as a reason for not using rail service. This result corroborates anecdotal evidence – drivers who commute into Boston pay high fees to park and therefore may not be deterred by fare price as much as inconvenience as compared to driving; drivers who commute to locations outside of downtown may have more parking available at their work, making driving a more convenient choice.

Of respondents who indicated they commute by other modes (subway, bus, walking, biking, other), 71 percent selected inconvenience rather than cost as a reason for not using the system. These responses were more surprising than those of the drivers, as the other modes are typically less expensive than commuter rail and cost is often cited as a barrier

Time of Day and Service Type Preference Correlates with Geography

Responses to questions about preferences for service span and type varied depending on the where respondents live. In total, 54 percent of respondents would primarily like to use the commuter rail during midday and weekend periods. Slightly more than half (57%) of the respondents who live in the inner core indicated interest in taking the commuter rail during off-peak periods (midday and weekends).

Respondents from the outer region were nearly evenly split between preferences for peak period versus midday and weekend service. These responses indicate a departure from traditional views of commuter

rail, as sizeable portions of respondents from both inner and outer regions indicate interest in service during off-peak periods.

Responses to a question about express and local service followed more geographic lines. Those living in the inner core split their preference between the two, yet 63 percent of those from the outer region prefer express service. This response matches the team's understanding of mobility needs across the region. People living in the outer region prefer service that can get them to downtown faster (express). People living in the inner core have less of a need for express service, because their trip is fairly short regardless.

Preference for Access to Different Destinations Varies

Slightly more than half of respondents would take the commuter rail more frequently if it provided better connections in and around downtown Boston, rather than to locations outside of the inner core of the system. Surprisingly, this breakdown held for both respondents living in the inner core, with 54 percent favoring connections to downtown, and respondents living in the outer region, where 51 percent favored connections to downtown. These results indicate that nearly half of respondents living in both the inner core and outer region would also seek connections to locations outside of downtown Boston from the rail system.