



## COMMUTER RAIL COMMITTEE

### MEETING NOTES

September 12, 2024, 2:00 PM

- A. Call to order:** Robert Scherer (Ashland), Chair called the meeting into session at 2:08 PM via Zoom.
- B. Introductions/Roll Call:** The Committee did not have enough members present to establish a quorum.
- C. Minutes:** Without a quorum, members were unable to move on the minutes from the 7/11/24 meeting.
- D. Presentation from MBTA/Keolis staff (Rose Yates, Mike Mueller, Mike Rooks, Abdellah Chajai):** MBTA and Keolis staff presented on performance updates, suicide prevention, trespasser mitigation strike efforts, & train safety.
  - a. A. Chajai presented on the commuter rail's monthly operational performance through timeliness of trains, ridership numbers and revenue data. Since a low of 89.52% of trains on time in June, July and August saw improvements with greater than 90% of trains on time both months. In August, 92.76% of the trains were on time. The upcoming challenges for the fall months will be red line closures, increased express services to Salem, and slippery rails caused by



falling leaves. Ridership recovery has continued to grow and in August, the commuter rail had 97% recovery from pre-COVID levels. A. Chajai said he hoped that by the first half of next year, the ridership will be equal to or greater than pre-COVID levels. At the next Advisory Board Commuter Rail committee meeting, they will show the MBTA's ridership recovery compared to national numbers, but currently the MBTA commuter rail ridership recovery is trending better than any other agency in the country.

- i. R. Scherer clarified that the profile of commuters has changed since pre-pandemic to include more off hour and weekend riders. R. Scherer asked how the ridership data is collected. A. Chajai answered that ridership is counted manually by the conductors. He also answered that the method for tracking ridership has not changed post-COVID. R. Scherer asked if the weekend and off hour riders that are more common now are bringing in less revenue than the former trends of daily commuters. Mike Muller answered that this is driven by a decrease in monthly passes as hybrid employees commute into the office less than five days a week. Revenue is recovering at a lesser rate than ridership. Roy Epstein (Belmont) asked if the recovery data was comparing ridership in the corresponding calendar weeks to determine recovery rates. M. Muller said that it is and that the most common ridership spikes occur



after Labor Day and on January 1. R. Epstein also asked if the recovery was consistent across commuter lines. M. Muller said that there is some variation as all lines are increasing but lines like the Fairmont Line are at 130% of ridership recovered while others are closer to the 70% or 80% mark. Steve Olanoff (Westwood) commented that some conductors check tickets by scanning while others observe that riders have tickets and asked if this practice had any impact on the accuracy of the counts. A. Chajai said that the inconsistency of conductors does not impact the ridership counts.

- b. A. Chajai presented an overview of the fare collection process. Chajai said the biggest challenge facing the smartphone ticket collection devices is the quality of internet connection on the train which impacts the turnaround time if a rider is purchasing a ticket from the conductor. To improve the fare collection process, Keolis has increased access to and upgrades in equipment to improve reliability. They have increased staffing at central stations to provide assistance. They have also revived the “Fare is Fair” program and have begun incognito checks to improve accountability. Finally, they are nearing implementation of contactless payment for ticket sales. A. Chajai reported that while ridership has increased by 10% over the last 12 months, fare collection has increased by 75% in that same time. Next, A. Chajai reported on the fare gates recently installed in North



Station. They have caused a 38% increase in onboard ticket sales and a 70% increase in ticket activations to North Station.

- i. Alan Castaline (Brockton) asked if there was a difference between weekday and weekend recovery rates. M. Muller answered that weekends are over-performing post pandemic at around 150% of pre-pandemic ridership recovered while weekdays are at around 90% recovery. A. Castaline asked what the comparison was between north and south side ridership recovery. A. Chajai said they didn't have the numbers, but would report back. Bruce Leicher (Harvard) commented that with the ridership increase, the station in Littleton is running out of parking and asked if there were any plans to address that. M. Muller answered that there are no immediate plans. B. Leicher commented that parking may be a limiting factor for ridership increases that might be considered. R. Scherer agreed that this is an important issue for the community to consider as there may be opportunities to address it regionally.
- c. Next, A. Chajai presented about the MBTA's partnership with Operation Lifesaver, a national nonprofit dedicated to saving lives through rail safety programs. Through Keolis, there are 23 Operation Lifesaver volunteer that are sent to do work in towns and at stations. There will be a rail safety week between September 23<sup>rd</sup> and 27<sup>th</sup> hosting outreach events in Barnstable, at North Station and South



Station. Another partnership with Samaritans provides free and confidential suicide prevention services throughout Greater Boston and MetroWest since 2014. Samaritans will help train Commuter Rail personnel in mental health awareness and suicide prevention.

- i. Hanna Switekowski (Deputy Director) commented that the Advisory Board could assist in spreading information about the Safety Week. Alana Westwater (MBTA) said she had some materials she could send.
- d. M. Muller introduced Rose Yates, Assistant General Manager at the MBTA, who joined to present her work specific to rail safety. R. Yates heads the Commuter Rail Collision Reduction Committee to look at instances of trespasser collisions on the right of way to analyze trends in the data and make improvements. Since 2017, there have been 152 person-train collisions and 86% of them were fatal. Of the 152, 80% were intentional. R. Yates said the goal of the committee is to make determinations as quickly as possible regarding the nature of the collision and to figure out a way to address any problems at the location. Within the toolkit of mitigation tactics are rail safety education and the MBTA provides resources that R. Yates said all municipalities should also have easily accessible on their town and city pages. Additionally, the MBTA has put up 988 signs on platforms and in quieter locations. Their committee has published responsible reporting guidelines for local news outlets and MBTA personnel to



use when reporting on collisions. R. Yates emphasized that communities must not push homeless communities to the tracks as has happened all over the country recently as this is demonstrated to increase the number of person train collisions. The MBTA is not legally obligated to fence off rails, but it is important to R. Yeats and M. Muller that as much of the tracks as possible can be fenced off on both sides. After the presentation, the discussion was opened for questions from committee members.

- i. R. Scherer questioned how determinations are made about where to prioritize fencing. M. Muller answered that they target areas that see the most collisions, but that it often is difficult because fencing is often cut or destroyed after it is put in. R. Scherer asked if communities are able to reach out to R. Yates' committee to submit requests for areas they think need fencing. R. Yates said that those requests could be made, but that fences are often band-aid solutions and communities should also be looking at broader solutions. Greg Guimond (Marshfield) suggested that the Executive Office of Housing and Liveable Communities should be involved in these solutions because many of their initiatives revolve around building housing close to tracks. He suggested that, for example, developers who receive density bonuses should help pay for fencing. R. Yates agreed that this would be incredibly



helpful. R. Scherer asked if the committee releases reports. R. Yates answered that, based on research from the Volpe Center, there is an effect where if rail train suicides are spoken about publicly, it could increase the incidence of them, so for this reason, the committee does not advertise their work or their data publicly. R. Yates said that there was a toolbox of resources from the FRA that she would share. H. Switekowski asked what the relationship between Amtrak and MBTA was in regards to funding and executing safety initiatives. M. Muller said that on tracks also used by Amtrak, they are also responsible for maintenance.

e. R. Scherer thanked the MBTA and Keolis staff for their presentation.

**E. Old/New Business:** R. Scherer asked committee members for any topics to be addressed in upcoming meetings. R. Scherer suggested topics raised in previous meetings of the fiscal cliff and the regional rail discussion. Additionally, he suggested that the committee consider the Littleton parking space shortages raised by B. Leicher earlier in the meeting. S. Olanoff agreed with a discussion on regional rail and a possible name change for the committee.

**F. Upcoming Meetings:** The committee discussed a date and time for the next meeting. The committee's attendance is low so committee members suggested that Advisory Board staff could send out a survey to confirm if members are still interested in participating and what times



work best for them. The committee agreed to set the next meeting for Thursday, November 7<sup>th</sup>.

*Note: These minutes were approved by vote of the Committee at its 11/7/24 meeting*

### **Attendees**

#### **Committee**

Rob Scherer  
Roy Epstein  
Alan Castaline

Ashland  
Belmont  
Brockton

#### **Other**

Abdellah Chajai  
Mike Muller  
Rose Yates  
Keolis  
MBTA  
MBTA



Brian Glennon  
Bruce Leicher  
Greg Guimond  
Steve Olanoff

Duxbury  
Harvard  
Marshfield  
Westwood

Alana Westwater

MBTA

**MBTA AB**

Brian Kane  
Hanna Switekowski  
Isabella MacKinnon

Executive Director  
Deputy Director  
Intern