



## COMMUTER RAIL COMMITTEE

### MEETING MINUTES

June 13, 2024, 10:00 AM

- A. Call to order:** Rob Scherer (Ashland), Chair called the meeting to order at 10:05 AM via Zoom.
- B. Minutes:** Greg Guimond (Marshfield) moved to approve the minutes of the 05/09/24 meeting. Bruce Leicher (Harvard) seconded this motion which was approved without objection.
- C. Commuter Rail Operations Update:** Mike Rooks from MBTA Commuter Rail Operations and Abdellah Chajai from Keolis Commuter Services delivered a bi-annual update on commuter line performance, ridership, and schedule changes. The update was followed by questions from committee members.
- B. Leicher questioned if municipal leaders could receive greater advanced notice of the schedule changes given the difficulties in coordination on their end. M. Rooks answered that schedules are currently published two weeks in advance, but the MBTA is looking to do outreach with regional authorities, for example bus services, to better coordinate around schedule changes.
  - R. Scherer questioned what the results of the Fairmont line increases have been. A. Chajai answered that Keolis will provide that information when they have better data, which they are currently gathering.
  - Todd Kirrane (Worcester) said Worcester is thankful for their partnership in improving the city's service. He questioned what has driven the increase in performance that has led to a recovery of 90% of pre-COVID ridership. A. Chajai answered that there are



many elements, but that the schedule changes have significantly aided this improvement as well as the service's on time performance and reliability.

- R. Scherer questioned if there had been any over-crowding of commuter trains following the schedule changes. M. Rooks said the MBTA and Keolis measure ridership and make changes to the schedule based on the collected data.
- Colette Aufranc (Wellesley) questioned if there has been any move to offer legislation that requires employers to offer benefits to workers who commute on public transit that are similar to the benefits offered for parking. Brian Kane (Executive Director) mentioned that the Transportation Funding Task Force is considering this issue. B. Leicher added that the IRS has legislation that incentivizes employers to offer similar benefits. Additionally, employers may need to consider sponsored transit passes as opposed to purchasing monthly passes because many employees are no longer commuting to the office every day.
- R. Scherer commented that he had observed gaps in the service to Worcester local stations because of the Framingham express route and that this might impact people who use the local stations. M. Rooks answered that they will be able to take this feedback during the next schedule change process.
- C. Aufranc questioned if there will be a discussion before the next schedule change. B. Kane answered that because the schedule changes must be approved on Beacon Hill, there is generally not sufficient time for the drafts to be shared in advance.
- B. Kane questioned what is the earliest that the public will be able to see the proposed schedules for the fall. M. Rooks answered that it depends on how large the scale of the changes will be. He



said there currently are not any large-scale changes planned, so the schedule should be available earlier.

- B. Kane also mentioned that with the worsening budgetary issues facing the MBTA in the upcoming years, the commuter service must be making an effort to collect as many fares as possible. He questioned what the status is for fare gates at South Station and Back Bay station. M. Rooks answered that South Station is getting closer, but that construction near the station has slowed progress. He said the Back Bay fare gate system is entering the design phase. He added that the new fare gates at North Station have had a positive impact.
- R. Scherer added to B. Kane's question regarding fare collection that in his own experience, his commuter ticket is only checked around 50% of the time. A. Chajai answered that Keolis monitors the activity of the trains' conductors and ticket collection is up 73% from last year. Additionally, the fare gates will help further increase this number. He added that conductors may sometimes struggle to collect fares because their primary job is to operate the doors at each stop, but that the service will continue to monitor and enforce fare collection.
- B. Kane questioned what is stopping automatic doors from being used. M. Rooks answered that the issue is primarily with the station infrastructure. All bi-level coaches have automatic doors; however, these only work at stations with high level platforms.
- R. Scherer questioned what the completion date for the Worcester station will be. M. Rooks answered that, pending inspection, it will be open in the next couple of weeks. R. Scherer also questioned if the entrance from Union Station would be operable soon which M. Rooks answered that it would.



- R. Scherer asked for someone to discuss the upcoming budget. B. Kane answered that the Operating Budget Overview Committee's report shows that, if the T is left to solve the \$700 million deficit in FY26 on its own, the service cuts will be draconian and would affect parts of the commuter service that have seen the greatest growth. R. Scherer thanked B. Kane for sharing.
- C. Aufranc mentioned her surprise that more decision makers in the state did not know about this issue. She emphasized the need for a push in communications and messaging around the issue to ensure that those in power and those who rely on the train are more aware. She added that towns may need to begin including this discussion in their town planning conversations as they may not get advanced notice if they are asked to increase their assessments. B. Leicher thanked C. Aufranc for raising this issue and questioned B. Kane about the press release discussed during the Full Advisory Board meeting on 06/06/2024.
- B. Kane thanked M. Rook and A. Chajai for their time and for their work on ridership increases.
- C. Aufranc requested better track signage at the Wellesley Square station. Morgan Griffiths (Natick) questioned if there was a progress update for the Natick Center station. M. Rooks said he could follow up with an answer.

**E. Adjourn:** With all business transacted, Colette Aufranc (Wellesley) moved to adjourn, a motion which Bruce Leicher (Harvard) seconded. This motion was approved unanimously, and the meeting adjourned at 2:54 AM.



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

### **Attendees**

#### **Committee**

Bob Rulli	Bridgewater
Bruce Leicher	Harvard
Colette Aufranc	Wellelsey
Emma DeGrandi	
Greg Guimond	Marshfield
Morgan Griffiths	Natick
Robert Scherer	Ashland
Sheri Warrington	
Todd Kirrane	Worcester

#### **Other**

Mike Rooks	MBTA
Abdellah Chajai	Keolis

#### **MBTA AB**

Brian Kane	Executive Director
Isabella MacKinnon	Intern