

COMMUTER RAIL COMMITTEE

Minutes

Thursday, March 14, 2024

- A. Chair Rob Scherer (Ashland) **called the committee to order** at 2:02 PM via Zoom.
- B. **October 16, 2023 meeting minutes:** The Chair requested a motion to approve the minutes. Roy Epstein (Belmont) noted a few typos in the draft provided. These were fixed. Colette Aufranc (Wellesley) moved to approve the minutes with the typos corrected. Greg Guimond (Marshfield) seconded. The motion was approved without objection.
- C. **Spring 2024 Schedule Changes:** The Chair invited Mike Muller, MBTA Executive Director of Commuter Rail to update the committee on proposed schedule changes, and any other updates from the Commuter Rail team. M. Muller noted that ridership and performance is strong compared to other systems. Abdellah Chajai, CEO of Keolis Commuter Services, provided the update on ridership and on-time performance. Mr. Chajai noted that ridership is at 95.97% of pre-pandemic levels as of February 2024. By autumn 2024, Keolis expects 100% of pre-covid ridership to return. Compared to other operators in the USA, the MBTA Commuter Rail has the highest percentage of ridership rebound of all other systems (Metro-North, NJ Transit, Long Island RR, Philadelphia SEPTA, Baltimore MARC, Chicago NICTA, Metra Chicago, San Francisco CalTrain). Keolis believes the reasons for this are congestion in and around Boston, the transition

from peak-oriented services to all-day service in April 2021, and improved on-time performance. Mr. Chajai noted that while ridership is back, it is a different type of ridership than pre-COVID. Off-peak and weekend ridership is dramatically increased over pre-pandemic levels.

- Alan Castaline (Brockton) asked about the ridership comeback weekdays versus weekends. A. Chajai noted that some weekday routes are at 80% of pre-pandemic levels, while some weekend routes are well over 100% of pre-pandemic levels. The profile of riders has changed. A. Castaline continued that ridership seems to be up and down and wondered how much of this variation was due to subway diversions. A. Chajai noted that there is some effect from diversions, as well as seasonality and many other levels. M. Muller noted that seasonality is important, and has been for many years including before the pandemic. January ridership is traditionally down, and it was in 2024 as well.
- Colette Aufranc (Wellesley) asked about commuter rail parking utilization. M. Muller noted that there is variation by parking lot size and depending on day of the week.

A. Chajai continued his presentation to note that on-time performance (OTP) (within 5 minutes) is at 93.15% as of the end of 2023, compared to 83.86% in 2015 and 88.59% in 2019 pre-COVID. The 2022 percentage was 92.48%. He further noted that Keolis works with the MBTA to manage OTP route-by-route and month-by-month. Line by line 2023 OTP versus the average OTP over the past 3 years is:

- Fairmount: 97.9%
- Lowel: 97.0%
- Greenbush: 95.0%
- Needham: 94.4%
- Providence: 93.9%
- Stoughton: 93.4%
- Worcester: 93.2%
- Rockport/Newburyport: 92.71%
- Kingston: 91.5%
- Franklin/Foxboro: 90.99%
- Haverhill: 90.90%
- Middleboro: 89.4%
- Fitchburg: 89.1%

A. Chajai noted that the MBTA has made equipment investments to assist with resiliency and weather delays. He continued, that on the lowest performing 5 lines, strategies to improve OTP are underway. He noted that on the Old Colony lines state of good repair investments are underway to reduce an ongoing signal issue that is the cause of a great deal of delay. On Fitchburg, weather and the Leominster washout issue was the biggest issue. The MBTA and Keolis have invested in specialized track monitoring equipment at washout-prone locations to alert to potential slope issues in advance. On the Haverhill Line, A. Chajai noted that most of the delays noticed were related to the installation of positive train control technology and the installation and testing of this technology. It is expected that this will be remediated soon as the technology improves. On the Franklin/Foxboro lines, the issues identified was around areas of single-track operation. He noted that the Franklin line double-track project is underway, and that this should add resilience to these lines to improve OTP.

- Dan Albert (Marblehead) asked about chronic delays on the

Rockport/Newburyport lines and specifically about trains that are very late compared to those 5 minutes late. Mr. Albert requested break down data for the Rockport/Newburyport Line to show OTP for Salem and Swampscott as well as the length of the delays. He also noted that a 5:01 minute delay and a 20:00 delay are different things for passengers. Other committee members agreed.

- Steve Olanoff (Westwood) asked about trains that are late between stations, and the definition of late within 5 minutes. He also asked about switch problems and mechanical failures. M. Muller noted that the switches on the Providence Line are maintained by Amtrak and not the MBTA. The MBTA is in ongoing discussions with Amtrak about their infrastructure and failure to respond to items effecting MBTA customers. He noted that Amtrak maintained infrastructure is the main cause of delay on the Providence Line. S. Olanoff asked why Amtrak's delay is so slow. M. Muller answered that it is very frustrating and that it is an ongoing challenge on maintenance and dispatch. While the MBTA owns the property, Amtrak maintains and dispatches the line.
- Roy Epstein (Belmont) noted that the 2023 OTP is relatively close to the prior 3 years. He asked about long-term trends. M. Muller noted that 2023 was the best performing year in recent history. Historically, unadjusted OTP hovered around 89% and it is 93.15% in 2023. He continued that OTP is better than or as good as peer agencies in the United States. He noted that the MBTA has a tighter definition of OTP versus many national peers.
- M. Muller provided the Spring/Summer 2024 schedule update These are still under development and awaiting approval. In terms of principals and frequency,

the new schedule will maintain all day service model, late night service, includes capacity increases, supports the Cape Flyer train, converts “I” Stop stations to regular station levels, and removed the time added in the fall and winter for slippery rail. Old coaches are being retired and replaced with newer, larger coaches.

- Regarding Worcester, and the heart to hub train, he suggested that prior to the pandemic, the express heart to hub ran directly between Worcester and Boston. It was scheduled later in the peak, arrived after 9AM and did not perform well in terms of ridership. During the pandemic, this express train was moved from later in the peak to the peak of the peak, departing Worcester at 6:30AM, stopping at Framingham (where it picked up 2/3rd of its ridership), and then to Boston. It was observed that ridership did not meet expectation, and that those train on either side of the schedule had better ridership. The express train interfered with scheduling other services. Based on the data, the stops were added at Grafton, Westborough, Southborough, Ashland and Natick- adding 22 minutes to the trip and getting the train into Boston around 8AM. This improved frequency on the entire Worcester line (60 mins to 45 mins headways) and allowed for the addition of a Framingham local making all local stops east of Framingham. The net gain was that every station saw an additional train in the morning, except Worcester, but that Worcester saw the headway improvement from 60 to 45 minutes. In 2023, working with Worcester elected officials as well as elected officials from MetroWest communities, the MBTA conducted a deep-dive study of data on the entire Worcester Line. This study suggests:

- Ridership on the Framingham/Worcester Line overall increased from 68.3% of pre-COVID ridership in the Spring of 2023 to an average of 80% of pre-COVID ridership in 2023.
- Crowding decreased across the line with new service added and headway reductions.
- Ridership on the new zonal express Heath to Hub doubled from 240-400 daily passengers to 640-800 daily passengers.

Surveys of passengers on the Zonal Heath to Hub revealed:

- 29% previously drove to Boston
 - 16% previously either drove to Worcester or Framingham before switching to their local station for the new service □ 10% are new commuters.
- R. Scherer asked how the MBTA gets input from riders. M. Muller noted that many people submit unsolicited feedback, municipal officials submit comments, and elected officials call and make their feelings know. He also noted that they are investigating removing some stops on the zonal express, but that this had its own challenges.
 - Roy Epstein wonders if the survey results may be too good to be true. He wondered about constraints at North and South Stations at peak. M. Muller there are no additional trainsets, coaches, locomotives, or related infrastructure to support new trains. Platform capacity is also an issue, and more space at terminals will be needed to meet much of the rail system envisioned. In addition to terminal capacity, and fleet capacity, there are also

issues with line capacity, mostly due to single tracking issues on multiple lines. If all lines were double tracked, or fitted out with additional sidings or other space for additional trainsets, more train could be added.

- M. Muller noted that the new schedule does not have major or radical changes.
- S. Olanoff thanked the team for an every-night 11:55PM departure from South Station.
- T. Kirrane (Worcester) asked about methodology of surveys and data collection. He noted that the effect on the people of Worcester is notable. He suggested that more folks from Worcester are now not taking the train but are driving instead. M. Muller noted that the Heart to Hub had ridership of about 100 per day and then 300 boardings at Framingham. Boardings for the new zonal express is about 140 on an average day, suggesting that folks from Worcester want to get to places other than Boston. T. Kirrane suggested that some stops currently in the zonal express be considered for elimination to speed up the trip from Worcester. He also noted that the MBTA needs to be better at communicating changes to cities and towns and elected officials on schedule changes. The Worcester City Council has received petitions seeking the restoration of the Heart to Hub Worcester to Boston train. M. Muller agreed that the communication in the fall could have been better. Engagement in Worcester continues, and additional outreach is planned. Balancing the needs of all communities on the line and the importance of larger communities is difficult and continually reviewed.

- S. Olanoff asked about the gates at North Station. He finds the gates disruptive, and wonders how they can be implemented at South Station and Back Bay. He wonders if it is cost effective to have staff at gates all the time compared to checking tickets onboard. M. Muller noted that they plan is to expand gates to South Station. At North Station, there was a 40% increase in mTicket activations. The gates are achieving their intended purpose.
 - R. Scherer noted that fare collection is uneven on the Worcester Line. M. Muller agreed, and noted that they are in touch with Keolis on fare collection, but did reiterate that gates are planned for South Station, Back Bay and other major, Boston stations.
 - D. Albert asked for more data on OTP per line. R. Scherer agreed, and asked for the percentage of significant delays and the cause of major delays in terms of what is and is out of the control of the MBTA.
- D.** R. Scherer moved to **adjourn** the meeting, a motion which D. Albert seconded. The motion was approved without objection and the meeting adjourned at 3:09 PM.

Note: These minutes were approved by vote of the Committee at its 5/9/24 meeting.

Attendees:

Committee Members:

Ashland: Rob Scherer (Chair)
Belmont: Roy Epstein



Brockton	Alan Castaline
Marblehead:	Dan Albert
Marshfield	Greg Guimond
Wellesley	Colette Aufranc (Vice Chair)
Westwood:	Steve Olanoff
Worcester:	Todd Kirrane

MBTA

Michael Muller Executive Director, Commuter Rail and Ferries

Keolis

Abdellah Chajai CEO, Keolis Commuter Services
Alana Westwater Chief of Staff, Keolis Commuter Services