

## Testimony on MBTA's 2019 fare increase proposal

I write in opposition to the proposed fare increases throughout the MBTA system, intended to come into effect on July 1, 2019. My reasons are as follows:

1. Increasing MBTA fares will perpetuate and exacerbate the racial injustice built into our region's public transit system.

These increases may not be motivated by racial animus, but they will have a disparate impact on African American residents and other people of color. Most of our poor, and our working poor especially, are members of our communities of color. Disproportionately represented on the losing side of the income divide, these individuals have low rates of automobile ownership, and fewer alternatives to an unsatisfactory but increasingly expensive transit system.

Even a small increase in transit fares amounts to a regressive tax among the poorest people in Greater Boston. Its effects will be magnified by the probably concurrent implementation of other fare collection policies about which MBTA has been far less forthcoming. Assuming that MBTA implements these other policies as it has previously represented, poor, transit-dependent communities, especially in our inner cities, will suffer a triple disparate impact.

The T's Fiscal and Management Control Board (FMCB) voted, in November, 2017, to award a contract to the consortium of Cubic-John Laing to replace MBTA's automatic fare collection (AFC) system, which was about 9 years old at the time. Several months before this vote, MBTA staff briefed the legislature's MBTA Caucus on "AFC 2.0." At that briefing, it revealed that it would be charging a one-time fee, estimated to be \$3-\$5, for the fare cards needed to use the new system.

Several legislators objected to the financial burden this plan would impose on T riders in poor communities of color. MBTA staff countered that these communities would benefit most, since eliminating the use of cash on buses would allegedly improve bus travel times by 10%. MBTA is clearly aware who predominate among its customers on buses, the overcrowded, unreliable third-class carriages of the T system.

Legislators also said that going cash-free would be a burden on communities already limited in mobility, since Charlie Cards are available at only a few outlets. T staff replied that the agency had a plan to sell cash-loaded Charlie Cards – with the new fee added - in grocery and convenience stores, like cards for Dunkin Donuts, and other retailers. (One wonders why the T doesn't do so already, making all our lives easier.)

Yet many poor people will not be able to afford cards pre-loaded with multiple fares. Those of us who ride T buses have seen riders who painstakingly take change out of their pockets, trying to make the fare. We have seen other riders chip in to make the fare, and sometimes bus drivers forgive a small shortfall – informal subsidies which would necessarily end under the proposed new regime.

Will we see riders expelled from buses, for lack of a card with sufficient fare? Has anyone thought this far ahead? Have the business school whiz kids behind AFC 2.0 ever had to scrounge in their pockets for bus fare?

At the legislative briefing, when questioning about the timing of the AFC 2.0 rollout, T staff reluctantly suggested that it would be implemented at the time of the next fare increase, just as the original automatic fare collection was. Yet, despite frequent requests and promptings, MBTA has declined to present the legislature with a follow up briefing on its plans for AFC 2.0, even though it has committed

\$723 million for procurement of a new automated fare collection system. I would supply the link to the place on the MBTA website where I found this announcement, but, frustratingly, MBTA keeps taking down information on this topic, so that even links I've previously posted have stopped working.

Transit riders face the prospect of increased fares; a new collection system which requires riders to pay for fare cards beyond the cost of fares themselves, and an end to the discretionary mercies which now occur at bus fare boxes. This set of changes is simply cruel, and can be foreseen to have a disparate impact on poor people, and communities of color. This disparate impact will increase again if AFC 2.0 is used to charge distance-based fares – a trial balloon already floated, and one which would particularly burden the poor currently being displaced from their transit-convenient inner city neighborhoods by gentrifiers who want the convenience of living near the T.

2. Massachusetts has a legal commitment and duty to reduce carbon emissions in all its sectors, to reduce the impacts of climate change

Why would we ever increase impediments to transit use, when we are trying to reduce carbon emissions from the transportation sector? MBTA itself admits that this fare increase will *reduce* its ridership by 4.8 million riders annually. <https://cdn.mbta.com/sites/default/files/fares/fare-proposal-2019/equity-analysis-sfy20-fare-changes.pdf> Assuming that only most of these displaced T riders decide to drive instead, that's a significant increase in traffic, and a significant decrease in traffic *safety* for those virtuous ones who are using our public ways to walk or bicycle instead.

3. Boston commuters suffer the worst traffic congestion of any US city – why would we deliberately make it worse?

Why would we encourage an increase in rush hour traffic congestion in metro Boston? We now officially lead the nation in this dubious distinction: <https://www.bostonglobe.com/metro/2019/02/12/bragging-rights-boston-now-has-worst-rush-hour-traffic-country-report-says/wMNdRAIrEV7svwShY80NaJ/story.html>

Our economy depends on a functional transportation system, yet the commonwealth tends to treat it as if it were some undeserved and unattainable luxury. I've often found myself standing on a crowded, delayed Red Line car, trying to calculate how many employee work hours are lost each year, due to "moderate delays" which make hundreds of people late for work. Why are employers not up in arms at the state of the MBTA?

4. MassDOT should address MBTA's legacy debt before increasing fares, and diminishing T ridership – it has within reach the means to do so

The "Forward Funding" scheme adopted in 2000 to put MBTA on a more solid financial footing overestimated revenues from the sales tax, in the days before everyone started shopping on line. Based on those unrealistic sales tax revenue estimates, the Big Dig debt transferred to MBTA perhaps did not seem so grievous. Yet the last time I checked, MBTA was the most debt-burdened public transit system in the nation.

Yet there is within easy reach a close-to-painless way to retire that Big Dig debt: we should toll our new Central Artery infrastructure. Massachusetts has built the country's most expensive public works project, but has not even attempted to recoup any of the costs from the internal-combustion-engine users of the Big Dig itself, though many are interstate travelers and truckers. We cannot justify continuing to place responsibility for any of this debt on our beleaguered MBTA, and its beleaguered customers.

5. Of course MBTA needs more revenue - let's raise revenue without gouging transit riders, and spend it sensibly

The proposed fare increases which will displace so many transit riders from the system is estimated to bring in only an additional \$32.1 million in fare revenue, from a current \$710.9 million to a projected \$742.9 million. \$32.1 million may sound like a lot of money, but it doesn't scratch the surface of the approximately \$1 billion annual revenue shortfall need to put MBTA in a state of good repair, per 2007 estimates.

The public might think that the bulk of MBTA's anticipated new revenue would be devoted to fixing the T's breakdown, signaling, and reliability problems. The T, however, has committed to spending \$723 million for procurement of its new automated fare collection system, AFC 2.0. I cannot imagine the justification for replacing a perfectly functional, 11 year old system at a cost of almost three quarters of a billion dollars, particularly when MBTA has so many other needs, far more compelling than changing out our Charlie Cards and turnstiles.

Yet we ignore the big opportunities for raising revenue for MBTA and other transportation needs. Purely apart from the expedient of tolling Big Dig infrastructure, Massachusetts could have and should have achieved some value capture from the great swaths of urban land benefitted by the Big Dig. In that case, as in the case of the Green Line Extension and other enormous public transportation investments, we allow private developers and land speculators to reap windfalls from our public investments.

You needn't take my word for it. The technique of value capture is used in other countries, and has been proposed by credible experts in the US: <https://www.cityandstateny.com/articles/policy/infrastructure/how-value-capture-can-save-new-york-citys-subways.html>

**6. To achieve our state's climate, social equity, mobility, and congestion-reduction goals, MBTA should become a fare-free transit system**

Years ago, when MBTA still had an advisory board, someone close to that board mentioned to me that MBTA's fare collection costs were about equal to its fare revenue. This equation suggested that MBTA could make the MBTA free without any significant loss of revenue. Citing other compelling reason, Boston City Councilor Michelle Wu recently argued that we should make the T free: <https://www.bostonglobe.com/opinion/2019/01/31/opinion-michelle-forget-fare-hikes-make-free/vJpKVu6Rft2C4Esi50mB5M/story.html>

A few General Managers ago, the MBTA had lapel buttons printed, on which the words "but we've always done it this way" were printed, with a red diagonal slash through them. We should revive and live by this refreshing sentiment – we have always raised fares, but we do not need to continue on this losing path. Instead of raising fares, MBTA should think of compensating its riders for all that lost time they will never get back, stuck on crowded platforms underground, on stifling, immobile subway cars, or at icy windswept bus stops.

Thank you for considering this testimony.

Respectfully submitted,

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