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Transit Policies In Doubt Under New Governor

Public transit in Massachusetts is facing a critical period, as the administration of Gov. William Weld begins to define its transportation priorities for the next 4 years.

In the first 2 months of his term, Gov. Weld's transportation aides have emphasized widening highways, while the future of existing transit services has become uncertain.

Numerous proposals which would affect the MBTA have been made -- and then retracted a few days later, after their negative impacts on service and ridership were made known.

Among the legislation which was filed, and then withdrawn, are proposals for a 33% subway fare increase (and a 50% bus fare hike), which could cause a significant loss in T ridership; and a cap on MBTA capital spending, which would make it impossible to build projects that Gov. Weld says he wants.

Other proposals, whose status was unclear at press time, are a \$14 million cut in operating funds, which would mean major bus service cuts; and unpaid furloughs for MBTA workers, which would force the T to pay other drivers overtime to keep service operating.

Most of these proposals have been removed from bills filed with the legislature, but they could still be implemented by the MBTA Board without legislative approval.

The almost daily changes in policies, combined with the damage that many of them would cause, show that the new administration does not yet understand how vital transit is to our regional economy and environment.

There are four different threats to MBTA service and ridership:

Management: The sudden resignation of General Manager Thomas Glynn, and the expected replacement of the entire MBTA Board of Directors, means that the collective memory of the T's upper management will be lost -- as will their concern for transit. It is essential that the new General Manager be an

Continued on page 3...

Central Artery Agreement Will Affect Transit Plans

No matter whether the Central Artery is built according to the present plans, whether the design is modified, or whether no Artery is built at all -- public transportation will still play an important role in Boston's regional economy and environment.

Without the Artery, or with a modified Artery, better transit will be necessary as an alternative to crowded highways.

With the Artery, good transit will be essential to preserve access into the city during construction. And improved public transport will also be needed to ensure that the widened Artery does not attract additional auto traffic and air pollution.

A Memorandum of Understanding, signed by the Secretary of Transportation and the Conservation Law Foundation, has succeeded in underscoring the importance of transit both during the Artery construction period and after the road is completed. But there are serious problems with how the agreement was reached and with what it contains.

The EOTC-CLF memorandum, a backroom deal, shortcut an established public review process. The lack of public input is a dangerous precedent, and it means that there are problems which need to be rectified, such as the omission of capital projects to maintain the MBTA's infrastructure.

Continued on page 4...

Glynn Resigns as MBTA Head

Thomas P. Glynn, the MBTA's General Manager since 1989, has announced his resignation, effective this spring. The surprise move comes amid reports of tension between Glynn and members of Gov. Weld's new administration. Glynn, who had one year remaining in his contract with the MBTA, will take a position at Brown University.

During his two years at the head of the T, Mr. Glynn was responsible for significant improvements in customer service and employee morale, and he spoke with candor and honesty under pressure. He will be missed.

Funding Is Needed to Ensure the Quality of MBTA Service

As Massachusetts' fiscal problems mount, the MBTA continues to be unfairly labeled as one of the state's "budget busters."

Instead of offering plans which will discourage riders by cutting service or unfairly raising fares, we must find a way to finance this essential public service.

On a per-rider basis, the cost of operating T service has been increasing at less than the annual inflation rate.

But growth in ridership means additional service, thus requiring total operating costs to rise faster than inflation. And capital costs of system expansion to accommodate new riders brings additional debt service costs.

Many of the MBTA's funding sources are limited. Proposition 2-1/2 caps the cities' and towns' share of T costs at a 2.5% annual growth rate -- less than inflation -- while federal operating subsidies are shrinking.

Other sources of income, such as advertising and real estate leases, are growing; but they will never be more than a small fraction of the total MBTA budget.

That leaves a growing amount which is now paid by transit users and by appropriations from the state's general revenues.

Not all of these increased costs should be paid by the riders. In the first place, it wouldn't be fair to ask commuters to pay

more than inflation; more importantly, too large a fare increase will backfire as people find other ways to travel.

Part of the T's costs should be paid by the wide variety of non-users who benefit from, and rely on, its service: developers whose buildings gain value because of nearby transit lines; employers who can draw on a more widespread workforce; retailers whose customers come by transit; and motorists who enjoy less congested roads because thousands of other people are taking the T. And all of us gain from the cleaner air and greater economic growth that transit brings.

In addition to a moderate fare increase, other funding sources such as a regional parking excise tax, a greater share of gasoline taxes, and increased use of monthly passes as an employee benefit, are needed to provide a stable fiscal base for subway, bus, commuter rail, and ferry services.

Good transit is a public service, used daily by thousands of citizens (and voters), which is essential to our regional environment and economy. It is a fragile system, which can be damaged quickly, and which is very slow to recover.

To ensure the continued health of greater Boston's public transit system, secure MBTA funding must be established. A.P.T. hopes that the Weld administration will share these goals and work with us to achieve them.

What's In, What's Out of the Governor's Transportation Bond Bill

The Transportation Bond Bill proposed by Gov. William Weld emphasizes expansion of the MBTA system, while omitting funds needed to maintain existing T services.

Just 7 MBTA projects are included in the governor's proposal. With the dates they are expected to be operational, they are:

** An intercity and commuter bus terminal over the tracks at South Station (1993).

** Commuter rail service to Newburyport (1993), and design work for commuter rail extensions to Worcester (1995), New Bedford, Bellingham, Saxonville, and Foxboro.

** Old Colony commuter rail service to suburbs south of Boston (1995).

** Expanded parking facilities at several commuter rail stations, and at Quincy Adams and Braintree on the Red Line (1995).

** Blue Line station renovations with longer platforms for 6-car trains (1995).

** Trackless trolley service on Washington St. in the South End and Roxbury (1995).

** An underground "transitway" from South Station to the South Boston Piers (2000).

In contrast, the bond bill submitted last year by former Gov. Dukakis contained more than \$500 million to preserve and maintain existing T services. Among the 34 projects proposed by Gov. Dukakis, but omitted from the bill offered by Gov. Weld, are:

** Purchase of 200 new buses to replace existing ones, which are up to 25 years old. The delayed purchase will mean that the buses must meet stricter emissions standards, costing thousands of dollars more for each bus.

** Money to design new, accessible Green Line cars, which will be needed to replace the aging Boeing LRVs by 1995.

** Overhaul of 59 commuter rail engines.

** Replacement vans for "The Ride."

** Purchase of additional Blue Line cars which will be needed to operate 6-car trains.

Continued on page 4...

The Lessons of the 1980-81 "MBTA Crisis"

Poor management + higher fares + service cuts + deferred maintenance = significant ridership losses. That's what happened to the MBTA just 10 years ago.

An administration which didn't care for public transit hired inexperienced managers, who looked only at the bottom line -- and nearly dismantled the T system. Riders were driven away by repeated rounds of fare hikes and service cuts, including the closing of 4 subway stations and the elimination of most Sunday bus service, and by deteriorated service (breakdowns and missed trips) resulting from inadequate maintenance.

A fifth of the T's users -- some 120,000 daily riders -- abandoned the system over a 2-year period from 1979 to 1981.

New Governor ...continued from page 1

experienced individual with an interest in providing quality transit service.

Fares: While some moderate fare increase would be appropriate as part of an overall MBTA funding package, too large an increase will drive riders away -- starting a downward spiral of ridership losses, revenue losses, and still more fare increases.

Service Levels: If the MBTA's operating budget is not adequately funded, service cuts will be necessary. Cuts will hit the T's bus routes first and hardest, with subway and commuter rail cuts also likely. Service cuts will also cause ridership and revenue losses.

Service quality: Inadequate operating funds will mean reduced maintenance, while cuts in capital (bond bill) money will mean

Other impacts, as estimated by the MBTA, include 52,000 additional auto trips (230,000 miles) per day, 5.4 million gallons of motor fuel used per year, and a \$23 million annual loss in downtown Boston retail sales.

Many of those who left the T then have never returned, and it has required substantial capital investment in service extensions to attract new riders to replace them.

By 1989 -- the latest figures available to A.P.T. -- overall subway patronage had recovered from the loss and was 16% higher than 1979 figures. But the ridership gains were all on the new lines to Braintree, Alewife, and Forest Hills, and on the Blue and Orange Lines north of the city. Despite growth in employment, ridership in downtown Boston was still 10% lower -- 12,760 fewer persons a day -- than it was before the "MBTA crisis".

[A more detailed analysis of MBTA ridership is available from A.P.T. on request.]

that old buses and trains cannot be replaced with new equipment. In either case, service will become less reliable, with more frequent breakdowns and missed trips. This, too, will discourage riders from using transit.

As the MBTA's experience of 1980-81 shows (see adjacent article), it is very easy to lose riders -- and very, very difficult to gain them back. When transit deteriorates, people change their travel patterns -- or they buy automobiles -- to avoid using the T.

A.P.T. is now planning a Forum on Public Transportation, to discuss transit's significance to Boston and how it can be financed. Details will be announced this spring.

Join Us!

Mass. Transit is published by the Association for Public Transportation, Inc. (A.P.T.), a non-profit tax-exempt organization founded in 1973 to encourage the use and improvement of public transit in Boston. We support transit because it is ecologically sound, because it is less disruptive of neighborhoods, and because it is the only transportation available for many people.

We also publish "Car-Free in Boston," the guidebook to public transit in greater Boston and New England.

A.P.T. depends on donations from its members and friends to continue its activities. Membership is \$15 a year, or \$5 for students and persons on fixed incomes. Members receive Mass. Transit and Car-Free Updates, as well as a copy of the next edition of "Car-Free" when it is published. Contributions in excess of \$5 per person per year are tax-deductible.

We welcome your ideas, comments, letters, and articles on transit issues. Please send them to Mass. Transit, c/o A.P.T., P. O. Box 192, Cambridge, MA 02238.

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Artery

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The memorandum is very specific about T fares and service extensions, but it is silent about service levels or service quality. In fact, its cap on T fares, combined with state law mandating a 33% revenue recovery ratio, will create fiscal pressures to cut both service and maintenance -- which could have a disastrous effect on ridership.

There are precedents for using highway money to fund transit operating costs, as a mitigating measure, while the roads are being built; this technique has been used during the Southeast Expressway reconstruction and during the current Central Artery North project in Charlestown. But it is not included in the EOTC-CLF memorandum.

There are also questions about the memorandum's list of capital projects which the state agreed to build. This is a shopping list based on their status at one moment, and not a result of a rational planning process. Some listed items, such as "South Station Access to Red Line," were complete before the agreement was made. But some other projects, which are named in the Artery EIR, were left off the list. These include Washington St. "replacement service" in the South End and Roxbury, and completion of a new Green Line subway at North Station, which is already under construction. Nor is there any mention of new cars to accommodate additional riders at expanded park-and-ride facilities.

It is also unclear how the agreement can be enforced after the Artery opens to traffic in the 21st century.

The EOTC-CLF Memorandum of Understanding is suitable as a draft for discussion. Now is the time to correct the procedural errors

Bond Bill

...continued from page 2

** \$193 million in repairs to tracks, signals, tunnels, and bridges on the Blue, Green, and Red Lines, and on commuter rail. This includes money to repair or replace 20 highway bridges over MBTA tracks.

** Accessibility improvements on the Red, Green, and Orange Lines, which are mandated by a new federal law.

** Money to complete the North Station Green Line relocation project, which is already under construction.

** Restoration of Green Line streetcar service to the Arborway Line.

More than half of the MBTA capital funds requested by Gov. Dukakis were dropped from the new administration's version of the bond bill; funding for Regional Transit Authorities across the state was also cut 40%. By contrast, Gov. Weld did not make any cuts in the \$1.4 billion of highway construction money sought by his predecessor.

Since the MBTA has an excellent record of getting construction projects underway once they are funded, and since maintenance projects do not require much design work, their approval would be a fast way to create jobs and reduce unemployment.

(This article went to press before hearings were held on the bond bill. Legislative leaders have said they hope to restore some of the transit money that has been cut.)

and to refine the contents of this first draft. These revisions should be made using established environmental review procedures, which were bypassed earlier.

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