



mass.transit

NUMBER 7

SPRING 1988

Watchdogging the T: How Best to Balance State, Local, and Consumer Interests

by Anne M. Larner

Executive Director, MBTA Advisory Board

(Editor's Note: Following are excerpts from Ms. Larner's talk at A.P.T.'s annual meeting on March 30. Ms. Larner's opinions do not necessarily represent those of A.P.T.)

What is a watchdog? One gets the picture of a doberman or german shepherd or perhaps a snarling pit bull protecting his master's interests with bared teeth and a loud bark.

Arborway Line Still On Hold

On March 29, one day before a promised vote by the MBTA Board of Directors on reinstating streetcar service to the Arborway Line (Green Line-E), it was announced that the decision would be postponed indefinitely.

Streetcar advocates have mixed opinions of what this latest delay means. The data in the T's own study, plus nearly universal political support in favor of streetcars, are strong arguments for bringing light rail service back to the Jamaica Plain neighborhood. Yet some high-level MBTA officials apparently remain opposed to reopening the line.

Some streetcar supporters believe that the decision makers are pausing for political reality to sink in, and that a pro-streetcar decision will ultimately be made. Others, however, claim that the T wants to avoid a move which would be politically embarrassing to Gov. Dukakis, who has made good transit an issue in his presidential campaign.

Still others say that by postponing its decision, the T hopes to outlast streetcar advocates. They point to other issues, such as the Watertown streetcar line, where the T has put off decisions for decades, allowing its opposition to erode over time.

One thing is certain: All of Jamaica Plain's elected officials, from city councillors to state legislators, have endorsed trolleys. Mayor Flynn and city officials have made strong commitments to streetcar service. If the MBTA board votes against streetcars, there will be political uproar.

This image reminds us that behind a watchdog is a master with interests to protect, and it also says that when we think of watchdogs we expect to hear a lot of barking and snarling.

Who is best suited to perform the watchdog role? And who has an interest at stake in public transit in Boston?

Riders and businesses have very specific and often narrow interests. Transportation is an issue to them primarily when it doesn't work -- and then it is usually a crisis. If an individual neighborhood or livelihood is threatened, they are likely to organize. But for ongoing minor everyday frustrations, the average rider and the average business readily wants to let someone else handle the matter. By the very nature of their daily regimen, neither of these groups is likely to sustain the necessary longterm interest in transportation to be an effective watchdog.

The longterm general watchdog function most naturally lies with some group whose very existence is based on balancing interests of a number of people. Local communities and the state are the likely candidates.

I would venture that they both have a key role to play. The trick is to have each play the role they are best suited for.

Continued on page 2...

Watertown Streetcar Hearing Set

The MBTA has scheduled a public hearing on restoration of streetcar service on the Watertown Line (formerly the Green Line-A), which was "temporarily" discontinued in 1969. Since then, the route has been served by T-Bus 57, Watertown-Kenmore.

Options under consideration, besides the existing bus service, include reopening the streetcar line to Union Sq./Allston, Brighton Ctr., Oak Sq., Newton Corner, or Watertown.

The hearing will be at 7:00 PM, Thursday, May 19, at the Oak Square V.F.W. Hall, 395 Faneuil St., Brighton (on T-Bus 57). The public is encouraged to attend.

New Commuter Rail May Affect Bus Ridership

On February 1, commuter trains between Boston and Providence began operating for the first time in 7 years.

Six weeks later, Bonanza Bus reduced its Boston-Providence rush hour service by 37%, from eight trips each way to five. Bonanza blames lower rail fares, and the fact that monthly commuter rail passes allow a free transfer to the MBTA's subway lines, for its loss in ridership.

The goal of new transit service is not to divert riders from other transit lines, but to convert auto commuters into transit users. If the train has weakened the bus company, then mitigating measures are in order. The train is subsidized by Rhode Island and Massachusetts; perhaps a bus subsidy could also be offered. Joint tickets and passes, good on trains and buses, could be issued, and subway passes could be printed on

Bonanza's monthly tickets.

This question has implications throughout the Boston area. Most private, unsubsidized bus lines have cut services or closed down entirely. The MBTA does have a small subsidy program which aids a few firms; even on those lines, however, riders often pay higher fares than for comparable MBTA routes, and they do not have the convenience of free transfers that MBTA passholders have.

With more commuter rail extensions in our future, other bus companies will be affected. It is time now to create a plan to ensure service on existing bus lines.

"Public-private partnerships" have been much discussed in recent years. One way to achieve this is for public transit agencies to work with private bus companies, so that both bus and rail can be strong options against the auto.

Watchdogging

...continued from page 1

It seems to me that the Legislature is the appropriate body to oversee capital development. It should play a vital role in developing State policy on transportation and making the requisite tradeoffs between new transit systems and new roads.

But what makes sense for oversight of daily operations? The very organization of local communities, which balances both neighborhood-specific and community-wide interests, embodies the key elements of monitoring a daily service. A board such as the MBTA Advisory Board, made up of the chief elected official from each community in the MBTA District, is as logical and appropriate arena for decisions as you'll find, as long as there is no distortion in their decision-making process.

The original concept behind the T's current structure was sensible. The capital program is controlled and basically paid for by the state; the operating budget and deficit are controlled and paid for by the cities and towns.

But Proposition 2-1/2 changed that considerably. There is no longer a direct dollar impact on the cities and towns for every T budget decision they make. Over the long haul, this will likely diminish that necessary tension of interests which originally made cities and towns an effective watchdog.

Sen. Patricia McGovern has proposed legislation to change who monitors the daily operations of the T. Her proposal would give the legislature bottom line control over the

T and would for all practical purposes erase any line item control over the T's budget. I fail to see how that will provide any group with more oversight power.

I would argue, instead, that we readjust the current system, which was originally sound, to offset the distortions caused by Proposition 2-1/2.

Historically, when any legislature deals in detail with the local level, what we end up with is the well-padded pork barrel -- not the usually prescribed diet for a watchdog. And legislators do not have to live with the local financial implications of local service decisions, as mayors and selectmen do.

What has gotten us into this situation is not a faulty concept at the beginning, but the result of inadequate local taxing power in general. Today the cities and towns in Massachusetts do not command enough financial resources to adequately fund all the services that should be under local control. Since 2-1/2, they have relied on the largesse of annual state aid.

Let me be clear: The remedy I am suggesting is not to raise taxes but rather that the current taxing capacity be reallocated to put more power over funds directly into local hands. Once again, local areas would be in the position to make choices and then pay the bills that result from their choices. The connection between decisions and paying the final bills would be remade, and the incentives to really look for waste and loss would be very much back in place.

Continued on page 3...

Short Items...

Even as construction is underway on a modernization of South Station (Red Line), state planners have come up with a new design to put the depressed Central Artery right through the middle of the station, requiring demolition of the work now being done.

Where's Rider? According to the latest issue of the T's newsletter, "It's published every two months." The January issue was the first since last June, which was the only issue published in all of 1987.

Commuter rail riders at North Station now can eat croissants and ice cream while they wait for trains, as part of improvements by the MBTA's landlords, the Boston Bruins. But there are still no public restrooms.

Rail passengers at South Station have for years run a gauntlet of taxi drivers who disobey city laws by soliciting long-distance fares and refusing short trips. That may change this summer: When the new station concourse opens, the cab stand will be within sight of an Amtrak police office.

According to the Boston Herald, the MBTA is no longer pushing its Blue Line-to-Charles connector, and the project's timetable "has either been extended or abandoned." However, the T is continuing its environmental impact study of the line.

The Boston Globe now has a weekly transportation column, "Starts and Stops," by reporter Peter Howe, on Mondays.

A.P.T. News

A.P.T. President Michael Reiskind testified at the Transportation 2020 forum held in Boston on March 1. He said that, in spite of claims that the U.S. "has the best transportation system in the world," public transit services here are inferior to those of many other countries. The forum, one of a series held across the nation, was for input on transportation needs for the next 30 years.

New A.P.T. officers were elected at the March 30 annual meeting; they are Stephan Chait, President; and William Gage, Vice-President. A.P.T.'s board also expressed its appreciation for the hard work put in by the outgoing officers, Michael Reiskind, President, and Mary Snyder, Vice-President.

Watchdogging

...continued from page 2

A word about the loud bark and snarling teeth: We've all heard stories of the ferocious-appearing dog who actually licks the hand of the thief. The reality is that effective watchdogging is not necessarily the same as grabbing headlines. There is an arsenal of weapons that can be used against the T and they don't all make loud noises. During a fairly stable political period, the very nature of a well-run watchdog is that much has to be done behind the scenes. To spur a reasonable, decent manager to action, you do not embarrass them unnecessarily.

The truth is, it is very tough for an outsider to know if we are doing a good job. Our own words are seen as self-serving -- as are those of the T.

Join Us!

Mass. Transit is published quarterly 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, as well as a copy of the next edition of "Car-Free" when it is published. All contributions 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.

Association for Public Transportation, Inc.

P.O. Box 192, Cambridge, MA 02238

- I'd like to join A.P.T. Enclosed is my tax-deductible donation of \$15.00 (\$5.00 for students and persons on fixed income)..\$ _____
- Please send _____ copies of "Car-Free in Boston" @ \$3.95 ea. (\$3.00 for members); plus \$1.00 postage per order.....\$ _____
- Enclosed is an additional contribution of.....\$ _____
- TOTAL ENCLOSED.....\$ _____

Name _____

Address _____

City _____ State _____ ZIP _____

Phone (home) _____ (work) _____

"Car-Free" Update #7

A.P.T.'s guidebook "Car-Free in Boston" contains complete listings of all Boston-area transit services. "Car-Free" is sold at bookstores and newsstands, or use the mail order coupon in this newsletter. Below are transit service changes since Update #6 in January. For a copy of Updates #1-6, send a self-addressed, stamped envelope to A.P.T.

- Red Sox Train** Special T-Commuter Rail train to all Red Sox home games stops at Yawkey station, adjacent to Fenway Park. Train departs from stations in Framingham, Natick, Wellesley, and Newton. For schedule call 227-5070.
- Red Line** Substitute buses now operate between **South Sta. and JFK/UMass**, Mon.-Fri. after 8:45 pm, until further notice. Regular service now operates at all times between South Sta. and Alewife.
- Green Line** Substitute buses now operate between **Park St. and Kenmore**, Mon.-Fri. after 8:45 pm, until further notice.
- T-Bus 39** (**Forest Hills-Copley**). After 8:45 pm Mon.-Fri., operates Forest Hills-Park St. while Green Line is closed for construction.
- T-Bus 47A** (**Kenmore-Boston City Hosp.**). New service. Operates Mon.-Fri. rush hours, as supplement to T-Bus 47, every 8 min. AM; every 17 min. PM.
- Harbortrans Ltd.** Now operates (**Boston-Squantum**) ferry formerly operated by Harbour Crossing. Departs from Long Wharf (marina side) in Boston. Rush hour only, 2 AM trips, 1 PM trip. Call 424-9797.
- Beverly Shoppers Shuttle.** New service. Local bus in Beverly, operates hourly Mon.-Sat. Call 921-0040.
- Hudson Bus** (**Boston-Lexington**). Midday service discontinued; now operates extended rush hour service in both directions.
(**Boston-Stoneham**). Midday service now operates only from Boston to Elm St., Medford. Saturday service discontinued.
- Peter Pan** Now operates (**Logan Airport-Worcester**) formerly operated by Quickway. Serves Westborough and Worcester, 9-12 trips daily.

The Cape Cod & Hyannis Railroad has announced its summer schedule as follows:
(**Braintree-Hyannis**), 3 trips daily; (**Braintree-Falmouth**), 2 trips daily;
(**Braintree-Martha's Vineyard**), through tickets including shuttle bus and ferry to Oak Bluffs, 2 trips daily; (**Attleboro-Hyannis**) 1 trip daily, connecting with Amtrak trains to/from New York and with trains to/from Falmouth and Martha's Vineyard.

Bay State Cruises has announced it will operate a high speed, premium fare ferry this summer, Boston (**Commonwealth Pier**)-**Martha's Vineyard (Vineyard Haven)**, daily.

Car-Free^(R) is a registered trademark of the Association for Public Transportation, Inc.



**Association for
Public Transportation, Inc.**
P. O. Box 192
Cambridge, MA 02238

#7

FIRST CLASS