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Commuter Rail: The Beat Goes On

Work has begun, or is scheduled to begin, on three major commuter rail extensions: Worcester, Newburyport and two Old Colony branches on the South Shore.

Before the ballast has had a chance to settle, however, the legislature has commissioned the MBTA to explore new rail possibilities. This assumes that there will be money left over for transit after the Central Artery/Tunnel Project. Most of these projects were not seriously considered in the Program for Mass Transportation (PMT), the state's own transit planning document.

- **Bourne/Sagamore.** This would be an extension of the Old Colony Middleborough line to Cape Cod via Wareham. The project is considered cost effective and has local support. The need for minimal trackwork keeps project costs down. The proposal is being considered but is on hold pending results from New Bedford/Fall River rail service studies required by the legislature. A decision to run this service via Middleborough could have a negative impact here.
- **Berlin.** This proposal would reopen the abandoned Central Mass. Line via Weston, Wayland, Sudbury and Hudson. A study last year recommended against the project: the projected ridership did not justify the cost of rebuilding over 20 miles of track.

Restoring service just to South Sudbury, cutting route mileage in half with slightly lower ridership could be considered in the future. However, the facts that the right-of-way is being considered for a bicycle path and that the Route 20 commuter corridor generates only enough business for one bus trip a day suggest otherwise.

- **Milford.** This would be an extension of the Franklin branch via Bellingham. Local political pressure, not commuter demand, seems to be behind this. An interesting question: what effect would this service have on potential Millis branch ridership?
- **Millis.** This extension of the Needham line via Dover and Medfield will be restudied this spring. The 1993 PMT assessment included only service that treated Needham and Millis services as separate lines, not branches of the same line. The PMT acknowledged that less-expensive alternatives would greatly increase cost effectiveness. Hence, the restudy. One community along the line currently opposes the project.
- **New Bedford/Fall River.** The legislature last year ordered a study of all possible routes for this controversial proposal. In the 1993 PMT service ran via Stoughton and East Taunton and would not have been cost effective. [Service ending in East Taunton would have captured over 80 percent of the new transit trips at 40 percent of the cost of the full build.]

Then, in early 1995, the Weld Administration began a strong push for the project—via Attleboro. A third alignment, through Middleborough, is also being considered.

In the meantime, the Wampanoag casino will not be built on the New Bedford golf course, but since the MBTA maintained that the casino was never a factor (why not?), it is unclear what effect, if any, this will have.

[For information on any of these proposals, call Erik Scheier, MBTA project manager, at 222-5894.]

MBTA Advisory Board Head Ends 12-yr. Tenure

Anne M. Lerner, tireless executive director of the fiscal watchdog MBTA Advisory Board since 1985, has left to pursue other interests, including a run for mayor of Newton. She is currently head of the Newton School Committee.

Robin Manion, an analyst for the Advisory Board since 1990, has been approved to succeed Lerner. The Advisory Board's duties include monitoring the MBTA's finances and approving its budget.

Known for her sharp analytical mind and quick wit, Lerner saw the MBTA go through several major changes during her tenure as executive director of the 78-member Advisory Board. Discussing highlights and lowlights of her 15 years at the Advisory Board, Lerner said the MBTA has gone full cycle, from an agency beset with system and morale problems in the early 1980s, to the high-flying agency expanding the Red, Orange and commuter rail lines in the mid-80s, to its current state, somewhat beaten and broken.

Lerner sees the 1990s MBTA as dominated by the politics of a given program, not the transit benefits or consequences, and this in turn has changed the way the MBTA deals with the Advisory Board and responds to it. What used to be comments on the Advisory Board's facts or interpretation have given way to blanket condemnations of reports on declining service quality and customer service and using the media to attack her and the Advisory Board.

Lerner's advice to transit advocates is to speak up when things don't seem right, watch the maintenance of trains and buses, push for maintaining the existing system, and try to get the Administration to talk through issues rather than pushing preconceived ideas without discussion.

The Electric Bus for Washington Street

APT has participated in discussions about transit on Washington Street since Massachusetts transportation officials got approval to relocate the elevated Orange Line and committed to a permanent replacement service for the el. APT calls on the MBTA to fulfill its 20-year commitment to permanent replacement service by working with the neighborhoods on the design issues of the electric bus and to start the environmental review process within four months.

Delaying a decision on mode while rebuilding the street will promote the default position, diesel bus, an unacceptable decision. Compressed natu-

ral gas buses or "bio-diesel" buses are also not acceptable as permanent replacement transit, because although they pollute less than regular buses, they are still buses and do not offer the "real" permanence supplied by overhead wires and would require significantly more to upgrade to rail in the future.

Residents and businesses have suffered as much as riders of the interim Route 49 bus. Lack of permanent replacement transit has held up the street reconstruction. Route 49 riders have to sit in traffic on the Surface Artery and Herald Street as the bus winds its way back into the *continued on next page*

Fun Transit Factoids

Spotlight on...

Millbury Station (Proposed)*

COSTS

To build\$3.3 million
Added Boston to Worcester travel time.....2-3 minutes

BENEFITS

Net increase in train ridership None
[CTPS projection]

* The MBTA has decided to "defer" this station.

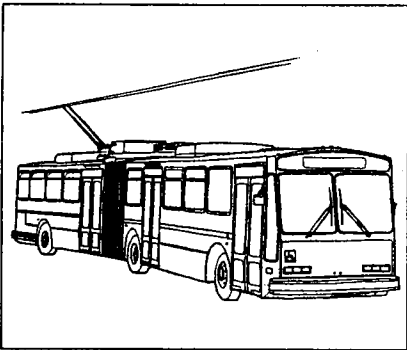
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Washington St. Electric Bus, cont.

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South End from downtown. APT, as advocates for better transit, supports the electric bus, because it would represent a significant service improvement; would allow the revitalization of Washington Street into a multimodal corridor for transit, cars, bicycles and pedestrians; and would be flexible to meet future transit needs.

The MBTA has studied other modes including light rail which has historically been supported by APT. Although light rail is attractive for its connection to the Green Line, we believe it is not buildable at this time: Due to the necessity to build an entire rail line to be operational, the prospect of light rail is many years away; federal funding has repeatedly been denied due to the inability to meet basic cost-effectiveness criteria; and design of a compatible and efficient way to take light rail through South Cove into a portal has not even begun.



Electric bus, on the other hand, is a buildable solution that would immediately improve service, preserve community development options by maintaining land uses and roadway for other modes, presents a visual cue (wires) that transit is part of the transportation mix, and would allow for future expansion or conversion as demand changes or shifts. Finally, funding is in

hand for the electric bus. The MBTA should move forward with the electric bus and improve transit on Washington Street now.

It is essential that electric bus service be built as an integral part of the MBTA system. Free and seamless transfers to rapid transit lines, surface stops with shelters and seats, signal prioritization, and a place on the MBTA spider map are all important. Finally, instead of waiting for the So. Boston Piers Transitway to connect into Boylston station to take Washington Street service to Boylston, the MBTA should pursue options—while the first electric bus phase is being designed and built—to connect the Washington Street service underground.

Electric bus service should also allow for potential upgrade if justified. Power supply installed for the electric bus should be easily convertible for light rail. Other design decisions should consider potential extensions or new routes after the No. Station-So. Station Rail Link, Circumferential Transit and the So. Boston Piers Transitway are built. Washington Street transit should be flexible enough to work with them.

Finally, APT believes that electric bus service may actually help set the stage for eventual conversion to light rail transit, as a transitional mode.

At Last! Green Line Improvements

Many Green Line stations will be reconstructed to provide handicapped accessibility when new low-floor light rail vehicles arrive in 1999. Platforms will be rebuilt and raised to facilitate floor-level boarding, reducing boarding and alighting times for everyone.

Station work will also include new canopies, benches, signage and lighting. Both Kenmore and Arlington, as "key stations," will be getting elevators.

Meanwhile, Boston and Brookline will be undertaking major road reconstruction projects on Huntington and Commonwealth avenues and Beacon Street. These projects will include improved Green Line platform access and measures to reduce automobile-light rail vehicle conflicts.

By mid-1997, repairs to signal systems on the B (Boston College) and E (Heath) lines will be completed. The signal systems give light rail vehicles some degree of priority over automobiles at most intersections. Because automobile cross-traffic slows down service on these lines, traffic signal cycle lengths will be modified to give streetcars additional green time.

Short Stops...

Unfunded Mandate

When the Central Artery/Tunnel (CA/T) project was approved in 1991, it was packaged as an intermodal project. Mitigation measures to relieve traffic congestion during construction—major MBTA capital and operational improvements, high-occupancy vehicle (HOV) lanes, more park-and-ride facilities to access transit and a marketing campaign to shift drivers onto alternative modes—would bring new transit riders. The expectation was that many of these new riders would stay with transit permanently, thus preventing gridlock on the new Central Artery.

Unfortunately, the CA/T project has not brought more federal money to the state for transit nor does any of the CA/T's budget cover these commitments.

The MBTA in 1993 submitted a "Draft Regional Transit Mitigation Program" to the Federal Highway Administration for funding, but it was not approved. Up to \$90 million in highway dollars would have been shifted to new transit support services and operational improvements during peak Artery construction. Recently, a scaled-down transit mitigation program was released, with many measures to improve MBTA operations through more efficient routings, joint fare agreements and schedule changes. No funds are currently committed to this program. This revised plan is viewed as "contingency planning" should traffic congestion worsen.

But what has become of the "intermodal" project? Could the "contingency plan" be implemented even if traffic keeps moving? If the "contingency plan" would improve MBTA operations and efficiency, what other reason need there be to make funding it a priority? Without improved transit service, can the new Central Artery avoid being as congested as the existing highway?

Outsourcing 101

The MBTA is proceeding with its controversial plans to contract out operation of its bus routes. But not everything is going according to plan. Routes were put into five "bundles," but only two were bid on. Moreover, the low bid on one bundle was the Carmen's Union, the MBTA largest union.

In January, the MBTA Board of Directors voted to negotiate a contract with ATC/Vancom of Illinois to operate bus routes from the Charlestown and Fellsway garages. Quincy-based routes were awarded to the Carmen's Union.

The MBTA contracted out station cleaning 10 years ago, and real estate operations were contracted in 1996. APT opposes "privatization" as proposed by the MBTA for its bus services.

What is APT?

The Association for Public Transportation is a non-profit organization founded in 1973 to promote public transportation in and around Boston and advocate for improvements. APT also publishes *Car-Free in Boston*, the guidebook to public transit in Greater Boston and New England.

APT is a transit-advocacy group that depends on its members for information on how to improve transit. Becoming a member of APT gives you a voice in improving transit services. Questions or comments? Call (617) 482-0282.

Membership benefits include:

- Copy of *Car-Free in Boston*
- APT newsletter, "Mass. Transit News"
- Meetings with guest "transit" speakers...and more!

Join APT!

I want to support transit by joining APT.

- \$20 Regular \$35 Friend
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 \$100 Friend of Charlie on the MTA

Name _____

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What public transportation do you use regularly?

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