

December 3, 2020

Fiscal Management Control Board
Massachusetts Bay Transportation Authority
10 Park Plaza
Boston, MA 02116

Re: Proposed Service Reductions under MBTA Forging Ahead Plan

Dear Fiscal Management and Control Board Members:

The City of Cambridge's Transit Advisory Committee, in its advisory role to the City Manager, has reviewed the limited information on the MBTA's Forging Ahead website on the proposed service cuts resulting from a loss of ridership and fare revenue due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The Committee recognizes the severity of the potential fiscal situation that *may* develop if ridership doesn't substantially recover or if additional State or Federal assistance is not forthcoming. However, the Cambridge Transit Advisory Committee strongly urges the Fiscal Management and Control Board to reject any specific plan to reduce service levels to any significant degree in the MBTA region, including any bus, rapid transit and commuter rail services that are provided in the City of Cambridge, given the enormous uncertainty of the long-term impact of the pandemic, including the effects of soon-to-be-distributed vaccines and other public health measures, as well as the potential horizon for new subsidies to maintain and expand transit services. We provide additional detail below.

The Committee has found the MBTA's materials difficult to fully understand the scope and impact of the proposed service reductions without additional detail like schedules on modified routes. The Committee is concerned with frequency reductions that are described as frequencies below the current "Service Delivery Policy" that are not explicitly described alongside the proposed changes. The outright elimination of routes, including routes 68, 72, 79, 80, and 88 is equally concerning.

The Committee is concerned with the MBTA's argument that few passengers on the routes with reduced frequency or proposed for elimination would still have access to transit service, but under the assumption that passengers can wait longer for their current service or could walk a short distance to an alternative service. We are concerned by the impact that this argument has on passengers' total journey travel times which will be made longer by:

- longer walk and wait times
- less convenient and longer transfer times with many bus/rail combined trips
- the potential decrease in service reliability when disruptions occur due to the reduction of redundancy in the entire system.

In addition, if the threat of COVID-19 lingers, there is no doubt that the proposed cuts will result in more crowded services that reduce passengers' ability to social distance on many services. These will impact both those transit critical and dependent passengers currently using the system and the many more so-called "choice" passengers yet to return to riding transit on a daily basis.

As just one example of the many unacceptable proposals, the elimination of Route 72 peak period service on Huron Avenue in Cambridge would result in a 15-minute peak period headway becoming 30

or more minutes depending on the final schedules proposed for the modified Route 75. This proposal completely undoes a recent **no-cost** service improvement in this corridor from Belmont Center to Harvard Square that the City co-developed with the MBTA last year. This service change was implemented only two months before the start of the pandemic. For a rider on Route 72, this one change along with the proposed Red Line frequency reductions could easily add an additional 20 minutes to a previous 30-minute trip to Kendall Square or Downtown Boston. In the opposite direction, even more time will likely be needed as the difficulty of timing a rail to bus transfer increases.

Our committee also does not believe that the MBTA has provided the public with enough clear and detailed information regarding the tradeoffs involved for each individual route in the service reduction proposals, such as the number of passengers impacted overall and the expected loss of pre-COVID ridership versus the total cost savings for each proposal.

Finally, we observe that recapturing riders, once the public health emergency has eased, will be much more realistic with the current frequencies and less crowded trains and buses rather than the proposed degraded frequencies due to understandable temporary ridership losses. We believe that the MBTA has not explained how it will determine if and when service levels will be restored and what criteria will be used to evaluate potential future demand (and not simply the then current counts of passengers on the degraded services), especially since it is not likely that the return to previous travel levels will happen all at once. Clearly, the currently proposed reduced service levels and potential crowding will influence pre-COVID MBTA passengers fortunate enough to have transportation options more than any loyalty to the MBTA. In particular, the committee notes that established travel demand theory shows that travelers often reconsider their choice of travel mode following major disruptions, like this pandemic, and the MBTA's across-the-board service reductions and elimination of route and transfer options will turn many previous MBTA riders into auto users as they gradually return to their prior travel destinations. Those choices would lead to other negative impacts to the transportation system in Cambridge and the region including renewed congestion and work against the climate and sustainability goals and plans of Cambridge and the Commonwealth. In summary, we see these proposed reductions as a big step towards the dismantling of a truly equitable system in the Boston region that all can reliably use on a daily basis.

We urgently ask that you indefinitely postpone any decisions to cut service levels and redouble your ongoing efforts to secure additional Federal and State support to weather this ongoing public health crisis.

Sincerely,

John Attanucci, Chair
On behalf of the Cambridge Transit Advisory Committee