



Charles D. Baker, Governor
Karyn E. Polito, Lieutenant Governor
Stephanie Pollack, MassDOT Secretary & CEO
Brian Shortsleeve, Chief Administrator and Acting General Manager



March 17, 2017

Dear Legislator:

I am sure you have been hearing a lot about the MBTA's weekend commuter rail service and so I am writing to offer a brief overview about several factors that will or could affect weekend commuter rail service in the near future.

As you know, the MBTA Fiscal and Management Control Board (FMCB) is reviewing the suspension of weekend commuter rail service as one of several options it will consider as it seeks to close the MBTA's FY2018 operating budget deficit. The FMCB is now hearing from a range of stakeholders, including you, about that and other options and will not make any formal decisions until next month. The FMCB will be discussing this issue at their meeting on Monday March 27 and they always welcome remarks from elected officials during the public comment period, which begins at noon.

You should also be aware that some weekend commuter rail service will be suspended beginning this summer for reasons that are not budget-related.

The first reason is a federal mandate for the MBTA to install Positive Train Control on the commuter rail system. Positive Train Control is a safety system to prevent train-to-train collisions, over-speed derailments, incursions into established work zone limits, and movement of trains through track switches that may have been left in the incorrect position. In compliance with federal requirements, the T has filed a PTC Implementation Plan to the Federal Railroad Administration to install hardware on all commuter rail lines and two pilot lines (Stoughton and Lowell Lines) by December 31, 2018, with full PTC implementation by December 31, 2020. The T faces a \$105,000 a day fine if PTC is not operational by December 31, 2018 unless an extension is granted. Even such an extension still requires all PTC hardware to be installed and pilot lines to be up and running before December 31, 2018.

Work on PTC has begun. Because the T requires complete and unencumbered access to commuter rail rights of way, it is not possible to meet the federal PTC deadline if regular service operates. As the T has already discussed several times at meetings and in public postings, this PTC work necessitates simultaneous **commuter rail weekend service suspensions beginning this summer and lasting into 2018 for the Lowell, Haverhill, Newburyport, Needham, Fairmount, Rockport, Fitchburg, Franklin, and Worcester Lines** as well as the Wildcat Branch (a 2.88 mile length of track between the Lowell and Haverhill lines). Simultaneous weekend shutdowns of the entire **Lowell and Haverhill Lines** will begin in July 2017. The newer and more technologically advanced **Greenbush, Middleborough or Kingston/Plymouth Lines** are will not face weekend shutdowns; nor will the **Providence/Stoughton Line**, which already had PTC installed by Amtrak. Commuter rail customers will benefit from an important secondary benefit to these PTC-related weekend shutdowns, which will also enable the T to accomplish state of good repair

work to improve system safety and reliability that simply cannot be done while trains are running. This work includes signal upgrades, installation of new railroad ties, and track maintenance.

Besides mandated PTC work, weekend commuter rail service suspensions are planned for the Lowell and Fitchburg Lines as the Green Line Extension Project proceeds. Current plans call for 25 annual weekend shutdowns of the Lowell and Fitchburg Commuter Rail Lines, beginning as early as March 2018 and continuing until project completion (approximately 2021). These lines will never be shut down at the same time but will be staggered throughout each construction season.

The weekend shutdown schedules above assume, of course, that PTC and GLX work both proceed as planned. But as you know, these are very complex projects and additional weekend shutdowns could become necessary.

While these limited suspensions of weekend commuter rail service due to PTC and GLX work will proceed this summer and beyond, let me restate that the FMCB has not yet decided whether or how to pursue the option of reconfiguring weekend service on all commuter rail lines. But the option is on the table because the MBTA must at least examine the cost/benefit of high-subsidy, low ridership services such as weekend commuter rail in the face of a nearly \$50 million operating budget deficit in FY18. Currently, the MBTA subsidizes a weekday commuter rail trip by about \$5 per passenger, a subsidy that jumps to about \$34 per passenger for the same trip on a Saturday or Sunday.

Faced with a statutory requirement to balance the T's operating budget, the Board is reviewing options to both reduce costs and increase own-source revenues. I recognize that curtailing weekend service will adversely affect some riders and businesses and welcome all ideas for more fiscally responsible ways to maintain this service over the long term. Working collaboratively with Keolis, I believe we have come a long way since the winter of 2015, implementing a number of important reforms and new approaches to old problems that have put the MBTA, including our important commuter rail service, on a better path. We now have an opportunity to work together to rethink weekend commuter rail service as part of the necessary but sometimes painful effort ensure the fiscal sustainability of the MBTA. I welcome your feedback on this important matter and look forward to working with you.

Sincerely,



Brian Shortsleeve
Chief Administrator and
Acting General Manager, MBTA