

OPINION: Public Transportation Essential During Emergencies **July 12, 2006**

By Jeffrey Rosenblum and Chella Rajan

Amidst this week's finger-pointing barrage, following Milena Del Valle's tragic death in the Big Dig, one agency stepped up efforts to maintain normalcy in Boston and the region: the MBTA.

Tuesday, as state and federal inspectors began investigating the cause of the collapse of 12 tons of roof slabs in the Ted Williams tunnel, travelers had to use alternate routes to Logan Airport. With the motorists' two-tunnel option to Logan now cut in half, many travelers clogged the Callahan tunnel, formerly the primary route to Logan Airport, causing massive traffic backups.

Meanwhile, the Massachusetts Bay Transportation Authority increased service levels to rush-hour frequency on both the Orange and Blue Lines, and secured special access for Silver Line buses through the stricken Ted Williams tunnel.

(No doubt, the thousands of travelers heading to Logan airport were glad to have someone step in with solutions that kept the city and state running, rather than politicking and finger-pointing.)

The state police also granted Silver Line buses access to a special emergency ramp, at frequencies of one bus every 20 minutes, which kept an additional route to Logan open while maintaining necessary access to emergency personnel.

The tunnel collapse, and the aftermath of delays on roadways all over Boston, should serve as a wake-up call to reduce risks throughout our entire transportation system. Having a multi-modal transportation system significantly muted the impact of the Ted Williams tunnel closure. It could have helped another urban area in a recent emergency situation.

The post-Katrina evacuation of New Orleans is an object lesson on what not to do; the lack of a detailed action plan – which included no transit – left evacuees to rely solely on cars that crawled on gridlocked highways even as huge numbers of transit-dependant riders were left behind to face death and disease.

A variety of planning policies and programs are needed to create a resilient transport system. These benefit everybody in a community, including drivers.

As with the staged evacuation of Washington DC's Mall last July, cars alone were insufficient. Dense cities can only be evacuated efficiently by prioritizing transit modes rather than cars.

During emergencies, moving more people in fewer vehicles would mean a safer and more efficient evacuation.

Once the flurry of accusations subsides, there is bound to be significant political pressure to increase investments to secure the safety of the tunnels associated with the Big Dig.

Fortunately we already had the necessary public infrastructure in place to maintain connections with the airport when the tunnel ceiling gave way late Monday night. Ironically, it was the Big Dig which allowed for these connections, when the state agreed to fund significant transit expansions and improvements to offset the environmental impact of the unprecedented highway project.

When the state signed the Big Dig transit commitments agreement with the Conservation Law Foundation it included Silver Line access to the airport and improved Blue Line service.

The Silver Line Phase II, which opened in late 2004, provides direct access to the airport from South Station, with dedicated right-of-ways.

Improvements to the Blue Line, including platform lengthening, signal upgrades and train replacements, have made access to Logan more convenient.

Unfortunately, the state has reversed its course of supporting crucial public infrastructure, significantly cutting the MBTA's funding since 2000, when it moved the MBTA to "Forward Funding". The MBTA remains in a state of fiscal crisis as it attempts to make up for a forecasted \$70-million budget gap in FY 2007. It has proposed significant fare hikes, the third in seven years, to make up that budget gap and has proposed significant restructuring of fares.

Unfortunately, further fare hikes are likely to drive off riders, destroying the long-term stability of the MBTA. Any fare hike should await the Transportation Finance Commission's long-awaited recommendations and the 2006 gubernatorial race. In the meantime, the state, which is in better fiscal shape than it has been in the past five years, must step in and support the MBTA with the \$35 million necessary to maintain the agency through the first half of 2007.

The MBTA has proven itself a state and regional asset, particularly during emergency situations. Investment in the MBTA did not happen overnight, but rather has been the conscious effort of dedicated public leaders, with an eye toward the region's long-term stability. This week, that investment paid back in spades.

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