

Fair Burden

*By Amanda Patterson, LivableStreets Alliance Staff Writer
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BOSTON— On June 6th, more than a hundred T riders rallied in Copley Square before packing a standing room only public hearing on the MBTA's proposed fare increases. The crowd chanted one message: Don't raise our fares! General Manager Dan Grabauskas, who was in attendance, also heard public concerns about inadequate quality of service. The T Riders Union (TRU) agrees that the new fare is too high and the service is already sub-standard.

State legislators, gubernatorial candidates and transportation advocates echoed the call for improved, affordable service. "At a time when gas prices are through the roof, we should not be raising fares," said Democratic gubernatorial candidate Deval Patrick. Green-Rainbow Party gubernatorial candidate Grace Ross agreed, saying fare hikes were being leveraged on the backs of those who can least afford them.

State Senator Jarrett Barrios, who represents parts of Cambridge, Somerville, and Chelsea, told the MBTA that debt relief is a possibility if the agency requests it. Sen. Pat Jehlen, (Somerville and Medford) echoed Barrios's call for debt relief, and assured the MBTA that the issue would receive the attention of the Massachusetts state Legislature.

The MBTA's proposal would raise fares and change the system's fare structure beginning in January 2007. If the plan passes, a subway ride will cost \$1.70 (up from \$1.25) and a bus trip \$1.25, (up from \$0.90). A new transfer system will provide free train to bus transfers for Charlie Cards holders, though those transferring from bus to train will pay the \$0.45 difference. Under the new plan, the average commuter rail passenger will pay 25% more per year.

MBTA Assistant General Manager Dennis DiZoglio said the fare hike –the agency's third in six years- is necessary to fill a pending budget gap of about \$70 million in fiscal year 2007, which begins in July. A large part of this deficit stems from the \$5 billion debt currently on the T's books. Servicing this debt costs over \$300 million dollars a year -one third of the agency's total operating budget. Most other transit agencies in the US spend less than 15% of their annual operating budget on debt service.

The MBTA Advisory Board is currently in the process of evaluating the proposed fare increase and restructuring, but recently approved a FY2007 budget that relies on revenue from the fare increase. It sees little other choice. "Grabauskas is required by law to balance the T's budget," says budget and policy analyst Ulla Hester. "At this point he has only two choices: higher fares or decreased service."

Other proposed changes include eliminating extra fares for longer trips on the Red and Green Lines, and increasing prices for commuter rail tickets and parking. To lower costs and speed boarding, tokens will be replaced with automated Charlie Cards. The Charlie Card can be used either as a monthly pass or to hold cash value to "pay as you go" (or both). It

can be recharged either online or at machines in stations. Purchasing a single ride will cost more.

Lee Matsueda of the TRU believes that consumers are confused by the simultaneous fare restructuring and fare increase, and says that the Charlie Ticket should be phased out. "The public is confused by the two types of automated payment," he says. While the T Riders Oversight Committee (TROC) supports the fare restructuring plan, they have not been consulted regarding the proposed fare increase.

The fare increase could also have a dramatic impact on ridership. By some estimates, the fare increase will result in 6 million fewer rides on the system. But MBTA spokesperson Joe Pesaturo points out that lost ridership figures have been wrong before, and Grabauskas has said that he will earn back every one of these lost passengers through improved service in the years to come.

For a copy of the LivableStreets Alliance "MBTA in crisis— Citizens' InfoSheet" handed out at the hearing, use the following link:

http://www.livablestreets.info/files/MBTAhearinghandout_6jun06.pdf

LivableStreets Alliance is a non-profit organization that believes urban transportation has the power to make Boston a more connected, livable city. We challenge people to think differently and to demand a system that balances transit, walking, and biking with automobiles. We promote safe, convenient, and affordable transportation for all users in urban Boston. Streets that are enjoyable to use will better support neighborhoods and business districts. LivableStreets believes that to remain a competitive, world-class city, Boston needs a world-class transportation network – one that makes our city a better place to live, work, and play.

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