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First-ever Boston Bus Marathon demands faster and more reliable bus service

TUESDAY, APRIL 18 – At 8 am this morning, less than 24 hours after Robert Cheruiyot finished his 26-mile Boston Marathon course in 2 hours and 7 minutes, teams of MBTA bus riders boarded buses in Roxbury and Chelsea for the first-ever Boston Bus Marathon.

“It takes more time to commute six miles round trip from Dorchester’s Four Corners to downtown on an MBTA bus than it takes a marathoner to run 26 miles,” said Khalida Smalls from the T Riders Union of Alternatives for Community & Environment (ACE).

“For too long the MBTA and the state have neglected transit in our communities. The bus system is truly a second class service, compared to the subway and commuter rail,” Smalls said. “Many of us who can’t afford a car rely on buses 24 hours a day, 7 days a week to get to work, school, medical appointments, and shopping. But you never know when a bus is going to show up, so you wait and wait. And when one does come, it’s always crowded. Today we’re riding to demand long overdue improvements in our transit service.”

The Bus Marathon is challenging the MBTA to speed up bus service and increase its reliability by running buses according to their own schedules. Organizers also called on the gubernatorial candidates to pledge new investment of transit resources in lower income communities and communities of color.

At 8 am, teams of marathon riders in Roxbury’s Dudley Square and Chelsea’s Bellingham Square boarded buses that took them downtown and back during a typical rush hour. They wore numbered bibs representing some of the worst performing routes in the bus system.

At a noon rally and closing ceremonies at the State House, marathon riders and supporters joined with public officials, community leaders, and transit advocates for an awards ceremony at the finish line. Riders also challenge the MBTA, the state, and the gubernatorial candidates to improve the reliability and speed of public transit for lower income riders and riders of color in Greater Boston. In addition to Marathon riders and supporters, State Senator Jarrett Barrios and State Representative Gloria Fox were expected to speak.

Also among the speakers was 12th grader Christopher Valencia, a student at South Boston High School. Valencia’s daily commute to school takes him from Jackson Square on the Orange Line, to Broadway on the Red Line, and then to City Point in South Boston on the #9 bus. Valencia leaves his home in Jamaica Plain every morning at 6:30, but finds the bus portion of the trip makes him so late to school that the doors are often locked when he arrives at 8 am.

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“Because of the bus, I’d be locked out and sent home. I’d end up missing whole days of school,” he said. “The bus comes at random times,” he continued. “It doesn’t follow any schedule.” Valencia now leaves at 6 am each day to ensure that he is on time. Valencia and other students in his class recently completed a survey of 317 youth with ACE’s Roxbury Environmental Empowerment Project. Among their findings: 80% said they had been late to school because of the MBTA. 79% reported that MBTA buses had passed them at their bus stops without stopping. 20% reported that the buses “never run on time...are always late.”

For many riders, the Bus Marathon simply illustrates the frustration they feel every day grappling with a transit system where the buses they depend on seldom run on time and are often overcrowded.

“I ride the 111 every day. The service is pretty bad,” said Alba Rivas from Chelsea. “Most of the time the bus is not on time, always full, with no place to sit. I think the MBTA is not providing good service to its customers. The way they treat bus riders is simply unfair.”

One out of every 3 three boardings in the MBTA system is by bus. Many of the busiest routes serve lower income communities and communities of color, according to MBTA documents. Of 154 bus routes listed in the MBTA’s draft Bus Service plan, only 4 ran according to their schedules on weekdays, an on-time percentage of 2.6%. By contrast on subway lines like the Red Line, trains ran on time 75-95% of the time.

“We’re talking about two separate and unequal transit systems,” said Lee Matsueda, an organizer at ACE. In general, the state and the MBTA invest far more in commuter rail in more affluent communities than they do in bus service in the city. We need new investment in urban public transportation so that everyone has access to first class public transit, regardless of race or class. ”

With the State’s 20 year transportation plan languishing in a lame duck governorship, and the region’s “Journey to 2030” plan being developed by a Metropolitan Planning Organization that has no people of color representation, Bus Marathon riders are also looking to the gubernatorial candidates for leadership.

“The Governor plays a critical role in setting transportation priorities, and allocating the needed funding to accomplish them,” said Bob Terrell, Executive Director of the Washington Street Corridor Coalition (WSCC) and member of the On the Move transportation justice coalition. “We’re challenging the current candidates to develop and announce their plans, with specific proposals for how they will improve urban transit and where they’ll get the funding to do it. For too long, communities of color and lower income communities have been treated like second-class customers.”

More information about the Bus Marathon, including a Bus Marathon blog can be found at www.ace-ej.org/tru/busmarathon