



November 23, 2020

Fiscal and Management Control Board
MBTA
10 Park Plaza
Boston, MA 02116

The South Shore Chamber of Commerce is concerned about the apparent framework for proposed MBTA service changes and cuts. We appreciate the incredible challenge facing the MBTA during the pandemic slowdown. However, we do not view the proposals as “spreading the pain across the system”, proportional scaling back, or balanced with plans for re-opening. Instead, we see some of these proposals as a) incorrectly focused exclusively on transportation services rather than including broader state interests, b) mistakenly based on short-term revenue problems rather than future operations, and c) developed without adequate planning on how to return services when the pandemic ends.

It is understandable that a transit system would look at transportation numbers. The Chamber views suburban mass transit as being critical to other non-transit priorities for the state. These include housing, environmental concerns, commercial real estate investment, suburban economic and community development, and workforce development. For example, the South Shore has made real progress on creating more multi-family housing and affordable housing gains based around transportation resources. This has been a priority for the South Shore Chamber of Commerce and the Baker Administration. It should be obvious that it is hard to promote transit-oriented development without transit. Unfortunately, the MBTA is being forced to work with only its transportation budget and services.

The MBTA is looking to solve a problem for two budget years (FY '21 and FY'22). Some decisions made in the first half of FY '21 could trigger private sector decisions that will make future operations more difficult. Those decisions could come from private transportation services, real estate developers, commercial tenants, and employers planning return to work strategies. Worse, some decisions might become unnecessary based on future national relief, infrastructure funding bills or earlier increases in ridership. (While we think some of the proposals are near-sighted the Chamber commends the DOT and MBTA for not abandoning the MBTA capital plan which looks to the future.)

We understand the need and accept appropriate changes in some levels of service during this extraordinary situation. We are concerned however with the possible elimination, intended or not, of services that could be forced by deep cuts or even suspension of services. For example, should South Shore ferry services have to close there is no plan on when or how it would return. There does not appear to be contingency planning if current contractors, equipment, and trained personnel disappear and are not available to the MBTA in the future.

We understand that your crystal ball is no clearer than ours in forecasting full re-opening or how the post-pandemic economy will change work and transportation patterns. Based on some DOT and MBTA comments the MBTA is already thinking about what a metropolitan transportation system will look like in the future. The Chamber believes the pandemic either forces or creates some creative re-thinking of business models, housing trends, how we work and even how we move around. We would like to work with the MBTA/DOT to think about new issues such as improved "last mile" transportation services, true intermodal planning in the suburbs, public private partnership opportunities, stronger smart growth planning around infrastructure. However, all of that may be harder to implement if the current system forces change now due to an emergency budget problem.

We are opposed to the suggested elimination of ferry services and cuts in bus or rail that can not be readily reinstated when ridership returns to more normal levels. We urge the Fiscal Control and Management Board to continue planning contingencies but expand the view beyond today and consider the broader consequences beyond just transportation.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Peter Forman". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Peter Forman
President & CEO
South Shore Chamber of Commerce