



Massachusetts Chapter

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## **Re: MBTA Fare Increase/Restructuring Proposal of 2006**

The two distinct components of this proposal - a fare increase proposal along with a restructuring of existing fare policy - are complex in nature and difficult to review.

One result could be an overemphasis on the issues surrounding the fare *increase*, with little discussion on the major benefits that could be expected with the proposed fare *policy* changes. Negative impacts resulting from proposed fare policy changes might also not be fully examined.

The MBTA's marketing effort has fallen short. To their credit, it was a complex and difficult message to get across. While some changes, such as "value pricing" should be implemented quickly, others need more work. The Club suggests the MBTA make one more effort to explain its new fare and fare restructuring policies, while incorporating any revisions resulting from the public comments received.

### **Transfer Policy**

The Sierra Club has long been supportive of a free or heavily discounted bus to rail transfer (value pricing) for the MBTA system. ***Of all the MBTA's restructuring proposals, this is the most important and progressive.*** The Club recommends that it remain as an integral part of any final fare policy initiative.

This change would bring MBTA fare policy in line with that of most, if not all, major American transit systems. Ridership and revenue on the MBTA's feeder bus and subway system could show an increase, even though the replacement monthly pass for the existing combo pass would cost less.

It must be noted that the provision of a free or heavily discounted transfer between modes was not originally implemented as social welfare policy, but as a way for the private interests that were operating transit systems in the early part of this century to increase ridership and profits. The realization that the inconvenience inherent in transferring from one mode to another was a disincentive to riding transit meant that some form of financial incentive was needed to attract and retain riders; hence a transfer system. Most major North American and European transit systems have retained and expanded transfers between modes. The MBTA has been very much the exception, rather than the rule, although the MBTA does offer a transfer between bus and subway in very limited circumstances.

Additionally, in the mid eighties, the MBTA allowed commuter rail monthly pass holders free transfers into the MBTA's subway and bus lines where formerly they had to pay an additional fare. The significant increase in commuter rail ridership since then is, in part, due to this financial incentive offered to the commuter rail rider.



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## Surcharges

As an awkward and punitive attempt to encourage riders to use the new electronic fare alternatives instead of cash, this proposal has the potential to cause significant bad will on the part of the traveling public. Poorly explained by the MBTA and much of the media, many people still think the new cash fares will be \$1.70 subway and \$1.25 bus.

It may have been better, and more in line with other transit systems, to have simply presented the new cash fares as \$2.25 and \$1.65 with no transfers allowed. This would have undoubtedly created more of a media ruckus but it also would have allowed the MBTA to get its real message across - ***Almost no one will ever actually have to pay full fare due to the many discounted alternatives made possible by the MBTA's new fare collection system and restructured fare policy.***

In any case, there needs to be a better way of offering people incentives not to use cash, especially paper, to use Charlie Cards and OnePasses and, equally important, not to use a Charlie Card for just one trip and then throw it away. Possible alternatives include charging a high minimum amount for the initial purchase of a Charlie Card - encouraging people to hang on to them; eliminating surcharges and allowing transfers on single ride Charlie Tickets within a certain time limit; renaming the Charlie ticket to something else suggesting a one time use only - too many Charlies are causing confusion; and exploring the possibility of retaining the token for surface bus usage only - they could be sold at a discount in packs of ten or more as is done by some other transit systems.

At this point the Club strongly recommends the elimination of the surcharges. There are sufficient incentives proposed to convince most frequent riders to forgo cash and take advantage of either the Charlie Card or the various pass options.

## Commuter Rail

### Fares

The Club is having difficulty in understanding the necessity of a commuter rail increase at this time. Information comparing the MBTA to other systems, including regional rail systems such as BART in San Francisco, as well as more traditional commuter rail systems such as SEPTA in Philadelphia, would have been of help in determining the need for such an increase. Comparisons as to fares, fare structure, revenue, capital and operating costs would need to be included.

### Fare Structure

The Club has always thought interzone fares were set too high and supports the MBTA's new policy of reducing such fares to encourage ridership. More fine tuning may be needed in the future.

## **MBTA Debt**

The state must assume part or all of the MBTA's existing debt service while also funding the mitigation projects for the Big Dig. Forward funding is not working as anticipated and has not adequately reimbursed the MBTA for expenses incurred as part of the CA/T project. It's also clear that the future expansion of the MBTA commuter rail system is a statewide responsibility.

## **What has the MBTA done to improve service?**

Much of what is contained in this section can be defined as addressing the long deferred maintenance needs of the system, along with the routine replacement of vehicles, equipment, and structures.

The Greenbush Line, along with the provision of 1400 new commuter rail parking spaces systemwide, will serve suburban commuter rail customers. The North Station Transportation Center and Phase II of the Silver Line serve the interests of downtown property owners and developers. Not much is left over for the older inner core neighborhoods of the system.

In terms of bus purchases, the MBTA reversed an earlier "no new diesel" pledge, and has instituted a policy of purchasing new diesel buses, instead of alternatively powered CNG, electric, or advanced hybrid electric vehicles.

Lacking the obvious symbolism of a massive power plant complete with towering smokestacks, the very real negative health impacts of large number of diesel powered vehicles, especially in densely populated urban areas, may be underestimated. As more research is done on the effects of small particulate matter on human health, it's becoming increasingly clear that existing concentrations of this material, in addition to other pollutants, may well be above acceptable levels. Concentrations of various pollutants inside buses are of equal concern to those released outside of the vehicle.

No future increase in MBTA diesel bus vehicle miles traveled (VMTs) should result from revenues generated by this proposed fare increase.

## **The Silver Line**

The State can't close the books on either the Southwest Corridor or Central Artery projects until one major commitment made as part of both projects is fulfilled. The Club is referring to the commitment to provide an "equal or better" replacement service for the Orange Line rapid transit line ripped out of Dudley Station in 1987.

Although both will be connected by Phase III of the Silver Line, the obviously unequal service to be provided to Roxbury (Phase I), as contrasted to what is being provided for the emerging waterfront district (Phase II), calls into question whether the principal of ensuring environmental justice to all populations hasn't been cynically manipulated to provide significant benefits for a few.

If this weren't the case, then the Silver Line would be in tunnel all the way to Dudley Station. The scales should balance!



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## Transit Equity and other Issues

### Equity

Which routes and services have the lowest subsidy/passenger? Are transit riders utilizing high density urban bus, streetcar and subway routes paying more than their fair share contrasted to riders utilizing other MBTA services? Does the MBTA return sufficient capital and operating resources to increase ridership and promote economic development in those older core neighborhoods which are most dependent on good public transportation access?

The MBTA states that it has “One of the lowest fare recovery ratios of large transit agencies” at 36% but lumps everything into one category. A more sophisticated analysis needs to be done of the various routes and modes to determine who pays what. Are public transportation’s best customers being poorly served? If so, why should they be expected to pay more in the way of fares?

### Indirect MBTA fare subsidies such as those for senior citizens and persons with disabilities

While there may be valid social policy reasons for deeply discounting fares for these groups, the MBTA should not have to bear the financial burden for subsidizing these discounts. The difference between the full fare and any discount fare needs to be apportioned separately in the state budget with the MBTA receiving the difference. It would be ironic if seniors and persons with disabilities have to fight to retain necessary transit services threatened with cutbacks caused in part by discounted fares for these very same populations.

### Property Development

Is the MBTA maximizing the development potential of the properties under their control as a source of revenue to the Authority, and not the general fund? If the MBTA is not to receive full market value for the sale or lease of its vast holdings to encourage certain development patterns, then the difference should be made up by the state. Transit Oriented Development won’t succeed if the transit authority can’t offer adequate transportation services to these new communities.

### Green Line outbound fare collection

The existing surface only fare on most of the Green Line, with the exception of the outer portion of the Riverside line, is 62.5 cents each way (\$1.25 - pay as you enter inbound, no charge outbound). With the proposed fare increase, but no change in fare policy, the fare would rise to 85 cents each way (\$1.70 - pay as you enter inbound, no charge outbound). The MBTA now is proposing a fare policy change which would require riders to pay the full subway fare in both directions - This would result in a **100% fare increase** for Green Line surface riders.

The MBTA’s proposal would negatively impact all Green Line riders, especially at peak periods, while reducing ridership and forgoing potential revenue gains.



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More diesel powered shuttle buses along Commonwealth Avenue, and fewer non polluting Green Line trains, may also be a result of this policy change.

If the MBTA wants to cut down on the number of BU students riding university shuttle buses inbound and the Green Line outbound - in effect paying no fares - then it should try implementing a variation of the proof of payment (POP) system in use by many other cities.

One final note - If collected, an 85 cent one way surface Green Line fare (or one half the resulting new subway fare) is not unreasonable given the very heavy rider turnover along almost the entire length of the Green Line system. The Green Line has among the lowest subsidies per rider in the entire MBTA system.

The Club hopes its comments will be of assistance.

Sincerely,

John Kyper  
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Massachusetts Chapter