

# *Fare Hikes, Service Cuts and MBTA Mismanagement: The Story of the T*

**By Senator Robert L. Hedlund**

On Tuesday January 3<sup>rd</sup> the MBTA outlined two proposals to reduce the over \$161 million budget deficit projected for Fiscal Year 2013 in a presentation to legislators. Both proposals included fare hikes, the reduction of services and a complete elimination of the commuter boat subsidy. As the Senator representing the South Shore, I know this will have a negative effect on my district. I am frustrated with the MBTA's proposal, especially the elimination of the Commuter boat subsidy.

The Hingham Commuter Boat has been a means of public transportation that I have supported since its inception. In fact during the years of negotiations over the construction of the Greenbush Commuter Rail Line from 2001 to 2007, I strongly advocated for an expansion of commuter boat services both in Hingham and Scituate over the creation of the commuter rail line. I have long since believed that Greenbush represents a decision marked by poor planning and false promises.

The years since the conclusion of construction have only further supported my original concerns regarding the \$513 million dollar restoration project. In fact, MBTA Blue Ribbon commission report from 2000 warned that "in order to avoid saddling future generations of riders with overwhelming costs...the committee recommends a moratorium on all capital projects" unless they "result in measurable increases in productivity or revenues." Two years later, a Pioneer Institute study found that the MBTA was already straying from the recommendations of the 2000 report and again warned against unnecessary capital expansion. Unfortunately, these warnings went unheeded, and the Greenbush Restoration went full steam ahead.

In 2010 the Metropolitan Planning Organization conducted a study of the recently completed Greenbush line comparing the projected ridership numbers and the actual numbers. The report is clear; Greenbush has not attracted riders, has hurt the commuter boat, and not reduced any congestion on Rt 3 or Rt 3A as originally stated. The findings are as follows:

### **Ridership is only 60% of what was projected**

- FEIR, 2001 predicted 3,320 peak hour riders by 2010
- Actual peak ridership is 1,934

### **Greenbush killed commuter boats**

- Ridership on commuter boats down 24% since launch
- More than two-thirds of Scituate, Cohasset and Hingham riders used to use commuter boat

### **Not removing cars from roadway**

- 66% of Greenbush riders were already using mass transit

- 15.8% were using commuter rail
- 46.6% commuter boat
- 3.4% private bus

#### **Has not eased congestion**

- Traffic fell by greater rate elsewhere in Metropolitan Boston region
- Greenbush region - Traffic down 4.2%
- Metro Boston – down 14%
- Study says decline has more to do with recession and high gas prices

I have never doubted the need for expanded mass transit options along the Greenbush corridor. I opposed the commuter rail because the constantly rising price tag – it jumped 25% alone between 2001 and 2007 – didn't justify the relatively small number of cars being removed from the roadways, especially when the MBTA was prioritizing Greenbush over projects such as the Green Line extension to Medford, which would have a much larger impact on air quality and vehicular traffic. Additionally the MBTA's own report from the Blue Ribbon Commission further supported my skepticism of the Greenbush restoration project.

On top of the sizeable annual debt service being paid by the MBTA for Greenbush, the MBTA must also pay millions of dollars annually to cover the line's operating loss.

All of this is the backdrop to the proposals the MBTA presented to the legislature on Monday. The plans include either a 35-43% increase in fares, a 19-20% reduction in service including cancellation of weekend service on the Commuter Rail, and both plans call for the entire elimination of the commuter boat subsidy.

While it is concerning to be raising fares during a down economy, I can understand the need to increase fares throughout the entire MBTA system. I would prefer that fares are not increased, but the need for additional revenue at the agency is clear. What I cannot understand is why we would first create the commuter line- which abjectly affected a better, cheaper, and already existing means of public transportation to the tune of \$513 million taxpayer dollars- then eliminate the subsidy that supported the most cost effective alternative. In addition to the elimination of the commuter boat, the MBTA would be canceling weekend service to the only remaining means of public transportation for residents on the South Shore, making this a curious decision at best.

Maintenance costs alone on the Greenbush line are exorbitant, including the now necessary replacement of all the concrete rail ties along the 57 mile Old Colony Line at a cost of \$91.5 million to the taxpayers. This comes less than 10 years after the completed construction.

The commuter boat represented a better investment at the time of the Greenbush negotiations, and has only continued to look better since the new line's completion. Eliminating an economically viable and potent industry in my district is not the way the T should go about solving its debt burden. Responsibility for bad decisions and poor planning lie with the agency responsible for those decisions, not those supporting the services they provide.

The burden of balancing the T's budget should not fall solely on the commuters who use those services. If the T, with its dedicated portion of the sales tax revenue and repeated investment by the legislature cannot live within its budget, maybe it is time for the state to take back control of the quasi-state agency and manage it effectively. It is time for real progress to be made, not knee jerk reactions by an agency that has proved its inability to live within its means.

As a long-serving member of the transportation committee, I have been vocal regarding the MBTA's repeated refusals to implement the recommendations of independent studies. The MBTA wasted hundreds of millions on a boondoggle and now wants to clean up the mess by eliminating the most efficiently run service they provide while saddling customers with an overwhelming burden which the MBTA knew all along was unavoidable. This is simply unacceptable and will not be tolerated.

Although I will be making my opposition clear, the MBTA still needs to hear directly from commuter boat riders. I encourage you to attend one of the MBTA's upcoming local public hearings to express your concerns:

**Hingham**

Town Hall  
Central Meeting Room  
210 Central Street  
Wednesday, February 8; 6-8 PM

**Quincy**

Thomas Crane Public Library  
Community Room  
40 Washington Street  
Wednesday, February 15; 6-8

I also recommend you to join the Facebook page I have created called "Save the MBTA Commuter Boat" to receive the latest updates on these proposals.

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