



Town of Arlington

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Steve Poftak
General Manager
Massachusetts Bay Transportation Authority
10 Park Plaza, Suite 5610
Boston, MA 02116

Re: Forging Ahead Proposed Service Changes – Comments from the Town of Arlington

Dear Mr. Poftak:

Thank you for this opportunity to comment on the MBTA's proposed service changes as part of the Forging Ahead Initiative. The Town of Arlington has significant concerns about the cumulative impact of the proposed service cuts and changes on Arlington residents, businesses, and vulnerable populations. The changes will jeopardize local and regional long-term planning for shifting to more sustainable transportation modes, reducing greenhouse gas emissions, and producing housing in transit-oriented locations. The proposed service changes will have a lasting impact on the affordability of the greater Boston area and it will take significant time to rebuild that service.

Public transportation is heavily utilized in Arlington.

20% of Arlington residents take MBTA public transportation to go to work; combined with biking and walking, more than one-quarter of Arlington residents do not commute by personal vehicle. This mode share is similar to or higher than other communities known as the "Inner Core" in the MBTA regions, despite the fact that Arlington does not have any fixed-rail transit service within its boundary. For bus routes 77, 79, and 350, more than half of riders use these routes to commute to work, but on Route 77, by itself, 56% of riders use this route for all other trips. In addition, one-third of riders on these three routes are low-income and two-thirds do not own a car. These are the bus riders and residents we focused on when implementing our Bus Rapid Transit (BRT) Pilot on Mass Ave in 2018, made permanent in 2019 with support from the MBTA and MassDOT. Without this same level of service, the MBTA's proposed cuts will worsen traffic congestion and the overall functioning of the MBTA system.

Transit cuts and reductions will have detrimental impact on Arlington.

Route 77 is a Key Bus Route and a lifeline for residents in the community as well as for those who travel through our community to key destinations, particularly businesses and places of employment. As noted above, more than half of Route 77 riders use the bus for travel other than commuting. Frequency cuts to the Route 77, combined with the possible elimination of Route 79 and lower frequency of Route 350, will make the 77 that much more important to residents, employees, and visitors. Further, the impact of reduced bus service will also be felt on drivers who already experience crowded corridors during peak travel times.

Route 80 serves as a critical connection to Green Line stations and is the only transit connection to the GLX from Arlington. It would cut off access for Arlington residents to this new service just as it is getting underway. There is no replicable service to these stations.

Route 79 connects Arlington Heights to Alewife and provides access to the greater regional public transit network. Although redundant with other bus service, it provides a one-seat ride from the Heights to Alewife and is especially important when other bus routes are delayed or overcrowded.

Cuts move Arlington in the wrong direction.

Arlington's planning and goals to reduce single-occupancy vehicle usage and greenhouse gas emissions rely on the continued access to robust and reliable public transportation. Connect Arlington, the town's transportation plan, focuses on improving connections to public transit and encouraging active modes like walking and bicycling. Arlington's Net Zero Plan also prioritizes public transportation improvements. Making cuts and eliminating service threatens these efforts to improve mobility and the environment.

Public transportation has been a key factor when reviewing new mixed-use commercial and residential developments. In the last five years, the Town has approved 91 units of housing in transit-oriented locations with another 221 units in the permitting process and at least 172 in pre-development stages. It is essential for the MBTA to be aware of these new riders as it restores services. The net loss of two bus routes, consolidating and reducing other routes, and reducing evening and weekend T service will imperil years of master planning, zoning, and community engagement work.

Cuts disproportionately financially impact Arlington.

Arlington pays almost \$3 million as its annual assessment to the MBTA. This is greater than other communities utilizing public transportation, without any fixed-rail transit. Our concern regarding this inequity is outlined in a letter drafted and sent in 2015 which is incorporated as an attachment to this letter. This makes these proposed cuts disproportionately burdensome on Arlington residents. Further, it presents even bigger challenges if cuts become permanent and the Town continues to pay a disproportionately higher share of assessment costs. Arlington has long expressed concern about the inequitable nature of the assessment formula and plans to continue its efforts to pursue legislative relief.

Stand by long-term transportation planning and financial commitments

The MBTA should maintain its long-term commitments to equity, suburban mobility, and fair investments in transportation throughout the region rather than create uncertainties that undercut local and regional planning efforts. The COVID-19 pandemic has illuminated the barriers to accessibility that have long existed; barriers that MassDOT was in the process of addressing when Destination 2040, the long-range transportation plan for the region, was adopted. The Town recognizes the importance of focusing on maintaining access to the MBTA to underserved communities and those hardest hit by the pandemic. We believe that maintaining service levels in Arlington is part of the same mission. We hope that the Board will work to minimize cuts, maintain a fair transportation system, and provide a concrete timeline about changes and next steps.

Sincerely,

Town of Arlington
Select Board

Honorable Senator Cindy F. Friedman
Honorable State Representative Sean Garballey
Honorable State Representative David M. Rogers