Appendix 1

Re: Public Comment on the MBTA Forging Ahead Plan

The Graduate Student Council (GSC) represents the 7,000 graduate students of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) in all matters concerning their quality of life during their time at MIT, including the availability, quality, and affordability of transportation services. MIT graduate students constitute a population that has high ridership potential and who live in households in few or no vehicles—essential, per the MBTA’s definition. **We thus wish to voice our concern and opposition towards several facets of the MBTA’s Forging Ahead plan** that will negatively impact students and the MIT community as a whole as we seek to transition back to a more normal academic environment over the course of 2021.

Only a small number of MIT graduate students own or have access to personal automobiles, and the need for cheap housing often leads to them living outside of easy walking distance from MIT’s campus. 66% of graduate students report having zero cars in the household, 20% have zero licensed drivers in their household, and only 5% of off-campus graduate students use an automobile as their primary commuting method. As a result, many students heavily rely on the various transportation services offered by MBTA and have high ridership potential. More than 30% of off-campus graduate students use the T as their primary commuting method, and this does not include the significant use by graduate students, both on and off campus, of public transit for non-commuting purposes. Crucial transit lines for MIT students include not just the obvious Red Line and Cambridge bus lines, but also numerous other services. The Blue and Silver lines are key to accessing the Boston Logan International Airport, a frequent means of traveling to conferences, field work, or family visits. Weekend commuter rail service is many students’ primary means for visiting family and friends outside of the core Boston metro area, and some MIT students live as far afield as Providence and thus depend on both weekday and weekend commuter rail service to access Boston. Even the ferries are used by some students to commute from the Hingham area. Many of these students cannot afford to live within walking distance of campus nor can they afford a personal vehicle. For these students, public transit constitutes an essential service.

The proposed changes, in particular the frequency reductions of the subway system, the elimination of weekend commuter rail service, and the elimination or reductions of numerous bus lines (Routes 68, 70, and 72 in particular) will negatively impact students. Since many graduate students work long and non-standard hours (almost 10% of off-campus graduate students regularly depart campus later than 10pm), even halting subway service at midnight threatens to impact a substantial number of individuals.
We recognize that the MBTA is suffering significant revenue reductions due to the coronavirus pandemic, but we cannot support long-term changes that will continue after the return of normal demand. We notice that many of the proposed changes are unlikely to be implemented until the spring or summer of 2021. Recent news regarding potential vaccines suggests that Massachusetts as a whole and MIT in particular may be returning to normal operations during precisely this time, and our community and the Boston metropolitan area as a whole will have need for the MBTA’s services.

Reductions in transit are at odds with the goals of the MBTA, Greater Boston communities, and Massachusetts. These changes force individuals to use personal automobiles, increasing congestion, costs, demand for parking (which is expensive and scarce near MIT and throughout the region), emissions, risks to pedestrians and cyclists, and economic inequality.

We strongly encourage the MBTA to consider making service changes that will only last for the duration of the pandemic, and to commit to quickly resume normal operations as demand rises and when external funding from state or federal sources becomes available.

In order to supplement the statistics about MIT community use of public transit that we have referenced above, the MIT GSC also solicited personal accounts and perspectives on the Forging Ahead plan. Some of these are attached at the bottom of this comment.

If you would like to know more about student transportation concerns or would like to discuss additional avenues to address MBTA’s current difficulties, please reach out to the GSC at gsc-eab-state@mit.edu.

Individual Student Perspectives

The below comments are selected comments received in a survey run by the MIT Graduate Student Council on the subject of the MBTA Forging Ahead plan. More than 140 responses were received during approximately one week that the survey was open.

*It [the Forging Ahead plan] would make it difficult for me to return home after late experiments, which can run until after midnight, if the Red Line service terminates at midnight. I also use the 68 bus to run between Harvard and MIT, and this would become more difficult especially for taking classes at Harvard as an MIT student and vice versa.* - Microbiology and Earth, Atmospheric, and Planetary Sciences PhD student, Somerville resident
Commuting time between MIT and home is already at around 1 hour due to the slowness of service; further decreasing frequency would mean spending up to 3 hours commuting each day if I use public transport (my routes are not on the essential list). -History; Anthropology; and Science, Technology, and Society PhD student, Everett resident

[I would be impacted by a] reduction in red line and key bus routes. Also as I prepare to graduate and look for a full time job, easy access to Kendall from suburbs [are] a key consideration. If that goes away I may look outside the state. - Health Sciences and Technology PhD Student, Somerville resident

I used to make much more use of the $10 weekend commuter rail pass to visit my family! Cutting the weekend service would make it really hard to stay connected with loved ones once we are able to meet back in person. -Earth, Atmospheric, and Planetary Sciences PhD student, Cambridge resident

MBTA bus service is what enabled me to be a bike commuter. In bad weather or when carrying heavy items, I would use MBTA service from Union Square to supplement my bike commuting. Without this, I would have been unable to dependably travel to work without using a vehicle. I am not opposed to short-term service cuts. I don’t see a better approach, short of shutting down capital projects or damaging long-term operations. However, it would help to have a commitment that service cuts are not permanent, and to notify riders along impact routes of plans to restore service long-term. Conditions to restore service if federal/state relief arrives would also be helpful. -Urban Studies and Planning PhD Student, Somerville resident

I’m extremely disappointed in MBTA’s cuts and reductions. I’m not in Cambridge now, but will move back soon. I use the commuter rail to visit my parents in Fitchburg, MA on the weekends. Without the commuter rail, I will not be able to see my family. The cuts in service after midnight are a safety issue. This means walking alone in the middle of the night. In general, a 20% reduction in frequency will be a challenge. It’ll add considerable time to a commute. -Philosophy PhD student, Cambridge resident

It will severely damage my capacity to move around. I mainly rely on MBTA services for all my movement. -Civil and Environmental PhD student, Somerville Resident

Route 101 is the closest route to my apartment and reducing its service would be very inconvenient in adverse weather- I would have to walk four times as far from the bus stop. Eliminating the Commuter Rail on weekends would also be a great inconvenience. -Chemistry PhD student, Medford resident
The service cuts on the weekend for the commuter rail will make it impossible for me to take mass transit to school. Also silver hill stop removal will prevent me from walking to the station. -Sloan School of Management Masters student, Weston resident

Cutting train service would increase my commute time dramatically and make it more difficult to time the bus (which already comes every 30 minutes). This would make my commute even more unpredictable. Before COVID, this route would already take me 35-50 minutes, and any more time than that is unrealistic for commuting 5 miles. -Chemistry PhD student, Medford resident

During rush hours, the MBTA subways and buses are already crowded with the current schedule. I have had instances where I would go early to the station, only to find that the train/bus is too full, and I have to wait for another to come. Further reduction of frequency would make it impossible to travel in a timely manner using MBTA, especially during rush hours, and make it significantly less accessible for lower income commuters/students who rely most heavily on public transportation. Additionally, limiting the E line to Brigham Circle will make it significantly harder for people to travel from the often more affordable neighborhoods in Jamaica Plains/Brookline. While having a bus service to make up for the lost train line is a nice idea, realistically given the limitations of bus/car travel and traffic surrounding the area, it is unreliable for people who desperately need affordable transportation. Most of the people commuting from these areas are students that cannot afford the extremely high prices of living directly in the city. -Sloan School of Management Masters student, Cambridge resident

The bus routes that I'm usually using (57, 64, 86) are listed as essential, so the main proposed change is frequency reduction. Yet these routes, especially route 86, are already infrequent; intervals between 86 buses can be up to an hour during the week in my experience. Reducing frequency further still will make commuting to campus harder to plan, especially during rush hours. -Linguistics and Philosophy PhD student, Brighton resident

The red line already gets quite crowded, gets delayed, and has long wait times between trains; if there is a 20% reduction in service, all of these issues will make it more difficult to get to work. Additionally, I often go home later at night after experiments; if there are fewer trains, I may have to wait longer at the stations late at night (which feels unsafe) either to board trains or wait for a connecting bus. -Materials Science and Engineering Masters student, Somerville resident

20% service reduction on the red line would make my commute significantly longer and cutting all service after midnight would make it difficult for me to stay at MIT late if necessary. -Computational and Systems Biology PhD student, Boston resident
I just moved to Cambridge, so I don’t know exactly which lines I will be taking, but I know they will be important to my life in Cambridge. I purposely selected housing near the T, so I would be so disappointed if services were reduced before I even got to benefit from them. One of the best parts of living in a city is saving money and benefiting the environment by utilizing public transit. -Chemistry PhD student, Cambridge resident

Rush hour on the red line outside of pandemic times is already a daily nightmare, 20% service cuts would make it so much worse. -Biology PhD Student, Somerville resident

If the pandemic ends, then I wouldn't like the reduced service of the subway rails, and without commuter rail on weekends there’d be no way to leave the immediate Boston/Cambridge area (don't own a car). Offering at least some kind of commuter rail on weekends would be helpful... during the pandemic, soft travel restrictions do make sense, but I would hope they'd reopen full services if we get past the pandemic. -Chemical Engineering PhD student, Cambridge resident

It would limit my ability to come in on weekends via commuter rail, and since it would close at 9pm I would not be able to stay late for evening campus events. -Mechanical Engineering Masters student, Worcester resident

The orange line already doesn’t run frequently enough during peak hours. If I’m expected to be on campus again in 2021, this is going to make my hour-long commute even worse. -Urban Studies and Planning Masters student, Somerville resident

The 68 is the most reliable way for me to get to campus, and eliminating it would sometimes mean I'd have to wait an extra hour or longer to reach campus. The only other practical option I have is the 70, which would also have service reduced. -Chemistry PhD student, Boston resident