

# Alternatives explored to save premium ride service

## Monday

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By Katie Lannan, State House News Service

BOSTON - MBTA officials on Monday laid out a series of alternative cost-saving measures for its paratransit service, The Ride, after an original proposal to reduce service met backlash from customers and advocates.

MBTA officials last month put forward the option of a one-year suspension of “premium trips” on The Ride as part of a series of fixes aimed at closing a \$42 million budget gap. Premium trips are those not mandated by the Americans with Disabilities Act and include journeys outside of the MBTA’s core area, or more than three quarters of a mile from active bus and subway service.

Since the March 13 proposal, people with disabilities, seniors, and other Ride users have urged transportation officials to keep the premium service intact and to allow time for savings from new initiatives - a centralized Ride call center and pilot program with Uber and Lyft - to be realized.

“Given the size of the cost savings that is sought relative to the budget of the MBTA, I believe it is unconscionable and unfathomable that MBTA officials would target the most vulnerable population who have the least control over transportation options to achieve needed cost savings,” Amy Ruell, the president of the National Federation of the Blind of Massachusetts, told the T’s Fiscal and Management Control Board Monday.

The Ride is \$17 million over its fiscal 2017 budget, and with savings from the call center and pilot program will still fall \$7 million short of its \$87 million target for fiscal 2018, according to figures presented at the meeting.

Ben Schutzman, the MBTA’s director of innovation, told the board that T officials had spent the past couple of weeks working with a community task force to develop alternatives to suspending premium service.

“The first idea we had in terms of getting to the lower target and saving \$7 million was to suspend premium service,” he said. “We heard you guys loud and clear and have heard the thoughts of all those within the community and know that we needed to go back to the task force and talk to the overall task force community and figure out areas to save money and not suspend or cut services in the same way that this was referring to.”

Schutzman highlighted two options he said “potentially have the most promise to prevent the suspension” of premium service. One, which is estimated to save between \$1 million and \$3.4 million in fiscal 2018, would involve booking trips through the brokerage system used by Human Service Transportation, a state office under the Office of Health and Human Services.

The other option would be to use the Uber and Lyft pilot program to cover trips not booked at least a day in advance. Officials said that could save between \$1.9 million and \$4.3 million next year.

The remaining alternatives include using the pilot program for all premium-area trips, providing premium trips via regional transit authorities, assessing cities and towns for premium service, increasing rider co-payments, and continuing premium service for current riders but not providing it for new applicants.

The control board will have the option to select all, none or a combination of the options.

Gov. Charlie Baker called the new cost-saving options “a good place to start.”

“Look, it’s not fair to the taxpayers who put a billion dollars out of their pocket every year into the MBTA and into The Ride, and to the riders who put almost a billion out of their pocket, to not be willing to pursue and engage in discussions about ways to continue to deliver a service and find a more effective and efficient way to do it,” Baker told reporters after meeting with legislative leaders. “I think it’s a big part of why we’ve had the kind of success we’ve had in both reducing the T’s operating deficit and plowing a lot of those savings back into the core system, which is exactly what we should be doing.”

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