



# MBTA overstating its budget woes, critics say



PAT GREENHOUSE/GLOBE STAFF

**Recent proposals to scale back passenger service have raised concerns that the MBTA is overstating its financial woes.**

By [Nicole Dungca](#) | GLOBE STAFF MARCH 23, 2017

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When MBTA officials presented potential cuts of weekend commuter rail service and trips for riders with disabilities, the proposals were portrayed as difficult but necessary moves to address a projected \$42 million budget deficit.

But to close observers of the MBTA's fiscal situation, framing the choice between sharp service cuts and a budget crisis is misleading, especially with the transit agency slated to receive an influx of state revenue that could bridge the gap.

“I think it's a false narrative that they're having to make these cuts in order to keep operations going,” said Carolyn Villers, executive director of the Massachusetts Senior Action Council. “They're targeting some of the most vulnerable to close a gap that doesn't exist.”

Public transportation advocates have praised the MBTA's current leadership and its fiscal control board for keeping careful watch over the agency's finances. But the recent proposals to scale back passenger service have raised concerns that the agency is overstating its financial woes — and unnecessarily frightening riders.

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“In reality, the T has a surplus in its operating budget, but they're choosing not to use it that way,” said Rafael Mares, a vice president at the Conservation Law Foundation, an environmental advocacy group. “They use the pressure they keep on themselves to justify service cuts and raising fares.”

State Representative William Straus, cochairman of the Legislature's Joint Transportation Committee, said the MBTA has the money on hand to balance its budget in the next fiscal year, but is choosing to earmark much of it for infrastructure projects.

That may well be a valid choice, Straus said, but he urged officials to depict the situation more clearly.

"They've presented it as 'We can't do these things unless we cut some of the services,'" Straus said. "But they have money to provide these services."

MBTA officials this month floated a cost-saving plan to eliminate weekend commuter rail service and scaling back trips for as many as 10,000 riders who use The Ride, a door-to-door service for passengers with disabilities.

After the proposed cuts came under sharp criticism, Governor Charlie Baker said the MBTA would not eliminate the weekend commuter rail service, but it remained unclear whether other reductions might occur.

Baker has frequently said that service cuts should be a "last resort," and, referring to trips for disabled riders, told reporters on Tuesday that the T should "continue to provide the service but do it in a more cost-effective way."

The MBTA has faced chronic budget problems, but in 2013, legislators approved a transportation finance bill that gave the agency an additional \$187 million a year, on top of the \$1 billion it receives from sales tax revenue.

The rest of the MBTA's nearly \$2 billion operating budget comes from fares, money from municipalities that receive service, and other revenues such as advertising and parking.

But MBTA leaders want to reserve most of that recurring \$187 million for infrastructure and repair projects, separate from operational expenses.

Brian Shortsleeve, the

MBTA's acting general manager, has said the MBTA is required under a 2015 law to balance its budget without additional state money, such as the subsidies approved in 2013. He has also said the money is "not guaranteed" and shouldn't be relied on for annual expenses.

Yet the agency tapped those funds last year to tackle a \$50 million deficit, and the 2015 law, which Baker pushed for, leaves the door open to using

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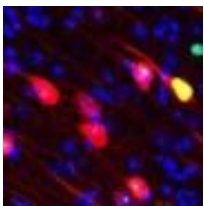
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Keolis Commuter Services canceled trains on the Stoughton, Lowell, Rockport/Beverly lines, as well as a second train on the Rockport line.

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