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T backing off paratransit service cuts

Pollack: Appropriation could be used to balance FY18 budget

BRUCE MOHL Apr 3, 2017

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STATE TRANSPORTATION OFFICIALS signaled on Monday that they are leaning toward no outright service cuts in paratransit service and are amenable to using a portion of a legislative appropriation to balance the coming fiscal year's budget.

Transportation Secretary Stephanie Pollack, who along with T staff has been pushing to balance the fiscal 2018 budget without touching the \$187 million legislative appropriation, appeared more flexible at a meeting of the T's Fiscal and Management Control Board. She said the budget could be balanced without touching the legislative appropriation in fiscal 2018, but she indicated that might not happen until the following year or at some point beyond that.

T officials also continued to back away from service cuts to trim spending. They previously dropped a proposal to eliminate weekend commuter rail service and save \$10 million. On Monday, they indicated they would no longer seek the elimination of paratransit service not required by the Americans with Disabilities Act, which is defined as service beyond three-quarters of a mile from existing bus and subway routes.

Instead, T officials said they were reviewing alternative, cheaper ways to provide the paratransit service. They offered up a series of initiatives on Monday, but they appear to be focusing on two that could be implemented in five months or less with minimal disruption to use of the T's paratransit service, which is called the RIDE.

One initiative would book trips outside the T service area using a company called Human Services Transport, which already handles trips for a number of state agencies. T officials estimated Human Services Transport could cut the T's per-trip paratransit cost from \$54 to \$29 per trip by putting each ride out to bid using its online brokerage system. The other initiative would use Uber, Lyft, and taxis to

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transport RIDE passengers outside the T's service area.

T officials estimated the two initiatives together could save between \$2.9 million and \$6.7 million in fiscal 2018. The T's initial proposal to eliminate paratransit service outside the agency's service area would have saved \$7.5 million.

The shift in focus at the T is a major victory for disabled individuals and their advocates, who have been flooding the meetings of the Fiscal and Management Control Board and

pleading with board members not to cut the service and disrupt people's lives.

T officials said they were making progress in reaching their savings targets, but a lot of work remains to be done. The T's budget for the current fiscal year projected \$92 million in spending on the RIDE, but the actual cost has grown to \$109 million. T officials want to pare back RIDE spending in fiscal 2018 to \$87 million. They are also forecasting that 15 percent of riders will be using Uber and Lyft next year, compared to just over 2 percent this year.

The other major savings initiative on the MBTA's table is to restructure bus maintenance work. Brian Shortsleeve, the chief administrator and acting general manager, said the T spent \$132 million on bus maintenance in fiscal 2016. He wants to pare that amount back by hiring private companies to do the work at four garages and by revamping existing operations at the Cabot Garage.

Shortsleeve said the T's bus maintenance cost was \$56 per bus revenue hour in fiscal 2016 and \$39 per hour at the Cabot Garage. He estimated private companies could do the work at the four garages for around \$25 per hour. At Cabot, T officials are hoping to pare the cost back to \$27 an hour, saving \$6 million per year.

Bill Griffiths,
the T's senior
director for
vehicle fleet

Bill Griffiths of the MBTA outlines how Cabot Garage will reduce employees and increase productivity.

maintenance and strategy, outlined a plan for Cabot that relies on restructuring the workforce and using data to drive productivity at the garage. Griffiths said he would cut the number of full-time-equivalent workers at Cabot from 72 to 53, eliminating the jobs of 10 machinists/technicians, and three managers. He said better data gathering on repairs would help the trimmed-down workforce complete its work faster and better. As one example, he said the T has analyzed data to find the 50 most common repairs at the Cabot Garage in advance, complete with parts, so work on any of those 50 repairs could be done expeditiously.

Brian Lang, a member of the Fiscal and Management Control Board and the president of a union, urged Griffiths to work closely with existing union officials, who have been grumbling that the T is unwilling to work with them.

"If there isn't a high level of cooperation, this will fail. Do you agree?" Lang asked Griffiths. Griffiths said he did agree.

T officials said they have been meeting regularly with union officials and have a four-

hour meeting scheduled for this week. But Mike Vartabedian, the area director of the

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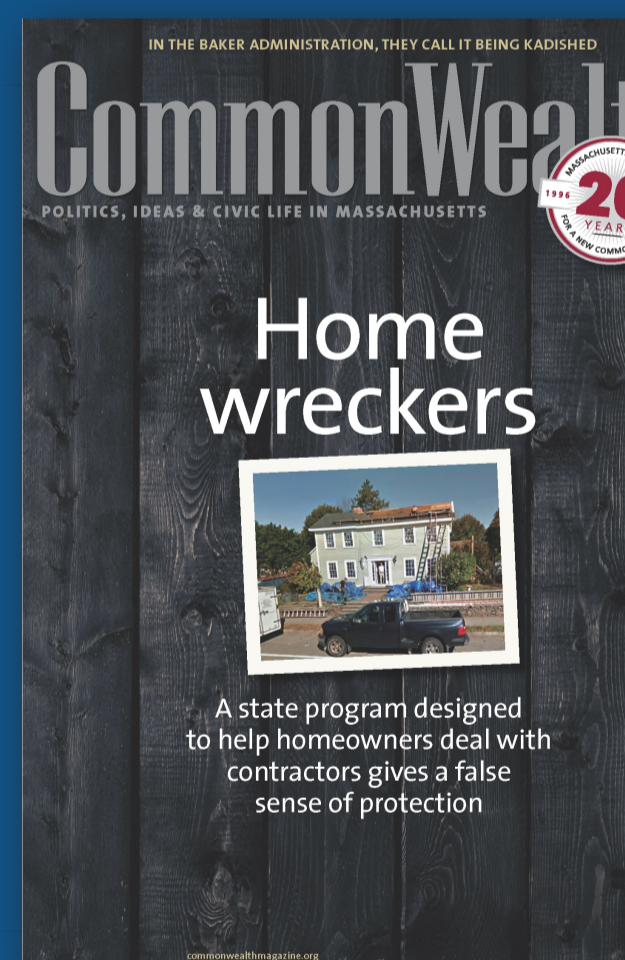
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machinists union, said the meetings have been one-sided, with T officials telling the union what they planned to do rather than collaborating with the union on ways to save money.

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