



Members of the Massachusetts Senior Action Council protest at the T oversight board meeting.

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T offers up other paratransit options

Disabled users demand withdrawal of proposed service cut

ANDY METZGER Mar 20, 2017

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LAST WEEK MBTA OFFICIALS presented some tough medicine the agency could take to zero-out its \$42 million structural deficit for the coming fiscal year, including slashing weekend commuter rail trips and special service for disabled passengers. On Monday, MBTA officials offered up some options that might make the paratransit service reductions go down easier, and said there would also be a range of options coming related to commuter rail.

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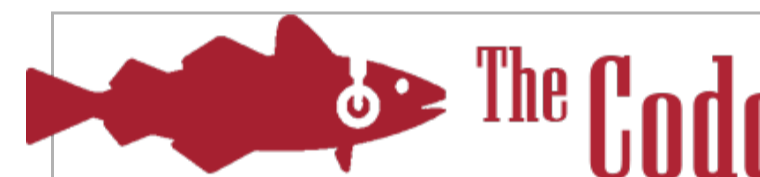
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“The goal is not to eliminate service. That is a last resort,” MBTA Chief Administrator Brian Shortsleeve said, echoing comments made last week by Gov. Charlie Baker.

In a briefing for reporters ahead of an MBTA Fiscal and Management Control Board meeting, officials described how other services could potentially fill some of the void if the MBTA discontinues its paratransit services to suburban communities outside the T’s federally mandated service area. Shortsleeve said there would be discussion about potential weekend service reductions on the commuter rail next week, along with possible alternatives.



“We’re going to lay forth a whole bunch of options,” Shortsleeve said. He said Keolis Commuter Services, the commuter rail vendor, would be pushed to develop better future weekend service and the T is open to “innovative” proposals from the private sector to serve commuter rail communities.

Shortsleeve penned a letter Friday to lawmakers about the proposed suspension of weekend service on the commuter rail, writing that the T will already need to suspend service on commuter rail lines for work on the Green Line Extension and to complete federally mandated positive train control – an anti-collision safety measure. The potential of suspending weekend service is “on the table because the MBTA must at least examine the cost/benefit of high-subsidy, low ridership services such as weekend commuter rail,” he wrote.

To save \$7 million, the T is considering eliminating paratransit service not required under the Americans with Disabilities Act — in areas three-quarters of a mile outside the routes of its existing bus and subway lines. According to the T, about 19 percent – or roughly 10,000 – of its roughly 55,000 Ride customers use service in those areas. Trips in those areas account for an estimated 11 percent – or roughly 215,000 – of the forecasted fiscal 2018 Ride trips. Nine towns, including Weston, Lincoln, Cohasset, and Concord, have more than 75 percent of their community outside the federally required service area. The towns of Medfield, Middleton, and Topsfield would lose Ride service town-wide if the T followed through on the idea.

Options under consideration for The Ride passengers who would lose service to and from the outer-lying Boston suburbs include partnerships with regional transit authorities, modification of service hours, limits on spending, and coordination with Human Service Transportation, a state office under the Office of Health and Human Services, according to T officials.

At Monday’s meeting, transit riders who use wheelchairs, are blind, or disabled urged the control board to reject the service cut. Several advocates for the disabled urged T officials to work with them to come up with alternative ways to save money on the program.

Transportation Secretary Stephanie Pollack said she welcomed new cost-saving ideas, but noted that the T and advocates for the disabled had expected \$8 million in savings in the paratransit program during the current fiscal year that never materialized. “These decisions have to be made,” she said of the need for spending cuts. “Every service the T provides is essential to someone.”

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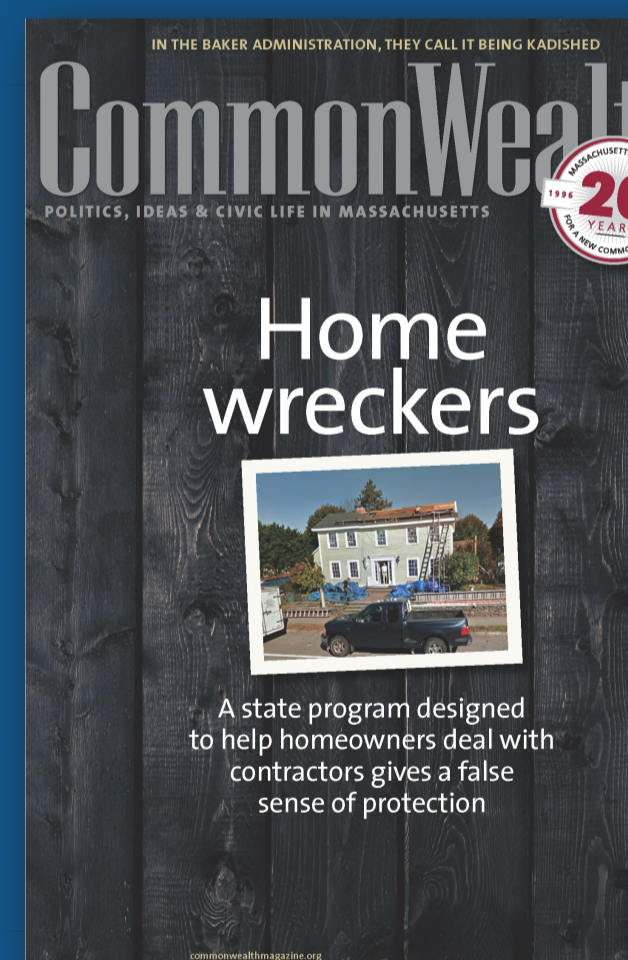
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Nancy Houghton of Beverly, who said she is severely ill and gets around in a wheelchair, said the T’s paratransit service is crucial for her to make visits to her primary care doctor in Middleton. “In my case, if it’s stopped it’s a death sentence,” she said of the proposed service cut.

James White, chairman of the Access Advisory Committee for the T who gets around in a wheelchair, said there are not existing services that could meet the needs if the T cuts The Ride service to premium areas.



“None of them are in any way positioned right now to pick up any of that slack,” White told the News Service.

Corine Burke, a member of the Needham Commission on Disabilities, said her son relies on The Ride for safe travel to his job at WalMart in Walpole. About half of Needham and two thirds of Walpole is in the premium service area.

“He pays the extra premium to be dropped off at the door,” Burke told the control board. “If he were to lose this job

because the premium service is discontinued, he would have an awfully hard time finding another employer who would support someone with such significant disabilities.”

Carolyn Villers, director of Massachusetts Senior Action Council, said Human Service Transportation is only available to people who qualify for MassHealth and does not help people get to work or visit with friends.

“This proposal itself is creating great fear and anxiety in thousands of lives,” Villers said. “A year ago we urged you to see us as collaborators and partners. We have continued that in good faith. We urge you to continue to build trust in the community. But to come and blindside us with a proposal that will have such a devastating impact makes it very difficult for those of us that have a constituency that we are accountable to, to continue to come to the table when rugs are pulled right out from under people.”

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