

Charlie Baker rejects rail cuts: Weekend service preserved

Matt Stout | Tuesday, March 21, 2017



Credit: Angela Rowlings

WORKING FOR THE WEEKEND: A commuter rail train sits at South Station. Gov. Charlie Baker announced yesterday that plans to cut weekend service have been scrapped, although alternative plans to trim more than \$17 million from the MBTA budget have some people concerned.

The MBTA is dumping its controversial proposal to ditch weekend commuter rail service “altogether,” according to Gov. Charlie Baker, who in taking system-wide cuts off the table appeared to keep other cost-saving measures in play.

Baker’s declaration came as the T sought yesterday to soften the blow of other proposed cuts to its door-to-door service for disabled riders with an expanded “set of options,” most of which still left advocates unsettled.

Together, the proposals could save \$17.4 million, including \$10 million on the commuter rail, as T officials try to tackle a \$42 million budget gap for next fiscal year. But they drew fierce blowback from lawmakers and riders alike, prompting Baker last week to say any service cuts

on the commuter rail should be a “last resort.” He appeared to go one step further yesterday.

“Our administration is exploring alternatives to last week’s MBTA budget proposals to make weekend commuter rail service more efficient, and will not pursue proposals to eliminate weekend service altogether,” the governor said in a statement, adding he still wants the T to pursue other “much needed reforms,” such as outsourcing bus maintenance work. Baker’s statement followed indications by T officials that they would present other options to cut costs on the commuter rail next week. Brian Shortsleeve, the agency’s interim general manager, pointed specifically to varying levels of riders between lines, as

well as on Saturday versus Sunday.

MBTA officials are already weighing a range of newly unveiled options to trim costs of The Ride program, where they had originally proposed eliminating its “premium” service, used by more than 10,000 people who live beyond three-quarters of mile from a subway or bus route. T officials said as many as a dozen communities would lose most or all of their Ride coverage in the cuts.

Other options could include partnering with regional transit authorities, state-provided paratransit services or local councils on aging to help bridge coverage gaps. Officials also floated the potential of creating a fixed budget, with service stopping once the cap is reached, or changing the hours it’s provided.

But Carolyn Villers, executive director of the Mass Senior Action Council, said she's spoken with 32 of the local councils, all of whom think it's "ridiculous to think the councils on aging could take on some of those trips."

"We are very open to continuing to work with The Ride and the MBTA to figure what are some viable alternatives," she said. "But to do that in a responsible way requires some planning and not just cutting the service and providing a band-aid approach."

James White, chairman of T's Access Advisory Committee, said the alternatives to The Ride can't replace it.

"There's no way they can pick up the slack," he said.