



August 23, 2022

Mayor Katjana Ballantyne  
93 Highland Ave.  
Somerville, MA 02143

Dear Mayor Ballantyne:

The Somerville Pedestrian & Transit Advisory Committee (PTAC) is writing to provide commentary and perspectives on the upcoming Orange and northern Green Line shutdowns. The Orange Line has the second highest ridership of the MBTA's rapid transit lines, carrying over 100,000 riders each weekday despite ongoing pandemic impacts. Several thousand more riders per day will be affected by the simultaneous shutdown of the northern Green Line between Union Square and Government Center. **The simultaneous and sustained loss of the Orange Line and northern Green Line is a public emergency**, compounded by unacceptably short notice to affected riders, municipalities, and schools as well as by simultaneous closures of commuter rail and critical pedestrian/bike infrastructure<sup>1</sup>.

A core tenet of Somerville's public policy, as expressed in our SomerVision goals, is to support and promote the use of "a mass transit network accessible to all parts of the city and all users, with innovative physical and informational improvements that allow for easy use and seamless intermodal connections"<sup>2</sup>. The City has invested considerably in transit-oriented infrastructure and policy to promote alternatives to car transportation. These investments and policies critically assume and depend on the existence of – and public confidence in – reliable public transit. Although we acknowledge and agree with the need to address safety concerns swiftly and comprehensively, **we are concerned that the MBTA's alternative transit options during this time will be inadequate**, particularly given the MBTA's lack of coordination across municipalities and other agencies. Further, we are concerned that given the continued disinvestment in the T, **even comprehensive improvements like this one will not be long-lasting or lead to a substantially better public infrastructure system**.

### **Short term observations and recommendations**

We applaud the **continuous quick-build bus-only (or bus/bike-only) lanes** the City has already created, including on Broadway approaching Sullivan Square. We hope that the City will receive ample support from MBTA, MassDOT, and MassDCR in continuing these efforts on existing roadways, critically including MassDOT roads like Rt. 28 and MassDCR roads like the Wellington Bridge. We have been alarmed by reports mere days before the shutdown that routes and stops had not been finalized and tested<sup>3</sup>, and that municipalities north of Boston seem to have been left in the dark and stymied in their efforts to coordinate with MBTA, MassDOT, and MassDCR to develop continuous bus priority lanes across the patchwork of municipal and state-controlled roadways constituting the shuttle routes<sup>4,5</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://twitter.com/MassDCR/status/1559944864472727554>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.somervision2040.com/transportation-infrastructure/>

<sup>3</sup> <https://twitter.com/senjehlen/status/1559582002885677056>

<sup>4</sup> <https://twitter.com/AbbeyNBCBoston/status/1559987344861761541>

<sup>5</sup> <https://twitter.com/MikeConnollyMA/status/1560079098059411459>

For the bus/bike-only lanes created to support transit users during the shutdown, **enforcement will be imperative** to help with change management for drivers and to ensure that all bus/bike-only lanes remain clear for shuttle use. As above, we have been concerned by reports that city leaders had not received clear guidance, days before the shutdown, about how to staff and finance patrols or whether the state will assist in such efforts<sup>6</sup>. **We urge MassDOT to contribute resources to assist with enforcement** throughout the shuttle routes in Somerville and beyond, particularly during peak hours.

In addition, we are concerned that **Orange Line riders riding from north of State St to south of Back Bay, or vice versa, will have to contend with a three-seat ride** (shuttle to Green Line to shuttle) rather than a one-seat shuttle ride. Given the magnitude of disruption to transit users, it is disappointing that car commuters continue to be prioritized over transit users on roadways between State St and Back Bay. Although this falls outside of the City of Somerville's locus of control, Somerville transit users will certainly be impacted by this three-seat ride, and we express our opposition to this choice to multiply the inconveniences experienced by transit commuters during the Orange Line shutdown.

Although the main focus of shutdown planning has appropriately been on efforts to mitigate the many negative impacts of the Orange and Green Line shutdowns on transit users, the shutdowns can also be viewed as a natural experiment of sorts. That is, the shutdowns may present **opportunities to evaluate feasibility and impacts, both positive and negative, of bus/bike-only lanes** in new locations. Examples of measurable impacts could include changes in traffic patterns and speed, bike usage, cut-through traffic, and speed and timeliness of regular bus lines running along the same routes. If it is feasible to collect such data on short notice, it could be an asset as proof of concept and to potentially support the case for making some of the bus/bike-only lanes permanent and/or advocating for expansion of bus/bike-only lanes in the future. This data could also usefully inform the MBTA's Bus Network Redesign – allowing the MBTA an opportunity to evaluate the impact of bus and bike lanes and consider their inclusion within longer-term planning. Finally, the free BlueBike memberships being offered during the shutdown present an important policy experiment to understand how subsidizing bike transit influences demand for and usage of bicycling as an alternative mode of transit.

**Timely, broad, and accessible communication** about the shutdowns and replacement shuttle services is of the utmost importance. We have been troubled by reports that signage related to the shutdown and replacement shuttle service was still sparse<sup>7,8</sup>, substantially inaccurate<sup>9,10</sup>, and not fully accessible<sup>11</sup> at Orange and Green Line stations mere days before the shutdown was scheduled to begin. Transit users have needed information about the changes in a comprehensive range of accessible formats and languages, to reach users that rely on different sources of information and have different abilities (for example, blind transit users require auditory or Braille announcements). And they needed this information well in advance of the changes so that they would have time to plan around the changes in their commute and mitigate any related personal impacts. This should have already been a top priority and we are concerned about the lackluster communication efforts from the MBTA thus far. The City of Boston has undertaken communication efforts along these lines, all collected on a single webpage<sup>12</sup>. In addition to

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<sup>6</sup> <https://twitter.com/AbbeyNBCBoston/status/1559993858448134145>

<sup>7</sup> <https://twitter.com/jersiegel/status/1559109688825888768>

<sup>8</sup> <https://twitter.com/datadyne007/status/1559184695962861568>

<sup>9</sup> <https://twitter.com/meptrsn/status/1557054599349010432>

<sup>10</sup> <https://twitter.com/ThomasGRyan/status/1560266289972936706>

<sup>11</sup> <https://twitter.com/SenJasonLewis/status/1559300444438011904>

<sup>12</sup> <https://www.boston.gov/departments/mayors-office/orange-line-shutdown-boston>

describing alternative transit options, the page offers additional resources for schoolchildren<sup>13</sup> (including the provision of 5,000 Charlie Cards loaded with free 7-day passes for students and families), an Accessibility Guide to the Orange Line Shutdown<sup>14</sup> and multilingual flyers<sup>15</sup>. We are concerned that the MBTA has not taken more of a leadership role in these efforts.

Finally, we note that **it is vital that the MBTA issue regular status updates** during the shutdowns to shore up public confidence in the timeliness and effectiveness of the work conducted during the shutdowns, and to clearly communicate the service improvements that transit users can expect following the shutdown work.

### **Longer term recommendations and concerns**

It is clear that **the MBTA is in need of significant reinvestment** to ensure that the current crisis is not replicated in the future. The current state of the MBTA is the culmination of decades of political decisions to undermine its funding and support, including but not limited to the move to saddle the MBTA with debt from the Big Dig and the unreasonable expectation that the MBTA should be financially self-sustaining and revenue neutral. It is imperative that we reverse course in future policy choices. In our view, it is important to take externalities into account in allocating funds to invest in critical transit infrastructure: Transit utilization reduces emissions, traffic congestion, wear and tear on roads, and demand for parking. In addition, dependable transit vastly increases the attractiveness of the Boston area to businesses and institutions, and is thus vital to the state economy. As one of the wealthiest states in the country, investing in a critical public good is well within Massachusetts's reach<sup>16</sup>. The MBTA should be viewed as the tremendous asset to the region that it is, and should be invested in accordingly in order to not only keep the MBTA functioning, but to restore public confidence in the system's reliability.

In the near term, **federal funding and state funds from the current state budget surplus are needed to rescue the MBTA** from its deep backlog of deferred maintenance, the dire functional and safety consequences of which we have all experienced over the past several months. In the longer term, **additional sustainable revenue sources** (including but certainly not limited to the Fair Share amendment, should it pass) will be necessary to maintain existing service to a higher standard and to invest in service enhancements to improve user experience and restore public confidence, such as the long-deferred North South Rail Link in collaboration with Keolis and Amtrak (the increased connectivity from which, we note, would have made the current shutdowns far easier to navigate).

Given the continual, decades-long disinvestment in the T by Massachusetts state government, we are concerned that **ill-planned, full-line shutdowns like this one will become a norm rather than an exception**. The MBTA is built for capacity; there is no built-in redundancy for large components of the MBTA infrastructure that would allow engineers to maintain the infrastructure without significantly disrupting service. As a result, it is becoming harder for the City of Somerville to rely on the MBTA alone for public transit, which in turn puts the City's SomerVision goals, plans, and support at risk. This makes it all the more critical that the **MBTA Bus Network Redesign ensures that the bus system complements and provides some overlap with subway lines** in light of possible future rail disruptions and changing transit patterns. If service continues to be disrupted periodically without adequate redundancy and

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<sup>13</sup>

<https://www.boston.gov/departments/mayors-office/orange-line-shutdown-boston#shuttles-and-transit-hub>

<sup>14</sup> <https://www.boston.gov/departments/mayors-office/orange-line-shutdown-boston#other-efforts>

<sup>15</sup> <https://www.boston.gov/departments/mayors-office/orange-line-shutdown-boston#multilingual-flyers>

<sup>16</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List\\_of\\_U.S.\\_states\\_and\\_territories\\_by\\_income](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_U.S._states_and_territories_by_income)

mitigation, we suggest that the city obtain the appropriate authority and funds to plan and deploy **redundant and complementary public transit infrastructure** to support future disruptions in MBTA service, as well as to address unmet needs in the current and/or redesigned MBTA bus networks. Finally, we recommend that the City partner with neighboring municipalities to conduct a retrospective of learnings from the current shutdown. This exchange of information may facilitate even more rapid and effective strategic alignment, enforcement, and accountability if similar shutdowns happen again.

As noted above, **timely communication and full transparency is paramount**. We hope that, in the future, the MBTA will prioritize giving far more advance notice to transit users and affected municipalities when shutdowns are required. As noted above, transit riders need far more advance notice in order for communications to be disseminated broadly and in a wide range of accessible formats, and for riders to have enough time to plan adequately around disruptions to their commutes and lives. Further, while we commend the remarkable agility and cooperation of the affected municipalities, the extremely short notice of the shutdowns has no doubt caused tremendous undue stress for City employees (particularly during a month when employees tend to have childcare gaps and prior vacation plans) and insufficient time to develop maximally effective mitigation plans. Reports that the MBTA did not substantively engage with the City of Somerville or other municipalities north of Boston until mere days before the shutdown are particularly alarming<sup>17</sup>. We recommend that Mayor Ballantyne press the MBTA for **better and more timely communication of future service changes** to mitigate impacts to the City's residents and employees.

Finally, we would like to thank the City of Somerville and again acknowledge the tremendous agility and resilience of City staff in their response to this crisis. We look forward to continuing to work together in support of our shared goals to promote public transit.

Sincerely,  
The Somerville Pedestrian and Transit Advisory Committee (PTAC)

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<sup>17</sup> <https://twitter.com/senjehlen/status/1559582002885677056>

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Jamey Tesler, Secretary of Transportation, MassDOT