Commuters Told Change is En Route

About 50 Turn Out for Public Meeting with MBTA and Keolis, Hosted by Rep. Roy

By J.D. O’Gara

On December 17th, 2019, Representative Jeffrey Roy (D-Franklin) hosted a public meeting with representatives from the MBTA and Keolis concerning commuter rail service in our area. About 50 members of the community attended the meeting, voicing their concerns and listening to the responses of Ryan Coholan, Chief Railroad Officer of the MBTA; Richard Dean, Vice President of Service Delivery for Keolis; and Robert Huggan, Franklin resident and Chief Transportation Officer for Keolis. Rep. F. Jay Barrows, of Mansfield, also attended, as did some Franklin officials.

After a community meeting in August of 2018, and a January 2019 meeting with Sen. Spilka and rail officials, Representative Roy recently started the “Franklin Line Working Group,” consisting of Representatives and Senators whose communities are served by the Franklin Line. Roy organized December’s meeting in response to the entire commuter rail system’s on-time performance taking a dive in late September and October, with the Franklin Line the worst performing line, with a 79.2 percent on-time performance (OTP). The meeting was an opportunity to hear more about delay causes and ways they are being addressed.

Richard Dean said things are “turning around,” with minutes of delay dropping to 130 in 2019 from 612 in 2018.
but admitted that the Franklin line experienced “a torrid last couple of months. It might get worse before it gets better,” he told community members. “But it will get better.” The addition of the new coaches expected to help with capacity problems, a pressing issue right now, where all seats are full, and a safety concern voiced by some in the audience. Franklin resident, “Rick” doubted the T would ever be able to deal with ridership in the growing bedroom community. “We were here a year ago at the library,” he said. “It just seems this problem is going to continually overwhelm you.”

Rep. Roy asked what many in the audience seemed to agree – if there were any correlation between the recent Franklin delays and the pilot of the new Foxboro line.

Although there is a perception that the new line is the cause of the delays, Callahan responded, “Based on analysis, the number one contributor (to delays on the Franklin line) is mechanical in nature. Unfortunately, a lot of these mechanical issues made themselves known at the most inopportune times at the most inopportune locations. Once the ripple starts, it’s very hard to roll it in.”

Kellie, from Franklin, was skeptical of that response, expressing frustration. “Right now, we have trains that break, equipment we have (to update), and in that environment, the Foxboro pilot was launched. Now you’ve added them. What are the metrics by which the Foxboro pilot is held to? What is the standard, and what are we supposed to do in the meantime? Just because we can doesn’t mean we should, but we have, and it kinda sucks.”

Attendees were assured, however, that change was in the works. In late September, 80 bi-level coaches were purchased, and the MBTA has invested $100 million in locomotive overhauls. The 10 worst performing locomotives were sent for overhauls (nine are back with the MBTA), and those that didn’t receive them were scheduled to have main engines replaced.

Coholan noted that his goal is for the MBTA to never be in a position of having trains in need of such repair again. Until now, he says, “There was never a real capital component to address major overhaul, and (locomotives) run 24/7,” he says. “Our goal is to prevent this from recurring. I want it fixed, and I want it fixed permanently. My goal to prevent us from ever ending up in this cyclical situation.”

In addition, the MBTA has invested 20% in its workforce from 2014 to 2019 and $1.2 million in simulation training. It also created new route line managers for each line in 2019, giving conductors and assistant conductors clear managers for first time in MBTA commuter rail.

“Our conductors and our engineers have somebody to go to, to help them be the best they can be at their jobs,” said Dean.

In March, of 2019, as part of the MBTA’s $8 billion, 5-year capital investment plan, the Franklin Line Double Track Project was launched, with the first phase to add four miles of double track extending from just west of Walpole Station to Rockwood Road near Norfolk Station. Keolis has also received the additional contract to cover construction of the second phase – adding a second track to a three-and-a-half mile stretch of the Franklin Line between Norfolk Station and just east of the Franklin Station terminus – and a third phase will connect Walpole and Norwood Central Stations with double track. By the end of the project, officials said, the entire Franklin Line will have double track.

Officials at the meeting lauded the double-track, pointing out that it will solve issues of working trains being delayed by a mechanical issue on another train, slow speeds due to signal problems and approaches of other trains.

Community members also raised other concerns. Betsy, from Franklin, who pays for a monthly pass, said “the constant increase in fares is exhausting,” and she was con-
New State Law Requires Financial Transparency in Higher Ed

By J.D. O’Gara

Jeff Roy remembers the day his constituent called him. “The day that Mt. Ida College closed, I received a phone call from the parent of a young man who was finishing his junior year, who was going to become a senior,” says Rep. Roy, “and Mt. Ida announced in April that it was closing. The deadline for applications was over, and he’s got three years at this school.” Transferring at that point, said Rep. Roy, was not an option.

“It left a deep impression on me,” says Roy, who was appointed House Chair of the Joint Committee on Higher Education in March of 2019. “I’m the parent of three kids who went through college, and I can’t imagine what I would do. I told Mark Lenzi I will do my best to come up with a solution to the problem.”

The Joint Committee on Higher Education was determined to make sure institutes of higher education in Massachusetts show better accountability to students with An Act to Support Improved Financial Stability in Higher Education (H4099), which made its way with unanimous support in the House and Senate and finally, Governor Baker, on November 14, 2019.

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Higher Ed Financial Transparency in New State Law Requires

Residents from Franklin and surrounding towns who use the commuter rail posed questions to officials from the MBTA and Keolis, in a meeting organized by Rep. Jeff Roy on December 17th.

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cerned that not all ticketed riders were paying their fair share. Coholan responded that the MBTA will implement a new system, where riders will “tap on, and tap off,” which will more accurately charge their pass.

Kaitlyn complained about doors being blocked from her parking lot at Forge Park as the train approaches, necessitating her to run all the way around to the other side to catch her train, and Huggan responded that “flagging the platform” was a required safety measure to prevent “horrific accidents.” He recommended getting to platforms three minutes before train departure time.

Lauren, another resident from Franklin, complained about the noise of idling trains near her home, even at 4 a.m. Huggan responded that a new layover was being sought, and the MBTA was securing funding to purchase the property at Union Street. The goal is to evaluate MBTA property and find an industrial area in which to put the new layover, which will make a difference in the noise.

Some questioned how they can get real time updates on train delays, especially since they can’t connect on the train. Response was that the system is currently running under 3G, and equipment running on the 3G connection needs to be updated, something that should be completed by March 2020. Shane, from Wrentham, added that the entire line’s on-time performance doesn’t help him plan what train would help him make better time. The answer was that the data was available, but whether it was made available to the public was not clear.

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