

Chairman's Report: Worcester MBTA Working Group

Date: June 2026

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY:

Efficient commuter rail connectivity serves as a vital economic driver for the Central Massachusetts region, attracting employers, students, and investment to the region. To capitalize on this potential, the Worcester MBTA Working Group was established in 2024 to advocate for the preservation, expansion, and modernization of passenger rail service. Recognizing that regional economic health depends on reliable transit, the Group focuses its priorities on elevating the passenger experience, shortening travel times, and building a more resilient transit network.

At the core of a better commute is the need to restore travel speeds and optimize daily schedules for riders. Post-pandemic reductions in express service degraded the passenger experience, adding up to 40 minutes to daily commutes and stripping the rail line of its competitive advantage. To reverse this trend and give riders their time back, the Group prioritizes holding the MBTA to strict travel time targets: restoring express trips to a 55-to-60-minute window and capping non-express trips at one hour and ten minutes. This daily efficiency must be supported by preserving consistent "clock-face" scheduling and maintaining the \$10 weekend pass, which are predictable, affordable options that have already successfully driven weekend ridership past pre-pandemic levels.

Sustaining these faster travel times depends on protecting existing express routes from future infrastructure bottlenecks. A major concern for passenger speed is the proposed West Station within the Allston Multimodal Project, as forcing all trains to stop at this new transit hub would compromise the Worcester commute. Consequently, the Group advocates for a four-track layout, consisting of two mainline tracks and two separate station tracks, to guarantee that half of all Worcester trains can bypass the station entirely as express routes. Further, the Group prioritizes safeguarding the Grand Junction bridge during construction to avoid forcing trains into a 100-mile maintenance detour. This is a critical risk-mitigation priority for riders, as the MBTA has warned that losing this maintenance link could cause service to cease within weeks.

Simultaneously, the MBTA must upgrade its aging infrastructure to prevent the systemic delays currently undermining daily reliability for passengers. With 51% of the MBTA's rolling stock currently out of a State of Good Repair, aging equipment remains a primary driver of mechanical disruptions and peak-hour crowding. Securing new locomotives and higher-capacity bi-level coaches is essential to stabilize daily service and support the MBTA's ambitious 2035 goal of delivering 80 daily trains to Worcester. This fleet overhaul must be paired with signal modernization. Outdated rail signals currently force wide train spacing and slower speeds; however, a targeted \$22 million signalization modernization project, slated for completion in late 2026, will allow trains to safely run closer together at higher velocities, expanding line capacity until further funding for needed infrastructure is secured, which will enhance expansion options significantly.

Finally, as these structural upgrades improve velocity and reliability, concurrent investments must elevate the on-board and station environment for commuters who regularly spend over 90 minutes on the train. Modern amenities are critical to retaining working professionals, beginning with the deployment of free, reliable Wi-Fi across all train cars to resolve a primary rider pain point. This must be complemented by modernized digital signage at stations, enhanced mobile app functionality for transparent communication, and the systematic removal of physical speed restrictions along the tracks to ensure a seamless, comfortable journey. Supported by the push for modernized, annual data collection to ensure rider demand is accurately tracked, these combined priorities ensure an efficient transportation network that puts the passenger first.

INTRODUCTION

In April of 2024, Worcester Mayor Joseph M. Petty and City Manager Eric D. Batista established a local advisory group known as the Worcester MBTA Working Group (“Group”). The purpose of the Group is to advocate for the preservation, expansion, and improvement of rail service and transportation connections between Worcester and Boston.

The Group was created in response to growing concerns about commuter rail service on the Framingham/Worcester Line, particularly following the post-pandemic schedule changes that reduced and eliminated popular express trains and increased travel times for Worcester riders.

The Working Group brings together representatives from local government, business, higher education, and state transportation agencies to advocate for improved rail service. Its core purpose is to ensure Worcester has a stronger voice in MBTA and MassDOT decision-making and to push for faster, more reliable, and more frequent service between Worcester and Boston.

These conversations are important for Worcester because commuter rail service is a major economic development issue for the city. Many residents commute to and from Boston for employment, while Worcester is increasingly viewed as a more affordable housing alternative to the Boston metropolitan area. Reliable and efficient rail connections also help attract employers, students, and investment to the city, strengthening Worcester’s role as the economic center of Central Massachusetts.

Over the course of the Group’s work, a number of key issues affecting rail service between Worcester and Boston have been discussed. These include signalization, scheduling, rolling stock, infrastructure capacity, regional rail connections, rider experience, and operational considerations.

HEART TO HUB / LOCAL-EXPRESS / ZONAL EXPRESS / REGIONAL RAIL

Announced in late 2015 and launched on May 23, 2016, the "Heart to Hub" service was heavily championed by Worcester business leaders and local officials as a game-changing connection. By

skipping all intermediate stops between Worcester and Boston, save for a couple of initial station stops inside Boston like Lansdowne and Back Bay, the train slashed the standard 90-plus minute commuter rail ride down to 60 minutes flat. In its initial phase, it ran twice daily on weekdays, offering a morning inbound trip departing Worcester at 8:05 AM and an evening outbound trip leaving Boston's South Station at 7:35 PM.

While celebrated as a major economic development win to connect Central Massachusetts talent to Boston's booming tech corridor, the service faced immediate infrastructure constraints. Because the line relies heavily on track segments shared with freight traffic, the express train had to be threaded carefully through local commuter schedules. Local officials consistently pushed for times that better aligned with a traditional 9-to-5 workday; however, moving the train closer to peak hours proved difficult without disrupting schedules for local commuters in MetroWest towns.

These scheduling challenges were compounded by the COVID-19 pandemic, which caused plummeting ridership and a shift toward hybrid work. The MBTA suspended the express for roughly two years, with only a brief reinstatement in late 2020. However, as ridership slowly rebounded and essential infrastructure work at Worcester's Union Station progressed, the train officially returned to the tracks on May 23, 2022, exactly six years to the day after its inaugural run.

The most significant shift came in the fall of 2023, when the MBTA eliminated the pure, non-stop version of the train. On October 2, 2023, the T replaced it with a modified express schedule that added five stops, including Framingham, which lengthened the travel time to roughly an hour and twenty minutes. The decision was met with pushback from Worcester-area commuters and advocates, who noted that losing the pure bullet train added more than 40 minutes of daily travel time for those making the full end-to-end trip.

Definitions & Terms: These terms refer to different train service patterns used to organize how trains stop along a commuter rail line:

- Heart-to-Hub Service: Refers to high-speed express service between Worcester (the “Heart of the Commonwealth”) and Boston (the “Hub”). These trains typically stop at very few stations or run nonstop, significantly shortening the commute.
- Local Service: Local trains stop at every station along the line between Worcester and Boston. These trains prioritize accessibility for riders at smaller stations but typically have longer travel times.
- Express Service: Express trains skip some stations, stopping only at major stops. This allows trains to reduce overall travel time for longer-distance commuters.
- Zonal Express Service: Divides the rail line into service zones, where trains stop at stations within a particular zone but bypass others. This model balances speed and accessibility while serving different groups of commuters efficiently.
- Regional Rail: A service model prioritized by the MBTA that focuses on providing frequent, predictable, all-day service (including weekends), rather than just focusing on traditional peak-hour commuter periods.

Concern: There are several concerns regarding travel time versus accessibility. While local service ensures all communities are served, it can increase travel times for longer-distance commuters from Worcester. For example, the elimination of the 6:30 AM express train in Fall 2023 added approximately 21 minutes to the morning commute and 19 minutes to the evening commute, adding up to 40 extra minutes of travel time daily. While a new express train was reintroduced in May 2024, it does not arrive at South Station until 8:45 AM, which is often too late for traditional 9-to-5 workers. ¹

¹ Worcester Regional Research Bureau, *Express for Whom?*.

Further, the MBTA states that the line has limited track capacity. Without additional third-track infrastructure, it can be difficult to run both local and express trains simultaneously, since faster trains cannot easily pass slower ones. This introduces scheduling complexity, as multiple service patterns require careful scheduling to avoid train conflicts and delays.²

Additionally, there are demand differences along the corridor. According to the June 2025 Worcester Regional Research Bureau (WRRB) report, while stations closer to Boston have high ridership density, outer stations show demand for faster long-distance service. In Fall 2024, Worcester accounted for nearly 16% of all inbound weekday passenger boardings, the highest of any single stop on the inbound line. Further nearly 50% of all inbound boardings occurred at Worcester, Grafton, Westborough, Southborough, Ashland, and Framingham. If travel times from Worcester to Boston become too long, rail service will lose these riders to driving, reducing the effectiveness of commuter rail as a regional transportation option.³

Moreover, at the December Allston Multimodal Task Force meeting, the MBTA anticipates by 2035, 160 daily trains on the Worcester/Framingham line (up from the current 55), with approximately 80 daily trains to serve Worcester's Union Station (up from 22). This would bring the waiting time (headway) between trains to under 30 minutes.⁴

Action: Leverage the data that has been shared by utilizing the WRRB study to analyze the exact time saved by express lines compared to traditional service and push back on previous MBTA claims that "75% of riders originate or terminate at Framingham" using updated station boarding data. The Group must leverage this data to argue for state transportation calculations that favor train service. This includes emphasizing that South Station is not the final destination for many weekday riders; for example, data shows a plurality of riders on the 552 express train disembark at Back Bay. Additionally, working together

² Worcester Regional Research Bureau, *The Promises of the Worcester/Framingham Line*.

³ Worcester Regional Research Bureau, *Express for Whom?*

⁴ 12.11.25 Allston Multimodal Task Force Meeting.

with other communities along the line for a stronger coordinated advocacy for the infrastructure needs serving the entire rail line. Lastly, protect express capacity by ensuring that future infrastructure projects, specifically the West Station design, guarantee that commuter rail trips have the ability to bypass the station entirely as express routes.^{5 6 7}

SCHEDULE

Definition: The schedule of the Worcester/Framingham Line refers to the timetable governing when commuter rail trains depart and arrive at stations between Worcester and South Station in Boston. It dictates train frequency, peak-hour service, off-peak service levels, and travel times between stations. Traditionally, the MBTA adjusts this schedule bi-annually.

Concern: As the Worcester/Framingham line is the second-most ridden among the MBTA's 13 regional rail lines, several scheduling concerns have been raised regarding its service. Historically, Worcester benefited from express trains that reduced travel times to Boston. However, recent reductions in express service have increased commute times, making the commuter rail less competitive with driving. Currently, trips between Worcester and Boston can exceed one hour and thirty minutes, a duration longer than comparable commuter rail distances in other regions. Additionally, peak periods often experience crowding or significant gaps between trains, limiting flexibility for commuters.⁸

The need for a reliable and efficient schedule is underscored by high commuter demand. According to the 2023 MBTA Passenger Survey, approximately 29% of weekday riders rely on the train five days a week. Further, between 2018 and 2022, the number of working residents living within a half-mile of Worcester's Union Station grew by 37%. This highlights a rapidly expanding pool of potential riders who are directly, and negatively, impacted by lengthy commute times and service reductions.

⁵ 4.4.25 Worcester MBTA Working Group Meeting Minutes.

⁶ 5.27.25 Worcester MBTA Working Group Meeting Minutes.

⁷ 6.26.26 Worcester MBTA Working Group Meeting Minutes.

⁸ Worcester Regional Research Bureau, *Express for Whom?*.

Action: Advocate for the preservation of the successful "clock-face" scheduling and the \$10 weekend pass, both of which have successfully pushed weekend ridership above pre-pandemic levels (with weekend ridership often reaching 50% of the average weekday volume). Continue to push the MBTA for shorter overall trip times, enforcing a schedule where express trips remain at 55 to 60 minutes and non-express trips do not exceed 1 hour and 10 minutes.^{9 10}

Passenger Service Impact: A consistent "clock-face" schedule combined with travel time targets (55-60 minutes for express, under 1 hour and 10 minutes for local) provides riders with the predictability needed to integrate train travel into traditional work hours. Maintaining affordable options like the \$10 weekend pass further ensures that the train is an accessible, attractive choice for both daily commuters and weekend travelers.

SIGNALIZATION

Definition: Signalization refers to the rail signaling systems that control train movements along the rail line, including trackside signals, communication systems, and automated safety technologies that determine when trains may safely proceed, slow, or stop. Modern signal systems allow trains to operate closer together at appropriate distances and at higher speeds, improving both capacity and reliability.

Concern: On the Framingham/Worcester Line, outdated signal systems present several operational challenges. Older infrastructure requires greater spacing between trains, limiting service frequency and reducing corridor capacity. These systems may also restrict allowable speeds, increasing travel times between Worcester and Boston.¹¹

Limited signal coordination further complicates operations, particularly for express service. Without modern signaling, it is more difficult to run express trains that bypass local stations, an essential feature

⁹ 5.27.25 Worcester MBTA Working Group Meeting Minutes.

¹⁰ 4.4.25 Worcester MBTA Working Group Meeting Minutes.

¹¹ Worcester Regional Research Bureau, *The Promises of the Worcester/Framingham Line*.

for Worcester commuters. Aging infrastructure can also contribute to dispatch conflicts, delays, and bottlenecks, especially on a corridor shared with freight operations.¹²

Action: The Healey/Driscoll Administration, with the Central Mass Legislative Delegation’s support, has allocated \$22 million for signalization modernization, with a targeted completion at the end of 2026, which will introduce new equipment to lead to improved efficiencies for both passenger and freight operations. Additionally, this work should open opportunities to shorten train travel time and improve or enhance existing train trips. The Group should monitor the MBTA Capital Investment Plan and request a brief on how targeted signal improvement could enhance service capacity and reliability without requiring construction of a third track.^{13 14}

Passenger Service Impact: Modernizing outdated rail signals allows trains to safely run closer together at higher speeds. For the passenger, this means less time waiting for delayed trains, faster overall travel times, and a higher frequency of available trips, reducing crowding without the immediate need for disruptive track construction.

TRIPLE TRACK OPTIONS

Definition: A triple-track rail corridor refers to a rail line that contains three parallel tracks instead of the traditional two, allowing trains to move in multiple directions simultaneously and providing greater operational flexibility. On the Framingham/Worcester Line, a triple-track configuration would allow two tracks to be used for regular bi-directional commuter service, while the third track could be used for express trains to overtake slower trains or accommodate freight movements.

Concern: Many portions of the line currently operate with two tracks, which limits the number of trains that can run simultaneously and creates significant limitations for express service. Without an additional track, express trains cannot easily pass slower local trains, reducing the feasibility of fast Worcester-to-

¹² Worcester Regional Research Bureau, *The Promises of the Worcester/Framingham Line*.

¹³ 3.23.26 Worcester MBTA Working Group Meeting Minutes.

¹⁴ 6.26.25 Worcester MBTA Working Group Meeting Minutes.

Boston service. To address this, the MBTA has identified a design project (P0261) for a new third track between Framingham and Weston, which would allow express trains to bypass West Natick, Natick Center, and the three Wellesley stops without impeding local service. However, the required investment is significant. At an Allston Multimodal Task Force meeting, the MBTA and MassDOT made it clear that no funding is currently planned for the project and there is no time horizon on when this might become a possibility. Fortunately, state officials did confirm at that same meeting that the ambitious 2035 service level goals for the corridor (which anticipate 160 daily trains) are not dependent on the Triple Track project being completed.^{15 16}

Action: Clarify the necessity of a third track versus operational alternatives, especially the ambitious 2035 service level goals of 80 daily trains to Worcester. While a third track has historically been considered crucial for West-East rail, the Group must evaluate recent MassDOT indications that improved signalization as well as rail siding expansion, similar to the Long Island Railroad, which could allow the Worcester line to operate effectively without a third track.^{17 18 19}

Passenger Service Impact: Adding a third track (or achieving equivalent operational flexibility through signals) ensures that express trains can physically bypass slower local trains. This allows Worcester commuters to enjoy significantly faster, uninterrupted trips to Boston without sacrificing the accessibility of train service for riders at smaller, intermediate stations.

ROLLING STOCK

Definition: Rolling stock refers to the physical train equipment used on a rail line, including locomotives and passenger railcars that make up commuter rail trains. Rolling stock determines passenger capacity,

¹⁵ Worcester Regional Research Bureau, *The Promises of the Worcester/Framingham Line*.

¹⁶ 12.11.25 Allston Multimodal Task Force Meeting.

¹⁷ 12.11.25 Allston Multimodal Task Force Meeting.

¹⁸ 6.26.25 Worcester MBTA Working Group Meeting Minutes.

¹⁹ 5.27.25 Worcester MBTA Working Group Meeting Minutes.

comfort, accessibility, acceleration performance, and reliability. Currently, the MBTA commuter rail fleet includes 105 locomotives and 452 coach cars.²⁰

Concern: A major concern involves aging equipment. Many MBTA commuter rail locomotives and passenger cars are decades old, which can lead to mechanical issues and service disruptions. According to the MBTA's Capital Needs Assessment, 51% of the agency's rolling stock assets are currently out of a State of Good Repair (SGR), with Commuter Rail coach cars representing the highest proportion of this financial need. Limited equipment availability may also contribute to crowding during peak hours, especially if trains are not long enough to meet demand. Moreover, additional train service cannot be added if there is insufficient rolling stock.^{21 22}

Action: Develop a formula to analyze ridership growth and future demand, to better position Worcester and Central Massachusetts to compete for new MBTA locomotives. This formula should incorporate the demographic projections from the Central Massachusetts Regional Planning Commission's "2050 Connections plan", which anticipates Worcester's population growing to nearly 228,000 residents by 2050, demonstrating a clear, data-driven need for expanded transit capacity. This approach will strengthen advocacy efforts and support long-term planning. The Group should also work closely with the MBTA as it finalizes its fleet strategy, whether through acquisition or leasing, to ensure sufficient rolling stock is available to meet current and future needs. To keep stakeholders informed, the Group should track current information on these rolling stock acquisitions, such as the MBTA and Maryland Transit Administration's joint effort to acquire BEMUs and new diesel engines, and provide online resources so readers can delve deeper into these active projects. In anticipation of service expansion, particularly the proposed inland route extension, it is critical to secure adequate equipment to maintain existing service frequency while accommodating additional demand. Importantly, the Group must ensure the MBTA's capital budget planning actively anticipates the funding necessary for the additional coach cars required to actually

²⁰ MBTA, *Capital Needs Assessment and Inventory*.

²¹ MBTA, *Capital Needs Assessment and Inventory*.

²² Worcester Regional Research Bureau, *The Promises of the Worcester/Framingham Line*.

deliver the 2035 service level expansion. Finally, the Group should advocate for the line's inclusion in ongoing MBTA capital investments, including the procurement of new, higher-capacity bi-level commuter rail coaches to replace the aging single-level fleet and improve overall system performance.^{23 24 25 26}

Passenger Service Impact: Replacing aging locomotives and coaches, which are currently responsible for mechanical delays because 51% of the fleet is out of a State of Good Repair, directly boosts daily reliability. New, higher-capacity bi-level coaches will alleviate peak-hour crowding, providing riders with a more comfortable and dependable journey.

WEST/EAST RAIL

Definition & Terms:

- West/East Rail: Refers to the proposed passenger rail service connecting Boston to Western Massachusetts, with major stops including Worcester, Palmer, Springfield, Pittsfield, and extending to Albany, NY.
- Compass Rail: Refers to the overarching vision and all-encompassing brand for intercity passenger rail across Massachusetts and beyond. It is designed as a regional network with Springfield, MA, serving as a central hub for trains radiating in all directions. The program integrates both existing state-supported north-south service (such as the Amtrak-operated Vermonter, Valley Flyer, Hartford line, and Berkshire Flyer, with newly proposed routes

Both concepts aim to create a frequent, express, and reliable intercity rail corridor across the Commonwealth, improving connections between the eastern and western regions. The MBTA has invested approximately \$74 million in Worcester's Union Station Center Platform Project in anticipation of expanded rail service connecting Worcester to Springfield, MA, and points further west. Currently,

²³ 5.27.25 Worcester MBTA Working Group Meeting Minutes.

²⁴ 6.26.25 Worcester MBTA Working Group Meeting Minutes.

²⁵ 12.11.25 Allston Multimodal Task Force Meeting Minutes.

²⁶ Long Range Transportation Plan 2050, Central Mass Regional Planning Commission

there is only one Amtrak train (Lake Shore Limited) operating from Worcester to Springfield, highlighting the need for additional service to fully realize the benefits of a West-East rail connection.

Concern: Several issues have been raised in discussions about West-East Rail: Currently, travel between Boston and Western Massachusetts by train is limited and often requires multiple transfers or long detours, making rail less competitive with driving. Existing rail lines require significant upgrades, including track improvements, signalization upgrades, and station investments to support faster passenger service. Additionally, much of the corridor is shared with freight rail operations (such as CSX), which can complicate scheduling, cause delays, and restrict capacity planning.^{27 28}

Further, West-East Rail is a massive infrastructure investment requiring state and federal funding, such as the Consolidated Rail Infrastructure and Safety Improvements (CRISI) Program. Despite the heavy required investment, there is definitive proof of demand: ridership on existing Compass Rail and state-supported Amtrak services doubled between 2018 and 2024.²⁹

Action: The Group should support MassDOT’s “Compass Rail” Inland Route initiative, which aims to deliver six daily round trips connecting Boston, Worcester, and Springfield by the 2045 service goal, along with expanded regional connections to New Haven. Ensuring these state milestones are met is critical to fulfilling the transit and economic visions laid out in the regional 2050 Connections plan. At the same time, it is essential to protect existing commuter rail service by ensuring that any eastward extension to Worcester and Framingham does not reduce current MBTA service frequency. The Group should work closely with the state to ensure that the additional locomotives required to support expanded service are successfully acquired and deployed. To remain aligned with the broader regional vision, the Group must

²⁷ Worcester Regional Research Bureau, *The Promises of the Worcester/Framingham Line*.

²⁸ MassDOT, *Compass Rail Program Overview*.

²⁹ MassDOT, *Compass Rail Program Overview*.

also ensure it stays informed on the East/West Rail conversations and planning happening in Springfield, ensuring Worcester's needs are represented as the central hub develops.^{30 31 32}

In parallel, the Group should advocate for cost-effective infrastructure solutions, like the \$22 million signalization upgrade scheduled for completion in 2026, which is expected to improve freight efficiency and reduce delays. This includes evaluating MassDOT's position that targeted signal improvements may allow the corridor to operate effectively without the need for a third track. The Group should also hold state and federal partners accountable to project timelines, with design anticipated in 2025, construction beginning in 2027, and service launching between 2029 and 2030. Finally, it is critical to ensure that major infrastructure projects in Boston, particularly the Allston Multimodal Project and West Station, are designed with sufficient track capacity and layover infrastructure to support expanded West-East rail service without creating bottlenecks for Worcester commuters.³³

Passenger Service Impact: Expanding the Compass Rail network offers passengers seamless, direct access to Western Massachusetts and New Haven. By managing this expansion and securing adequate equipment, riders will gain new regional travel options without experiencing any reduction or disruption to the frequency of their daily commuter service.

ALLSTON MULTIMODAL TRANSPORTATION PROJECT

Definition: The Allston Multimodal Project is a major infrastructure initiative led by the Massachusetts Department of Transportation that will reconstruct the Massachusetts Turnpike (I-90) through the Allston neighborhood of Boston. The \$2.07 billion project is funded by multiple sources and will be built on an over 100-acre site belonging to Harvard, in partnership with Boston University, the City of Boston, and the Federal Highway Administration.

³⁰ 6.26.25 Worcester MBTA Working Group Meeting Minutes.

³¹ 3.23.26 Worcester MBTA Working Group Meeting Minutes.

³² Long Range Transportation Plan 2050, Central Mass Regional Planning Commission

³³ 4.4.25 Worcester MBTA Working Group Meeting Minutes.

The project is designed to replace aging highway infrastructure while creating space for significant transportation improvements. It aims to bring the elevated highway to surface level, eliminate outdated on and off ramps, and create a new local street network. Crucially, it involves constructing the West Station commuter rail facility, adding additional rail track capacity, expanding bicycle and pedestrian connections, strengthening local transit connections, and improving access to the Charles River waterfront for the residents of Allston and Brighton. Because the Worcester commuter rail line runs through this corridor, the project is considered one of the most important infrastructure investments affecting rail service between Worcester and Boston.

Concern: The Allston Multimodal Project has raised several policy and planning concerns related to transportation operations and long-term rail capacity. Chief among these are funding challenges and delays stemming from the project's complexity and significant costs. Most notably, in July 2025, MassDOT was notified that the Federal Highway Administration rescinded \$327 million of a previously awarded \$335 million Neighborhood Access and Equity Grant for the project. As a result, MassDOT is procuring an outside consultant to conduct an independent cost and engineering analysis to determine how to deliver the project with available resources, with results not expected until 2026. The project's complexity and significant costs have prompted concerns.^{34 35}

Another major issue is the potential for construction disruptions, as the massive scale of the work raised concerns about temporarily affecting commuter rail operations along the Worcester Line. Fortunately, MassDOT has stated that three lanes of I-90 will remain open during construction, and most railroad construction will be performed at night to ensure there is little interruption to the train schedule. However, there are still concerns regarding the timeframe during which the Grand Junction bridge will be closed.³⁶

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³⁴ MassDOT, *Allston Multimodal Project*.

³⁵ MassDOT, *Allston Multimodal Latest Updates*.

³⁶ 4.4.25 Worcester MBTA Working Group Meeting Minutes.

³⁷ 3.23.26 Worcester MBTA Working Group Meeting Minutes.

³⁸ Worcester Regional Research Bureau, *The Promises of the Worcester/Framingham Line*.

Further, rail advocates emphasize the importance of ensuring the corridor includes sufficient track capacity to support future regional rail service, including the proposed West-East "Compass Rail" service. If the corridor is not designed with adequate capacity, it could severely limit future improvements. Lastly, there is the possibility of bottlenecks at the proposed West Station. There are ongoing concerns that demands from Boston neighborhoods to have every local train stop at the new station could negatively impact the overall speed and accessibility of the line for Worcester and Metrowest commuters.^{39 40 41}

Action: Monitor the progress of the Allston Multimodal Project, with particular attention to the Allston Multimodal Task Force meetings, as well as key milestones such as the upcoming EIS/EIR filings and the anticipated Fall 2027 Design-Build Contractor Notice to Proceed. The Greater Worcester members on the Allston Task Force are State Representative Hannah Kane of Shrewsbury, and the City of Worcester's Chief Development Officer, Peter Dunn. The Group should also remain aware that USDOT funding is contingent upon planning completion by September 2026, making adherence to timelines critical. At the same time, strongly advocate for sufficient track capacity within the project, including the two proposed dedicated Worcester mainline tracks, two Grand Junction side tracks, and four layover tracks at Beacon Park Yard to ensure long-term service reliability and frequency.^{42 43 44 45 46}

In parallel, the Group should protect Worcester's express service by submitting a formal letter supporting the West Station design only if it preserves accessibility and does not require all express trains to stop. It is essential that track configurations allow express trains to bypass the station efficiently. Additionally, the Group should stay actively engaged with MassDOT's independent cost and engineering review through

³⁹ 4.4.25 Worcester MBTA Working Group Meeting Minutes.

⁴⁰ 6.26.25 Worcester MBTA Working Group Meeting Minutes.

⁴¹ Worcester Regional Chamber, *Important Decisions Regarding Commuter Rail*.

⁴² 4.4.25 Worcester MBTA Working Group Meeting Minutes.

⁴³ 3.23.26 Worcester MBTA Working Group Meeting Minutes.

⁴⁴ 12.11.26 Allston Multimodal Task Force Meeting Minutes.

⁴⁵ MassDOT, *Allston Multimodal Project*.

⁴⁶ MassDOT, *Allston Multimodal Latest Updates*.

2026 to ensure that any funding changes or constraints do not lead to cost-cutting measures that undermine critical rail infrastructure investments.^{47 48 49}

Passenger Service Impact: Advocating for sufficient track capacity through the Allston corridor prevents future bottlenecks that would otherwise slow down trains moving in and out of Boston. Ensuring smooth construction phasing also protects riders from severe delays and schedule interruptions while this massive infrastructure project is built.

WEST STATION

Definition: West Station is a proposed commuter rail transit hub planned for the Allston neighborhood of Boston as part of the Allston Multimodal Project. Located along the Framingham/Worcester Line, it is intended to serve the rapidly developing Allston–Brighton area and act as the linchpin for the redevelopment of nearly 150 acres of land surrounding the former Beacon Park Yard.

The station is expected to improve transit access for residents and workers, providing crosstown bus connections via a new deck bus concourse. Crucially for regional commuters, West Station is envisioned to provide direct train access to Kendall Square in Cambridge and onward to North Station via the Grand Junction line. Following public feedback, the revised design for West Station and the layover yard now includes four tracks and three platforms.

Concern: Several operational and planning considerations surround the proposed West Station project. One key issue involves service pattern decisions and competing local interests. Some Boston neighborhood advocates have demanded that every local train stop at the new West Station. If this policy were implemented without bypass infrastructure, it could severely negatively affect travel times and service reliability for commuters traveling between Worcester and Boston.^{50 51}

⁴⁷ 6.26.25 Worcester MBTA Working Group Meeting Minutes.

⁴⁸ WRRB, Letter Supporting Worcester Linee Needs in Allston I-90 Project Design.

⁴⁹ Worcester Regional Research Bureau, *The Promises of the Worcester/Framingham Line*.

⁵⁰ 6.26.25 Worcester MBTA Working Group Meeting Minutes.

⁵¹ WRRB, Letter Supporting Worcester Linee Needs in Allston I-90 Project Design.

To address these challenges, corridor capacity remains a central focus. To add a new transit hub without slowing existing service, the track layout must be meticulously designed. The current plan accommodates this by proposing to hold two Worcester main lines alongside additional space for Worcester express tracks, two Grand Junction side tracks, and four layover tracks. Further, a recent Rail Operations Analysis supports the Task Force's position that any reduction in this proposed four-track passenger layout (two Worcester main line tracks and two separate West Station tracks) would sacrifice future rail service goals. Utilizing this expansive infrastructure, MassDOT's stated operational goal is for half of all commuter rail trips to stop at West Station, while the remaining half will efficiently bypass the station as express trains.

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Finally, logistical factors such as the construction timeline and station access must be considered. Because West Station is tied to the broader Allston Multimodal Project, its development is dependent on the progress and sequencing of that large-scale infrastructure effort. Additionally, while parking is not currently planned for the new facility, adjacent parcels owned by Harvard University could potentially be converted to accommodate passenger parking in the future.⁵⁴

Action: To advocate for Worcester and Central Massachusetts' needs regarding the West Station project, the Group should endorse the current MassDOT West Station design proposed in the upcoming MEPA/MEFA filings. However, this support must remain contingent upon the guarantee that the final design will not negatively impact Worcester's accessibility or increase travel times. Specifically, the Group must support the proposed layout featuring four tracks, ensuring the design retains two dedicated tracks for the Worcester mainline alongside two separate West Station tracks. This crucial infrastructure

⁵² 4.4.25 Worcester MBTA Working Group Meeting Minutes.

⁵³ 12.11.25 Allston Multimodal Task Force Meeting Minutes.

⁵⁴ MassDOT, *Allston Multimodal Project*.

will allow trains, including Amtrak and future West-East "Compass Rail" services, to efficiently bypass local stops.^{55 56 57}

To protect this express capability, the Group should engage in dialogue to counter Boston neighborhood demands that mandate every local train stop at West Station. Instead, advocacy efforts should focus on operationally solidifying MassDOT's stated plan to have half of all Worcester trains run as express routes, bypassing the station entirely. In all state-level communications, the Group should also remind stakeholders that the relocation of the CSX freight yard to Worcester in 2012 and 2013 was a crucial step that provided the adequate physical space needed to build the West Station layover and passenger infrastructure today.⁵⁸

Finally, the Group must emphasize that the ambitious 2035 service level goals, which anticipate up to 160 daily trains on the Worcester line, are dependent on the completion of the Allston/West Station project. Therefore, stressing the urgent need to resolve the project's recent \$327 million federal funding rescission is essential to securing the Commonwealth's transportation future.^{59 60 61}

Passenger Service Impact: Securing a four-track layout at the new West Station guarantees that at least half of the Worcester trains can bypass the stop entirely. This protects express riders from being forced into unnecessary stops and prolonged commute times, while still unlocking new transit connections for those who need to access the Allston-Brighton area.

GRAND JUNCTION

Definition: Grand Junction is a rail line, purchased by the Commonwealth from CSX in 2012, that crosses the Charles River and continues north through Cambridge, Somerville, Charlestown, Everett and

⁵⁵ 6.26.25 Worcester MBTA Working Group Meeting Minutes.

⁵⁶ 12.11.25 Allston Multimodal Task Force Meeting Minutes.

⁵⁷ WRRB, Letter Supporting Worcester Linee Needs in Allston I-90 Project Design.

⁵⁸ 4.4.25 Worcester MBTA Working Group Meeting Minutes.

⁵⁹ 3.23.25 Worcester MBTA Working Group Meeting Minutes.

⁶⁰ MassDOT, *Allston Multimodal Project*.

⁶¹ Worcester Regional Research Bureau, *The Promises of the Worcester/Framingham Line*.

Chelsea. Currently consisting of one track, with space for another, it serves as the only rail connection east of Worcester between the MBTA North and South train lines. Currently, it is a critical operation line used by the MBTA and Amtrak to move trains between both North and South stations, allowing them to reach essential maintenance facilities, like the MBTA Commuter Rail Maintenance Facility in Somerville.

Concern: The West Station project unlocks the potential to use Grand Junction for direct passenger service to Kendall Square and Cambridge. A 2024 Cambridge Redevelopment Authority study predicted this connection could attract between 6,500 to 11,200 daily riders by 2040 and save riders 24 to 26 minutes of travel time between Worcester and Kendall Square compared to transferring to the Red Line at South Station. However, the current speeds on the line are limited by the Federal Railroad Administration to just 15 MPH for passenger rail. Converting the line for regular commuter use would require significant infrastructure investments, with upgrades including double-tracking, signalization, and implementing safety measures at six vehicle and three pedestrian at-grade crossings in Cambridge.^{62 63 64}

Additionally, concerns have been raised about the necessary closure of the Grand Junction rail line bridge during a portion of the construction of the Allston Multimodal Project. Closing access to the Grand Junction bridge would sever the only rail connection east of Worcester between the MBTA's north and south side tracks. When this link is cut off, south side trains (including those on the Worcester, Providence, and South Coast lines) requiring routine maintenance at the Boston Engine Terminal would be forced to take a massive detour of over 100 miles via Ayer. This would route additional non-revenue train traffic directly through Worcester. The MBTA has warned that without reliable access to this heavy maintenance facility, "service would cease within weeks," an outcome that would wreak havoc on commuters and be detrimental to service expansion the Worcester/Framingham Line.^{65 66}

⁶² 4.4.25 Worcester MBTA Working Group Meeting Minutes.

⁶³ Worcester Regional Research Bureau, *The Promises of the Worcester/Framingham Line*.

⁶⁴ Worcester Regional Chamber, *Important Decisions Regarding Commuter Rail*.

⁶⁵ 3.23.26 Worcester MBTA Working Group Meeting Minutes.

⁶⁶ Worcester Regional Research Bureau, *The Promises of the Worcester/Framingham Line*.

Action: To ensure the long-term viability and operational success of the Grand Junction line, the Group must support the proposed track capacity at West Station. Specifically, it is critical to endorse the layout that includes the two proposed Grand Junction side tracks, as these are essential to keeping the vision of future Cambridge passenger service alive. In tandem with this, the Group should advocate for the necessary long-term track investments required to raise passenger train speeds above the current 15 MPH limit, ultimately unlocking Grand Junction as an efficient transit corridor. Finally, protecting or lessening the burden of maintenance access during the Allston Multimodal Project construction must be a top priority. The Group and communities along the line must advocate for MassDOT and project designers to minimize construction impacts on the Grand Junction bridge. Keeping this vital maintenance link open is important to prevent 100-mile detours through Worcester and avoid service disruptions across the entire south side commuter rail network.^{67 68 69}

Passenger Service Impact: Unlocking the Grand Junction line for passenger service could possibly save Worcester riders 24 to 26 minutes of travel time when commuting to Kendall Square, eliminating the need to transfer at South Station. Furthermore, protecting this bridge during construction ensures trains can access critical maintenance facilities, preventing 100-mile detours that would cause catastrophic service collapses and extreme delays for riders.

AMTRAK

Definition: Amtrak is the national passenger rail service of the United States, operating intercity trains across the country to provide long-distance and regional rail connections between major cities, complementing local commuter rail systems. In Massachusetts, Amtrak operates several routes, the busiest being trains along the Northeast Corridor, which connect the Massachusetts cities of Boston and Springfield, MA to New York City, Philadelphia, and Washington, D.C. Worcester currently has one daily

⁶⁷ 4.4.25 Worcester MBTA Working Group Meeting Minutes.

⁶⁸ 3.23.26 Worcester MBTA Working Group Meeting Minutes.

⁶⁹ Worcester Regional Research Bureau, *The Promises of the Worcester/Framingham Line*.

Amtrak train, the Lake Shore Limited, which passes through Union Station in both directions, connecting riders to Boston in the east and to Springfield, Pittsfield, Albany, and points further west.

Concern: Although Worcester is located along a major rail corridor, it currently lacks direct Amtrak passenger service to the broader Northeast Corridor, requiring travelers to drive to Boston, Providence, R.I., or Springfield to access trains to New York City, Philadelphia, Baltimore, and Washington DC. Expanding Amtrak service requires extensive coordination with state transportation agencies, freight rail operators, and commuter rail systems.^{70 71}

A primary concern is ensuring that state and federal partners recognize the crucial importance of the Worcester stop for both boarding and disembarking. Worcester is already a massive transit anchor; recent data shows that nearly 16% of all inbound weekday MBTA commuter rail passengers boarded at Worcester Union Station. This proves there is an immense, built-in demand for long-distance travel originating in Worcester. The region must secure direct routes to the Northeast Corridor so that this massive pool of riders is not forced to transfer or drive to access the national rail network.^{72 73}

Action: Worcester should continue its collaboration on Compass Rail, specifically supporting the Inland Route. The Group must track the federal funding MassDOT recently received, which is dedicated to designing a route that will get people from Worcester to Springfield's Union Station, which has direct access to the Northeast Corridor. Also, the Group must push for state and federal partners to meet their proposed 2045 Compass Rail service goals, which include providing six daily round trips from Boston through Worcester to Springfield. Lastly, protect the express corridors, ensuring that future corridor designs, such as the West Station track layout, allow Amtrak riders to efficiently bypass local stops. The track design should also consider the ability to connect riders to North Station via West Station.⁷⁴

⁷⁰ MassDOT, Compass Rail.

⁷¹ MassDOT, *Compass Rail Program Overview*.

⁷² 5.27.25 Worcester MBTA Working Group Meeting Minutes.

⁷³ Worcester Regional Research Bureau, *Express for Whom?*.

⁷⁴ 6.26.25 Worcester MBTA Working Group Meeting Minutes.

Passenger Service Impact: Securing direct Amtrak service to the broader Northeast Corridor allows Worcester passengers to board long-distance trains right in their own city. This eliminates the need for riders to drive to Boston, Providence, or Springfield to connect to the larger Cities on the East Coast, improving regional travel convenience.

RIDER EXPERIENCE

Definition: Rider experience refers to the overall quality, comfort, convenience, and reliability of using public transportation from a passenger’s perspective. This encompasses the entire journey, from navigating schedules and waiting at the station to the condition of the train itself.

Concern: Reliability and on-time performance are critical, as unexpected delays can reduce commuter confidence in the system. While weekday on-time performance on the Worcester line has generally stayed above 90% in recent years, weekend reliability has seen more variability and recent dips, which can frustrate riders. Travel time also plays an important role; if rail service is significantly slower than driving, potential riders may choose other options.⁷⁵

Further, overall rider satisfaction relies on transparent communication. A lack of clear electronic notifications and real-time schedule updates regarding delays or track changes limits commuter flexibility and creates a stressful travel environment.^{76 77}

Additionally, commuter rail riders frequently experience inconsistent, slow, or non-existent Wi-Fi connections during their journey because of the need to use personal hot spots. For the Worcester/Framingham Line, where current trips can exceed an hour and thirty minutes, the lack of reliable internet hinders the ability of commuters to work productively or access entertainment, making the rail less competitive with driving.⁷⁸

⁷⁵ Worcester Regional Research Bureau, *Express for Whom?*

⁷⁶ 6.26.25 Worcester MBTA Working Group Meeting Minutes.

⁷⁷ MBTA, *Capital Needs Assessment*.

⁷⁸ Worcester Regional Research Bureau, *Express for Whom?*

Action: To enhance the rider experience, the Group should focus on improving communication, reliability, and accessibility across the Worcester/Framingham Line. This includes advocating for continuous improvements to the MBTA mobile app to ensure better language access, reliability, and usability for all riders. In addition, the Group should support investments in upgraded station technology, such as clear digital signage and real-time electronic notifications, so passengers are consistently informed of delays, service changes, and schedule updates. Strengthening communication tools will help build rider confidence and improve the overall usability of the system.⁷⁹

Equally important is improving schedule predictability and reducing travel times. The Group should continue to support the “clock-face” scheduling model, which provides consistent and easy-to-remember departure intervals, allowing riders to better plan their commutes. At the same time, efforts should be made to reduce travel times by tracking and advocating for the removal of speed restrictions, such as the current constraint between Lansdowne and Auburndale, which will increase maximum operating speeds and shorten trip durations.⁸⁰

Finally, the Group should advocate for upgrades to digital infrastructure, particularly providing free Wi-Fi connectivity on both existing and new train cars, so riders have reliable internet access throughout their journey.

Passenger Service Impact: Providing free, reliable Wi-Fi transforms the train into a productive environment, resolving a major pain point for commuters who spend over 90 minutes on board. Upgrading digital signage and the mobile app ensures transparent, real-time communication, greatly reducing travel stress when delays or schedule changes occur.

⁷⁹ 6.26.25 Worcester MBTA Working Group Meeting Minutes.

⁸⁰ 5.27.26 Worcester MBTA Working Group Meeting Minutes.

KEOLIS / MBTA REPROCUREMENT

Definition: Keolis Commuter Services is the private company contracted by the Massachusetts Bay Transportation Authority (MBTA) to operate the commuter rail system in Massachusetts. Under this contract, Keolis is responsible for the day-to-day operations of commuter rail service, including train dispatching, maintenance, and customer service.

Concern: Because Keolis operates the trains, delays or operational challenges can directly affect on-time performance and overall rider satisfaction. Improvements to service often require coordination between MBTA leadership and Keolis operations teams, which can complicate decision-making and slow the implementation of operational changes.

Infrastructure limitations also play a major role. Because Keolis operates trains on tracks owned or controlled by multiple entities (MBTA owns the main train tracks and operates commuter rail service, while CSX retains freight rights and owns the tracks west of Worcester), track capacity, signaling systems, and freight rail coordination affect scheduling and reliability. Additionally, aging equipment creates operational hurdles; with a significant portion of the MBTA's rolling stock out of a State of Good Repair, Keolis faces a heavier maintenance burden to keep older trains in service. Workforce and operational capacity are also pressing concerns. Staffing levels, employee training, and the availability of equipment influence service frequency and responsiveness to disruptions, which is especially critical during massive, planned service surges.^{81 82}

Action: The Group must advocate for Keolis and the MBTA to implement modernized, automated ridership data tracking systems. Relying on outdated methods presents significant challenges; for instance, the ridership data collected during the Fall of 2024 was tallied manually by MassINC Polling, which introduces the potential for human error. Moving forward, the Group should reiterate the need for the state to collect station boarding data annually and with greater detail, to help inform the Group's

⁸¹ Worcester Regional Research Bureau, *The Promises of the Worcester/Framingham Line*.

⁸² MBTA, *Capital Needs Assessment*.

advocacy efforts as well as other stakeholders on the line. Further, because this manual data was only collected on Tuesdays, Wednesdays, and Thursdays between September and November and was likely only counted once, it may not provide a comprehensive picture of actual corridor demand. In addition to modernizing data collection, the Group must proactively coordinate with Keolis and MBTA leadership to guarantee that adequate staffing, equipment, and operational services are secured for planned ridership surges. Strict operational readiness is critical for major upcoming events, such as the 2026 FIFA World Cup, which is expected to bring up to 40,000 overall riders and will require significant schedule adjustments to accommodate the anticipated 21,000 transit riders per game.⁸³

Passenger Service Impact: Modernizing ridership data collection ensures that the MBTA accurately understands passenger demand, leading to schedules and train capacities that actually reflect rider needs. Proactive coordination with Keolis for major events, like the 2026 World Cup, ensures that adequate staff and equipment are ready, preventing severe crowding and operational breakdowns during ridership surges.

CONCLUSION

The Framingham/Worcester Line represents a critical transportation and economic lifeline for the City of Worcester and the broader Central Massachusetts region. The issues outlined, ranging from signalization and scheduling to infrastructure capacity, rolling stock, and rider experience, underscore both the challenges and the significant opportunities to modernize and strengthen this corridor. As Worcester continues to grow as a residential, economic, and transit hub, ensuring fast, reliable, and competitive rail service to Boston and beyond is essential to sustaining that momentum.

Moving forward, the Worcester MBTA Working Group must remain a strong and coordinated advocate at the local, state, and federal levels, ensuring that key investments such as Compass Rail, the Allston Multimodal Project, and signalization, as well as infrastructure upgrades, are implemented in a way that

⁸³ 5.27.25 Worcester MBTA Working Group Meeting Minutes.

enhances, not compromises, service for Worcester riders. Additionally, working together with communities along the line will be critical for stronger coordinated advocacy for the future infrastructure needs serving the entire rail line. By prioritizing express service, protecting existing commuter capacity, advancing data-driven planning, and improving the overall rider experience, Worcester can position itself as a central player in Massachusetts' evolving rail network. Ultimately, a well-functioning and forward-looking rail system will not only improve daily commutes, but also drive long-term economic development, regional connectivity, and quality of life for residents across the Commonwealth.

MAJOR STATIONS

Boston South Station: Located at the Northern end of the Northeast Corridor, Boston's South Station is the busiest train station in all of New England, with around 24,600 daily boardings, equaling around 600 to 800 trains daily. Serving as a major transportation hub, riders have the ability to access the entire Northeast Corridor, including Acela Service and Lake Shore Limited service, nine MBTA Commuter Rail lines, MBTA Subway Service, MBTA Bus Service, and access to Boston's Logan International Airport.

Boston North Station: Located on the north side of the City of Boston under the TD Garden, North Station serves as a northside commuter rail terminal. With 400 to 500 total train arrivals and departures, it provides train service for Amtrak's Downeaster to both New Hampshire and Maine, as well as commuter rail service for five commuter rail lines. It also provides access to MBTA Subway and Bus Service.

Back Bay: Located in Boston, Back Bay is a heavily utilized transit hub that provides access to Amtrak services, the MBTA Orange Line, and multiple MBTA Commuter Rail lines, including the Worcester/Framingham Line. For Worcester Line commuters, Back Bay is a critical destination; in fact, a plurality of riders on the morning Worcester express train alight at Back Bay rather than continuing to South Station.

Worcester Union Station: The Western Terminal for the Worcester/Framingham Line in the City of Worcester, with 41-49 daily trains departing and arriving at Union Station. With improvements underway, the MBTA has invested approximately \$74 million in a center platform project that includes a new high-level center platform with elevators, ramps, and reconstructed tracks to increase capacity and accessibility. In addition to currently hosting Amtrak's Lake Shore Limited, Union Station is envisioned as a major stop for the upcoming West-East "Compass Rail" service, with ambitious state goals to increase service to 80 daily trains at the station by 2035

Springfield Union Station: The Northern terminal of the Hartford Line in the City of Springfield boasts 31 trains per day connecting travelers. Springfield is known as the rail crossroads and serves as the

established central hub for the proposed Compass Rail network. It currently provides North-South connections to the Northeast Corridor and Metro North Service in New Haven, CT, via Amtrak's Northeast Regional, Vermonter, Valley Flyer, and Hartford Line services, and will be the anchor for future West-East Rail. Currently, the station has two operating platforms with the vision to bring all 4 platforms up to standard and online with the increase of rail traffic along the West-East line. To support this future capacity, there is currently a funded final design underway for track improvements at Springfield Union Station.