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Dear General Manager Poftak,

Envisioning “*Gold at the end of the rainbow.*”

On behalf of Newton’s residents, employees, staff and elected officials, I along with Council President Susan Albright and Vice President Rick Lipof want to thank you for the opportunity to submit this response to the MBTA’s recently released Bus Network Redesign proposal.

We recognize some significant benefits to Newton and across the region, but we do have mixed feelings and some very strong concerns. But, we can envision the “*Gold at the end of the rainbow,*” if we spend time working to redesign some of the proposed routes. Let us explain our thinking below.

FIRST: THE GREAT NEWS

We applaud and appreciate the proposal to improve service frequencies on various routes throughout the City and region, as well as the proposed extension of *Route 60*, from its current terminus in Chestnut Hill, to serve Newton Centre via Langley Road. This proposal is a significant improvement which will provide new travel opportunities among various markets, including a convenient connection to and from the Green Line.

A proposed new route, *Route 53*, has a lot of promise by connecting the Green Line with Brandeis University and areas of Waltham. We suggest, however, that the MBTA consider changing the proposed route so that it connects to the Woodland MBTA Station via Commonwealth Avenue and Washington Street (instead of the proposed route to Riverside Station via Grove Street). This revised route would retain some service along a section of Commonwealth Avenue, where service is proposed to be eliminated, while also proving access to Newton-Wellesley Hospital (one of the two largest employers in Newton), and avoiding the need to run additional buses on narrow Grove Street.

AND NOW: THE EVEN GREATER NEWS

With the support of Governor Baker, Secretary Tesler, General Manager Poftak, and leaders throughout government, we recognize that we are closer than ever to completing the design and construction of two-sided, accessible commuter rail stations in Newtonville, West Newton and Auburndale.

It now appears that within a few years, this project will be completed, and it will transform travel throughout the northern side of Newton and, in fact, along the entire Worcester Line. We cannot express loudly enough how exciting and significant this project will be for Newton and the region!

It’s been a long-time coming and we thank you for turning this vision into a reality. The operational difficulty, as you know, is that the platforms at the three stations in Newton are currently only one-sided, meaning that trains must all switch onto a single track before and after the three Newton Stations, in order to stop here. To stop in

Newton, an outbound train toward Worcester must switch onto the southerly track before arriving at Newtonville Station, and then must switch back to the northerly track after stopping at Auburndale Station. Because of this operational challenge, along with the move toward “clockface” schedules across the region, the MBTA skips service in Newton for large periods of the day. New, accessible, two-sided platforms will allow trains to stop in Newton throughout the day, as they do throughout the rest of the MBTA Commuter Rail system. We believe that these stations could then become feeder locations, where passengers would connect between local buses and the commuter rail, for service to and from Boston. The timeline for this vision has recently changed from a long-term aspiration to a short- or medium-term reality.

AND THE REALLY, REALLY BAD NEWS (*BUT HOW TO AVOID IT*)

We find the proposed changes to our Express Bus network in Newton to be very concerning, especially in light of the current challenges of our Commuter Rail system, as described above.

Newton has historically been served by Express Buses, that complement our infrequent Commuter Rail service, particularly for access into and out of Boston.

Our concerns have been exacerbated by the recent service cuts and modifications to our Express Buses routes. Until recently, Routes 553, 554, 556 and 558 ran throughout the day, and riders relied on these routes to travel between Newton and Boston, especially during the hours when the Commuter Rail vehicles didn’t stop in Newton. However, as part of the recent “Forging Ahead” process, the MBTA Control Board voted to terminate these four Express Bus routes at Newton Corner, where riders must now transfer to another Express Bus, to continue on to Boston or from Boston to points west.

These changes, which we understood to be temporary COVID-related service modifications, have now become the “current service” in the MBTA’s maps and “compare your trip” features. But, to understand the scope of service deterioration in Newton, it is important to compare the proposed new bus network service with the Pre-Pandemic Express Bus service – not with the Post-Pandemic “Forging Ahead” service changes.

Yet, even when comparing the current (Post-Pandemic) bus service with the proposed redesigned bus service, we have many concerns, including the following:

- Service is proposed to be eliminated along our Adams Street / Chapel Street corridor in Nonantum. Through a lens focused on equity, it seems inconsistent for the MBTA to propose to eliminate service in Nonantum, where some of Newton’s most transit-dependent residents live. The same holds true for other services proposed to be eliminated, including the Elliot Street corridor, along with sections of Crafts/Waltham Streets, and the Commonwealth Avenue/Washington Street area. These are areas where transit service should be improved – not eliminated – with the only options available to walk longer distances and/or transfer between vehicles.
- Our Express buses, already cut back from Pre-Pandemic services, are now proposed for elimination during mid-day and weekends. We are very concerned about this significant service loss. These changes will negatively impact many Newton residents, including our many transit “by choice” commuters. Of a more regional concern, these changes will encourage more (previous Express Bus) commuters to give up on public transit and choose to commute to Boston via private vehicle, just as major construction projects get underway on Storrow Drive and I-90 including the straightening of the Massachusetts Turnpike in Allston. Shifting more commuters from Express

Buses to private vehicles will create even worse traffic delays for anybody who uses the Massachusetts Turnpike to travel between Boston, Newton and points west.

- Our two bus stops with the highest passenger volumes, by far, are located in Newton Corner – one stop is located on the north side of the circle, the other stop on the south side of the circle. Since Newton Corner remains a difficult location for pedestrians to cross, MBTA buses have historically circled Newton Corner, to provide safe bus service to both stops. Unfortunately, in an apparent attempt to speed up bus service, the proposal changes this historic safety feature, with buses proposed to serve only one of these two bus stops in each direction. We strongly feel that this proposal will cause inconvenience and safety concerns to our residents and employees. Until significant pedestrian safety improvements can be made in Newton Corner, MBTA buses must stop at both the northern and southern stops, in both directions. (We are grateful that MassDOT is moving forward with plans to improve the Newton Corner circle and the exits on and off the Mass Pike to improve safety for pedestrians, bicyclists and drivers. But, in the meantime, we need the buses to circle Newton Corner.)

Our clear, consistent and urgent suggestion is the following: **Immediately return our Express Bus service to how it had operated pre-pandemic.** While the Commuter Rail stations are being renovated, we propose that our City staff and elected officials work with MBTA staff, and their consultants, to update the network of bus routes in Newton to take advantage of, and focus on, providing transfer opportunities to and from our improved future Commuter Rail stations. We need access by buses to and from Boston while the exciting work is done on the Commuter Rail Stations. Plus, it makes such little sense to move forward with the proposed bus service plan, with inconvenient or no service available, especially when Newton lacks a consistent Commuter Rail option, just to potentially change the bus network once again a few years down the road.

Please **restore our Pre-Pandemic Express Bus network now**, and take the time to work with us to create a cost-effective, usable plan for a new bus network that would take advantage of the pending new Commuter Rail stations and service, which is now expected to be up-and-running sooner than had previously been expected. This new, future bus network would use transfer opportunities at our three Commuter Rail stations to provide connections to and from Boston, and would no longer require transfers at Newton Corner for service continuing to or from Boston. This is the *“Gold at the end of the rainbow”* that we all envision, and the way to avoid the really, really bad news for our Newton residents and employees.

Sincerely,

Ruthanne Fuller
Mayor, City of Newton

Susan Albright and Rick Lipof
President and Vice-President, Newton City Council
On behalf of the Newton City Council