

6/28/2022

Mayor Ruthanne Fuller

Re: TAG comments on MBTA Better Bus Project proposals

Dear Mayor Fuller,

The citizen members of the Transportation Advisory Group (TAG) have carefully reviewed the MBTA's Better Bus proposal. In contrast to some of our greatest fears when the process began, we believe the proposed plan offers real gains and only modest losses for Newton. It brings long-overdue regional connectivity to residents traveling between Newton and our neighboring communities, it improves frequency and reduces wait times, and it adds much needed service outside of the traditional 9 to 5 commute including weekend, early morning and evening hours.

In creating their proposal, the MBTA used state of the art real-time transportation and ridership data to optimize transit routes for today's transit users. Some of benefits of the plan for Newton include:

- a new Riverside-to-Auburndale Square high-frequency bus connection that continues to Waltham and Arlington,
- a new local connections between West Newton, Waltham, and Watertown Square,
- the extension of the 60 bus to Newton Center,
- regular, predictable local bus service along Washington Street.

These changes improve service in some of the busiest transportation corridors in the city. In contrast, the routes that the plan discontinues have very low ridership, even before COVID. In addition, alternate routes that often cause confusion for new and occasional bus riders have also been discontinued in order to promote greater predictability of service. We believe these tradeoffs are in general prudent and well-considered, especially in light of the T's financial and service constraints.

To be clear, some of the proposed changes could benefit from modest adjustments. For example, service for residents near the Warren House will be markedly worse without the 505 route, and the Newton Corner express buses need stops on both sides of the Pike to help pedestrians to board safely. The MBTA has explicitly asked for feedback regarding these types of local issues, and Newton should provide detailed and informed comments in response.

We share a vision with you that includes reliable and convenient multi-modal transit across Newton. Optimized bus service will be even more important when reconstruction work begins on the Massachusetts Turnpike between Newton and Boston. The loss of the Pike's private vehicle lanes will present the risk of congestion, but also the opportunity to establish new travel habits that include bus and broader transit ridership. A robust transit system across Newton, supplemented by services such as NewMo, provides the city with transportation resilience that

can provide greater convenience, improve traffic, reduce carbon emission, and benefit social mobility:

“The relationship between transportation and social mobility is stronger than that between mobility and several other factors, like crime, elementary-school test scores or the percentage of two-parent families in a community”, - Nathaniel Hendren, Harvard economist.

We welcome further discussion with you and city staff on the MBTA’s proposal and how Newton can best respond to it.

Sincerely,

Michael Halle
Chair, Newton Transportation Advisory Group
For its citizen members