MBTA overstating its budget woes, critics say

Recent proposals to scale back passenger service have raised concerns that the MBTA is overstating its financial woes.

By Nicole Dungca | GLOBE STAFF  MARCH 23, 2017

When MBTA officials presented potential cuts of weekend commuter rail service and trips for riders with disabilities, the proposals were portrayed as difficult but necessary moves to address a projected $42 million budget deficit.
But to close observers of the MBTA’s fiscal situation, framing the choice between sharp service cuts and a budget crisis is misleading, especially with the transit agency slated to receive an influx of state revenue that could bridge the gap.

“I think it’s a false narrative that they’re having to make these cuts in order to keep operations going,” said Carolyn Villers, executive director of the Massachusetts Senior Action Council. “They’re targeting some of the most vulnerable to close a gap that doesn’t exist.”

Public transportation advocates have praised the MBTA’s current leadership and its fiscal control board for keeping careful watch over the agency’s finances. But the recent proposals to scale back passenger service have raised concerns that the agency is overstating its financial woes — and unnecessarily frightening riders.

“In reality, the T has a surplus in its operating budget, but they’re choosing not to use it that way,” said Rafael Mares, a vice president at the Conservation Law Foundation, an environmental advocacy group. “They use the pressure they keep on themselves to justify service cuts and raising fares.”
State Representative William Straus, cochairman of the Legislature’s Joint Transportation Committee, said the MBTA has the money on hand to balance its budget in the next fiscal year, but is choosing to earmark much of it for infrastructure projects.

That may well be a valid choice, Straus said, but he urged officials to depict the situation more clearly.

“They’ve presented it as ‘We can’t do these things unless we cut some of the services,’ ” Straus said. “But they have money to provide these services.”

MBTA officials this month floated a cost-saving plan to eliminate weekend commuter rail service and scaling back trips for as many as 10,000 riders who use The Ride, a door-to-door service for passengers with disabilities.

After the proposed cuts came under sharp criticism, Governor Charlie Baker said the MBTA would not eliminate the weekend commuter rail service, but it remained unclear whether other reductions might occur.

Baker has frequently said that service cuts should be a “last resort,” and, referring to trips for disabled riders, told reporters on Tuesday that the T should “continue to provide the service but do it in a more cost-effective way.”

The MBTA has faced chronic budget problems, but in 2013, legislators approved a transportation finance bill that gave the agency an additional $187 million a year, on top of the $1 billion it receives from sales tax revenue.

The rest of the MBTA’s nearly $2 billion operating budget comes from fares, money from municipalities that receive service, and other revenues such as advertising and parking.
But MBTA leaders want to reserve most of that recurring $187 million for infrastructure and repair projects, separate from operational expenses.

Brian Shortsleeve, the MBTA’s acting general manager, has said the MBTA is required under a 2015 law to balance its budget without additional state money, such as the subsidies approved in 2013. He has also said the money is “not guaranteed” and shouldn’t be relied on for annual expenses.

Yet the agency tapped those funds last year to tackle a $50 million deficit, and the 2015 law, which Baker pushed for, leaves the door open to using...
In the past, Setti Warren has had two liens and a license suspension.

One of the Newton mayor’s past liens placed his residence at 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue (yes, the White House).

R.I.P. Supreme Court Phil A. Buster, 1806-2017

The Supreme Court filibuster died on April 6, 2017. He was 211 years old.

Only Hernandez is linked to ‘murder car’ and ‘murder weapon,’ prosecutor says

In closing arguments, Aaron Hernandez’s defense team told jurors the prosecution’s case was “riddled” with “lies” from star witness Alexander Bradley.

Thunderstorms could spawn tornado in Southeastern Mass.

A powerful weather system dumped buckets of rain on Massachusetts Thursday.

Boston’s newest crop of firefighters is made up entirely of veterans

Many of the veterans who graduated from the Boston Fire Academy had seen combat overseas.

MIT study shows deeper look at how memories are stored

The seeds of both short-term and long-term recollections are planted nearly simultaneously in the brains of mice.
Commuter rail delays blamed on defect in new locomotives

Defects in the MBTA’s newest locomotives have left the system without enough trains to provide full service.  

Stop erecting speed bumps for Marathon handcyclists

People who gave their limbs for this country should not have to beg to take part in the Boston Marathon.

Motley to step down as UMass Boston chancellor

J. Keith Motley will step down at the end of the academic year amid a cloud of unrest on the campus over its financial problems.

The ‘Dumbledore’s Army’ of Harvard? Project takes aim at Trump’s agenda

The founders of the “Resistance School” have likened their efforts to “Dumbledore’s Army” from the Harry Potter novels.

For social studies teachers, WWI presents a growing challenge

Though the conflict set the stage for today’s complex problems, many Americans know little about the war.

Trial of man accused of poisoning Stephen Rakes begins in Woburn

Willam Camuti allegedly poisoned Rakes, a former South Boston man who was a victim of James “Whitey” Bulger, because he owed the victim money.
‘Old Ironsides’ restoration nearing completion

During the restoration process, the ship has remained open to visitors. MORE...

Sale of Revolutionary war hero’s home sparks battle in Danvers

The Putnam family would like the house returned to them, but the Danvers Historical Society wants to sell. MORE...

Lawyer in Dunkin’ butter case: $90,000 payout ‘not actually profitable’

An attorney explained why a settlement paying $90,000 to lawyers, but just $500 to the man who brought the lawsuit, is not unfair. MORE...

Tito Jackson apologizes for pushing arm of WGBH reporter

Jackson, a Boston city council member and mayoral candidate, apologized after the station manager sent him a letter of complaint about the incident. MORE...

Harvard, founded by ‘stock of the Puritans,’ wants them gone from storied anthem

The university has launched a competition challenging its community to come up with an alternative to a line in “Fair Harvard,” citing its exclusivity. MORE...

On Immigrants’ Day, advocates urge legislators to pass ‘sanctuary state’ bill

After speeches, a peaceful crowd of about 100 people hoisted signs
For second straight day, commuter trains canceled

Keolis Commuter Services canceled trains on the Stoughton, Lowell, Rockport/Beverly lines, as well as a second train on the Rockport line.