

TOWN OF HINGHAM

OFFICE OF THE SELECTMEN

Mary M. Power, Chair
Joseph M. Fisher
William C. Ramsey



Tom Mayo, Town Administrator
Michelle Monsegur,
Assistant Town Administrator

October 29, 2020

Secretary Stephanie Pollack, MassDOT
Chairman Joseph Aiello, Fiscal and Management Control Board
General Manager Steve Poftak, MBTA
Massachusetts Department of Transportation
10 Park Plaza
Boston, MA 02116

Re: Maintain Service on the Hingham/Hull
Ferry and the Greenbush Commuter Rail

Dear Secretary Pollack, Chairman Aiello, and General Manager Poftak:

We are writing to ask that you join us as a partner to support the Commonwealth's economic and environmental vitality and to avert the MBTA's proposed reductions or elimination of services for the Hingham/Hull Ferry and the Greenbush Commuter Rail Line. Transportation is a "public good", a service that must be provided by the government and made accessible to all.

We offer the perspective of Town officials, of Hingham residents, and of Hingham business owners. But we also advocate for the best interests of all of us who live and work in the Commonwealth.

1. First and foremost, this is a matter of Public Health.

The MBTA is currently experiencing a financial crisis brought about by the coronavirus pandemic. While there may be questions about how government should best respond to the emergence of COVID-19, this is one response to the pandemic that is beyond dispute: **The risk of COVID-19 transmission is lower when persons are outdoors instead of in confined spaces.** This is the reason that the Centers for Disease Control and the Massachusetts Department of Public Health have encouraged restaurants to prioritize outdoor seating. This is the reason why Town Meetings have been held outside in recent months.

Yet the MBTA is now proposing to eliminate the only mode of public transportation that allows for outdoor seating and abundant fresh air for riders – Ferry service.

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In the current environment and for the next few years, Ferry service offers far safer and healthier transport than other modes of public transportation. The design of ferries and the Federal rules that ferries operate under allow for more social distancing and safer seating. Ferries have open upper decks and provide outdoor space. Fresh air is abundant for both interior and exterior seating. Riders are not confined to a dark tunnel while on a ferry.

Seniors are one of the largest demographic groups who take the ferry. Health care workers, blue-collar and white-collar workers, tourists and restaurant diners – we all use the ferry. As the pandemic goes through its phases and economic activity returns, ferry ridership will be the first to rebound even as concerns of health and limited ventilation persist for other modes of public transit.

Based on the above facts, we are dismayed that the MBTA would disregard the health and welfare of our residents by responding to the current COVID-19 crisis with a proposal to eliminate the safest mode of transportation provided by the MBTA. Ferry service will be the gold standard for public transportation in a post-pandemic world. Let's preserve it and grow the service.

2. Reduced Ferry and Train service will lead to increased greenhouse gas emissions.

“Yesterday’s solutions and yesterday’s plans are no longer sufficient,” Governor Baker said on January 21, 2020, when he announced the Commonwealth’s commitment to a net-zero emissions goal by 2050. “We must continue to take bold action to reduce our greenhouse gas emissions.”

Unfortunately, the MBTA’s plans to reduce or totally eliminate service on the Hingham/Hull Ferry and the Greenbush Commuter Rail Line would be a giant step backwards, away from the Governor’s goal.

Provision of “essential services” is the stated aim of the MBTA, but it excludes any notion or concern that more vehicles on the road will necessarily create increased congestion and adverse environmental consequences. Indeed, the MBTA encourages and expects residents on the South Shore, from Weymouth to Scituate and beyond, to drive to and from Boston and surrounding areas instead of riding the commuter rail or ferry.

The direct consequence of the MBTA’s proposed service cuts will be increased on-road emissions not only in Plymouth County, but also along the highways and roads of Suffolk, Norfolk, and Essex Counties, in the very communities already suffering with unhealthy levels of smog and soot. The United States Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) estimates that a single passenger vehicle emits about 4.6 metric tons of carbon dioxide per year. EPA figures show that the transportation sector is the largest contributor to anthropogenic U.S. greenhouse gas emissions. Pre-COVID daily ridership exceeded 6,000 riders on ferries and 3,000 riders on the Greenbush train. Here in Hingham, a pre-COVID census of riders confirmed that 50% of our commuters to downtown Boston were taking public transit.

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Governor Baker asked us to take bold action to reduce greenhouse gas emissions. **We need to embrace policies that will turn car drivers into passengers on public transit. The MBTA's proposal would have the exact opposite effect; it would turn former riders of public transit into greenhouse gas emitters.**

3. MBTA's proposed cutbacks will undermine Affordable Housing and Smart Growth.

The Town of Hingham, in cooperation with the Department of Housing and Community Development and private developers, has been working for years to increase our stock of low- and moderate-income housing. Our affordable housing projects include a 281-unit rental community located directly at the Hingham Shipyard where Ferry service originates, and a 220-unit rental community located across the street from the Shipyard. These rental developments include affordable housing units created under Chapter 40B. The promise to these renters has been easy access to Boston so they can get to work reliably and in a reasonable timeframe without needing a car.

We applaud the MBTA for recognizing that it is essential to maintain public transportation for residents who are low income. However, the critical nature of these needs appears to have been overlooked by the MBTA when it comes to those low-income residents who currently reside, or plan to relocate to, Hingham and other South Shore communities. If our low-income residents can't afford a car or the costs of gas and parking, then what options do these residents have to commute to Boston? **Chapter 40B's mandate for development of affordable housing in cities and towns throughout the Commonwealth will be subverted if low-income residents who relocate to our affordable housing developments are penalized by the loss of public transit services.**

Similar concerns apply to smart-growth projects in Hingham and other towns where principles of Sustainable and Transit-Oriented Development have resulted in projects that are physically centered around the Ferry and the Greenbush commuter train. Private residential and commercial developers immediately adjacent to the Hingham Ferry Terminal have invested over **half a billion dollars** in residential, commercial, and office space in reliance on continued ferry service. As a successful Intermodal Center, the Hingham Shipyard has grown to include residences, restaurants, retailers, office space, entertainment, and marina operations. We have 675 total housing units at the Shipyard. Its residents, including many seniors, moved to the Shipyard to have access to the ferries.

With housing and businesses located proximate to public transit, efficiencies in transportation have been achieved, expanded housing opportunities have been realized, and increased job and business opportunities have resulted, all while promoting a clean environment. All of these achievements are threatened, and future smart growth on the South Shore will be deterred, if the MBTA proceeds with its planned cuts in transportation services.

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4. Overall business and development will be hard hit by the MBTA's planned service cuts.

Hingham and our neighboring towns have been focusing on economic development and community building. This is our future, and it depends on transportation options that are sustainable and clean. Strategies to improve the quality and quantity of residential housing, the infrastructure of commercial areas, and the diversity of our residents all require transportation systems that will be reliable and available.

Transportation is not just for work-related travel. Ferries provide access to the Boston Harbor Islands. The Ferry and the Greenbush train (through a connection at South Station) offer a public transit option for travel to Logan Airport, supporting Massport's strategy to reduce congestion and parking demand. Both the Ferry and the Greenbush train facilitate support of the greater Boston economy by South Shore residents, including dining out, shopping and travel, as well as work.

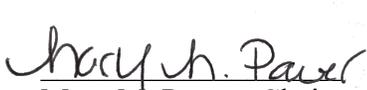
If the MBTA strips away services from the Greenbush Commuter Rail Line and the Ferry, our town and other communities will suffer because of a failure of an essential government service. Government investments of \$534 million in the Greenbush line, which extends from Braintree to Scituate, and \$7 million in Hingham's new ferry terminal, which supports handicap access, show clear recognition of the importance of these transit services and highlight the waste of public funds that would result from terminations or significant reductions in these services.

We recognize that the MBTA faces financial challenges that cannot be ignored. But those challenges could be managed through debt assistance and additional funding at the state and federal levels. Most importantly, the MBTA should avoid going down a path that will discourage ridership through cuts in service. The level of ridership in a post-COVID world will in many ways be determined by the MBTA's own programs for enhancing the ridership experience, by providing reliable, dependable, and safe transportation options. The best way to promote ridership and avoid a downward spiral and loss of confidence in public transit is to maintain and augment services.

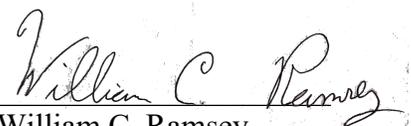
Rather than entering a period of retrenchment, we urge you to lead with a vision that protects our environment and enhances our communities.

Very truly yours,

Hingham Board of Selectmen


Mary M. Power, Chair


Joseph M. Fisher


William C. Ramsey

cc: Governor Charlie Baker
Lieutenant Governor Karyn Polito