

General Manager Phillip Eng Testimony

Monday, June 26, 2023

Good afternoon, Chair Crighton, Chair Straus, and members of the Joint Committee. Thank you for allowing me the opportunity to address this committee today.

Just like the thousands of men and women who work at the MBTA, I take great pride in my public service, and I cherish the opportunity to work in public transportation. I am proud to be General Manager of the MBTA. I view public transportation as vital to public life and our economy.

Every day, the dedicated workforce of the MBTA provides safe service to the T's riders. But when it's not functioning the way, it should, we all – our workforce, the public, our riders, and the cities, towns, and communities we serve – we all suffer.

The MBTA is a system of incredible complexity, and I've begun to dig deep into the challenges facing the system. I view these challenges as opportunities – opportunities to improve, to empower our workforce to think outside the box, to embrace the institutional knowledge of our teams on the ground, and to motivate our workers to welcome new ways of doing business.

The T has history, the T has character, and we are working to restore public pride and confidence.

I am a regular MBTA rider myself, and I also rode the T regularly even before my tenure as General Manager as I travelled around Boston.

And as a rider, I know how frustrating it is when you can't get accurate information in real-time about when your train is arriving, when it's delayed, or how long a delay will take.

Transparent communications is one of my top priorities, and we're taking steps now to improve the quality of our real-time information by providing better and more accurate communications in the moment to riders.

We believe that improving the rider experience and improving the transparency of our communications can go a long way in restoring public confidence, and ultimately ridership.

But our job starts with making sure the T is safe and reliable. In the past, the MBTA has faced incidents that have raised concerns about the safety of the system.

We are taking measured and calculated steps to improve, engaging with our state and federal oversight partners throughout the entire process. Safety for the public we serve, and safety of our dedicated workforce is paramount. The system is safe - but we can and will do better.

I have made a commitment that we will build a top-to-bottom safety culture in everything we do, and in doing so, it will allow us to better deliver the safe, reliable, and robust service that our riders expect and deserve.

As you know, we continue to fully support and collaborate with the Federal Transit Administration (FTA) during their Safety Management Inspection (SMI) process.

We welcome this opportunity to dive deep and go into greater detail with the FTA about the safety initiatives we've accomplished, those that are currently underway, and the areas that need improvement.

We are also grateful to the Legislature for their support and investment in making the T a safer organization. As of April 2023, we have spent about \$110 million of the \$378 million that the Legislature has allocated to us to improve safety in response to the SMI.

I am very proud of the diligent and focused work by everyone, including our partners at the FTA and all involved, to improve our safety processes and protocols.

The MBTA's Quality, Compliance & Oversight (QCO) Office is in place to manage the implementation of the changes brought about by the response to the FTA's SMI and other cross-authority efforts.

This office is dedicated to ensuring the outcomes of those changes are effective and sustainable.

The QCO Office has four guiding principles that I believe can be extended to the entirety of the Authority:

- 1) Taking a human-centered approach;
- 2) Practicing transparency and strong communications;
- 3) Setting everyone up for success across the T; and
- 4) Listening to and learning from our frontline workers.

As we work through the SMI, the QCO team has already accomplished a number of successes.

One major and early success was restoring our Green Line work train to working order, which was identified by the FTA in Special Directive 22-4 with the related Corrective Action Plan closed out in March 2023.

Another vital safety achievement that the public may not see or hear about is the completion of a significant amount of Right of Way Addendum training. On April 18, the FTA issued an immediate action letter to the MBTA, requiring retraining of all of our employees and contractors on Right of Way Addendum Curriculum.

Safety on our ROW is imperative. The team immediately embarked on a comprehensive Right of Way retraining initiative, prioritizing employees and contractors to ensure that critical work and inspections could continue as we deliver daily service. An aggressive, around-the-clock, 5-day-a-week, 4-hour retraining program was approved by the FTA and implemented. Half classroom and half practical, the training reinforced key areas leading to recent near misses.

This has been a solid collaborative effort between Training departments, Operations, Capital, Safety and contractors alike to identify and get folks through the training. Nearly 2,000 employees and contractors have been retrained in just more than one month. The ROW Addendum Curriculum was one near-term action that we are taking further as we develop an enhanced 8-hour ROW training.

We also recently lifted two speed restrictions on the Orange Line in an area known as the Tufts Curve, which is another major success in response to the FTA SMI and addresses Special Directive 22-4, Finding #3 – the curved track section on the Orange Line between the Tufts Medical Center and Back Bay Stations had been under speed restriction dating back to 2019 due to excessive wear and defects.

Track defects were corrected between Tufts Medical Center and Back Bay Stations on both north- and south-bound tracks. Following the replacement of track last summer and fall, and the recently completed replacement of a significant number of cogene eggs (“cogene eggs” support the track itself), we were able to remove the 10 mph speed restriction last week and raise the speed in this area back to line speed after jointly inspecting the work with the FTA. With the lifting of the Tufts Curve restrictions, the MBTA has requested the closure of the CAP from the FTA Special Directive 22-4.

These are just a few examples of some recent successes and highlights as we make progress on the SMI. Implementing our responses and closing out each of our Corrective Action Plans will take time, but these are part of the measured, documented steps we’re taking to improve the safety of the system.

Removing the speed restrictions currently in place is one of the biggest challenges we face, and a challenge I recognized when I took on the role of MBTA General Manager – how we accomplish the work to improve our track and infrastructure while also providing adequate service to our riders, ensuring that all of the work is performed safely, and making sure the work produces meaningful results for subway riders.

At my direction, MBTA personnel are building out a track work schedule that strikes a balance between meeting the needs of riders while also providing sufficient track access to crews that perform the maintenance activities.

In parallel to the development of a larger scale work plan, I have issued a directive to target the most severe speed restrictions first.

As of last week, we have now lifted 99 speed restrictions.

32 speed restrictions have been lifted from the Orange Line, plus the two I mentioned at the Tufts Curve.

We have also lifted 42 speed restrictions on the Red Line as a result of early access evening work as well as work performed overnight. More specifically, we have been able to lift 9 speed restrictions in the section between North Quincy and JFK/UMass; plus 2 speed restrictions have been improved from 10 to 25 miles per hour.

Systemwide, we have lifted 15 restrictions on the Blue Line – we recently completed work to address two more speed restrictions on the Blue Line between Maverick and Airport and between Beachmont and Revere Beach to raise the speed to 25 mph—and 8 restrictions on the Green Line.

The process of lifting speed restrictions is a dynamic process. As we continue our systemwide work to restore reliability and service that our riders deserve, I am proud of the integrated effort this takes among our internal departments as well as our contractor teams. Over time, we will streamline our efforts and reach higher levels of efficiencies as we work to achieve fixes that are holistic and complete. Our teams are focused on identifying root causes so that, when we fix it, we fix it right.

I am committed to improving our system so that it is safe and reliable for our riders and our employees, and we will provide continued updates on future track work as the schedules are finalized.

Improving and restoring our infrastructure to a state of good repair must also go hand-in-hand with rebuilding our workforce.

We have increased our headcount and have already outperformed our hiring activities in the last 8 years.

While a good start, we have more work to do.

Challenges do exist, and the T is not alone in this effort – our peer transit agencies around the country are also struggling to staff up their ranks with proficient, fully trained, fully certified employees, just like the MBTA.

At the T, we have experienced a large number of separations this year, but hiring remains a priority.

The recent hiring activities such as HR on the GO!, increased marketing campaigns, increasing the Bus Operator sign-on bonus to \$7,500, and free CDL classes for Bus Operators, yielded a 112% increase in average monthly applications.

The MBTA has always been a premier workplace and a huge attraction for talent. It is my mission to broadcast that this is still true today. The MBTA is still every

bit the premier workplace it has always been, and we are focused on streamlining our processes to get qualified candidates more quickly in the door.

Towards that goal, we have created the position of Chief Workforce Officer to spearhead and drive hiring and retention efforts, and to develop and transform our workforce strategy to become more comprehensive, efficient, and people-centered to better attract and retain employees.

I'm also pleased about the recent agreement with Local 589, Boston Carmen's Union, to hire new bus operators directly into full time status.

We are making progress but must lean in and continue to make improvements. All of our employees are exceedingly proud of their public service work, and I want to amplify that outward. I have no doubt we can attract the talent we need.

The Healey-Driscoll Administration has set the tone, and we are moving forward, together – striving towards a safer, more reliable, robust transportation system that serves the public to the levels that they expect and deserve.

I know that results matter. And only when our riders start to feel and notice the improvements, will people believe we are on the right track, literally and figuratively.

The heart and core of what we do is providing reliable, safe transit service to riders who expect and deserve a modern, best-in-class system. Modernizing and upgrading the T, including in areas related to safety, can and does take time, but we're continuing to make progress.

I am committed to achieving our ambitious safety and reliability goals while improving transparency and the quality of our communications with riders and the public – we can and will do better.

Thank you again for allowing me this opportunity to speak. I look forward to continuing to partner with the Legislature as we advance these initiatives at the T, and to sharing more about our progress in making the MBTA a safer and more reliable mode of transportation.

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