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Silver Line to get improvements with stimulus funds



The MBTA is using federal stimulus money to install laminated glass windcreens at 25 Silver Line Washington Street bus shelters to protect waiting riders from the elements. (John Tlumacki/Globe Staff)

By Eric Moskowitz

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Last week I wrote about an MBTA line, the Greenbush commuter rail, where ridership is lagging behind projections. Here's some news about a line that is doing better: The Silver Line Washington Street.

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When the MBTA extended that bus rapid transit line — a bus that has its own travel lane among other special features — to reach South Station last October, officials hoped it would attract about 2,600 new riders within a year or two.

The T tracks bus ridership by month. From October 2008 through September 2009, the Silver Line Washington Street had an average of 13,035 weekday boardings, measured in CharlieCard and CharlieTicket counts. From October 2009 through September 2010, ridership averaged 15,509, a daily increase of about 2,474. The figure would have been even higher but includes the two weeks last October before the service started, said Melissa Dullea, director of plans and schedules for the MBTA.

And Silver Line riders are about to be treated to some new benefits. The T's board of directors last week approved the use of \$3.4 million in federal stimulus funds to build laminated glass windcreens to protect waiting riders at 25 bus shelters along the corridor and also to help smooth the ride. The Silver Line's specially painted lanes will be touched up, particularly at crosswalks where old cobblestones and deteriorated asphalt have proven jarring for riders.

In addition to blocking wind, rain, and snow, the glass shields will also help trap warm air in the winter from the overhead heaters that were installed in May, June, and July — with other stimulus funds — in what are already the sleekest

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bus stops among the T's nearly 200 bus routes. The improvements are part of the plan to encourage ridership along the bus rapid transit route serving the old corridor of the late Orange Line elevated train.

"We're really taking bus shelters to the next level," MBTA General Manager Richard A. Davey said in an interview after the MBTA's board meeting last week. The project will employ 16 construction workers between now and mid-2011, when it is scheduled for completion.

The T and the state have directed multiple rounds of federal stimulus dollars from the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act, to the Silver Line — funding the \$2.5 million extension to South Station last year, and a \$30.7 million purchase of 25 sixty-foot, hybrid diesel-electric buses. Most of those buses went to the 28 and 39 routes, but some went to the Silver Line/Washington.

The Silver Line Washington Street — named for the route it follows — would be the busiest bus route in the MBTA system, but the South Station extension technically split it into two routes, renamed SL4 and SL5, that largely follow the same course. The original goes from Roxbury's Dudley Station through the South End to Downtown Crossing; the new one branches off through Chinatown to reach South Station. The \$2.5 million project last year paid for lane work, new shelters at the Chinatown and South Station stops, and a ramp at Essex Street.

That provided a one-seat commute from Dudley to South Station, but it did not actually connect the Silver Line's Washington Street route with the other Silver Line on the map: the SL1 and SL2, also known as Silver Line Waterfront, which runs between South Station and Logan Airport and along South Boston's Seaport District.

Craigie Drawbridge repairs bring transit worries

Construction on the Craigie Drawbridge, which began yesterday, will keep Route 28 inbound between Cambridge and Boston closed until early December, and again for about two months early next year.

The project is part of the sequenced work on six major Charles River Basin crossings — the Craigie, Longfellow, Boston University, River Street, Western Avenue, and Anderson Memorial bridges — between now and 2016, at a cost of more than \$400 million. The work is part of the \$3 billion Accelerated Bridge Program to address years of neglect on the state's aging bridges.

The state and the nonprofit group A Better City have each created websites to help motorists, T riders, bicyclists, and pedestrians. You can find them at www.massdot.state.ma.us/charlesriverbridges and at <http://bridgingthebasin.com>.

The state has urged the public to avoid the area or consider public transportation.

But a protransit coalition — including the city of Cambridge and A Better City, which represents large employers and institutions — is worried that the MBTA will not be ready to handle the influx without added investment. The detoured Craigie traffic could clog roads used by MBTA buses around Lechmere or in Charlestown. Three bus lines rely on the Charlestown Bridge that carries North Washington Street and that will attract Craigie spillover, including the 111 bus — an Everett/Chelsea to Haymarket route that is the T's fifth-busiest and that serves a diverse, densely populated area not covered by rail.

Advocates also worry that without additional investment, the Green and Red lines will be strained — discouraging new riders from sticking with the T. The Red Line, the busy spine of the rapid transit system, is especially prone to delays caused by disabled trains and signal and switching problems associated with its tired infrastructure.

The MBTA has not yet bolstered cross-river service, but spokeswoman Lydia Rivera said the agency is working closely with the state's highway division to monitor traffic impacts associated with the projects. The T also advises riders

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with smartphones or Internet access to consult the third-party applications that have recently been developed to provide bus- and subway-arrival predictions using T data. Those can be found at mbta.com/apps.

The many impacts of the Craigie work — which will run 24 hours a day to meet a goal of April completion — include the rerouting of the EZRide, a \$1 bus run that carries 1,900 riders a day. It is not run by the T but by the nonprofit Charles River Transportation Management Association, and it connects North Station, Lechmere, Kendall Square, and MIT, covering one segment of the circumferential Urban Ring that transit advocates hope will someday be built to connect the T's hub-and-spoke system.

One positive development: The 20 popular linden trees by the Museum of Science that were reduced to stumps last winter in an earlier phase of Craigie work — to accommodate a broader thoroughfare and new retaining wall — were replaced last week by the state with two dozen new lindens. And the lawn in front of the museum now boasts juniper instead of grass to retain more moisture and limit runoff.

“We’re quite pleased about that,” said Jonathan Burke, vice president for visitor services and operations at the museum, which opened two new exhibits this weekend amid the construction. “We’re trying to look on the positive side.”

Alford bridge work could mean double headache

A mile north from Craigie, the state is also about to replace a lesser-known span, the Alford Street Bridge, connecting Everett and Charlestown over the Mystic River. The bridge is owned by the city of Boston, but the state is handling the project. It carries Route 99, a popular alternative to the Tobin Bridge and its \$3 toll.

That may mean a double set of delays for drivers. Although Route 99 does not connect to Route 28 and the Craigie Drawbridge/Dam Bridge, those who follow it through Charlestown or who divert for East Cambridge — as reader Denise Brehm does — may encounter Craigie-related congestion once they cross the Mystic.

“It’s madness! I live in Chelsea, and there are no good public-transportation alternatives, which means my 5-mile commute from Chelsea to MIT will be nightmarish,” Brehm wrote.

The Alford Street Bridge work starts tomorrow. On Friday the bridge’s capacity will be reduced from two lanes in each direction to one. Unlike the painful but relatively swift Craigie work, the Alford lane reductions will last until the project concludes in May 2013, according to Department of Transportation spokesman Adam Hurtubise.

SPS New England of Sudbury won the construction contract with a \$49.2 million bid. The work calls for replacing the moving drawbridge and its mechanism, repairing the bridge substructure, and replacing the bridge superstructure.

“We recognize that there are going to be traffic impacts,” Hurtubise said. “We’re trying to minimize those impacts, but the bridge is in serious need of repair.” ■

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