


With Widespread Delays, MBTA's Long-Standing Issues Come Into Focus

By [Jack Lepiarz](#) February 4, 2015

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A Green Line trolley runs down Commonwealth Avenue in Boston on Tuesday. (Robin Lubbock/WBUR)

BOSTON — The more-than-100-year-old MBTA system has certainly been showing its age. [The T struggled mightily on Tuesday](#), and there are more delays early Wednesday.

MBTA officials say the system's troubles point to a dire need for reinvestment.

A Massive Maintenance Backlog

The delays got so bad during Tuesday morning's commute that Beverly Scott, the T general manager, took the unprecedented step of urging customers to seek alternate transportation.

"Quite candidly, if you don't wind up having to use the service, that probably is a plus," she said. "I'm just going to be candid. I've never said that in my life, but I don't want to wind up misleading anyone."

That's the head of a public transportation agency telling people not to take public transit.

The issue, Scott said, is that the MBTA is facing a massive backlog in maintenance. Some Red Line cars are nearly 50 years old. Much of the Orange Line's fleet dates to the 1980s.

Both fleets are due for at least partial replacements starting in about four years.

But new cars alone won't solve the problem, said Kristina Egan with Transportation For Massachusetts, an advocacy group.

"Just our power and signalization system needs about \$300 million, but we only have about \$25 million programmed over the next five years, so about 8 percent," Egan said.

Scott estimated the T would need about \$5 billion to be able to handle future storms like the past two. But she called the past week, [the snowiest in Boston's history](#), an outlier.

"Just the historic weather conditions and the fact that there's not been a break," she said. "You get through two days, and here you wind up with another dump. And then the two days that you had plummeted down to 10, 12, 2 below zero with the wind chill factor. It's been really brutal."

Spending, And High Debt

There are also criticisms about how the T spends its money, including its pension system. State law allows MBTA employees to retire at 55, or after 25 years of service.

Rick Dimino — president of the nonprofit A Better City, who co-chaired a transportation transition team for Boston Mayor Marty Walsh — said he understands why some are wary of investing more public dollars into the T.

“Part of the problem is related to the perception that maybe we could do better in spending the money more effectively and efficiently,” he said. “And so they’re a little anxious about putting money into a system that’s broken.”

Dimino cited that perception as a big reason why voters last fall rejected a state law that would have tied the gas tax to inflation. And he says public agencies can always be more efficient.

“But as someone who’s looked at the numbers for a long time, we’re not going to be able to reform and efficiency and effectiveness our way out of this problem. The transportation system simply needs more money,” he said.

Another issue facing the T is its high debt burden. The agency has more than \$5 billion in outstanding debt — much of which is related to the Big Dig. This fiscal year, nearly a quarter of the T’s budget will go to servicing debt.

These long-standing issues are surfacing as the T faces an especially busy day Wednesday, with the New England Patriots’ Super Bowl parade in Boston.

Mayor Marty Walsh has told visitors to take the T, since there will not be enough parking with 40-plus inches of snow on the ground.

Scott says she expects about a 25 percent improvement in service, Tuesday to Wednesday. But she says that is still well below normal operations.

She says the long-term fix will be very expensive.

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