



A commuter rail train pulling into Needham Center.

TRACKING TRANSPORTATION / TRANSPORTATION / OPINION

MBTA's Widett plans don't make sense

Commuter rail electrification, not storage, should be priority

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THE MBTA'S recent announcement of a \$155 million land purchase at Widett Circle is an opportunity for the agency to consolidate its wide footprint of bus and rail facilities in central Boston, reducing the amount of valuable land used for these purposes. Yet the agency is intent on doing the opposite.

As StreetsblogMass pointed out, the Widett plan is part of a broader (and in our view misplaced) effort to acquire commuter rail storage, despite the T having continued plans to store trains at Beacon Yard and Readville. This decision to spend \$155 million to keep more trains idle is fundamentally incompatible with the future that the Fiscal Management and Control Board set out for a Regional Rail network of modern electric trains running frequently throughout the day, instead of today's model of diesel-powered trains idling downtown. It wastes money that could be better spent on that modernization, which would deliver far higher capacity benefits than building more railyards on valuable land.

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Sadly, the MBTA has made middling progress on adopting Regional Rail, while spending substantial amounts on the expensive, unreliable, and environmentally damaging diesel fleet. Transit systems providing frequent urban rail service don't operate like this. Two fundamental issues drive the push for more layover storage: the presumed need for a large gap between peak and off-peak service, and the poor reliability of the diesel fleet. We agree that additional maintenance capacity is needed, but it must be developed in such a way that allows for Electric Multiple Unit (EMU) maintenance, not simply for storing diesel trains. We should be making expenditures of this scale looking toward the future, not the past.

It is past time for the MBTA to acknowledge and adopt industry best practices. In fall 2019, approximately 20-22 trains per hour in each direction used South Station at both morning and evening rush hours in total. By comparison, Paris' Transilien commuter rail services operate at high frequency – amounting to as much as 6 trains per hour *per line* – and use stub end stations in the central business district. But they do not use downtown layover space; instead, downtown layovers are reserved for intercity trains, which require more service (such as food restocking) in between trips. When layovers are needed, they happen at the ends of lines, rather than near the central business district. Such systems spend less money on real estate and more on providing higher service frequency. We do not see a compelling reason why frequent regional rail operated by the MBTA should be any different.

Because capital costs are driven by peak service demand, it is not as expensive to run frequent off-peak service as the MBTA seems to believe – and in a future where the peak is less important and frequent all day service is more important, it's wasteful to buy more land for storing trains.

The MBTA claims that the facility was essential for increasing frequencies on the Fairmount Line. At the same time it argued that the line faces congestion thanks to the frequent non-revenue moves to Readville Yard. The claim that the Fairmount Line is congested is suspect – the main capacity constraint on it is the single track terminus at Readville, a condition which could in the short term be resolved by continuing trains to the Franklin Line. Presumably, more frequent service would mean fewer trains needing to access Readville Yard during the day; refueling needs are a concern, but that indicates that the MBTA needs to spend more resources on refueling sites than on layover.

The T's vague assurances that its layover plans will be compatible with future electrification belie the harsh reality that investing in major layover facilities reflects continued spending on the diesel fleet, and continued adherence to outdated service frequencies. The 2022-2025 capital investment plan allocates \$721 million to acquiring new diesel rolling stock. Yet when it comes to

electrification, the MBTA consistently cries poverty; the capital investment plan only allocated \$50 million to electrification planning. An electrified fleet would provide faster trips, require less maintenance, reduce pollution, and cost less to buy, maintain, and operate than the T's current diesel fleet. These misplaced priorities reveal an agency that is not serious about its commitments to better service or to decarbonization.

Even more troubling is the fact that the Widett plan is viewed as a step towards the South Station Expansion project, a long delayed, poor use of funds that will use some of the most expensive land in the Northeast for train storage. Just as frequent all day service means the T should make more modest layover plans, it renders a large terminal station downright wasteful. London's Fenchurch Street station accommodates around 20 trains per hour at peak on just four platforms, and Utrecht Centraal, the largest station in the Netherlands, substantially increased the capacity of both its stub-end and through tracks by implementing track and switch modernization of the type used in Japan. Why isn't the T learning from and adopting global best practices?

As explained in the TransitMatters Regional Rail Proof of Concept, operating practices such as more efficient crew staging and dedicated platforms, combined with the better speed and reliability of EMUs and adopting similar modernization as implemented in Utrecht, would double the capacity of North and South stations' existing platforms. If in the future more service is needed, the MBTA should build the North-South Rail Link, which would increase capacity without taking up valuable downtown land – land that can be more easily redeveloped should the Post Office ever move.

The Widett plan need not be based on wasteful, inefficient operating practices. While we are disappointed in the lack of transparency around the decision to spend over \$150 million, the purchase is not wholly lacking in merit. The future Widett facility could be combined with a bus facility, freeing up Southampton and Cabot Yards, along with the Albany bus facility for redevelopment. What we need is a new administration and a new T board with the foresight to anticipate the future,

the resolve to stop spending money that doubles down on industry worst practices and the willingness to commit to Regional Rail that goes beyond simple appropriation of the term. The T has been good at talking the talk; it is time to walk the walk.

The prospect of massive layover facilities beyond Beacon Yards and Readville should be entirely out of the question. The MBTA often argues that such large purchases are necessary to prevent catastrophic service failure – but part of the reason for that feared outcome is the continued use of diesel locomotives. At some point, enough is enough. Either we are serious about Regional Rail or we aren't, and it is now for the new administration to prove its commitment to change.

Righting the ship is not just the responsibility of the MBTA – it's also incumbent upon the Legislature and the newly elected governor to put real financial commitments towards the service improvements they claim to support. It's high time to put the necessary level of financial commitment towards electrification, or the T will never provide the service Metro Boston riders need.

This article is a collaboration of TransitMatters members – Regional Rail campaign lead Ethan Finlan along with executive director Jarred Johnson and Matt Robare.

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