

Would you take the MBTA if you could drive more easily? Nor would almost anyone else. That's bad news for the climate.

By [Taylor Dolven](#) Globe Staff, Updated July 22, 2023, 2:25 p.m.



Commuters encountered long wait times for the Orange Line at the MBTA Downtown Crossing station on June 20, 2022. CARLIN STIEHL FOR THE BOSTON GLOBE

By now, wait times for many MBTA buses were supposed to be approaching 15 minutes at most, and wait times on subway trains were supposed to be trending toward [three](#)

[minutes](#). By now, the agency was supposed to be electrifying its buses and its diesel commuter rail system and increasing how often trains show up.

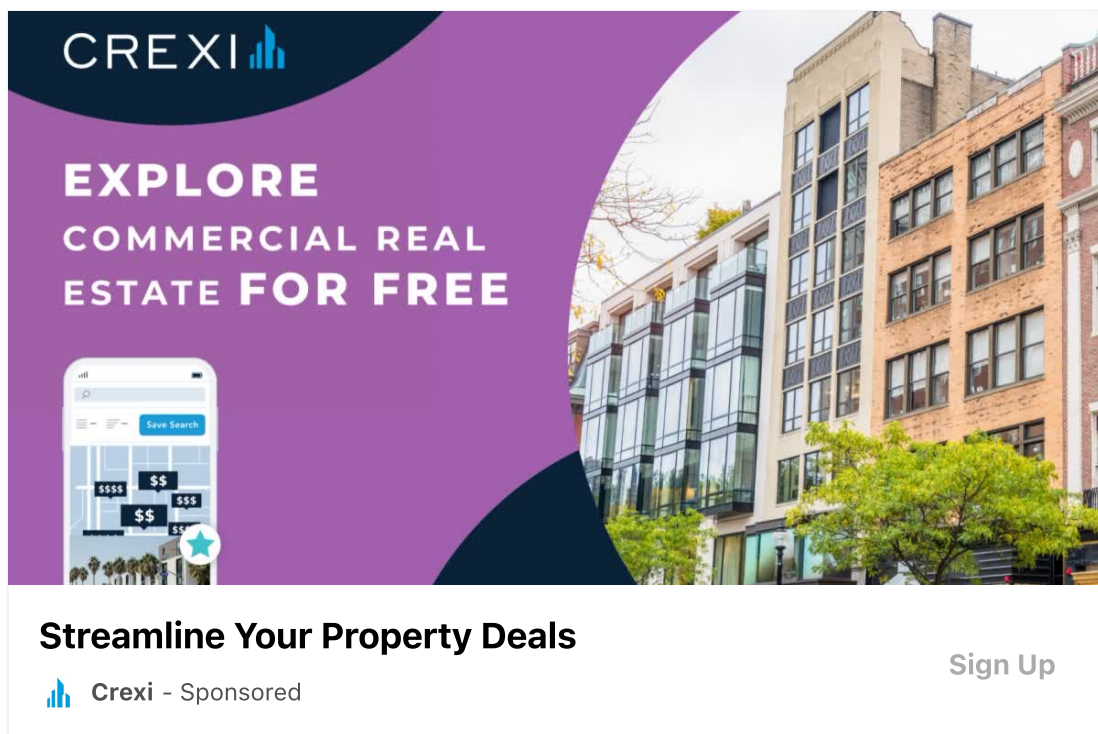
And by now, more and more drivers were supposed to be enticed out of their cars by fast, reliable trains and buses that were supposed to be increasingly electric.

These plans and promises by the MBTA are just the beginning of what's needed from the agency to stem the worst effects of climate change, transit and climate advocates say. But none have become reality.

Instead, car traffic is back to pre-pandemic levels, along with its fumes, MBTA ridership has largely plateaued at about [62 percent pre-pandemic levels](#), and the inaction stands out particularly now, during the [hottest summer on record](#).

Just about everyone in Massachusetts [supports climate change mitigation efforts](#), and around three-quarters of people in the state live in or next to [municipalities with some kind of MBTA service](#). But few will choose the train or the bus if they have a car that will get them where they need to go more quickly and less miserably.

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The advertisement features a purple and dark blue background on the left with the Crexi logo and the text "EXPLORE COMMERCIAL REAL ESTATE FOR FREE". Below this is a smartphone displaying a real estate search interface with dollar signs and a star icon. On the right, there is a photograph of a modern brick building with large glass windows. At the bottom, the text "Streamline Your Property Deals" is displayed, followed by a "Sign Up" button and a "Crexi - Sponsored" label with the Crexi logo.

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Which is to say: The MBTA's failures, [small](#) and [not so small](#), threaten progress on slowing deadly sea level rise, flooding, drought, and heat waves that are becoming more common and more devastating.

Tom Farrell, 52, is among the multitudes who could use the MBTA's system but don't. Instead of taking the Lowell Line of the commuter rail, he drives from his home in Methuen to his job in Chelsea, where he has free parking.

In his previous job for a software company, Farrell said, he traveled to cities around the world and got familiar with other transit systems. Boston's would have to look a lot more like Toronto's, where subway trains come as fast as every [two minutes and 50 seconds](#) and the [airport has a train station](#), for him to convert.

"There would have to be a big revamping of the transit system: more service, more hours, more trains," he said. "Their transit system is very efficient, easy to get around."

In some ways, the stars are aligning for Massachusetts to achieve its goals to reduce transportation emissions by a third below 1990 levels by 2030 with [electric power emissions trending down](#), the Healey administration's appointment of a [first-ever climate chief](#), and an unprecedented amount of federal funding for climate efforts up for grabs. But the MBTA's woes and its slow-roll on key improvements threaten critical progress.

More than one-third of [Massachusetts' carbon emissions](#) come from the transportation sector, and personal cars and trucks cause the most damage. Encouraging the adoption of electric vehicles is important, but reducing the number of miles driven is by far the [most efficient way to cut emissions](#), according to climate experts, and has added benefits like relieving [congestion](#) and reducing [traffic deaths](#).

“We have the opportunity to do a lot of damage if we rely only on vehicle electrification,” said Johannes Epke, staff attorney at the Conservation Law Foundation Massachusetts. “We miss out if we don’t invest more broadly in public transit options.”

On paper, the MBTA has made some plans to meet the moment.

In reality, many have not materialized.

In 2019, the T’s former oversight board [directed the agency](#) to “transform the current commuter rail line into a significantly more productive, equitable and decarbonized enterprise.” The commuter rail of the near future should not just be for commuters, the board ordered, but should provide all day service every 15 to 20 minutes and “be largely electrified.”

Instead, the commuter rail remains powered by outdated diesel locomotives and wait times between trains can be longer than an hour. Meanwhile, commuter rail systems from [Buenos Aires](#) to Berlin, where trains come several times an hour, have already electrified lines using technology that has existed for more than a century and provides faster, more reliable trips. The MBTA does not have a target for when its lines will be electrified and its wait times will be down to 15 minutes.

Last year, the T said it would [increase the number of scheduled bus trips by 25 percent over five years](#). It has pledged to get wait times between subway trains down to as low as three minutes (which they were in [1990](#)) and wait times for many buses below 15 minutes (also the 1990 standard).

Instead, the T has repeatedly slashed bus and subway frequencies over the past year and a half; there are around 20 percent fewer scheduled bus and subway trips this summer compared with the summer before the pandemic, according to the T. Riders have had to grow accustomed to the dreaded “20+” minutes on station countdown clocks and slow zones are popping up faster than the T is eliminating them; they now cover [around 23 percent of the system](#).

The agency reassured riders that deep cuts made to scheduled subway service last year were meant to only last “through the summer” of 2022 while the T hired more dispatchers; that turned out to be false. The agency does not have any goals for when it aims to restore bus and subway service to even pre-pandemic levels.

Also last year, the MBTA put out a [call for bids](#) to provide as many as 460 battery electric buses that were supposed to start arriving by last month. New electric bus garages were supposed to start opening as soon as this year.

Instead, the T’s first electric bus garages in North Cambridge and Quincy are [years behind schedule and millions of dollars over their original budgets](#). The T said in April it would ask its board of directors to approve an order for the new battery electric buses in the “spring.”

It’s summer, and still no order.

In a statement, MBTA general manager Phillip Eng said the board will vote on the battery electric bus contract at a meeting next week. The T faces “an historically challenging construction market” and “unprecedented challenges in filling front line operator positions to operate our trains and buses,” he said in a statement.

Still, “the T remains committed to its decarbonization and service improvement goals.”

Karissa Hand, a spokesperson for Governor Maura Healey, said the state is investing in electric vehicle chargers, electric buses for regional transit authorities, bike and pedestrian infrastructure, among other transportation-related things.

“The Healey-Driscoll administration believes that one of the most important strategies we can take to confront the climate crisis is fully electrifying our public transportation system and making it more reliable and accessible, which will help get more people out of their cars,” she said in a statement.

Massachusetts [residents who don't have access to a car](#) are losing access to jobs, hourly wages, and time with their families as transit has become less reliable. For those who have a choice of whether to take the T or to drive, the car often wins.

Mitchell Glazier, 71, is among the people who might take the T if it didn't seem so undependable.

When he bought his home in Newton more than 30 years ago, having a Green Line station and commuter rail station within walking distance was a selling point because he was commuting downtown. Now, he works from home. He hasn't boarded a train in more than a decade.

"I would love to be able to jump on the T and avoid having to pay exorbitant parking fees," he said.

Instead, when he goes into Boston about once a month for conferences in the Seaport, client meetings downtown, or to see the symphony or the Red Sox, he drives. At least that way, he said, he knows what time he has to leave his house to get to where he's going on time, even if it costs him \$40 in parking fees and involves using Waze to navigate around traffic jams.

"You can get rerouted in a traffic jam, take an alternative route and make your way," he said. "But when you're on the T and get stuck it could be hours."



Mitchell Glazier of Newton lives within walking distance of the Green Line and commuter rail, but drives to Boston. DAVID L. RYAN/GLOBE STAFF

If service disruptions were rare instead of daily occurrences and wait times between trains were no longer than 10 minutes, Glazier said he'd be glad to ditch his car.

"I don't mind taking the T because you can read, look at your phone, do work," he said. "I'd have to have some kind of validation that they've gotten their act together."

Jerry Ayers, 63, would love to take the T from his home near Billerica to Bruins and Celtics games or to the airport, especially since the rebound of pre-pandemic traffic.

But if he misses the 9:45 p.m. train home from North Station, he has to wait until 11 p.m. for the next one — and tickets are \$42 for him and his son together.

"I can drive in and be on my own time schedule for 10 bucks more," he said.

Many of the strategies in the state's [2025 and 2030 climate plan](#) to reduce driving are also stalled, including [e-bike rebates](#) and multifamily housing [construction](#) near T

stations. Other long-talked-about transit projects that would make trains more attractive compared with driving, like extending the Blue Line to connect to a Red Line station and connecting Western Massachusetts to Boston with frequent rail service, are still not a reality.

Without commitments and funding to improve and electrify transit, individuals will continue to drive and clog roadways, their vehicles emitting greenhouse gases.

“Let’s make sure that every vehicle in Massachusetts is electrified, but we have to have way fewer of them,” said Jarred Johnson of TransitMatters. “Our vision for climate change can’t be sitting in traffic jams.”

Waiting for decades for the T to be more usable will make the region unlivable, he said.

”There needs to be way more urgency.”

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