



Steep steps make Newton commuter rail steps inaccessible to the disabled. (Photo by Josh Ostroff)

TRACKING TRANSPORTATION / TRANSPORTATION / OPINION

## How long will Newton have to wait for accessible commuter rail stations?

# MBTA is making slow progress, but accessibility must be prioritized



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**AS WE CELEBRATE** the 33<sup>rd</sup> anniversary of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), all of us have a stake in providing full accessibility. One in five people will experience a temporary or permanent disability. Almost everyone has a family member, friend, or colleague for whom accessibility is critical to full participation in the economy and society.

As the oldest public transit system in the United States, the MBTA is playing catch-up on access. Decades of underinvestment have multiplied the challenges the Commonwealth faces in making the T safe, reliable, efficient, and accessible. The Federal Transit Administration's oversight of the MBTA – and the crises that precipitated FTA involvement – is a consequence of years of deferred maintenance, misplaced priorities, and management missteps.

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Today, we all want a different story. We appreciate MBTA General Manager Phillip Eng's confidence that change is underway. With new staff leadership, a new governing board, and the commitment of a new governor, the MBTA hopes to start a new chapter.

Accessibility should be central to that new chapter. Thirty-two of the MBTA commuter rail system's 142 stations are fully inaccessible to riders with disabilities, including all three stations in Newton. About half of the Green Line stations are not accessible. One in every eight bus stops are not accessible. The unreliability of elevators hinders riders every day.

Accessibility barriers are highest for people with disabilities. But full accessibility benefits us all: caretakers pushing strollers, travelers with suitcases, children starting to walk, older people beginning to walk more gingerly or see with more difficulty. Systems designed for everyone work better for everyone.

Newton's three inaccessible commuter rail stations are a perfect case in point. We are encouraged by the MBTA's commitment to bring these stations to final design for rebuilds. Thousands of riders (and prospective riders) who are underserved by the inaccessible, single-sided platform stations served by steep, long stairs at Newtonville, West Newton, and Auburndale are eager for construction to begin. Likewise, residents moving into new housing view frequent, accessible service as essential.

When the MassPike extension came through Newton (and Boston) in the early 1960s, the state all but destroyed passenger rail service here. The Newton Corner station was eliminated. The remaining stations were left with just one platform on one side. A legacy of skeletal service remains to this day. Because of the platform configuration (the only stations like this in Massachusetts), there's almost no service mid-day, and essentially no reverse commuting opportunities.

Where do the Newton stations stand today? To its credit, the MBTA is advancing the design of all three stations. The MBTA has committed \$15 million to bring these designs to be ready to bid for construction. Later this year, the design will be at the 75 percent stage, with an anticipated public meeting to review progress, answer questions, and take comments. This will also be an opportunity to update the cost estimates for these stations, for which the working number has been \$170 million.



Newton commuter rail. (Photo by Josh Ostroff)

Next year, in 2024, the MBTA will update its Capital Investment Plan (CIP). The five-year CIP is the list of every MBTA infrastructure project, including stations, fleet, tracks, signals, bridges, electrification, and more. Understandably, the current CIP made safety the priority, and we expect that it remains the Number 1 priority until the T has made needed progress.

Importantly, the CIP also includes significant investments in accessibility, with 95 projects across the system accounting for over \$2 billion of investments over the next five years. But considering how long the MBTA has been planning to replace Newton's rail stations, and how long construction will take, the sooner these stations are approved in the CIP, the better. And residents in many other cities and towns face the same challenges.

Newton's local, state, and federal legislators are fully on board. Newton's state delegation successfully obtained almost half the construction cost in the most recent Transportation Bond Bill, while Rep. Jake Auchincloss won a federal earmark and continues to advocate for federal funding with the US Department of Transportation. Newton's commuter rail stations are a strong candidate for the next grant round of the federal "All Stations Accessibility Program," which is funding transit projects all over the country as part of the 2021 Bipartisan Infrastructure Law. Funding is coming into place.

The Newton stations are part of the next generation of a stronger regional rail network. The MBTA's plan for electrified rail with frequent service via accessible stations will transform public transit across eastern Massachusetts. It's time to leverage commuter rail. The hundreds of miles of track will allow us to address our challenges of congestion, pollution, and unlocking economic development.

Critically, accessible Newton stations with double platforms and frequent service as part of a regional rail network are essential to meeting the need for housing. The MBTA Communities Act, and a revitalized, fully accessible MBTA are two sides of the same coin. Our housing crisis is intertwined with our transportation challenges.

For Massachusetts to thrive, we must provide housing options that are affordable and close to walkable, transit-served neighborhoods. Newton continues to make important strides in creating new housing, particularly multi-family housing and mixed-use developments that provide accessible living. At the same time as we have housing for people of all means across Massachusetts, we must ensure that our public transit network is modernized, reliable, convenient, safe, and accessible.

To redeem the commitment made when the ADA became the national law of the land in 1990, public transportation must be accessible to everyone. The ADA guarantees that people with disabilities have the same opportunities as everyone else; let's live up to that promise. We are grateful to the MBTA and state leaders for sharing this commitment.

*US Rep. Jake Auchincloss represents the Fourth Congressional District of Massachusetts. Ruthanne Fuller is the mayor, Cynthia Creem is a state senator, and Kay Khan is a state representative — all from Newton. John Lawn Jr. is a state representative from Watertown.*

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