

‘If you don’t take the bus and train, you don’t understand’: Months later, many T slow zones remain — to passengers’ chagrin

By [Taylor Dolven](#) Globe Staff, Updated July 26, 2023, 5:43 p.m.



A man waited at the platform for an Orange Line train at Sullivan Square Station. JONATHAN WIGGS/GLOBE STAFF

After slow zones on the MBTA’s subway system expanded to more than a fifth of all tracks in March, the Healey administration vowed to quickly get to the bottom of the commute-warping problem.

”The governor has directed the MBTA to conduct a thorough review of this situation and take immediate corrective actions to ensure accountability,” Governor Maura Healey’s spokesperson, Karissa Hand, said in early April.

Now, months later, the percentage of subway track with speed restrictions has barely budged, and the agency has yet to explain why trains were previously allowed to run at full speed in areas where inspectors found defects.

Asked when riders can expect to see improvements, Healey said Wednesday that she understands their frustration.

“What’s happened here is we have a system that has been underinvested in for years, there’s a lot of repair, a lot of maintenance, frankly, a lot of catch-up, and public safety has to be first,” she said. “We are moving as quickly as possible.”

But even passengers inured to the T’s woeful recent performance struggle with the uncertainty of when things will improve.

“It’s just gotten so unpredictable,” said Brenda Flores as she waited for an inbound Orange Line train at Sullivan Square Station this week, on her way to church downtown.

After she boarded, the train crawled from Sullivan Square to Community College Station, taking nearly six minutes to move the less than 1 mile between stations.

Flores said that leg of the trip is “always like this,” and repeated shutdowns on the Orange Line and beyond have not seemed to render the trains any faster. A round trip on the Orange Line is now more than nine minutes longer than it was in early March, before the massive uptick in slow zones, [MBTA data shows](#).

”They lock it down for a couple of days, and you think it’s going to get better, but it doesn’t,” Flores said. “If you don’t take the bus and train, you don’t understand.”

Slow zones have plagued the subway system for years as the T avoided making repairs to its tracks, opting to slow down trains over faulty areas instead. But the situation got considerably worse in March when the T’s state oversight agency found problems with Red Line tracks that the T didn’t appear to know about.

In mid-March, the T hired several outside consulting firms to search all of the tracks for problems; it turned out more than one-fifth needed speed restrictions. The T appears to have been previously unaware of more than 100 track defects that should have had speed restrictions. As of Wednesday, there were 215 restrictions in place, [according to the MBTA’s dashboard](#), up from 71 on March 8, before more trains were slowed.

In early April, the T said it hired another outside consultant for 90 days to investigate what went wrong, agreeing to pay him \$300 per hour and no more than \$70,000 to figure out how the T was unable to account for so many track problems.



An outbound Orange Line train headed toward Sullivan Square Station. JONATHAN WIGGS/GLOBE STAFF

T spokesperson Joe Pesaturo said this week that it has extended its contract with the consultant, Charles O'Reilly of Carlson Transport Consulting, for another two months to complete a "final report" by Labor Day.

"The MBTA will act swiftly on its findings and recommendations," Pesaturo said in an email.

Pesaturo said that the T is not providing a target date for when all speed restrictions will be lifted, but that progress is being made.

"The percentage of restrictable track has been reduced since March," he said. "And while some restrictions have not been lifted in their entirety, enough work has been performed to allow trains to increase speeds in those segments (and shorten travel times)."

While track repairs in recent months have allowed trains to move faster along some stretches, the T's dashboard shows that the percentage of subway track with speed restrictions remains nearly unchanged since late March at around 23 percent.

Pesaturo has said previously that the historical data in the dashboard may not be entirely accurate and it is “primarily meant to convey where are we today.” The team that maintains the dashboard was working on a fix for the historical data accuracy in May, Pesaturo said. He did not immediately respond to questions Wednesday about whether it had been fixed.

Recently, the T had been adding new speed restrictions at around the same rate that it had been eliminating them, the agency’s dashboard showed, and closures for repairs don’t necessarily result in subways running at full speed once those repairs are completed.

The [T shut down the Red Line](#) between Park Street Station and JFK/UMass Station for repairs for a weekend in early May. That area still has more than a dozen speed restrictions, the dashboard shows.

During two weekends in June, the T [shut down the entire Green Line extension](#) and said it “replaced, welded, and aligned 3,300+ feet of rail to improve conditions, which will allow us to increase speeds” on the Lechmere Viaduct between Lechmere Station and Science Park Station. That came after the T announced in March 2022 that it had completed similar work, including “renewed 3,500 feet of track” in the same area.

Yet there are still three speed restrictions between Lechmere and Science Park, the [dashboard shows](#).

Pesaturo said the previous work on the viaduct included tie replacement and structural repairs. Now, the agency is replacing the rail, he said, and doing “tie work” after service hours. He did not say when the agency expects to eliminate the Lechmere Viaduct slow zones.

Emma Sopchak boarded a C Branch train of the Green Line at Kenmore earlier this week a little before 8:30 a.m., transferring from a bus as part of her typical commute. She said

she used to leave early to beat the morning rush, but “now it seems to have caught up with me again.”

Raised in Vermont — where she said transit lags behind Boston — Sopchak was drawn to the city in part because of its promise of an easy commute.

“We’re supposed to have this kind of built-in infrastructure that we’re really proud of, that just never seems to work and never seems to be something we can actually be proud of,” Sopchak said. “It seems like a point of shame for a lot of Bostonians.”

Still, the 28-year-old said a slow system is better than a dangerous one, noting the T’s recent safety issues.

“I’d rather ride a slightly slower train,” she said, “if it means someone’s not going to die on it.”

Correspondent Daniel Kool contributed to this report.

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