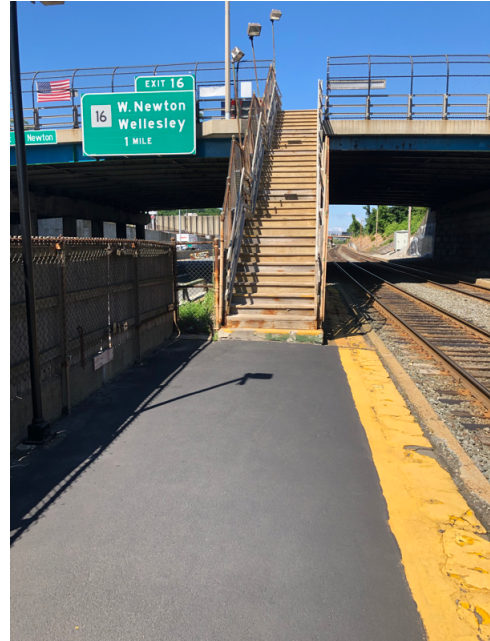


Newtonville Commuter Rail Station: A Photo Essay

This document explores the Newtonville commuter rail station via a sequence of photos and comments. The goal is to illustrate why enhancing the commuter rail service in Newton may be possible but difficult.



1. View of the Walnut St stairs to the platform



2. View of the Walnut St Stairs from below

Immediate observations:

- There are 36 steps down.
- The walkable width of the steps is 65 inches.
- There is only one functioning platform which is located on the south side of the tracks between the tracks and the turnpike.
- Trains stop at a small covered zone which is halfway between Walnut St and Harvard St. This is a long walk from either set of stairs.
- The stairs and most of the platform has no protection from the elements: sun, rain, or snow.
- There is no handicap accessibility.

Trains stops at Newtonville are split into regular stops [which always happen] and flag stops [which require that a person on the platform flag the train].

6 east bound trains in the morning and 5 west bound trains in the evening have regular stops. By switching tracks, the MBTA arranges that regular stops happen at the platform. Flag stops are another matter.

We will look at handicap accessibility in the next three photos.



3. Walnut St stairs closeup



4. Underneath the Walnut St stairs

The closeup photo of the Walnut St stairs shows that there is currently not enough width between the stairs as built and the train tracks for a wheel chair to pass even if a standard elevator were constructed from the Walnut St overpass down to the platform level.

The photo underneath the Walnut St stairs shows a tangle of beams and scaffolding. To achieve an accessible entrance with a standard elevator at Walnut St, a complete rebuild of the stair structure would be needed.

The platform width at Walnut St is 12 feet but the centered location of the stairs relative to the platform precludes a path wide enough for a wheel chair on either side. We believe that it would be best to shift the stairs towards the tracks to then provide a wide enough and safe path to accommodate a wheel chair between the stairs and the chain link fence.

The question of weather, especially snow, affects the issue of accessibility as well. It is not reasonable to expect a wheelchair to move through unshoveled snow. This means that the entrance area, the stairs, and the entire platform should be covered.

After additional photos, we will come back to the issue of currently having a functioning platform only on the south side of the tracks.



5. Remnants of an old north side platform



6. Section of the north side platform in disrepair



7. Walkway to access the north side track



9. Walkway and steps in one photo



8. Steps to a locked Washington St gate



10. Where the old north side platform ends



11. View west towards the end of the old north side platform

It was fascinating to discover that there once was a north side platform in Newtonville. Presumably, when this north side platform was functional, east bound trains used the south side track and west bound trains used the north side track and there was no need for track switching. All trains that stopped, could stop at an appropriate platform.

Nowadays, the north side track serves as an express track. From the point of view of train service, this usage blocks expanded Newton service. At present, Newton train service is extremely limited.

There are 28 inbound trains that start in Framingham or Worcester. Of these, 6 have regular stops in Newton and 6 more have flag stops.

There are 26 outbound trains that end in Framingham or Worcester. Of these, 5 have regular stops in Newton and 9 more have flag stops.

The flag stops in Newton are a bit problematic. It is not clear from the schedule if and when these trains are routed to the south side track (platform side). In cases where a flag train happens to be on the north side track, the wooden walkway is used to provide access to the train. In that case, the walkway location is the only place where passengers may enter or exit the train. This is certainly an additional accessibility issue.

The steps to Washington St opposite the covered portion of the platform are curious. The gate at the top of the steps is locked and the steps have no hand rails. The steps are clearly not intended for the general public.

The steps are intended for service personnel who need more direct access to the platform in special circumstances. I confirmed this on a recent visit to the Newtonville station in mid-morning. The gate was unlocked and several workmen were doing tasks.

One workman was adding extra nails to the walkway from the platform to the north track to keep the boards from becoming loose and poking upwards. The fact that this work was being done means that the walkway must be in active use at least for some flag stops in Newton.

Another workman was starting to repaint the yellow safety stripe at the edge of the platform.

I have a few thoughts about accessibility.

One thought is to rebuild the north side platform, make it accessible as well, and enable trains to stop at both the south platform (eastbound) and the north platform (westbound). Doing this at all three Newton stations is the key infrastructure requirement needed to expand service in the city.

The "view west" photo in Newtonville shows a retaining wall on the north side of the tracks that quickly becomes quite tall. I think that it would be very problematic to cut into this wall and attempt to move it closer to Washington St in order to extend a rebuilt north side platform all the way to Harvard St.

I think that a rebuilt north side platform will likely have more or less the same length as the unused platform that exists now. In particular, accessible access to a north side Newtonville station may only be possible from Walnut St and from Washington St.

I conclude with some photos from the Harvard St end of the Newtonville platform and will then will continue with further thoughts on accessibility.



12. View east towards Harvard St



14. Harvard St stairs from below



13. Closer view east towards Harvard St



15. Inset space between the Harvard St end of the platform and the Turnpike

Looking at the two "view east" photos, you can see that the Newtonville platform becomes significantly narrower near Harvard St. First, the chain link fence that separates the platform from the turnpike has been inset left by 55 inches. Second, the asphalt of the platform has been inset right by 39 inches. Before the inset occurs, the platform is 192 inches = 16 feet wide. After the inset, the platform width is narrowed to 98 inches = 8 feet 2 inches. The width has been almost cut in half at this point. By the time that the platform reaches the Harvard St stairs, its width has narrowed even further to 86 inches = 7 feet 2 inches.

The Harvard St stairs have 34 steps and the walkable width is 61 inches. Adding the width taken up by the structure of the stairs, there is little clearance to get past the stairs and currently little reason to do so.

The final photo taken from above the Harvard St stairs shows what is behind the section of fence that has been inset by 55 inches. The answer is: nothing of value. There is grass, weeds, and random debris.

To make the existing south side platform accessible from Harvard St end is difficult because of the gratuitous narrowing of the platform at the Harvard St end. However, if the 55 inch fence inset is eliminated and the fence is moved back closer to the turnpike then there would be room for a wide enough path from an elevator at Harvard St to the south side platform.

It is worth noting that the width of the south side platform is not constant. Going west from the current inset point, the width narrows. At the point of the covered station waiting area, the awning projects 90 inches = 7 feet 6 inches and the platform width is 120 inches = 10 feet. At the Walnut St stairs, the platform is wider at 144 inches = 12 feet.

Now let us consider the accessibility of a potential future north side platform.

At the Walnut St end, the accessibility challenges would be about the same on the north side as on the south side.

However, if a future north side platform is to be made accessible anywhere near Harvard St, it will have to be in the vicinity of the steps that are currently used by service personnel and not at Harvard St itself. In particular, there would need to be a much wider sidewalk along Washington St from Harvard St to this accessible entry point on Washington St.

It turns out that there is an MBTA plan to make the Newton have accessible rail stations. This plan is sketched in a System-Wide Accessibility (SWA) document: 2019-06-05-swa-initiatives-accessible.pdf

The wording about Newton rail stations is on page 5:

Newtonville, Auburndale, and West Newton Stations—Design

Scope: This project will produce a design to make all three stations accessible via a high-level platform at each station on the northern embankment. Each station will have ramps to access the high-level platform.

Update: The MBTA has selected a design firm, and a timeline for the design process is being developed.

This is certainly a big step forward for accessibility since it provides accessibility in Newton *with the existing level of train service.*

However, *the single platform model is retained.* The single platform will switch from being the south side to being the north side. The south side platform will be taken out of use.

There will then be the same technical obstacles to providing frequent and robust train service in Newton as there are at present.

To have frequent and robust train service in Newton, it is essential to have two updated and fully accessible platforms (south side and north side) that are in full time daily use.

This is what transit advocates and the city should be pushing for.

If Newton is forced to accept "half a loaf", that is, an active accessible north side platform and a south side platform that will fall into disrepair, it will be years and years before Newton will be able to get frequent and robust train service.

The MBTA will consider Newton station updates as *complete* and will not consider the question of *further updates* for a long time. This has huge implications for the Washington St Vision.