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CITY OF CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge, MA

Attn: Steve Poftak, General Manager, Massachusetts Bay Transportation Authority
CC: Acting Secretary of Transportation Jamey Tesler, members of the MBTA Board

10 Park Plaza
Suite 5610
Boston, MA 02116

Dear General Manager Poftak:

We are writing to request your collaboration with us as the elected and appointed representatives of our respective communities in an effort to ensure that there is a fair, equitable, and standardized process for implementing fare-free bus pilots, and potentially permanent fare-free service on specific MBTA bus routes. We believe this effort will help improve the efficiency of public transit, improve transportation equity, reduce emissions, and create safer streets that will save lives.

As the recent Fare Free Bus Pilot in Boston has demonstrated, offering free bus service is an effective means of attracting riders back to the MBTA system. The Route 28 bus carried more than 12,000 daily riders before the pandemic and—in addition to the immediate impacts for bus riders—the pilot provided valuable insight into the effects that eliminating fares has on ridership, transit costs for residents, boarding times, and the experience of bus riders and drivers. We hope to expand upon the success of this pilot in each of our respective municipalities, and specifically move forward with pilots on bus routes that run through multiple municipalities.

While the implementation of fare-free buses requires a partnership between our municipalities and the MBTA, we are not asking the MBTA to simply forgo fare-revenue to make this happen. Our communities are willing to fund fare-free buses because of the benefits we know they would bring. We want to prioritize accessible transit with newly available funding streams including the recent federal stimulus funding for each municipality and the returned funding for the Green Line Extension in Cambridge and Somerville. We are also committed to working with the State Legislature to ensure that we can sustain free bus service in the long term.

While we are excited about the growing momentum throughout the Commonwealth to explore and implement fare-free buses, we are concerned the MBTA does not have a standardized process for advancing these pilots and measuring their success. In recent conversations with members of the MBTA team we were disappointed to learn that, despite the overwhelming success of the Route 28 pilot, the MBTA has no immediate plan to expand these pilots on other routes and in other communities.

We would like to work with you to set up a standard model for piloting, and potentially making permanent fare-free bus routes. We can look to the MBTA's partnership with Massport as a potential model. The fare-free Silver Line from Logan Airport has proven to be successful for years— helping to reduce traffic congestion and improve travel for residents and others. That model of allocating funding for service based on operating costs is one that could be replicated in the MBTA region.

Even before the pandemic, we knew that fare-free buses contributed to advancing transportation equity and efficiency goals by treating public transit as a public good. Compared to driving and other modes of transit, buses carry a disproportionately high share of low-income and minority riders who have long faced barriers to transportation equity. In addition to reducing costs for these riders, eliminating fare-collection would speed bus service and improve reliability, since delays often occur due to fares being collected as riders board.

The global pandemic that has devastated ridership on public transit. While many people—and especially essential workers—continued to commute by bus throughout the pandemic, others switched their mode of transit, as residents were encouraged to social distance during the pandemic. As the economy begins to reopen and workers return to jobs in-person, Boston has already hit its unbearable pre-pandemic traffic levels. If riders do not return to using public transit, this traffic will continue to worsen, leading to higher levels of pollution and traffic fatalities in our communities.

Throughout its history, we have valued the MBTA as a partner and as a resource for our residents. Working together to implement fare-free buses in our communities is a step we can take to build on that partnership, advance transit equity and efficiency, and improve transportation outcomes coming out of a public health crisis that has threatened to make them even worse. We are requesting that the MBTA respond to the seriousness and urgency that these challenges demand by collaborating with us to create fare-free buses in our communities. We look forward to working with the MBTA to make this a reality for riders and residents.

Sincerely,

Cambridge:

Sumbul Siddiqui, Mayor of Cambridge
Alanna Mallon, Vice-Mayor of Cambridge
Burhan Azeem, Cambridge City Councilor

Amesbury:

Anthony S. Rinaldi, Amesbury City Councilor

Boston:

Julia Mejia, Boston City Councilor At-Large
Ruthzee Louijeune, Boston City Councilor At-Large

Everett:

Stephanie Martins, Everett City Councilor

Malden:

Amanda Linehan, Malden City Councilor

Medford:

Zac Bears, Medford City Councilor

Nicole Morell, Medford City Councilor

Melrose:

Maya Jamaledine, Melrose City Councilor

Manjula Karamcheti, Melrose City Councilor

Newburyport:

Afroz Khan, Newburyport City Councilor

Newton:

Alicia Bowman, Newton City Councilor

Alison Leary, Newton City Councilor

Brenda Noel, Newton City Councilor

Emily Norton, Newton City Councilor

Rowley:

Bryan DiPersia, Rowley Board of Light Commissioner

Somerville:

Matthew McLaughlin, Somerville Council President

Ben Ewen-Campen, Somerville City Councilor

Willie Burnley Jr., Somerville City Councilor

Wakefield:

Jonathan Chines, Wakefield Town Councilor

Mehreen Butt, Wakefield Town Councilor

Watertown:

Caroline Bays, Watertown City Councilor

Lisa Feltner, Watertown City Councilor

Tony Palomba, Watertown City Councilor

John Gannon, Watertown City Councilor

Winchester:

Michael Bettencourt, Winchester Select Board

Worcester:

Candy Mero Carlson, Worcester City Council

Etel Haxhiaj, Worcester City Council