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MBTA SETS DIRECTION FOR SPRING 2021 COMMUTER RAIL SCHEDULES

Plan maximizes use of Commuter Rail resources and delivers a schedule more attractive to today's and future potential riders

BOSTON – February 22, 2021 – The MBTA set the direction today for Spring 2021 Commuter Rail schedules, focusing on preserving access, matching service to ridership and passenger needs, and providing more operational flexibility. Responding to feedback from riders and communities, weeknight service after 9 p.m. will largely remain, particularly where ridership has returned more than in other areas and on transit-critical lines.

“Travel patterns have changed and will continue to evolve. As we look to the spring, we can be even more efficient with taxpayer dollars while ridership is low and use this time to shift toward a schedule that could be more attractive to future riders. The intent is to pilot a service model closer to regional rail,” said Steve Poflak, General Manager of the MBTA. “The MBTA Railroad Operations team and Keolis have developed some exciting plans that can achieve both objectives.”

In 2020, the MBTA initiated plans to match service with lower ridership levels resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic, while ensuring access for essential workers and transit-critical communities. Ridership and community feedback was – and continues to be – integral to this process, which included virtual forums and other mechanisms to solicit the public's input. Weekend service was partially reduced on January 23.

For the Spring 2021 schedule, MBTA leadership determined today that weeknight service after 9 p.m. will continue with only very late or extremely low ridership trains eliminated. MBTA leadership also set direction for weekday service, effective in the spring. The MBTA and Keolis, the MBTA's operating partner for Commuter Rail, will advance the service toward a regional rail approach, which provides passengers with more flexible options and opportunities to add trains more easily in the future.

“We're pleased to help the MBTA strike a balance between the need for greater cost efficiencies, while still providing an attractive service for potential riders,” said David Scorey, CEO and General Manager of Keolis. “This shift recognizes that fewer and fewer people commute 9 – 5. We plan to offer a schedule that can attract an entirely new type of rider and offers flexibility to add service when the time is right.”

Specifically, the Spring 2021 schedule would provide fewer trains during the morning and evening peaks, and more trains during the middle of day to provide more regularly scheduled trains. Compared to the Fall 2019 pre-COVID schedule, this direction will have approximately 11 percent fewer weekly trains, while improving rolling stock utilization by approximately 18 percent. Shifting in part to this model on MBTA Commuter Rail is possible due to the low ridership, and it is beneficial for the MBTA because it provides financial efficiencies as well as increased flexibility to increase service in the future when appropriate.

Additional Information on Regional Rail

Regional rail, which is a common model on European passenger railroads, typically includes consistent interval service (e.g., train departures at a station every 45 minutes), clockface schedules (e.g., train departures at a station at 30 minutes past each hour) and regular bi-directional service for residents traveling in or out of major hubs. While MBTA leadership provided this direction today, final schedules will be published in March.

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