

Fare-Free Public Buses are Yielding Results in Southeastern MA

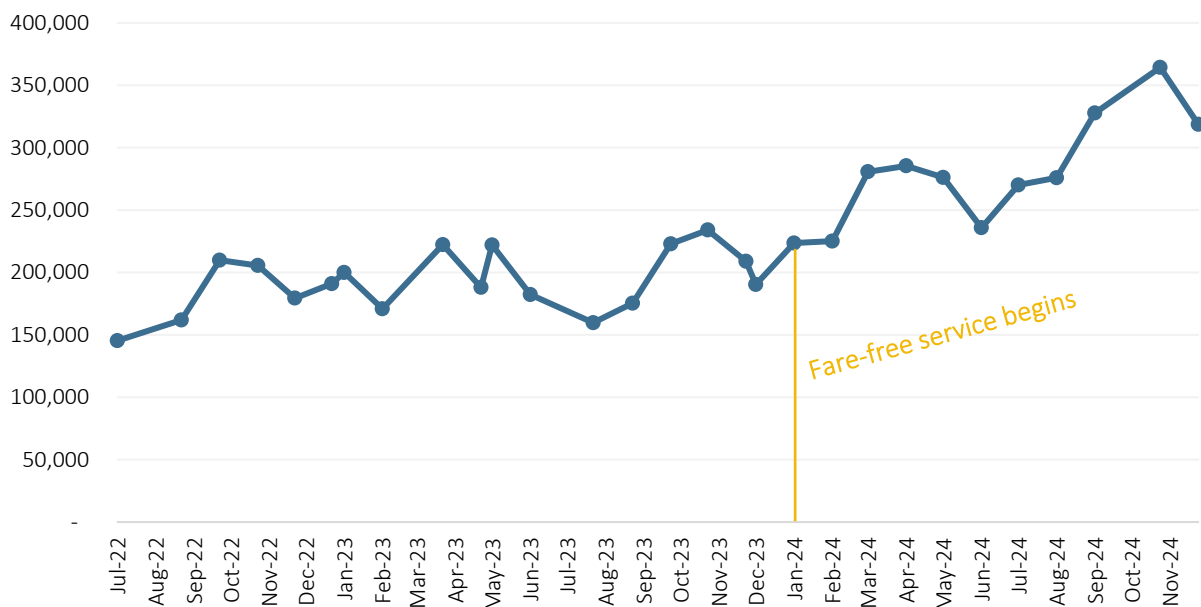
By Phineas Baxandall, Policy Director

People riding public transportation in the ten cities and towns served by the Southeastern Regional Transit Authority (SRTA) don't worry about exact change or updating their fare card. Bus drivers don't split their attention between driving and guarding against people sneaking in the back doors. Families living paycheck to paycheck don't have to choose between bus fare or groceries. Since 2024, residents and visitors in Southern Massachusetts step onto public buses and shuttles without a thought because fares have been eliminated.

Key Takeaways

- At the fare-free Southeastern Regional Transit Authority (SRTA) **ridership increased 56 percent** during the first five months of Fiscal Year 2025 compared to same period last year.
- Ridership at SRTA grew over a dozen times faster than at the neighboring two transit authorities which continued to collect fares.
- Even with more riders entering and exiting buses, **on-time performance improved** without the need for drivers to collect and enforce fares.
- Free-fare bus service can help success of the new \$1.1

Ridership Climbs with Fare-Free Buses at SRTA



SRTA Supports Mobility and Equity

SRTA has played a longstanding role in providing mobility options for residents in the region around Fall River and New Bedford. Since 1974 SRTA has provided transit service to Acushnet, Dartmouth, Fairhaven, Fall River, Freetown, Mattapoisett, New Bedford, Somerset, Swansea, and Westport. The service area covers 289 square miles and includes 322,845 residents.¹ With service originating from terminals in Fall River and New Bedford, SRTA operates two dozen public bus routes as well as door-to-door shuttles for persons with disabilities.

A variety of racial, ethnic, and income groups ride SRTA. Riders are disproportionately people of color or Latino, and disproportionately come from lower-income households. Most SRTA routes and almost all urban routes travel in Census blocks with disproportionately minority populations (identifying as Hispanic or not white).² According to a 2019 fare analysis, 52 percent of passengers identify as minorities and 80 percent identified as low-income.³

Bus stops are located where they are needed most. While 64 percent of the population within the ten-municipality service area reside within a half mile of a bus stop, 91 percent of the population without access to a vehicle lives within a half mile of a bus stop.⁴

SRTA service provides a lifeline for people to reach work, school, medical appointments, friends and family. It is especially important for those who don't drive or don't have access to a vehicle, and for businesses whose customers and employees need a way to reach them.

Based on SRTA's pre-pandemic profile, the transit authority's annual operating budget was approximately \$19 million.⁵ Fare revenue in 2019 comprised \$2,466,765, which represented 12.3 percent of the agency's operating and capital expenditures.⁶ Federal pandemic aid and enhanced state funding enabled SRTA's budget to reach roughly \$24 million in Fiscal Year 2023 and introduce Sunday service.⁷

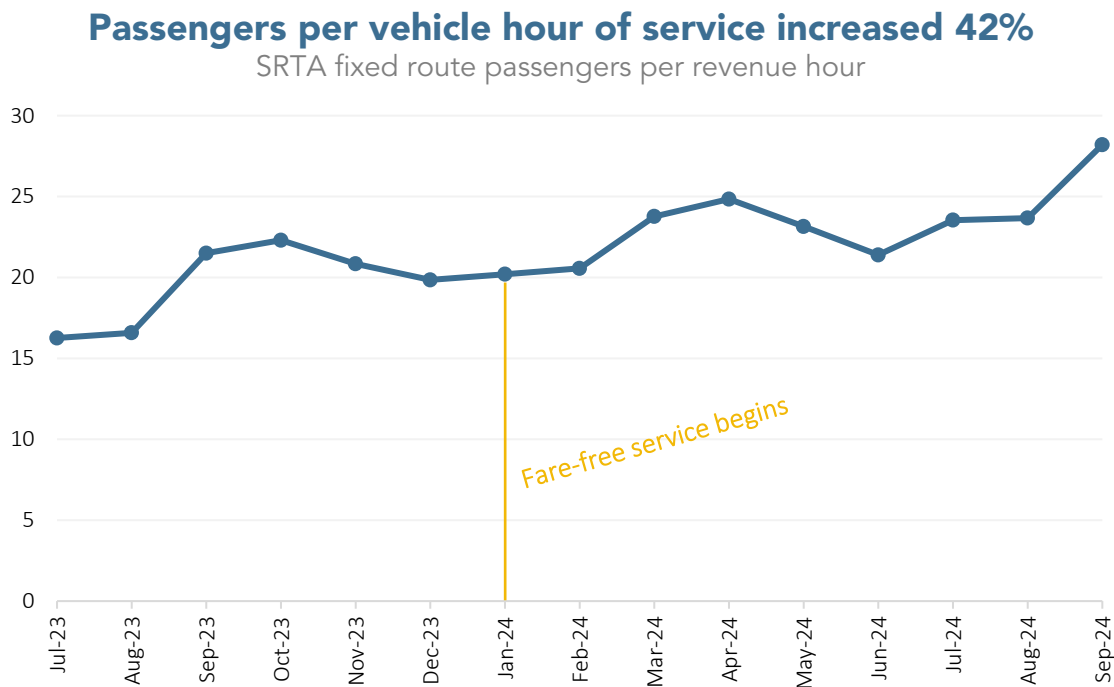
Free Fares Have Delivered Results at SRTA and elsewhere

After public transit ridership fell nationwide with the start of the pandemic, Massachusetts's regional transit authorities (RTAs) have defied national trends by boosting ridership levels above their pre-pandemic levels.⁸ RTA ridership has risen in Fiscal Year 2024 as the Commonwealth utilized funds generated by the Fair Share tax on incomes over \$1 million. These funds were used to provide grants to RTAs which suspended fare collection. By contrast, public transit ridership nationwide remained 28 percent below its pre-pandemic level.⁹ Ridership at the Boston-area MBTA, which continues to collect fares, remained 35 percent below pre-pandemic levels.¹⁰

At SRTA the path to free fares has been a stop-start process that did not follow a long-term plan. Like other RTAs, the elimination of fares at SRTA was first prompted by the COVID pandemic in March 2020 to avoid unnecessary contact that might spread the virus. The transit authority reintroduced full-price fares in October. A little over a year later, SRTA temporarily reintroduced free fares through a statewide program in late 2022.¹¹ Encouraged by the successful results of earlier experiments and new funding made available through a state grant (and then through the Commonwealth's new tax on income over \$1 million), SRTA reintroduced free fares in January 2024. At that time, they committed to continue fare-free through at least June 2025.¹² Major improvements to ridership and service have followed.

Ridership on SRTA has grown dramatically since fares were eliminated. **Trips on SRTA bus routes grew 55.5 percent** in the first five months of Fiscal Year 2025 (July to November 2024) compared to the same period in Fiscal Year 2024. This is a gain of 555,878 rides.¹³

At SRTA, the reintroduction of free fares in January 2024 also coincided with the introduction of limited service on Sundays, which previously had no service. Many other RTAs likewise used federal pandemic funds and state grants to introduce new weekend or night service. Enhanced service hours worked hand in hand with the elimination of fares to increase total ridership. More service hours alone, however, do not explain the increase in ridership because **the number of riders for each hour of SRTA bus service also increased 42 percent** following the elimination of fares in January 2024, based on the most recently available SRTA data.¹⁴ In other words, SRTA did not just gain ridership by having more hours of bus service. **As buses became fare-free, they were also used by significantly more passengers during each hour.**



The dramatic ridership gains at SRTA are particularly impressive because behavioral research underscores how difficult it is to successfully induce travelers to change their mode of travel. People tend to have a strong cognitive bias favoring existing familiar default arrangements and they disproportionately weigh the sunk costs they’ve already invested, such as car ownership.¹⁵

SRTA’s ridership gains are consistent with other transit systems that have eliminated fares in Massachusetts. These large ridership gains are most notable at the larger regional transit authorities in the Worcester and Merrimack Valley that have been consistently fare-free over multiple years, giving time for the word to get out and people to adjust their travel patterns:

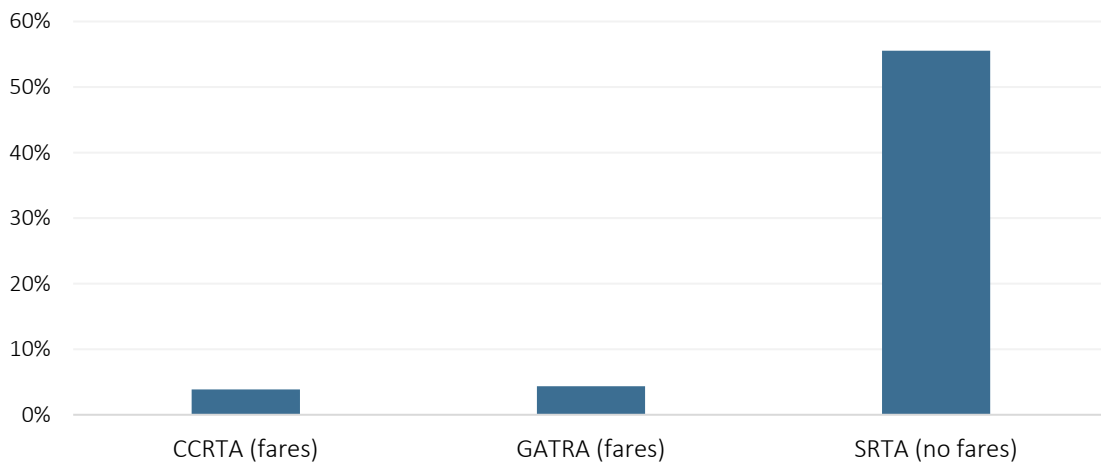
- The Worcester Regional Transit Authority (WRTA) has been fare-free since March 2020. Ridership quickly rebounded, surpassing pre-pandemic levels in FY 2022. WRTA ridership exceeded 4.5 million rides in FY 2024, more than doubling its FY 2021 ridership levels. Two-thirds of riders in a recent survey said that they’d use the service less or not at all if fares were reintroduced.

- At Merrimack Valley Transit (MeVa), which serves 16 cities and towns in Northeastern Massachusetts, early experiments with free service on three routes in Lawrence had shown initial gains in ridership. Fares were subsequently eliminated system-wide and fareboxes were removed from all vehicles in March 2022, sending riders a clear signal of commitment to the policy and allowing resources used for fare collection and enforcement to be redirected to improved service. Ridership increased sharply, exceeding pre-pandemic levels by March 2023 and growing to almost double those levels currently.¹⁶

These dramatic ridership gains cannot be entirely attributed to the elimination of fares. Across the United States, ridership fell precipitously on public transportation in 2020 with the onset of the pandemic and then reversed course in recent years with the end of the pandemic. We should expect *some* ongoing increase in all public transit ridership with people returning to work and other gatherings. For instance, weekly ridership on the MBTA fell 88 percent in the first two months of the pandemic. MBTA ridership has been recovering each year since, including 7.4 percent growth over the last year.¹⁷

But it is instructive to contrast SRTA ridership changes with the two other transit authorities in Southeastern Massachusetts: the Cape Cod Regional Transit Authority (CCRTA) and the Greater Attleboro Taunton Regional Transit Authority (GATRA). Like SRTA, these neighboring transit authorities also received federal pandemic funds and funding from the Fair Share tax. However, they were the only two of Massachusetts’s 15 RTAs not to eliminate fares.¹⁸ Looking at the most current available data and comparing the first five months of Fiscal Year 2024 with the first five months of Fiscal Year 2025, GATRA ridership increased 4.4 percent and CCRTA ridership increased only 3.9 percent. This is the same period that SRTA ridership grew 55.5 percent. In other words, **with free fares SRTA ridership grew 13 to 14 times faster than its two neighboring transit agencies that charged fares.** Moreover, an analysis from CCRTA indicates that the transit authority incurs many additional costs associated with collecting fares. The costs related to fareboxes, money pick up and counting, accounting, banking, security, and credit card transactions, add up – as does the additional time paid to drivers as a result of waiting for passengers to pay their fare (“dwell time”). CCRTA analysis in 2021 found these collection-related costs totaled about three-quarters of all the revenue collected from passengers.¹⁹

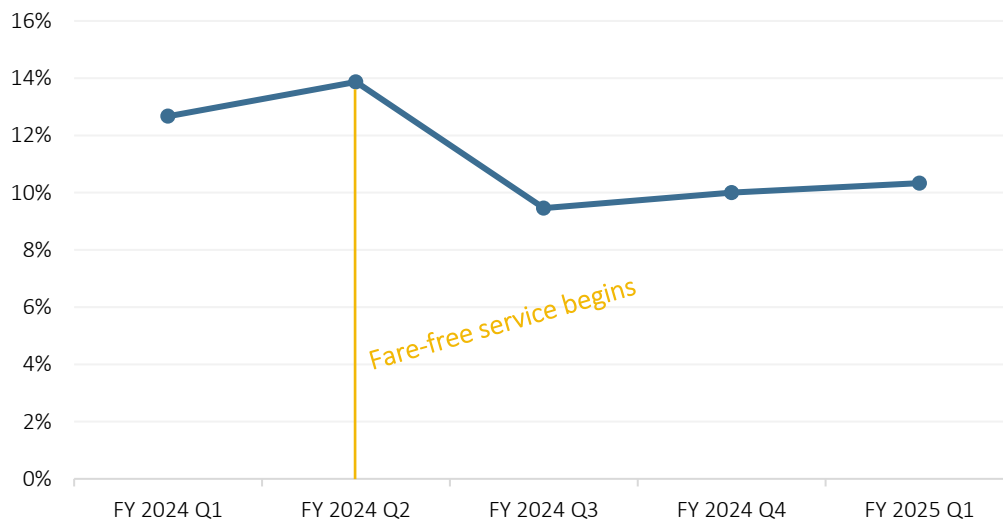
SRTA Added Riders Faster than Transit Authorities that Continued to Charge Fares



Overall ridership changes between the first five months of FY2024 and the first five months of FY2025

Ridership increases may be the clearest indicator of RTA success because users of the service are “voting with their feet” about the merits of free fares. Free fares appear to have also helped improve the quality and convenience of service at SRTA in other ways. One indication is that SRTA vehicles have more often been on time. The percentage of bus stop arrivals that were not on time fell from almost 13 percent during the first quarter of FY 2024 to about 10 percent after fares were eliminated during the same period of FY 2025.²⁰ One factor may be the ongoing challenges recruiting and retaining bus drivers which can be eased when bus drivers can focus on travel and greeting passengers rather than unpleasant and sometimes dangerous interactions over fare payment.²¹ Data analysis also shows that **eliminating fare collection reduces the amount of time that buses must stop before moving again to the next stop.** According to SRTA analysis of its one-month 2022 fare-free pilot program, “Operational data suggests that fare suspension had a positive effect on on-time performance... [E]liminating fare collection reduces dwell times and contributes to improved on-time performance.”²²

When fares ended, the percent of buses failing to arrive on time declined



Percent of late or missing fixed route arrivals by quarter, SRTA

The Future Role of Free Fares

New commuter rail service can have transformative impacts on new development and job opportunities, but success depends on people also being able to get to and from the station. This challenge is often called rail transportation’s “last mile problem.” The Commonwealth of Massachusetts is spending \$1.1 billion on the South Coast Rail, a project to restore commuter rail service that ended over 70 years ago to Fall River and New Bedford. This first phase, which begins with an extension off the existing Middleborough/Lakeville Line, began in June 2024 testing trains operating on the tracks at speeds up to 79 miles per hour.²³ Rail service is scheduled to begin May 2025.²⁴

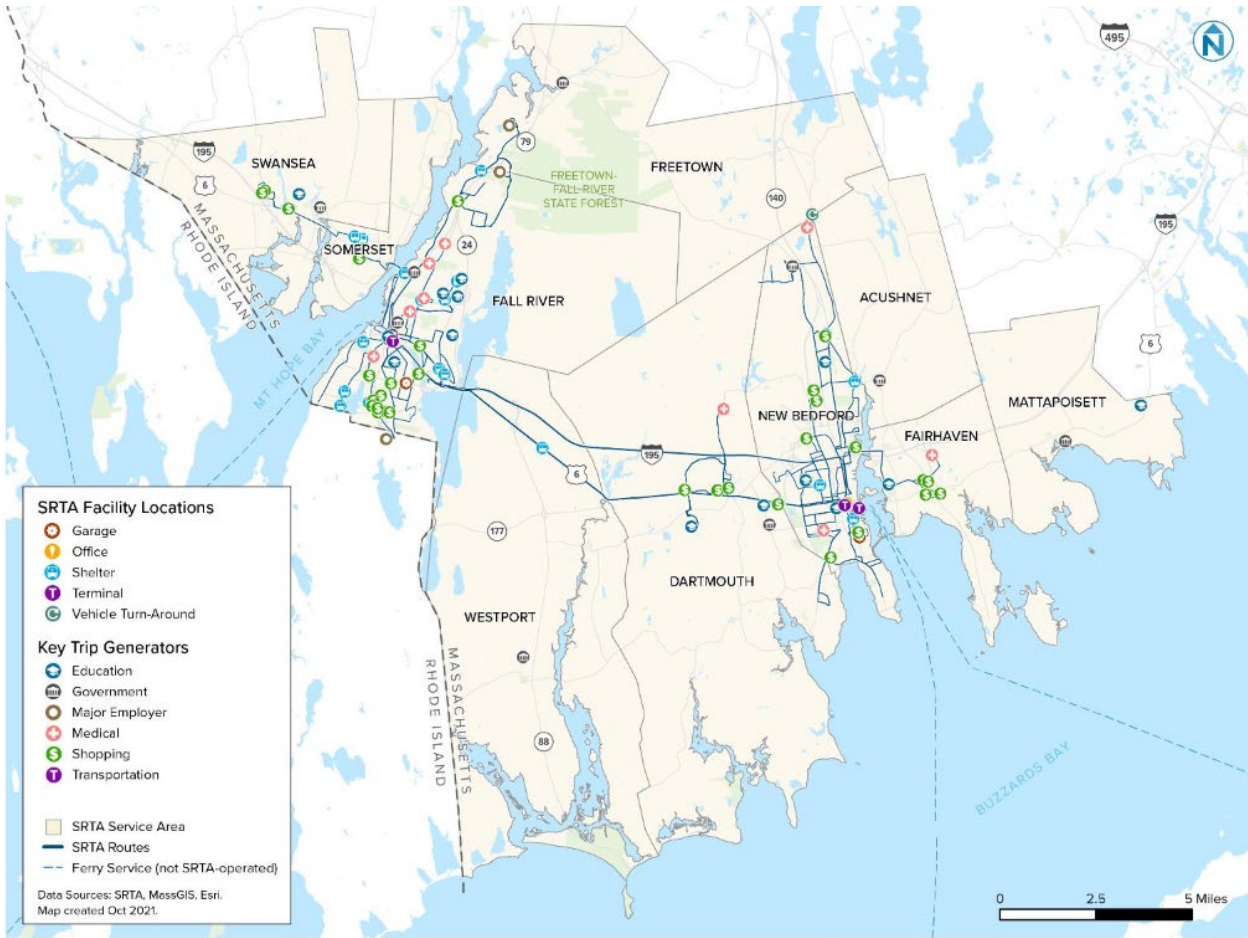
South Coast Rail (SCR) has the potential to provide new regional access to more affordable housing and to spur housing development for thousands of families, while enabling thousands of commuters to access jobs in the Boston area by travel car-free, reducing traffic congestion and global warming emissions. Unfortunately, at the start of 2023 a consultant study commissioned by SRTA found that, “In its current

state, the existing SRTA bus network will not provide a reliable, high-quality connection to SCR [South Coast Rail].”²⁵ It is not clear whether the state will invest in additional “last-mile solutions” and support for SRTA that could further enhance service and accessibility. In any case, the growth and improvement of fare-free service and ridership has helped enhance SRTA’s ridership base.

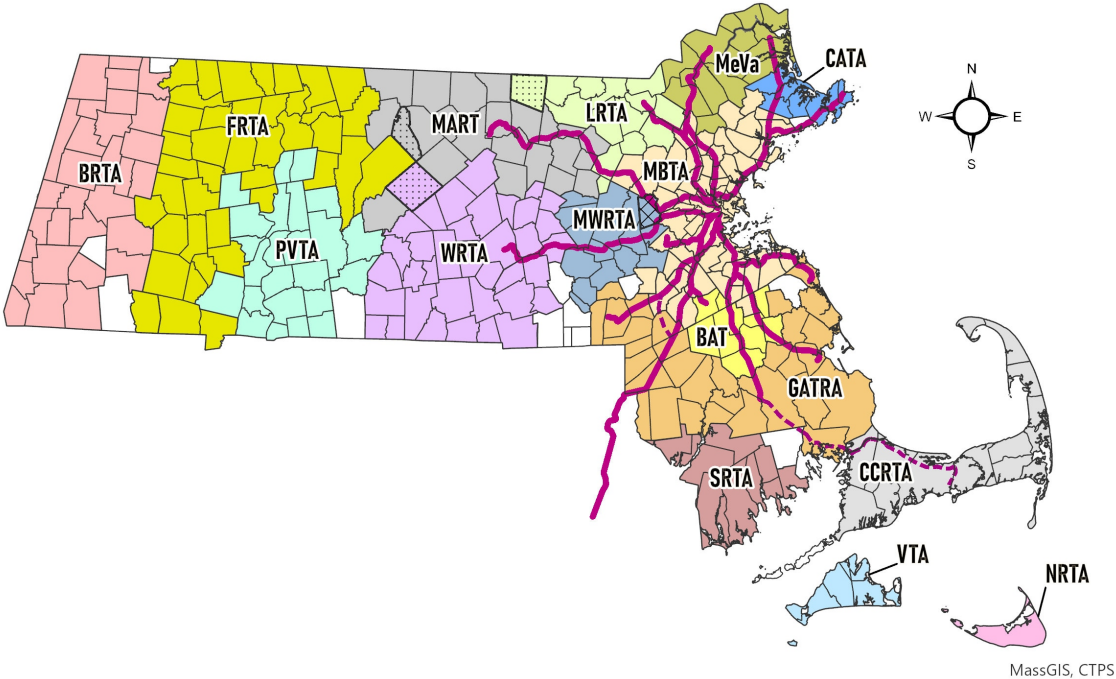
With support of Fair Share funding, SRTA decided to continue its free fares policy through at least June 2025. Continuing the successful policy into the future will require an ongoing commitment from SRTA and state budget writers. A fare-free SRTA can be an important part of realizing the potential of this major infrastructure investment. Fare-free bus service can allow commuters to step onto buses without regard to transit fares – reducing the “friction” associated with this choice and increasing its simplicity. Free SRTA service combined with low-income fares for commuter rail would also allow the new rail service to better serve low- and moderate-income families. At present, housing prices around New Bedford and Fall River have been increasing. Families straining to cover rising rents would find their challenges a little easier if trips to the South Coast Rail station and elsewhere didn’t require fares.

A March 2024 poll by MassINC also demonstrated public recognition of the success of free fares at SRTA and the significance of continuing the program. The March 2024 survey of 500 residents of the 10 communities served by SRTA before the authority decided to extend fare-free service found that two-thirds of residents supported such an extension (most of whom voicing strong support) and less than a quarter expressed any degree of opposition.²⁶ Among those who had ridden SRTA since it became fare-free in January, a majority (56 percent) said they would ride less or not at all if fares were charged again.

Map of SRTA Service Area with SRTA Facilities and Key Trip Generators (Source: SRTA, [Title VI Program \(2022\)](#))

















Map of Transit Authorities in Massachusetts (source [MassDOT](#))








Legend

RTA Boundaries

-  BRTA - Berkshire Regional Transit Authority
-  BAT - Brockton Area Transit
-  CATA - Cape Ann Transportation Authority
-  CCRTA - Cape Cod Regional Transit Authority
-  FRTA - Franklin Regional Transit Authority
-  GATRA - Greater Attleboro-Taunton Regional Transit Authority
-  LRTA - Lowell Regional Transit Authority

-  VTA - Martha's Vineyard Transit Authority
-  MBTA THE RIDE - Massachusetts Bay Transportation Authority THE RIDE
-  MeVa - Merrimack Valley Regional Transportation Authority
-  MWRTA - MetroWest Regional Transit Authority
-  MART - Montachusett Regional Transit Authority
-  NRTA - Nantucket Regional Transit Authority
-  PVTA - Pioneer Valley Transit Authority

-  SRTA - Southeastern Regional Transit Authority
-  WRTA - Worcester Regional Transit Authority
-  Shared Service Area with Massachusetts Bay Transportation Authority
-  Shared Service Area with Montachusett Regional Transit Authority
-  Not within any RTA service area

MBTA Commuter Rail Lines

-  Full Service
-  Used Seasonally or for Special Events

Endnotes

¹ [Title VI Program](#) (Feb 2022), pp.1-2.

² Figure 30, Title VI, page 5-8

³ Title VI report, Page 5-9, Figure 31 and Figure 32).

⁴ Title VI report, page 7-9 figure 46

⁵ Federal Transit Administration. Southeastern Regional Transit Authority 2019 Annual Agency Profile. https://www7.fta.dot.gov/sites/fta.dot.gov/files/transit_agency_profile_doc/2019/10006.pdf. Capital expenses represented an additional \$1.25 million.

⁶ Southeastern Regional Transit Authority, National Transit Database, 2019 Annual Agency Profile, at https://www.transit.dot.gov/sites/fta.dot.gov/files/transit_agency_profile_doc/2019/10006.pdf

⁷ In FY 2023, the operating budget was roughly \$24 million, with an additional nearly \$6 million in capital expenditures. See Federal Transit Administration. Southeastern Regional Transit Authority 2023 Annual Agency Profile.

https://www.transit.dot.gov/sites/fta.dot.gov/files/transit_agency_profile_doc/2023/10006.pdf

⁸ PowerPoint presentation at RTA Council Meeting, Dec. 10, 2024, slide 9. See also summary “Free Bus Rides Help Regional Transit Hit New Highs,” (Dec 10, 2024) at

https://www.statehousenews.com/news/transportation/free-bus-rides-help-regional-transit-hit-new-highs/article_5299c864-b725-11ef-b405-4bfb6fc01249.html

⁹ Comparing ridership the week of December 15-21, 2024 with February 23-29, 2020. See American Public Transit Association, “Transit Dashboard,” 261-week view, accessed December 28, 2024 at <https://transitapp.com/apta>. Note that ridership in smaller communities of less than 500,000 people, which is more similar to Massachusetts RTA service areas, ridership is 22 percent below its pre-pandemic level.

¹⁰ MBTA Performance metrics comparing February 2020 to November 2024 at

<https://www.mbta.com/performance-metrics/ridership-the-t>. Counting only buses, ridership in November 2024 remained 19 percent below pre-pandemic levels.

¹¹ Fares were [temporarily suspended](#) between November 25 and December 31, 2022 as the result of a state-funded “Try Transit” program at all RTAs. Despite little public awareness of the temporary program, a state evaluation concluded it was a successful experiment. A Massachusetts Department of Transportation evaluation of the found an increase in ridership attributed to free fares, though noted that the experiment was too short for clearer results. Nonetheless, MassDOT reported that, “In general, the RTAs felt that the “Try Transit” pilot program was a success. Aside from ridership increases, the RTAs received positive feedback from their customers and from their operators, noting faster, more efficient boardings and fewer confrontations between the driver and the rider.” See Massachusetts Department of Transportation (MassDOT), “Fare Free Pilot Program for RTAs,” report submitted pursuant to Section 1595-6370 of Massachusetts Budget Act of 2023, page 17.

¹² “Fair Share” funding through the Education and Transportation fund provided \$30 million for RTAs providing free fares in Fiscal Year 2025, with \$3,230,893 provided to SRTA. See Massachusetts Department of Transportation, “[Healey-Driscoll Administration Announces Fare Free Regional Transit Across State](#),” Press release, October 24, 2024.

¹³ As the chart indicates, there is normally a drop off in November ridership compared to earlier in the fall.

¹⁴ See SRTA, “Performance Measures” at <https://www.srtabus.com/performance-measures/> quarterly data. Comparing just monthly September 2023 ridership to September 2024, the increase per hour was 31 percent.

¹⁵ Whillans, A., Sherlock, J., Roberts, J., O’Flaherty, S., Gavin, L., Dykstra, H., & Daly, M. (2021). “Nudging the Commute: Using Behaviorally Informed Interventions to Promote Sustainable Transportation,”

Behavioral Science & Policy, 7(2) at <https://doi.org/10.1177/237946152100700204>; Ariella Kristal and Ashley Whillans (Dec. 2019), “Why It’s So Hard to Change People’s Commuting Behavior,” *Harvard Business Review*, at <https://hbr.org/2019/12/why-its-so-hard-to-change-peoples-commuting-behavior>.

¹⁶ Since March 2023, monthly ridership has exceeded February 2020 levels. Monthly ridership also temporarily topped those levels in September and October 2022. Ridership data provided by Merrimack Valley Transit in November 2024.

¹⁷ Comparing September 2024 to September 2023 and September 2019 to avoid differences in ridership due to time of year. For all MBTA ridership statistics, see MBTA Performance Metrics at <https://www.mbta.com/performance-metrics/ridership-the-t>

¹⁸ A fourth RTA in Southeast Massachusetts is the Brockton Area Transit (BAT), which also went fare-free and increased service. BAT September 2025 ridership exceeded all previous records, more than doubling over the previous September. See PowerPoint presentation at RTA Council Meeting, Dec. 10, 2024, slide 8.

¹⁹ The CCRTA-provided analysis was based on Fiscal Year 2021, as originally budgeted. It includes farebox replacement and repairs, farebox software maintenance agreement, regular upgrades to the associated hardware and software, purchasing payments to an accounting firm, audit reconciliation, the physical stock for tickets, and banking and credit card fees, personnel time for the “counting room” where cash from fares is kept separately under security, armored car pickup for bank deposits, and the controls involved in extracting the money boxes from the buses and inserting them in a vault which can only be done by a supervisor. The analysis found the largest cost comes from the additional time paid to drivers because of longer bus trips due to additional “dwell time.” The analysis is published in Massachusetts Budget and Policy Center, “[The Dollars & Sense of Free Buses](#)” (March 2021). A separate 2019 study on fare collection costs focused on a narrower set of direct costs using data provided by the Worcester Regional Transit Authority (WRTA). That 2019 study estimated the WRTA’s amortized annual cost of purchasing fareboxes at \$100,000, their maintenance cost at \$500,000, and the cost of staff processing payments at \$250,000. Together these costs represented 28 percent of the WRTA’s fixed route fare revenue. See Worcester Regional Research Bureau, “[The Implications of a Fare-Free WRTA](#)” (May 2019).

²⁰ SRTA, “Performance Measures” at <https://www.srtabus.com/performance-measures/>

²¹ On ongoing challenges to recruit bus drivers across the U.S., see Transit Workforce Center, “[Bus Driver Recruitment and Retention in Challenging Times](#)” (April 2022); and Transit Center, “[Bus Operators in Crisis: The Steady Deterioration of One of Transit’s Most Essential Jobs and How Agencies Can Turn Things Around](#)” (July 2022).

²² SRTA, “Try Transit Promotional Analysis 2022”, page 2, provided upon request. Dwell times had also fallen during the suspension of fares in 2020. This was a time of greatly reduced ridership due to the pandemic, so part of the reduced time waiting at stops was simply fewer people. Nonetheless SRTA conducted a regression analysis that also examined the volume of passengers and was thereby able to determine that, “The decreased boarding dwell times can be partially attributed to the amount of time spent by each passenger depositing fare payment into the farebox.” See “On-time Performance and Travel Time Analysis,” memo to SRTA Administrator Erik Rousseau from Shayne M. Trimbell, AICP (October 28, 2020), provided upon request.

²³ MBTA, “South Coast Rail” at <https://www.mbta.com/projects/south-coast-rail>

²⁴ MBTA, “MBTA General Manager Shares South Coast Rail Updates,” (September 2024) at <https://www.mbta.com/news/2024-09-18/mbta-general-manager-shares-south-coast-rail-updates-taunton>

²⁵ SRTA, “[South Coast Rail Service Plan: Final Report](#),” (January 2023), page 1-1.

²⁶ MassINC Polling Group, “[Poll: Fare Free SRTA Pilot Off to Strong Start on South Coast](#)” (March 2024).