

Boston to keep three MBTA bus routes free to ride through June, but long-term plan is unclear

By [Niki Griswold](#) and [Jaime Moore-Carrillo](#) Globe Staff, Updated February 20, 2026, 8:00 a.m.



A passenger boards the 28 free bus at Ruggles Station in March 2023. JESSICA RINALDI/GLOBE STAFF

The city of Boston will pay to keep three MBTA bus routes fare-free through the end of June, temporarily extending a [pilot program](#) that was expected to run out of money by month's end.

But its long-term future past that is unclear, four years after [Mayor Michelle Wu](#) championed the program as a way to remove financial hurdles for riders and help improve service.

Routes 23, 28, and 29 — which go through Mattapan, Dorchester, and Roxbury — have been free for riders since March 2022, when Wu launched a [pilot program](#) to eliminate fares on the three routes, using [\\$8 million in federal pandemic relief dollars](#).

Wu [extended the program](#) for another two years in February 2024, again using federal COVID-19 funds to [reimburse the MBTA](#) about \$340,000 per month for the program through the beginning of this March.

The city has not spent all of the money it allocated to extend the program two years ago, and what's left over is enough to fund the pilot through June, Wu's office said Friday.

But its future past that remains in jeopardy. The city, which is already facing [budget challenges](#), has not publicly identified a sustainable funding source that could replace the dwindling federal money. On Friday, Wu's office said only that the city is “discussing the long-term future of the program with the MBTA.”

The mayor had previously hoped that the results of the pilot program would [spur the MBTA to fund and expand](#) fare-free service. But the cash-strapped agency is [staring down a massive budget deficit](#).

In a statement released by Wu's office, MBTA general manager Phil Eng said said the T has been “pleased to be able to support the City of Boston's program,” but he did not indicate whether it would, or could, help extend the program past June.

Wu on Friday said the city is looking to “work with the MBTA to keep this going.”

“Fare-free bus service helps families, workers, and businesses, and also makes bus service faster and more reliable,” Wu said in a statement Friday.

Implementing the fare-free pilot program in her first term was a key political victory and a marquee accomplishment for Wu, who [has long championed](#) providing [fare-free transit](#).

Phineas Baxandall, director of research and policy analysis for the Massachusetts Budget and Policy Center, said what skeptics scoffed at as a “pie-in-the-sky promise” has been meaningful in the city.

“It had real results for a lot of people, and has been a model around the country,” he said.

Wu said Friday that ridership on the three free routes grew by 35 percent in the first year of the pilot, and ridership on all three is 16 percent higher than it was [before the pandemic](#). Wu has also said that eliminating fares has also helped make boarding faster.

Analysis by the research and advocacy group TransitMatters, though, shows that the 23 and 28 buses [ranked](#) among the T’s slowest routes in 2024.

MBTA ridership largely [plummeted during the pandemic](#). But in a March 2023 report, the city said ridership on the 23 and 29 buses [rebounded](#) sharply after the routes went fare free, recovering at a faster clip than the bus system as a whole.

The 2023 city report also notes that the vast majority of surveyed riders on the fare-free lines already took the bus before fares were removed, and about three quarters of respondents said they would’ve taken the bus even if they had to pay.

About 5 percent of respondents said they forewent cars trips because the bus was free.

Experts said eliminating fares on public transit produces a number of benefits, from increased ridership, to faster travel times. It also makes it easier for lower-income people

to get around the city, whether for work, to see family or friends, or get to doctor's appointments.

"People ride more when it's cheaper. ... that means improving their mobility, giving them opportunities to go places and do things, participate in life," said Peter Furth, a professor of civil and environmental engineering at Northeastern University. "The impact [of fare-free transit] is enriching people's lives, it's promoting economic inclusion."

Furth said he would like to see the city's fare-free program continue, and expanded to additional bus routes, either paid for or subsidized by the MBTA.

The MBTA would not likely agree to that, said Brian Kane, executive director of the MBTA Advisory Board.

"Nothing's free, someone always pays for it," Kane said. "Given the [fiscal conditions that the T is operating under](#), it's just not money they can forgo, even on bus alone."

He emphasized that the MBTA already offers cheaper fares to eligible riders. The T's standard one-way bus [fare](#) is \$1.70, but low-income and other eligible riders can qualify for a lower rate of 85 cents.

While the financial relief provided by the fare free program could seem minor, for some, like Grove Hall resident Nico Nixon, every dollar matters.

"It helps people," especially those scraping by, Nixon said. He spoke to the Globe while riding a 28 bus headed to Ruggles Station on Thursday morning, before the city announced it was extending the fare-free pilot.

Nixon said he was in between jobs and had come from visiting family.

"Obviously, I want all the buses free," he said. "But let's not get ahead of ourselves."

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