Pointing to Massachusetts's fare-free experiment, Markey, Pressley press for a $25 billion federal free transit plan

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US Representative Ayanna Pressley and Senator Ed Markey are again pushing legislation dubbed the "Freedom to Move Act." JONATHAN WIGGS/GLOBE STAFF

What would it take to make public transit free in the United States?

At least $25 billion, per one estimate.

Senator Ed Markey and Representative Ayanna Pressley on Monday released a report that proposes dedicating tens of billions in federal grants over five years to help eliminate transit fares nationwide.

The Massachusetts Democrats' proposed "Freedom to Move Act" points to the success of free bus pilots in Boston and the state's 15 regional transit authorities, arguing that the experiments transformed Massachusetts into a "national leader in fare-free transit policy," according to their report.

The proposal itself is not so dissimilar from legislation the duo filed in 2020, and then three times since, under the same name. In a Republican-controlled Congress, the bill has little chance of becoming law.

This time around, Markey and Pressley argue in their 16-page report that eliminating fares motivates riders to take public transit and saves them money. Forking over less for the bus leaves people with more for groceries, rent, and spending at local businesses, which flows through the economy and back into residents' pockets, research shows. And getting rid of the exchange of money while boarding reduces the dwell time at bus stops by as much as 20 percent on Boston's free buses, the city found.

Markey said there is a "Commonwealth's worth of data" to prove free transit deserves greater federal investment.

Ridership on Massachusetts' regional buses is up 14 percent from pre-pandemic levels, compared to a 19 percent decrease in public transit ridership across the country, according to Markey and Pressley's report.

"What we've learned is that if you build it, they will come. If you make it free, they will ride it," Markey said. "The whole point is to relieve local agencies of the false choice that

they're sometimes confronted with, because we don't need to pick between affordability and quality services. We can do both."

Right now, government funding for Massachusetts' free buses may not be enough to both maintain service and improve the system for a growing crop of riders. The fare-free mandate for regional buses is contingent on the state budget, but even the $40 million dedicated to fare-free pilots this fiscal year leaves transit systems' budgets "very constrained," Noah Berger, the Merrimack Valley transit administrator, told the Globe.

Boston's free routes 23, 28, and 29 were funded by federal pandemic dollars that ran out in June, before officials said they were extending the fare-free pilots through the end of 2026.



Buses sat idle in the Merrimack Valley Transit Authority yard during a strike last month. PAT GREENHOUSE/GLOBE STAFF

Neither Mayor Michelle Wu's administration nor the MBTA said at the time how much the program's temporary extension would cost. Transit advocates, while cheering the extension, also have fretted over the program's long-term future and where officials could pull money to keep rides free on the three bus routes.

Passenger fares already make up a small piece of transit agencies' revenue. The MBTA relied on fares for nearly a third of its revenue before the pandemic, but that fell to 15 percent in fiscal year 2025. Before regional buses stopped charging riders, fare revenue supported about 10 percent of the systems' budgets.

In a 2023 city survey about the Boston bus program, 5 percent of riders said they took the bus rather than a car. Even keeping that sliver of people off the roads has "multiplying effects" on easing traffic congestion and making it smoother for everyone — walkers, riders, and drivers — to get around, said Stacy Thompson, board member of the transit advocacy group LivableStreets Alliance.

"I don't think that any transit authority in the country can point to a more effective strategy to increase ridership than removing fares," she said.

Reggie Ramos, executive director of the statewide transit coalition Transportation for Massachusetts, said the $25 billion federal proposal is a "drop in the bucket" in the federal coffers for a service "that translates into so much good," especially for low-income Bay Staters struggling with high housing costs.

"People squeezed for housing are the same people who are squeezed for transportation," Ramos said.

Pressley said the immediate benefits of free-fare policies cannot be undersold when affordability is "top of mind" for both elected officials and voters.

Reliable transit, she said, is "about agency. It's about living a full life. For our seniors, it's about independence."



Jacori Jones and her son, Jai, rode the 28 bus through Boston in 2024. JONATHAN WIGGS/GLOBE STAFF

Phineas Baxandall, director of research and policy analysis at the left-leaning Massachusetts Budget and Policy Center, said the pilots have changed his own once-hesitant opinions about free fares, because it showed that choosing not to charge riders is one of the only surefire ways to encourage more people to use public transit.

“Transit authorities should not be punished for their success in getting more riders,” Baxandall said. “The bottom line is not just the budget, but the success of bringing people on the buses or trains, conveniently to where they need to go.”

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