

Project: Fare Free MBTA Rte. 66 Pilot Program
Project Proponents: Select Board Vice Chair Raul Fernandez & Public Works Commissioner Erin Chute Gallentine
Project Partners: City of Boston, City of Cambridge
Cost: TBD/\$1.2M

PROJECT SUMMARY:

Provide Fare Free Service for those who board the MBTA Rte 66 Bus in Brookline as they travel to and from Nubian Square in Boston, Harvard Square in Cambridge, and other stops in between.

PROJECT DESCRIPTION:

The MBTA Rte 66 Bus, which is classified as one of the MBTA's "Key Bus Routes", is an important local and regional bus route that connects Nubian Square in Boston with Harvard Square in Cambridge and travels through Roxbury Crossing, Brigham Circle, Mission Hill, Brookline Village, Coolidge Corner, JFK Crossing, Lower Allston, Union Square Allston, North Allston, and the area around Harvard Stadium/Harvard Business School. Transfers are possible between 30 other MBTA bus routes; the MBTA Greenline (B, C, D, & E branches); the MBTA Orange Line; and the MBTA Red Line. It remains the second busiest buses in the entire MBTA system with a 2019 pre-COVID ridership of over 13,500 boarding and alighting weekday trips, over 8,300 boarding and alighting Saturday trips, and over 6,400 boarding and alighting Sunday trips. Throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, the route 66 continued to be the third busiest in the region, proving the importance of the route to travel for essential trips.

The proposed project would fund, in accordance with MBTA policies, fare free boarding at all Brookline stops along the Rte 66 bus and the greater .75 miles catchment area of the RIDE paratransit service by reimbursing the MBTA for any potential lost revenue. While there is a potential for partnership with the Cities of Boston and Cambridge to cover the full route, the current project is confined to covering just the Brookline portions at this time.

PROJECT GOAL # 1: SUSTAINABILITY, CONGESTION, PASSENGER GROWTH, & MODE SHIFT

In recognition of the fact that transportation currently accounts for 43% of all greenhouse gas emissions in Massachusetts, the Brookline Select Board has adopted a Climate Action Plan and committed to become carbon neutral by 2050 and Brookline Town Meeting passed the Healthy & Sustainable Transportation Warrant Article in December 2019 that resolved to achieve a mode split of 75% of trips by walking, biking, electric micro-mobility, and public transit (among others). Additionally, over the last decade, the Brookline Transportation Board and Town Transportation staff have implemented policies, projects, and pilots to support the creation of a multi-modal transportation network in Brookline that improves and prioritizes 'alternative' modes of transportation over single occupant vehicle (SOV) trips. This has included projects to support walking, biking, micro-mobility, car share, ride share, bike share, scooter share, and public transit.

One of the first projects done as part of this refocus on the movement of people over vehicles, and to address the impacts of climate change, was the creation of the MBTA Working Group to identify improvements to the Rte. 66 Bus as part of the Commonwealth's Key Bus Network Improvement project. Through the efforts of the Working Group and in cooperation with the MBTA, the Town was able to improve safety, speed, and convenience for bus riders through stop relocations and consolidations as well as installation of better amenities including benches and shelters. While these changes have improved the service of the Rte 66 bus, there continues to be growth potential in ridership. According to the US Census Bureau, the 6 census tracks within Brookline that border the Rte 66 bus have an average of 4.5% of workers age 16 and older who primarily commute by bus with a high of 8.7% (census track 4009) and a low of 1.5% (census track 4007). In contrast, the same 6 census tracks have an average of 27.5% of workers age 16 and older who commute alone in single occupant vehicles with a high of 33% (census track 4004) and a low of 22% (census track 4009). Though studies have shown that Fare Free projects alone only has a marginal effect on mode shift and climate change, when done in combination with other changes like those previously implemented and currently being contemplated along the route (Transit Signal Priority, Gateway East dedicated bus lane, etc.) the effect is greater. The combined effects have consistently been increased passenger growth, which, over time, will have a positive change on mode shift away from SOV trips and in turn a positive effect on congestion reduction, sustainability, and climate change caused by tailpipe emissions.

PROJECT GOAL # 2: EQUITY IN TRANSPORTATION MOBILITY

Perhaps the largest impact that a Fare Free system can have is on equity in transportation and mobility. Based on strong indications that riders come from historically underserved backgrounds, improving access to the Rte 66 service is critical for addressing transit equity needs in Brookline. According to a 2017 CTPS passenger survey, 55% of route 66 riders come from households without a private vehicle. Forty percent are from households with incomes lower than \$43,500, 40% are people of color, and 67% are women. Locally a map produced by the IT Department, based on 2010 census by block group, shows that the majority of the areas bordering the Rte 66 bus in Brookline are classified as Environmental Justice Neighborhoods for "Minority" classification and one is for "Minority, Income, and English isolation" classifications. Furthermore, in the 6 Brookline census tracks that border the Rte 66 bus the percentage of households below the federal poverty line runs between a low of 5.3% (census track 4007) and a high of 25.7% (census track 4002). Based on the data it is a good indication that any general decrease in fares overwhelmingly puts money in the pockets of those who are more likely to be spending every extra dollar on non-discretionary items like paying bills, buying groceries, and meeting other basic needs.

According to a 2017 CTPS passenger survey, 55% of route 66 riders come from households without a private vehicle. While ridership levels were reduced during the pandemic, the route maintained a higher percentage of pre-COVID ridership than the vast majority of the MBTA system. This fact demonstrates that the route provides the main means of transportation for essential trips related to employment, shopping, health, and well-being. Based on these ridership numbers, a fare free Rte 66 will ensure that everyone, regardless of income, can access public spaces, job centers, and other amenities related to these essential trips and better access to jobs can contribute to socioeconomic mobility.

PROJECT GOAL #3: COMMERCIAL AREAS SUPPORT

This initiative will also provide support for the Brookline commercial areas located along the Harvard Street corridor and Rt. 66 MBTA bus route by promoting increased customer foot traffic, as well as providing a more affordable commuting option for employees of Coolidge Corner, JFK Crossing, and Brookline Village businesses. Fare free service in Brookline will promote increased customer foot traffic by incentivizing Rt. 66 bus passengers to disembark and explore the commercial areas along Brookline's Harvard Street corridor. This service will complement and amplify the impact of commercial area activation initiatives included in the [Coolidge Corner & JFK Crossing Rapid Recovery Plan](#), including an events series and retail pop-up pilot program. Fare free bus service in Brookline will make it easier for bus riders to explore new Brookline commercial area offerings and events. Fare free bus service will also benefit Coolidge Corner, JFK Crossing, and Brookline Village businesses and their employees by providing a more affordable commuting option.