

**Give a Hoot: Endangered Night Owl Service Indicates
Threatened Regional Transportation System**

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Executive Summary

Greater Boston's Night Owl service is endangered. Budget cuts and systematic under-funding of public transportation have put the Night Owl on the chopping block this spring. This report compares Greater Boston's nighttime public transportation service with that of other similar transportation systems across the country and finds that, out of eleven comparable systems, Boston is one of only two that do not offer some form of nighttime service on weeknights. And cutting current weekend Night Owl service would make Boston one of only two comparable cities that fail to provide nighttime weekend service. Of the two cities, Boston, MA and Atlanta, GA, Boston's service shuts down earlier.

The Night Owl in Boston is like an endangered species of wildlife. Our society acts to protect endangered wildlife species because their endangerment is a symptom and a sign of larger, systematic problems that threaten whole ecosystems. As we try to create a vibrant culture and economy in Greater Boston for the 21st century, this metaphor is useful. Endangered Night Owl service is a symptom and a sign of the systematic failure to adequately invest in public transportation for the region and state, and this larger problem threatens ultimately to undermine smart development in the region.

Introduction

In the 1950s, long before the MBTA was established, its predecessor, the MTA, ran a 24-hour subway system covering the city of Boston. That was around the time that the infamous Charlie rode the MTA "all night long...through the tunnels," but now that much of Boston is working to meet the challenges of the 21st century, all-night public transportation is a thing of the past.

In September of 2001, in response to pressure from politicians, night club and restaurant owners, union groups, students, and activists, a much needed revival of all-night public transportation began when the MBTA started the Night Owl service. The Night Owl service runs three shifts of buses along the four subway lines and seven popular bus routes every half hour from 1:30-2:30am on Friday and Saturday nights. The Night Owl service provides Bostonians with a safe and inexpensive ride home after 12:30am for the first time since 1960, when all-night service was cut.

Since the Night Owl service began in 2001, legislators and activists have worked to expand the service to run 7 nights a week instead of two, providing inexpensive rides home for all late night workers. Senator Steven Tolman and Representative Alice Wolf both filed legislation to expand Night Owl services and provide a safe and affordable ride home all week long for Boston's night owls.

Now, three and a half years since service began, the MBTA is proposing to cut the Night Owl service, rather than expand it.

This report reviews transit systems across the country that are similar to Boston's and compares nighttime service. The findings indicate that while Boston's MBTA is one of the largest systems in the country, the nighttime service it provides is not competitive with the services of other major cities.

Findings: Public Transportation and Nighttime Service

Size of the System

Public transportation is a critical component of urban infrastructure. Accessible, affordable and efficient public transportation is vital to creating a livable community and cleaning up our air. For people who have transportation choices, accessible public transportation enables them to choose not to drive, reducing pollution and congestion. And for people who are dependent upon public transit as their only option in getting to and from their jobs, markets, and other vital destinations, public transportation is a critical component of their lives. Night-time service, such as the Night Owl, is a critical part of any public transportation infrastructure.

In addition to Boston, there are ten other cities across the country which have transit systems extensive enough to provide people with basic alternatives to owning a car. Those cities have developed transit systems that support buses, light rail and heavy rail, and they serve at least 700,000 people and run over 50 million trips annually. Those cities are: Atlanta, GA; Baltimore, MD; Chicago, IL; Cleveland, OH; Dallas, TX; Los Angeles, CA; Miami, FL; New York, NY; San Francisco, CA; and Washington, DC. New York City boasts the biggest system in the country serving 17.8 million people and providing 2.67 billion rides annually.

Boston's MBTA serves the third largest population, serving 4.5 million people, and covers the second largest geographical area, covering 770 square miles.

Chart 1: Heavy Rail Systems in the US, Population Served

City	System	Service Area Population
New York, NY	NYCTA	17,799,861
Los Angeles, CA	MTA	11,789,487
Boston, MA	MBTA	4,510,400
Philadelphia, PA	SEPTA	3,728,909
Chicago, IL	CTA	3,708,773
Baltimore, MD	MTA	2,077,677
Miami, FL	MDTA	1,900,000
Cleveland, OH	GCRTA	1,786,647
Atlanta, GA	MARTA	1,354,871
Washington, DC	WMATA	1,305,693
San Francisco, CA	MUNI/ BART	793,600

Chart 2: Heavy Rail Systems in the US, Miles of Track

City	System	Service Square Miles
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New York, NY	NYCTA	835
Boston, MA	MBTA	770
Baltimore, MD	MTA	557
Chicago, IL	CTA	288
Philadelphia, PA	SEPTA	273
Washington, DC	WMATA	220
Los Angeles, CA	MTA	121
Atlanta, GA	MARTA	103
San Francisco, CA	MUNI/ BART	83
Cleveland, OH	GCRTA	75
Miami, FL	MDTA	63

Surprisingly, for having the second largest structure and serving the third largest population, the MBTA runs only the fifth largest number of trips annually. Comparing systems across the country, ridership is relatively low in Boston.

Chart 3: Heavy Rail Systems in the US, Annual Unlinked¹ Trips Provided

City	System	Annual Unlinked Trips Provided'
New York, NY	NYCTA	2,671,728,275
Chicago, IL	CTA	485,225,048
Los Angeles, CA	MTA	445,196,341
Washington, DC	WMATA	391,303,553
Boston, MA	MBTA	388,975,811
San Francisco, CA	MUNI / BART	330,161,717
Philadelphia, PA	SEPTA	313,687,051
Atlanta, GA	MARTA	159,357,652
Baltimore, MD	MTA	115,678,655
Miami, FL	MDTA	81,891,426
Cleveland, OH	GCRTA	55,744,904

¹ An Unlinked Passenger Trip is the number of passengers who board public transportation vehicles. Passengers are counted each time they board vehicles no matter how many vehicles they use to travel from their origin to their destination. (<http://www.apta.com/research/stats/ridershp/definitions.cfm>.)

Nighttime Service in Boston, Peer Transit Systems

Regardless of how one compares systems, Boston boasts one of the largest and most comprehensive systems in the country. But Boston is one of only two of the heavy rail systems in the country that does not provide night-time service during the week. The other system is in Atlanta, which provides service for another half hour after the MBTA shuts down.

Chart 4: Sunday-Thursday Nighttime Service

		12-12:30 am	12:30-1am	1-1:30am	1:30-2am	2-2:30 am	2:30-3am	3-3:30 am	3:30-4am	4-4:30 am	4:30-5am
Atlanta, GA	MARTA	B&R	B&R	B							
Baltimore, MD	MTA	B	B	B	B	B	B	B	B	B	B
Boston, MA	MBTA	B&R	B&R								
Chicago, IL	CTA	B&R	B&R	B&R	B&R	B&R	B&R	B&R	B&R	B&R	B&R
Cleveland, OH	GCRTA	B&R	B&R	B	B	B	B	B	B	B&R	B&R
Los Angeles, CA	MTA	B&R	B	B	B	B	B	B	B	B	B
Miami, FL	MDTA	B	B	B	B	B	B	B	B	B	B
New York, NY	NYCTA	B&R	B&R	B&R	B&R	B&R	B&R	B&R	B&R	B&R	B&R
Philadelphia, PA	SEPTA	B	B	B	B	B	B	B	B	B	B
San Francisco, CA	MUNI/ BART	M-B&R	M-B&R	M-B	M-B	M-B	M-B	M-B	M-B	M-B, B-R	M- B, B- R
Washington, DC	WMATA	B	B	B	B	B	B	B	B	B	B

Key: B&R-Bus and Rail Service; B-Bus Only Service (only major routes or full service); M-B&R-Muni Provided Bus and Rail Service; M-B-Muni Provided Bus Only Service; B-R-BART Provided Rail Only Service

Friday and Saturday nights are traditionally late nights out for city dwellers and workers. It is on those nights that Boston runs the Night Owl services, extending its hours of operation until 3am. The MBTA's extended night owl hours are certainly beneficial to those who get out of work late or need a safe ride home after last call. However, in comparison to other heavy rail systems across the country, Boston's lack of an all-night ride on Friday and Saturday nights is noticeable.

Chart 5: Friday and Saturday Nighttime Service

		12-12:30 am	12:30-1am	1-1:30 am	1:30-2am	2-2:30 am	2:30-3am	3-3:30 am	3:30-4am	4-4:30 am	4:30-5am
Atlanta, GA	MARTA	B&R	B&R	B							
Baltimore, MD	MTA	B	B	B	B	B	B	B	B	B	B
Boston, MA	MBTA	B&R	B&R	Night Owl	Night Owl	Night Owl	Night Owl				
Chicago, IL	CTA	B&R	B&R	B&R	B&R	B&R	B&R	B&R	B&R	B&R	B&R
Cleveland, OH	GCRTA	B&R	B&R	B	B	B	B	B	B	B&R	B&R
Los Angeles, CA	MTA	B&R	B	B	B	B	B	B	B	B	B
Miami, FL	MDTA	B	B	B	B	B	B	B	B	B	B
New York, NY	NYCTA	B&R	B&R	B&R	B&R	B&R	B&R	B&R	B&R	B&R	B&R
Philadelphia, PA	SEPTA	B	B	B	B	B	B	B	B	B	B
San Francisco, CA	MUNI/ BART	M-B&R	M-B&R	M-B	M-B	M-B	M-B	M-B	M-B	M-B B-R	M-B B-R
Washington, DC	WMATA	B&R	B&R	B&R	B&R	B&R	B&R	B	B	B	B

If the night-owl service is eliminated, Boston's public transportation service will rank in last place on weekends as well as weeknights. In terms of developing an urban infrastructure and supporting a growing city, eliminating the Night Owl is taking public transportation in the wrong direction, limiting accessibility, negatively impacting quality of life, reducing the potential for Boston's development and growth.

Conclusion

"Greater Boston's assets, from its deep pools of talent and capital to the great center city and picturesque towns, are world renowned. So why rock the boat, spend time, money, or intellectual capital on risky new undertakings? We caught a whispered undertone in many interviews: "Aren't we already the 'hub' of what counts?" But there's a fatal flaw in defensive strategy. Boston has seen its advantages wither before. If innovation is its critical resource, momentum should be its mantra."

- Neal Peirce and Curtis Johnson, *Boston Globe*, "How to Change the Future," December 20, 2004.

Public transportation serves the community, its businesses, residents, and industries by providing members of the society with accessible, affordable, and efficient modes of travel. Investing in public transportation and expanding service ought to be a top priority of the MBTA, the state of Massachusetts, the city of Boston and surrounding communities. Unfortunately, divestment, rather than investment, is the story of the times.

In 1950, Charlie rode the MTA "all night long." As fiscal year 2006 begins, the MBTA is in a financial crisis that is forcing it to cut the services that make it a system citizens want to use. The fact that the MBTA has the second largest system in the country and serves the third largest population but provides the fifth greatest numbers of rides annually, begs the question, why is our ridership so low? The MBTA can be one of the premier systems in the country but it must provide accessible, affordable and attractive rides to the people of the Commonwealth; cutting the Night Owl service is a step in the wrong direction.

Cutting the Night Owl service is a sign of Massachusetts' divestment from public transportation and the people of the Commonwealth. Taking away late night service takes away affordable and accessible transportation from those who choose transit and those who depend on it most. Night-time service is a feature of most major cities that have invested at comparable levels to the Greater Boston region in a public transportation system. Cutting the Night Owl service is a sign that Greater Boston is falling behind the leading cities across our nation in developing a transportation system that enables a thriving and vibrant economy and culture.

In combination with fare increases and a consistent failure to adequately expand public transportation to serve the region and meet important legal commitments, cutting Night Owl service risks downgrading the MBTA from a first-rate system to a waning second-class one. In order to build a leading city in the twenty-first century, we must, as Neal Peirce and Curtis Johnson, authors of *Citistates*, suggested, "invest billions in transit." Funding public transportation is not the sole responsibility of the MBTA or the state, but the responsibility of the entire community, including the transportation agencies, municipal governments, state government, and the federal government, along with riders.

Recommendations

- The MBTA should continue to take steps to eliminate waste in the MBTA and maximize revenue without jeopardizing public safety or operational efficiency.
- Provide adequate funding for Night Owl service every day of the week.
- Provide adequate funding for expansion of the transportation system in Greater Boston to improve transportation options, reduce congestion and air pollution, and meet important legal commitments relating to the Big Dig and federal Clean Air Act.
- Prioritize public transportation investment throughout the state—not just in the Greater Boston region—over highway spending.
- Review current MBTA and Regional Transit Authority funding systems, and current practices for allocating state and federal transportation funding, to determine the best way to meet the growing needs of the region and state.

Methodology

This report analyzed all city-based public transportation systems that include heavy rail (for example in Boston Orange, Red, Blue and Commuter Rail trains are heavy rail; Green line trains are light rail). In addition to being city-based authorities that have heavy rail, each of the systems considered in this study serves at least 700,000 people and provides over 50 million rides a year. The source list of public transit authorities is maintained by the American Public Transportation Association website (www.apta.com).

San Francisco's Muni and BART services were considered together because together they operate as a cohesive system in the Bay Area.

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