



# CITY OF CAMBRIDGE

# TRAFFIC, PARKING, + TRANSPORTATION

## MEMORANDUM

**To:** Cambridge City Council

**From:** Iram Farooq, Assistant City Manager for Community Development  
Brooke McKenna, Transportation Commissioner

**Date:** April 1, 2024

**Subject:** MBTA Track Improvement Program work in February and July 2024

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We are providing an update on the City's efforts to support the Massachusetts Bay Transportation Authority (MBTA) Track Improvement Program in 2024. The Track Improvement Program is focused on making much-needed and long-deferred track repairs and improvements to the subway system. This work is intended to restore all subway lines to a more regular service – with more predictable travel times and reliable trips. The MBTA is also taking the opportunity to deep clean, make repairs, and maintain systems like lighting, station platforms, subway signals, and communication systems. In Cambridge, this work means extended closures of the Red Line in February, July, October, and December 2024.

The MBTA recently completed two Red Line closures in February: a 10-day closure and a weekend closure. For these closures, City staff focused on providing on-street mitigations and informing Cambridge community members of the closures. These efforts took approximately three months of planning and involved staff from the Executive, Traffic Parking and Transportation, Community Development, Public Works, Human Services Programs, Communications Office, and Police Departments.

Below, we provide a review and reflections on the February closures and some information on the upcoming July closure.

### February Red Line Closures and Shuttles

Between Monday, February 5 and Wednesday, February 14, the MBTA closed the Red Line between Alewife and Harvard during the day on weekdays and between Alewife and Park Street on weekday evenings and all day on weekends. They ran replacement shuttles to all closed stations in Cambridge, Somerville, and Boston. The MBTA reports that on a typical weekday when the Red Line is in service, an average of 22,000 riders use the Red Line between Alewife and Harvard. To provide the replacement shuttle service, the MBTA used 116 shuttle buses at peak times between Alewife and Harvard. The MBTA also made the Fitchburg Commuter Rail line between Porter Square and North Station free to all riders. The MBTA did not count the number of riders using the shuttles, but did report increased ridership on the 83 and 77 bus.

Later in February, the MBTA closed the Red Line from Alewife to Broadway in South Boston on the weekend of February 24 and 25. This closure primarily provided time to inspect the tunnel, tracks, and systems and identify additional needed repairs. The MBTA ran shuttles to replace the Red Line and offered free commuter rail rides between Porter Square and North Station on these dates.

For on-street mitigations during the longer February shutdown, the City was able to provide to the MBTA:

- Temporary bus stop zones for shuttles—relocating or expanding existing bus stops.
- Dedicated shared bus-bike shuttle queuing lanes in Porter Square and Harvard Square.
- Modifications to traffic signals to prioritize bus movements along the shuttle route – including on Mass Ave in Porter Square and Mount Auburn Street near Harvard Square.
- Temporary sidewalk patches to improve paths of travel for people walking between stations and shuttle stops.

Police Department staff assisted by coordinating police details and helping to enforce temporary curb restrictions and dedicated shuttle lanes. Except for the temporary bus stop zones for shuttles, these on-street mitigations were not repeated for the weekend closure in February.

City staff also made significant efforts to communicate about the closure to residents, students, businesses, workers, places of worship, and visitors in Cambridge. In addition to amplifying the MBTA's materials, the City of Cambridge:

- Published a webpage with detailed information on the closures.
- Created a flyer with basic facts on the shutdown, with translations into Amharic, Arabic, Bangla, Chinese, Haitian Creole, Portuguese, and Spanish. Community Engagement Team members helped share information in non-English speaking communities.
- Created maps of shuttle routes and stops and shared on the city webpage and in online materials.
- Shared ongoing updates in the Daily Email e-newsletter.
- Shared detailed information on City and various department social media pages (nearly 70 posts across accounts that led to 157,000 impressions throughout the campaign).
- Posted VMS boards on key streets to inform drivers of the shutdown.
- Issued multiple announcements to local and regional media, which resulted in published media coverage (e.g. Cambridge Day, The Crimson, Boston.com, Boston Globe).
- Involved the City of Somerville in local planning meetings.

Information about the closure was also included in communications by the Department of Human Services Programs (especially the Council on Aging, Commission for Persons with Disabilities, and early childhood education programs), Cambridge Public Schools, 22-CityView, and Cambridge Libraries.

In addition, we reached out to organizations in Cambridge to provide information on the closure, shuttles, and travel options. We also asked these organizations to inform their visitors, clients, and employees about these changes and, where possible, make accommodations for workers' travel. These included:

- Partner organizations like the Cambridge Health Alliance, Housing Authority, Redevelopment Authority, Alewife TMA, Central Square BID, Harvard Square Business Association, and Kendall Square Association/Security Network
- Emergency services
- Emergency Management Associations
- Transportation management associations
- Places of worship
- Universities
- Representatives of large employers
- Other business associations and neighborhood groups

Our key communications priorities were to ensure that:

- Residents and workers knew that the partial Red Line closure was happening.
- People understood that the closure could mean more traffic and longer commutes for all modes.
- People knew about alternative travel options and accessibility accommodations.
- People could access information about shuttle stops, shuttle routes, and accessibility.
- The information reached underserved communities and people who don't speak English.
- The information reached people who drive, take the T, and take the bus.

The communications plan specified messages for different groups of Cambridge constituents, including:

- For residents: consider alternatives to driving alone, especially walking and biking, and consider keeping trips local.
- For workers: consider telework, walking, biking, shuttles, and MBTA local bus routes.
- For large employers, give your employees options, including telework or schedule flexibility.

During and after the February closures, we received feedback from city staff, constituents, and the MBTA. Some key messages that we heard were:

- The City's channels provided more information and Cambridge-specific details than the MBTA's. In their Camberville newsletter, the Boston Globe linked to the City's Twitter, rather than the MBTA's, for updates about the closures.
- The MBTA was not able to confirm some shuttling details until just a few weeks before the closure. This resulted in a short lead-time, specifically, to implement on-street mitigations.

- Shuttle operations were more complicated than originally communicated and changed day by day. This resulted in shuttle buses traveling on unexpected streets or occupying unexpected areas in Harvard Square and the Alewife area.
- Employees, specifically at larger private businesses, did not get notification or receive actionable information to consider alternatives for commute trips to work.
- The MBTA reported that they saw more riders on bus routes that traveled parallel to the closed section of the Red Line. That is, Route 77 on Mass Ave north of Harvard Square and Route 83 from Rindge Avenue to Central Square via Inman Square.
- Few people heard about the free commuter rail option from Porter to North Station, though the MBTA noted approximately 600 additional weekday trips from Porter to North Station during the February closure.
- The MBTA informed us that their work removed 10 track speed restrictions which reduced one-way travel times on the Red Line by a total of about eight and a half minutes.

The most-repeated piece of feedback we heard was that shuttles were very slow and impacted the flow of traffic throughout Cambridge and Somerville. The MBTA reported that a one-way shuttle trip from Alewife to Harvard during rush hour could take up to 40 minutes. On the subway, before the repair work, this trip would take 15 to 20 minutes.

During peak travel times, the MBTA ran 116 shuttles on Cambridge streets, significantly contributing to congestion for all modes. We have shared relevant feedback with MBTA staff. We are considering how to modify city efforts for the Red Line closure in July and the MBTA are also considering modifications as well.

### Planned July Red Line Closures and Shuttles

In July, the MBTA plans for a 16-day closure of the Red Line between Alewife and Kendall/MIT stations. Their current planned dates are from Monday, July 8 to Tuesday, July 23, 2024. The MBTA will confirm the exact length of the closure and dates closer to the actual date of the closure. We are happy that the MBTA has scheduled this very significant closure of the Red Line during a time with less activity at the universities and during summer vacation for the schools. This also means that more people can consider walking or biking for their trips around the city. The MBTA expects that this track work will remove up to nine track speed restrictions. This would mean improving travel times by four minutes for a one-way trip.

This closure will last almost twice as long as the February closure and includes a section of the Red Line with much higher weekday ridership. For example, about 43,000 riders use this section of the Red Line on an average weekday (compared to 22,000 using the section impacted by the February closure). That is about the same number as the entire Orange Line that the MBTA closed in summer 2022. This means that the MBTA is planning for around 200 shuttles and are asking the City for more impactful mitigation alternatives. The MBTA estimates that the current Red Line trip from Alewife to Kendall/MIT station is about 25 to 30 minutes and that a shuttle could take up to 70 minutes without any mitigations. Mitigations would reduce the number of

shuttles and would likely improve travel times to be less impactful. We have suggested that the MBTA consider:

- Continue close collaboration with the City to come to agreement on appropriate on-street mitigation measures along the shuttle routes as soon as possible to ensure enough time for implementation in advance of the closure.
- Running additional commuter rail trains on the Fitchburg Line
- Changing the shuttle routing to include dedicated local and express variations
- Adding more bus trips on parallel bus routes or routes connecting to the Green Line
- Supporting options to bike and walk, such as BlueBike valet stations, and communicating those options in their outreach
- Coordinating a regional communication campaign for this closure
- Reducing the size of the shuttle fleet
- Making all Mass Ave bus routes fare-free for the length of the shutdowns

We are reconvening the city staff working group to continue planning for the July closure. This again includes city staff from the Executive, Traffic, Parking, and Transportation, Community Development, Public Works, Human Service Programs, the Communications Office, and Police Departments. We are meeting on a weekly basis with MBTA shuttle planners and senior staff to discuss details on shuttle operations. As we work with the MBTA to prepare for the next shuttle operation in July, we are evaluating additional on-street and off-street mitigation. These include:

- Additional on-street mitigations, including additional sections of dedicated bus and shuttle lanes
- Temporary expansion of or new shuttle bus stops
- Supporting more trips on BlueBikes and cycling in general
- Organizing community support for trying a new bike or walk trip route within Cambridge

For the July closure, we have already begun discussions of modifications to the communication plans. Our objective is to build on and improve our February outreach. Our communications staff plan for:

- Deeper collaboration on messaging and outreach strategies with the community engagement teams at the Department of Human Services Programs and Community Development Department.
- Earlier outreach to all stakeholders, with MBTA providing final confirmation of closure dates and extents as soon as possible.
- Reaching out to additional stakeholders that we may have missed last time, including companies catering to visitors, like those running tour buses.
- Additional opportunities to communicate and collaborate with employers, such as providing them with materials and suggested templates to share with their employees.

- More messaging encouraging people to bike and walk, with additional materials and other supports for new cyclists and to help pedestrians and cyclists navigate the city.

As mentioned above, planning is well underway for the July closure. We will provide an additional update as we get closer to the closure dates. The MBTA plans to follow this July closure with a 6-day closure in mid to late October and a 6-day closure in mid to late December.