

'Best commute I've ever had': Red Line shutdown gives Fairmount Line a chance to shine

By [Shirley Leung](#) Globe Columnist, Updated October 16, 2023, 6:10 a.m.

Call it the commuter train that could.

The [Fairmount Line](#), the only commuter route that runs entirely through Boston, is experiencing record ridership, surging to an average of nearly 60,000 passengers a month. That's an astounding 30 percent increase from before the pandemic, according to Keolis Commuter Services, the private contractor that operates the commuter rail system for the T, even as most MBTA services remain below pre-COVID levels.

Now, with the Ashmont branch of the Red Line and the Mattapan trolley shut down for two weeks, the Fairmount Line is getting its chance to show what public transportation can be. While the MBTA repairs and replaces tracks along the subway lines, which closed Saturday, [commuters can ride the nearby Fairmount train for free through Oct. 29.](#)

The line's 9.2-mile route weaves through some of Boston's poorest communities, in Roxbury, Dorchester, Mattapan, and Hyde Park, serving as a vital connection to downtown via South Station. It wasn't always that way.

Community leaders like Marilyn Forman, who grew up in Dorchester's Four Corners, have vivid memories of being left behind. They watched trains rumble through their

neighborhood, but there were no stations for people to board. Instead, residents had to take the bus.

But then Forman, along with the Greater Four Corners Action Coalition, started to ask: Why should it take them an hour to get downtown? Why should they have to own a car to get around? Why can't they hop on the commuter rail and be downtown in 15 minutes, too?

Born was the [Fairmount Indigo Transit Coalition](#), a collection of neighborhood and community development groups that partnered with the [Conservation Law Foundation](#) and [Boston Foundation](#). For more than two decades, these advocates have pushed for increased service, new stations, and lower fares on the Fairmount Line.

Their efforts yielded four new stations — Newmarket, Four Corners/Geneva, Talbot Avenue, and Blue Hill Avenue — and fares that are the same price as the subway (\$2.40 each way). Only Readville, at the end of the Fairmount Line in Hyde Park, costs more: \$7.



The Fairmount Line at the Blue Hill Avenue stop in Mattapan. JONATHAN WIGGS/GLOBE STAFF

Forman, who serves as the coalition's co-chair, said improving the Fairmount Line, even for some in the community, at first seemed far-fetched. Skeptics wondered if people would even take the train if it stopped in their neighborhoods.

But [ridership grew, slowly but surely](#), with the help of CharlieCard giveaways and [free-fare days](#). The pandemic likely brought more riders, uncomfortable traveling in crowded buses, to the more spacious train. And as [Red Line woes have mounted](#) — from signal problems in 2019 to slow zones starting in 2022 — even more commuters have found their way to the Fairmount Line, which runs through the same neighborhoods as the Ashmont branch.

Riders have quickly discovered that the Fairmount Line beats driving. For example, it's six minutes from the Four Corners/Geneva station to Newmarket, the closest stop to the burgeoning South Bay Center with shops, restaurants, and a movie theater.

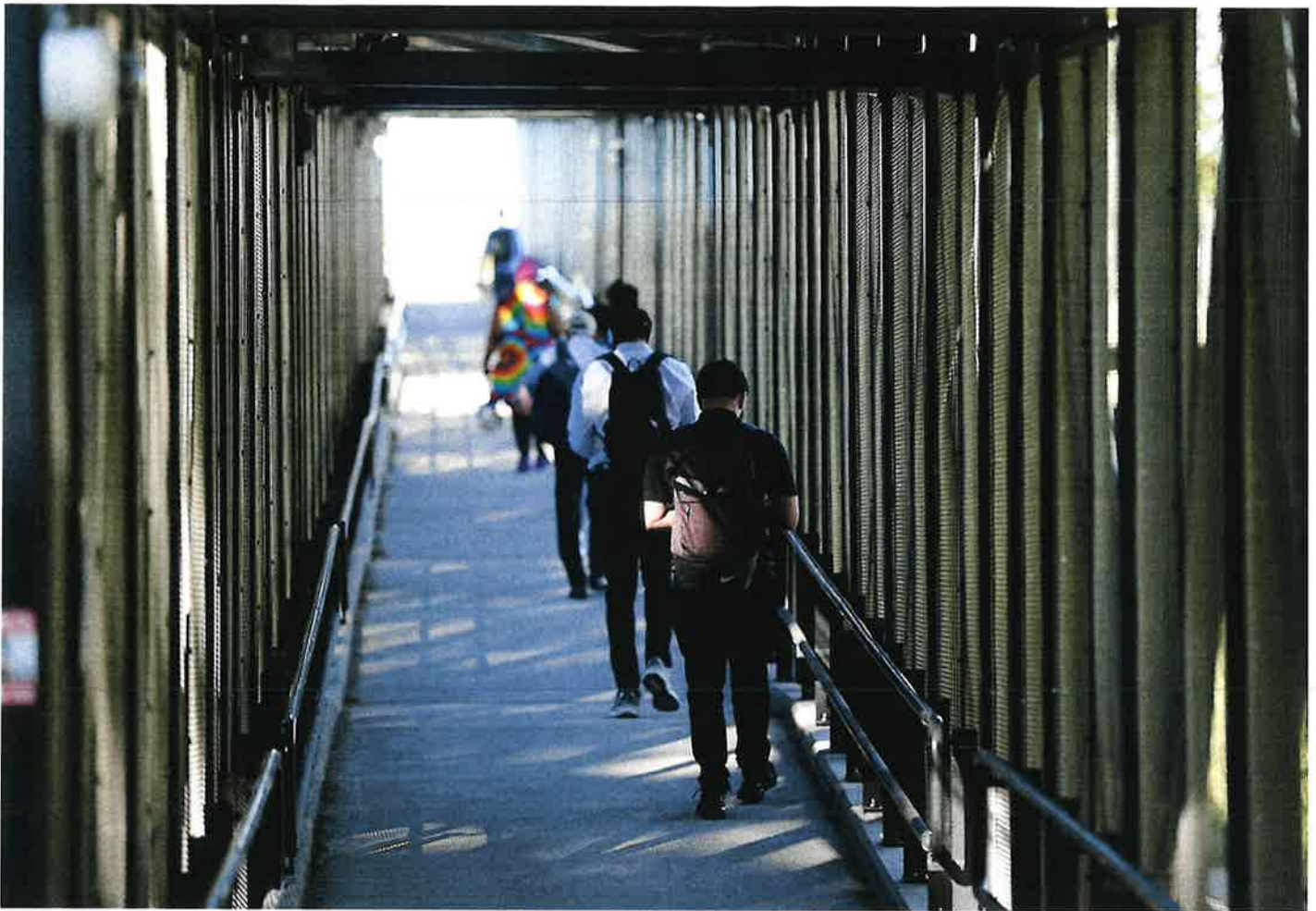
For acting state transportation secretary Monica Tibbits-Nutt, the increased ridership represents all that can go right with public transit. She was serving on the MBTA board when decisions were made to increase the [Fairmount Line's frequency — every 45 minutes on weekdays —](#) and offer seamless payments with CharlieCards.

“Growing up very, very poor and seeing what other people had, and seeing people be able to get on nice trains, the idea of having that in my neighborhood and not being able to take it, that's heartbreaking,” Tibbits-Nutt said. “I know what that life is like, and I know how easy it can be for us to make it better. We just have to want to do it. And that's why the Fairmount Line has always meant so much to me.”

The other secret to the Fairmount Line's success? The route offers what every transit rider craves: reliability. The line boasts an on-time performance rate of 98 percent — the envy of the MBTA system. There are none of the daily guessing games that come with riding the Red, Orange, or Green lines.

Instead, you'll hear Fairmount riders coo: “The train has never been late in the years that I've taken it.”

That's from former governor Bill Weld, a regular rider since 2015 after moving from Cambridge to Canton. He makes the short drive to the Readville Station (where it costs \$2 to park), and then it's a brisk 30-minute ride (including eight stops) to South Station, which is across the street from his office at the Mintz Levin law firm.



Commuters coming off the Fairmount Line at the Blue Hill Avenue stop in Mattapan. JONATHAN WIGGS/GLOBE STAFF

“It’s the best commute I’ve ever had,” Weld said.

I, too, have had the same experience since defecting from the Red Line in the spring when the slow zones became unbearable. [It has been five years \(!\) since I had a predictable, 48-minute door-to-door commute from Milton](#) via the Mattapan trolley and Red Line Ashmont to Downtown Crossing. Now that same commute, if I am lucky, takes more than an hour.

So far, so good on the Fairmount Line — so much so that I don’t know if I will ever go back. From my home, it’s a 9-minute drive to the Fairmount Station in Hyde Park. Sure, parking costs me \$4, in addition to the fare, but I will gladly pay for dependability.

Here’s another perk of the commuter rail: You have room to pull out a laptop or make a quick call.

I have run into other Red Line refugees such as Molly and Ken Sherman. The Milton couple fell into a familiar pattern when the slow zones worsened: they drove. But traffic was horrible, and they didn't want to spend \$500 a month to park downtown. At her book club, Molly Sherman learned about the Fairmount Line and decided to give it a try. They got hooked.

"The train has never been late," Ken Sherman said. "The only time it's ever been an issue is when one of us misses the train because we were late."

It would be easy for Fairmount Line to rest on its laurels. But community groups, transit advocates, and now Boston legislators want more.

State Senator Liz Miranda and state Representative Brandy Fluker Oakley are [co-sponsoring a bill](#) they hope will better integrate the Fairmount Line into the transit system (think free bus and subway transfers) and have it run as frequently as the subway. They also want the MBTA to come up with a plan by July 2025 to electrify the route to eliminate diesel trains that pollute the neighborhood.

"The MBTA is in crisis," said Miranda, who lives by the Fairmount Line's Uphams Corner station in Dorchester, and is a regular rider because she doesn't drive. "This is a timely and significant opportunity to target the communities in Boston who can benefit most from transit justice."

Shirley Leung is a Business columnist and host of the Globe Opinion podcast "Say More with Shirley Leung." Find the podcast on [Apple](#), [Spotify](#), and globe.com/saymore.

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