

Fighting for Affordable and Fair Transit Service in Boston, Massachusetts

Boston holds a prominent place in US history, from its past role in the country's founding to its current role as an educational and technological hub. It is also the birthplace of US public transit. Part of the current Massachusetts Bay Transportation Authority (MBTA) Green Line was the first subway to exist in the country, and the city was one of the earliest examples of public agencies committing to investing in expanding transit services through the early twentieth century, going against subsidies for car commuting and zoning laws that hampered transit development in the 1920s.

All the while, the region has a long history of segregation and racism. The Great Migration in the first half of the twentieth century created many of the current Black communities in Boston—with many Black people moving to neighborhoods like Roxbury, Dorchester, and Mattapan, driven by the racial terror of the Jim Crow South as well as the promise of economic opportunity in the North (Ciurczak, Jennings, and Schuster 2023; Gumprecht 2023). Segregation was cemented throughout the 1900s by a series of restrictive covenants, redlining, White flight, and urban renewal, and continues to be maintained today by housing discrimination and predatory lending (Harvard Chan-NIEHS Center for Environmental Health 2022; Taylor 2019).

Together, this history shows up in the transportation system we see today. Black and Brown neighborhoods like Roxbury, Mattapan, and Chelsea have long been deprioritized for transit service (Figure 1, p. 2). As of 2024, Black people in the City of Boston have around 50 percent less access to jobs within 45 minutes than White people do (TransitCenter 2023). They are also served by 18 percent less transit service intensity, and it takes them 27 percent longer to get to the nearest hospital than their White

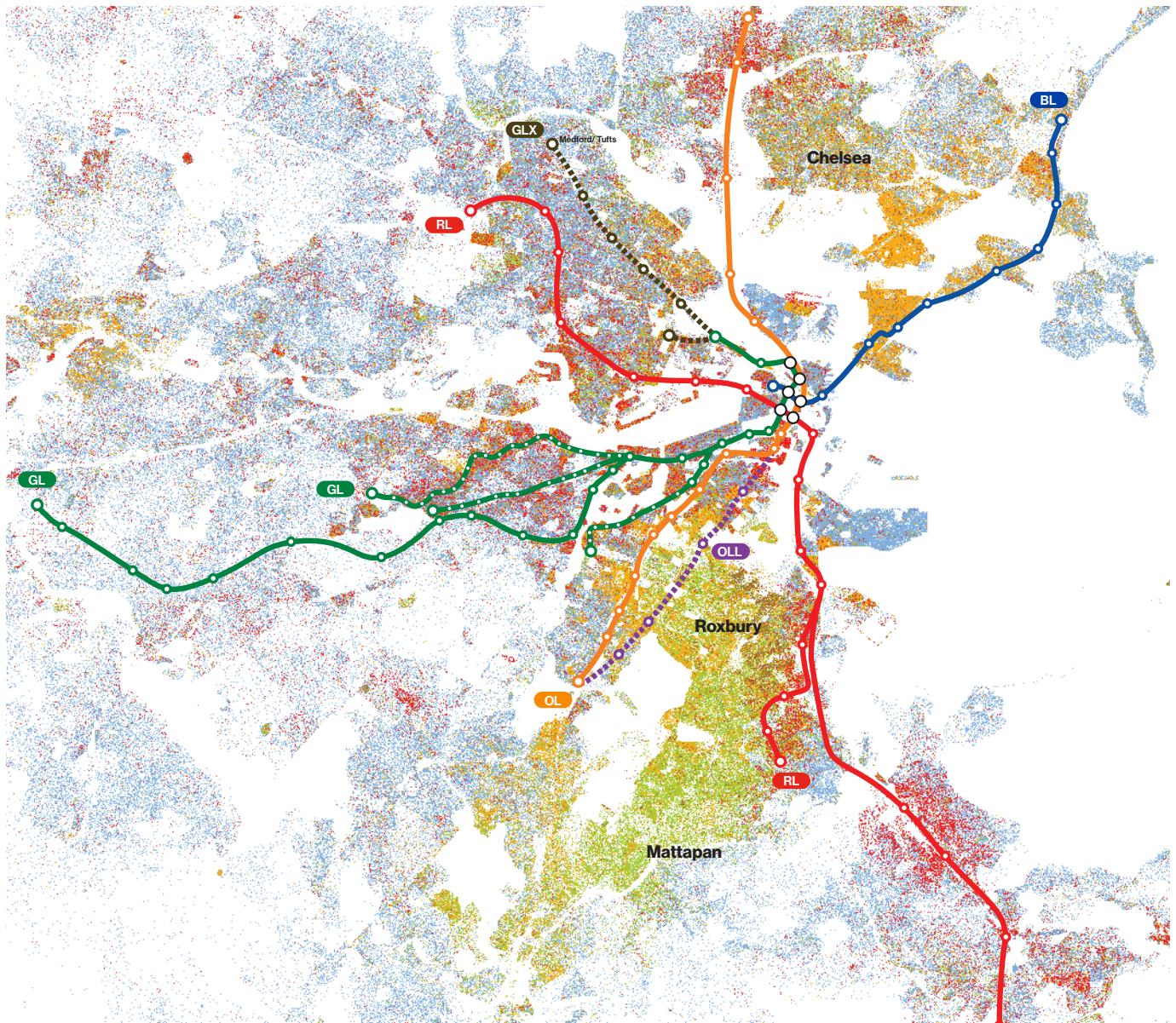
counterparts. Many neighborhoods of color, such as Chinatown, were torn apart by highway construction and were the site of some of the biggest highway revolts that set the precedent for the environmental impact review process used in current transportation planning (Crockett 2018).

With costs of housing and transportation continuing to rise, over 44 percent of people in the metropolitan area are living with housing and transportation costs they cannot afford. On average, people in the Boston metropolitan area spend 46 percent of their income on housing and transportation, with households of color paying on average 8 percent more than their White counterparts (CNT 2024). From Roxbury to Egleston Square and from Nubian Square to Chinatown, new housing developments have been pushing up housing costs and threatening displacement.

Alternatives for Community and Environment in Roxbury

Alternatives for Community and Environment (ACE) is a grassroots organization building power with communities of color and low-income communities in Massachusetts to eradicate environmental racism and classism, create healthy and sustainable communities, and achieve environmental justice. Rooted in the Roxbury neighborhood of Boston since its start in 1994, ACE is recognized for its community work that has reverberated to the state and national levels: organizing the youth-led Roxbury Environmental Empowerment Project, leading legal and technical work grounded in civil rights and environmental law, convening the T Riders Union (TRU) to fight for first-class MBTA transit services, and convening a statewide network of experts for pro bono legal and technical assistance.

FIGURE 1. Black and Brown Neighborhoods Like Roxbury, Mattapan, and Chelsea Have Long Been Deprioritized for Transit Service



Legend

- | | | |
|-------------|---|--------|
| Red Line | Green Line Extension 2021 | Black |
| Orange Line | Orange Line Elevated Washington St. | Latinx |
| Blue Line | Asian | White |
| Green Line | Other Race/Native American/Multi-racial | |

The Roxbury and Mattapan communities are predominantly people of color, yet they are underserved by MBTA light rail service. The Washington St. Elevated, in dashed purple, long served Roxbury through the 1900s but shut down in 1987 when the Orange Line moved to its current route to the west. This change eliminated a key service from some of Boston's most vibrant communities of color.

SOURCE: REPRODUCED WITH PERMISSION FROM GEWIRTH 2021.

Roxbury is often regarded as the center of Black Boston, as its community members are 46 percent Black, 29 percent Hispanic, 15 percent White, and 4 percent Asian (WBUR 2024). In recent decades, the neighborhood has been changing rapidly, as many of the low-income Black people are displaced and higher-income White people move in; in 1990, Roxbury's population was 79 percent Black and 4 percent White (Barstein et al. 2022; Lewis and Edozie 2019). Within these categories, communities are also increasingly diverse; Roxbury has a large multigenerational Black American population and thriving Cape Verdean, Haitian, Dominican, and Puerto Rican populations (Ciurczak, Jennings, and Schuster 2023; BPDA 2024).

Roxbury was also the center of the civil rights movement in Boston, including the 1967 Grove Hall sit-in and riot that sparked the city's civil rights protests; the site of key civil rights hubs, such as the Freedom House, NAACP, and the Dudley Street Neighborhood Initiative; the home of Malcolm X in his early years; and the start of many civil rights protests led in part by Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. (Fong 2018; Dunham, n.d.).

The effects of transit racism are apparent in Roxbury. From 1901, the Washington Street Elevated constituted the southern portion of MBTA's Orange Line, which connected major commercial and population hubs such as Dudley (now Nubian) Square and Egleston Square (Carter 2012). In 1970, under extreme pressure from community members and the People before Highways movement, Governor Francis Sargent called for a moratorium on highway construction, leaving 110 acres of already-cleared land in Roxbury and Jamaica Plain for a new segment of Orange Line, shifted westward away from the major population centers. When the Washington Street Elevated ended service in 1987, as restitution, the Roxbury community was promised a replacement transit service that would be "equal or better," initially the #49 bus. In 2002, after 15 years of debate while ACE and others of the Washington Street Corridor Coalition were advocating for a light rail replacement, the MBTA built the Silver Line, a bus rapid transit project that many advocates called the "Silver Lie," as if a silver coat of paint had been applied to the existing #49 bus (Belcher 2024). A journey downtown on both the Silver Line and #49 took roughly double the time as the old elevated Orange Line. Advocates have made multiple civil rights complaints but largely regard the lack of investment in majority-Black Roxbury but large investments in commuter rail and the Big Dig project serving White suburban commuters as a stark example of transit racism.

Now, Roxbury remains a gap for rapid transit in the region, though it is clear that its community members do rely on it. Some 45 percent of Roxbury's population does not have access to a car (over 9,300 households), which is around 11 percent higher than rates in the rest of the city (US Census Bureau 2022b). At Nubian Station, almost 28,000 people pass through every day. This occurs



Photo: ACE

ACE and youth from REEP (Roxbury Environmental Empowerment Project) visit State Senator Liz Miranda's office to talk about transportation from a youth perspective.

amid the many other cumulative impacts that Roxbury community members already face from air pollution, other environmental injustices, and displacement (Agyeman 2005).

ACE has done major work in Boston's transportation justice for over 20 years, much of it through the T Riders Union (TRU)—a group of over 500 riders. Through the years, they've focused on a series of efforts.

In 1997, ACE worked with the Clean Buses for Boston coalition, organizing over 75 youth and community and environmental groups to win a consent order for the MBTA to buy 350 compressed natural gas buses to begin replacement of its diesel fleet.

In 2000, TRU won free bus transfers and reduced-cost subway-bus passes for all transit riders after a four-month Higher Fares Are No Fair campaign to lessen the burden of fare increases on lower-income riders (Loh 2006).

From 2000 to 2003, TRU participated in the Boston Metropolitan Planning Organization's (MPO) Environmental Justice Committee to try to get transit projects prioritized, democratize the MPO, and bring decisionmaking power to community hands. Unfortunately, this collaboration ended after it was recognized that TRU's input was not being considered and that the MPO process largely diverted community energy from the real sources of decisionmaking power, such as the state (Loh 2006).

Another long campaign was built on nine years of relentless advocacy for a Youth Pass, culminating in 2014 with a sit-in that led to 21 youths being arrested. Still, the result was a win in 2015, when MBTA finally agreed to a Youth Pass pilot and then full implementation in 2016 (ACE 2016).

Most recently, support has led to the implementation of a low-income fare in 2024, which will result in a roughly 50 percent reduction in fares and reduced weekly and monthly passes for those who are eligible for many other state assistance programs.

Through the years, TRU has organized riders in multiple ways, from supporting bus route captains in stewarding their

routes, to advocating for state bills for MBTA funding, to organizing ride-a-thons and rallies to spread the word about key policy opportunities.

Alternatives for a Just, Mobile Future

TRU grounds itself in its transit justice platform built on these eight principles:

- 1. Justice**—We demand transit justice and an end to transit racism and classism.
- 2. Equity**—For too long, low-income communities and communities of color have endured unequal and subpar service from the MBTA. We demand equitable transit investment, quality bus service, and first-class service for transit-dependent riders.
- 3. Affordability**—We demand an MBTA that everyone can afford to ride.
- 4. Respect**—We demand safety and respect from transit police and an end to discriminatory policing by transit officers.
- 5. Accountability**—We demand worker and rider voice in decisionmaking, and accountability and transparency from the MBTA, Massachusetts Department of Transportation (MassDOT), and elected officials.
- 6. Sustainability and Quality in Funding**—We demand full, dedicated, and sustainable MBTA funding from our governor and legislature, and removal of the Big Dig debt from the MBTA.
- 7. Public Transit = Public Good**—We demand a fully public transit system that provides quality jobs to community members and is protected from threats of privatization.

- 8. Community Stability**—We demand that MassDOT ensure new developments will strengthen our communities, not contribute to displacement.

TRU aims to achieve this vision by working with coalitions to advance a number of different policies. Its members wish to see dramatically increased funding for the MBTA as well as fare-free routes and implementation of the low-income fare program. They are also active in preserving transit service for the community amid the MBTA's bus network redesign slated for December 2024. To combat poor air quality, the group recently won the start to commuter rail electrification with the Fairmount Indigo Transit Coalition and advocated for an accelerated transition to electric buses by the MBTA along with equitable EV charging infrastructure. In 2024, ACE was selected to oversee \$50 million in federal funding for regional environmental justice work (Bleichfeld 2024), and at the national level, it works with environmental justice organizations across the country to prioritize community-driven solutions and take part in the EPA's National Environmental Justice Advisory Council (NEJAC).

TRU also calls for shaping development for Boston's traditional low-income communities with civic and road design that reflects community needs and minimizes displacement. This advocacy for logical and fair design is in tandem with other environmental justice priorities, such as supporting siting reform for high-polluting energy facilities, expanding local air quality monitoring efforts and target setting, and promoting street and green space projects to counter heat and poor air quality.

This feature is excerpted from Freedom to Move: Investing in Transportation Choices for a Clean, Prosperous, and Just Future. Read the fully referenced report at www.ucsusa.org/resources/freedom-move.

www.ucsusa.org/resources/freedom-move
es.ucsusa.org/recursos/libertad-de-movimiento



ACE builds the power of communities of color and low-income communities in Massachusetts to eradicate environmental racism and classism, create healthy, sustainable communities, and achieve environmental justice.

2201 Washington St #302
Roxbury, MA 02119
(617) 442-3343
info@ace-ej.org



The Union of Concerned Scientists puts rigorous, independent science into action, developing solutions and advocating for a healthy, safe, and just future.

NATIONAL HEADQUARTERS
Two Brattle Square
Cambridge, MA 02138-3780
(617) 547-5552