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FRAMINGHAM

# Rail line vows changes will avert delays The Boston Globe



At South Station, commuters board a Worcester-bound train. On June 26, there were major delays on the rail line. (The Boston Globe/File 2007)

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Operators of the Massachusetts Bay Transportation Authority's commuter rail service are pledging to install new switches and take other steps to avoid lengthy delays like the one that stranded riders on the Framingham/Worcester and Needham lines for more than two hours in June.

Officials from CSX Transportation, the MBTA, and the Massachusetts Bay Commuter Railroad Co. met with lawmakers from communities along the corridor recently as a follow-up to the June 26 incident in which a switch failure delayed 10 rush-hour trains.

The steps to avoid delays include replacing 12 switches along the Framingham/Worcester Line, and increasing overtime for employees covering the operation. Additionally, new employees have been hired to respond to switch or signal problems during the morning and evening rush hours.

Replacing the 12 switches, at a cost of roughly \$500,000, will be paid for by CSX, according to a spokesman for the freight railroad company, Robert Sullivan.

When asked how long it would take to replace the switches, Sullivan said CSX hopes to begin the work early this month, and complete it "as quickly as we can."

He said there are too many variables involved in the work for the freight line, which owns the section of tracks involved, to offer a more precise timetable. For example, he said, the work will have to be scheduled around the rail line's busy

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schedule.

Supplies for the replacement project are scheduled to be delivered tomorrow, he said.

The work will involve replacing four switches at three locations along the Framingham/Worcester Line; two are between the Newtonville and Yawkey stops, and the other is just east of the Wellesley Farms station.

CSX has hired seven new rail maintenance workers, who are still being trained, and has put more staff on overtime in case immediate switch maintenance is necessary, according to state Representative Alice Peisch, a Wellesley Democrat who was at the July 16 meeting. The cost of the seven new workers will be funded by the state because they are "above what CSX would normally require," Sullivan said.

However, CSX will cover the cost of putting the current employees on overtime, he said.

"The representatives set a tone of urgency for the measures to be completed, and pressed the officials to make sure these steps were a top priority," Peisch said in an announcement detailing the meeting's outcome.

On June 26, a switch failure delayed 10 rush-hour trains, four of which were stalled for two hours, according to Massachusetts Bay Commuter Railroad, which operates the commuter service for the MBTA. After the delay, Richard Davey, the commuter rail company's general manager, said it took 90 minutes for CSX to get maintenance workers to the site of the problem.

According to Peisch, she learned about the switch failures, and the delayed commuters, that night, and contacted all "relevant parties" requesting a meeting. July 16 was the earliest date that representatives from Florida-based CSX officials could attend. However, Sullivan said, CSX was in communication with officials from the MBTA and the commuter rail company before the meeting.

"I think the meeting was very productive and that the proper steps are being taken to avoid delays like the one that occurred on June 26," Peisch said. "I would also like to recognize that, aside from this one horrific situation, in the past six months on-time performance has increased greatly and is now over 90 percent. I applaud CSX, MBTA, and MBCR for the significant improvement."

However, she said, the Framingham/Worcester Line's is still on the "lower end" of the state's 11 commuter services, which have on-time percentages reaching into the upper 90s.

"What distinguishes the Framingham/Worcester Line is that it's controlled by CSX, which can be a problem," said Peisch, since the freight company can give its trains priority over the commuter service. The MBTA owns the tracks used by its other commuter lines.

The state reached a tentative \$100 million deal in October to buy the Framingham/Worcester Line's tracks from CSX in hopes of improving commuter service between Boston and Central Massachusetts.

When the deal was reached, it was reported that it could take until 2012 to complete.

The Worcester/Framingham Line is among the MBTA's busiest commuter services, carrying 4,000 to 5,000 passengers roundtrip every weekday, but it has also long been plagued by delays.

In February 2008, the MBTA created new timetables that added as much as 12 minutes to the scheduled time for trips between Worcester and Boston. Since the schedule change, on-time performance - which was as low as 50 percent in the fall of 2007 - has increased to around 90 percent. ■

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