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BACK BAY

## Amid complaints, T aims to fix Back Bay station's ventilation system

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(Matt Rocheleau for Boston.com)

The dusty air that has plagued Back Bay station for at least 20 years may be improved at last. The T has a ventilation overhaul project in the works.

By Matt Rocheleau, Town Correspondent

When Adel Essahli returns to his Revere home, he often has to clear his nose of black soot. His white Styrofoam cup of coffee he buys in the morning is discolored by day's end, and if he wipes his brow, he finds that same dark residue.

No, Essahli isn't a coal miner. He works at a convenience store inside Back Bay subway station, where thousands of workers and commuters pass through dusty air caused by diesel-powered commuter rail trains every day.

Using federal stimulus money, the Massachusetts Bay Transportation Authority officials say the agency is working to "significantly improve" the two-decade-old air quality problem at Back Bay station. The MBTA acknowledges that the ventilation system doesn't work well, and says it will

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Despite health studies suggesting the air could be dangerous, MBTA spokesman Joe Pesaturo said there is no health threat.

"Air quality has been tested a few times and never found to be hazardous," Pesaturo said. "The station workers, however, spend the most time in the station ... and our mitigation efforts are being designed to benefit them."

In several recent visits, the exhaust visibly clouded the downstairs platform area where several thousand commuter rail passengers pass through daily and the lobby area above where passengers wait, buy tickets and food from vendors.

"Honestly, down on the platform it was some of the worst air quality I've measured," said Bruce Hill, senior scientist at the [Clean Air Task Force](#), a Boston-based nonprofit pollution research group.

Hill led a project that measured air in the station in 2006 and 2008 as part of a larger study recording levels of diesel exhaust on commuter trains in Boston, New York City, and Chicago. "It was as hazardous as you'd expect to see just about anywhere."

That air, which is especially dusty during rush hours, is also sucked onto trains while their doors are open inside the station, and it can take 10 to 20 minutes to dissipate from the coach after the doors close, according to the [nonprofit's study](#).

Douglas W. Dockery, chairman of Harvard University's environmental health department, referred to several studies on the potential health effects of such poor air quality, including [increased risk](#) of potentially fatal heart disease.

"There's nothing that says people are going to keel over on the spot," Hill said.

However, fine particle pollution from diesels is responsible for around 21,000 premature deaths and 410,000 asthma attacks in the United States each year, [according to the CATF](#); and diesel exhaust poses a cancer risk 7.5 times higher than the combined risk from all other air toxics.

Some commuters interviewed during recent visits did not know why the air was hazy or why it smelled, though none claimed not to notice -- as Hill described it -- the "almost tailpipe conditions."

"If you can smell [the diesel], it's at very high levels," he said.

And for those who spend more than a quick pass or two through the station each day, the smog and its stench are unmistakable.

An eight-year veteran of Back Bay station, Dunkin' Donuts employee Hicham Khadri also said he leaves work covered in the dusty film that settles throughout the station.

That dust is black carbon, Hill said, a particulate that can adsorb other toxic chemicals and metals in the environment.

Khadri said he can recall around four or five people -- some had allergies -- who quit because the smoke was so bad.



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"You can see the smoke. It's all over my body, my face ... if you run a clean cloth on your face, you can see it," he said. "We're scared [about potential health impacts], but we have no choice. We need the jobs."

In addition to Essahli and Khadri, several other station workers were interviewed but declined to identify themselves because they said their employers might not want them discussing the matter.

They all expressed concern over the station's air quality and said that the exhaust problem worsened about five years ago.

"The smoke keeps coming in," Essahli said. "It comes all the time and we're breathing it in."

In a 1992 customer survey, riders complained about the smog prompting a T-funded study which found "elevated" levels of carbon monoxide, formaldehyde, particulates, and oxides of nitrogen, according to a [2008 Globe story](#).

T spokesman Joe Pesaturo said at the time that the T took a number of recommended steps including, ensuring train engines are properly maintained.

In 1996, a massive complex to be built near the station was announced. Included in the \$800-million Columbus Center project's plans was \$700,000 in ventilation improvements for Back Bay station.

After 13 years of delay, however, the project officially [died](#) in March.

"Because the developer failed to move the project forward, the MBTA stepped in, and began the process of making the improvements on its own," Pesaturo said.

In 2008 he told the Globe, the T could not afford the ventilation project on its own. But federal stimulus money – [\\$3 million worth](#) appears to be lined up – has changed that.

The T hired a consultant in April for "a system that successfully mitigates the fumes from locomotives and motor vehicles on the turnpike, and improves air quality inside the station," said Pesaturo in an e-mail.

The consultant visited in mid September "to finalize the design plans," Pesaturo said.

Bids will be solicited later this fall, and the project would need state transportation board approval before beginning.

Many of the station's regulars are taking a we'll-believe-it-when-we-see-it stance.

Essahli said he has tried contacting city and T officials, but "you never get the 'right person.' I end up leaving a message and never hear back ... I just believe that they're not going to fix it anytime soon. The people that make the decisions on this aren't here. They aren't in any danger."

Air Pollution Control Commission Executive Director, Carl Spector, said his city office mainly handles outdoor air and he said he was not aware of complaints about the station being brought to the department in the past.

State environmental department spokesman Joe Ferson said complaints about the station's air have been submitted there, but none within the past six months, and said that indoor air quality issues would be under the city health

commission's jurisdiction.

Boston health commission spokeswoman Ann Scales said the department has received complaints from riders over the years, and in one instance tested the station's air quality finding it to be "within normal limits." Complaints from people who work in the station would be handled by the Occupational Safety and Health Administration, she said.

Officials there said the office had not received diesel exhaust complaints from station employees.

Ryan, who works nearby and asked that his last name not be used, has been commuting through the Back Bay station for seven 7 years.

"We're not asking for the station to be sparkling clean, but this doesn't even make sense," he said. "They always say 'oh, we're working on it.'"

In 2004, Northeast States for Coordinated Air Use Management [found](#) "alarmingly high levels of black carbon" in the underground station, [according to the CATF](#).

"Researchers found it difficult to wait on the platform with the equipment—experiencing mild respiratory effects such as coughing, runny nose and watery eyes," said the [task force's own study](#). Exposure "could prove hazardous for some sensitive individuals – at peak concentrations that were documented at perhaps 100 times outdoor concentrations of black carbon and ultrafine particles."

A [2004 study](#) prompted a Massachusetts Bay Commuter Rail [memo](#) "appealing to the MBTA for resolution before the consequences escalate, either in employee health issues or regulatory reprisal."

Alleged Clean Air Action violations resulted in a [federal settlement](#) with the Justice Department and Environmental Protection Agency in August mandating all MBTA diesel trains switch to the cleaner ultra-low sulfur diesel fuel – a step that will help, but "will not eliminate the problem by any means," according to Hill.

Pesaturo said the original ventilation system has not performed well.

"The duct system above the ceiling, along the platforms, is the only part of the system that has failed," due to rusting associated with age, he said in an e-mail.

The station's large tunnel ventilation fans work, but have restrictions placed on their use "due to vibration issues raised by abutters," he said.

But abutters have had more to complain about than just vibrations.

"We've had pretty serious issues with soot settling inside the building, inside people's living rooms," according to an employee of an apartment building located near one of the station's outdoor exhaust vents.

The employee, who asked not to be identified, said residents of the building have requested air quality tests, but the employee was not aware of whether results were ever returned.

"In our conversations with the MBTA, we were told that the exhaust fans had to be shut down because commuters complained of the cold and pedestrians complained of diesel fumes being exhausted at street level," said Scales.

Sherry Berger, owner of [Six Burner](#) on Dartmouth Street, remembered when

the large sidewalk vents near her restaurant's outdoor seating would launch large plumes of smoke. But it's been around 10 years since she has seen the plumes.

"Now it all just goes into the station," she said. "It chokes you going through there"

South Shore resident Jerry Good, commuted through Back Bay station for more than 7 years until he switched to driving – though unrelated to the smog – three months ago.







"It's pathetic," he said. "I'm surprised people aren't getting sick. I've gone in there and though I was going to die because of the smoke, and I find it appalling that," it is not being investigated further.

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(Matt Rocheleau for Boston.com)

Air quality at Back Bay station has been found by numerous studies to be poor and the air is often sucked into trains as they sit with their doors open in the station.

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