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Map app in Apple iOS 6 expected to drop MBTA, other transit directions

Posted by Matt Rocheleau June 13, 2012 04:28 PM

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This story was updated on Mon. June 18, at about 6 p.m. to add a response from an Apple spokeswoman. She declined to comment.

By Matt Rocheleau, Town Correspondent

The map application on Apple's newest software for the iPhone, iPad and iPod is expected to no longer include transit directions as a "built-in" feature.

Instead, when iOS 6 launches this fall, users will need to download a third-party application to see directions when, for instance, trying to travel around the Boston-area using the MBTA.

The news has drawn dismay from some Apple product users and advocacy organizations.

But, top technology officials at the Bay State's public transit agency are less worried.

"We're obviously very pleased with the current map application," which has transit directions as a native feature of the app, said the T's director of innovation, Joshua Robin.

"But, we're confident our third-party developers will be able to work with the new software," he said by phone Wednesday. "Hopefully, [Apple] will leave enough hooks for the local development community to integrate with the new software."

In recent years, the MBTA has been working steadily to capitalize on the popularization of smart phones in order to improve the experience of riding the nation's oldest subway system, including by working with third-party mobile application developers to create apps designed specifically for the T.

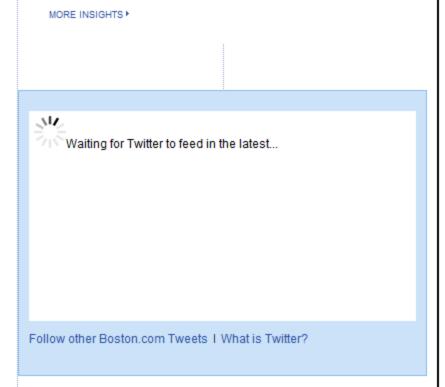Few, if any, features within the T's existing third-party mobile apps are expected to be affected, Robin said.

Apple unveiled plans for the new software this week that will replace the current native map application, which is powered by Google Maps, with a new app that Apple built itself from scratch.

Scott Forstall, senior vice president of iPhone Software at Apple, said during the announcement of the iOS 6 software that: "When building maps, we looked around and realized the best transit apps, for metros, for hiking, for biking, are coming from our developers. So instead of trying to build those ourselves, we are going to integrate and feature and promote [developers'] apps for transit right withing the maps app in iOS 6."

Trudy Muller, a spokeswoman for Apple, declined to comment further in an e-mail to Boston.com.

Seattle-based company Walk Score, which discourages driving and promotes walkable neighborhoods, is using its website to urge participation in a social media campaign aimed at telling Apple to find a way to include public transit directions when it launches the new software – that: "We'd be lost without transit directions on our phones."

"We believe that having built-in transit directions on your phone helps public transit work better for everyone, so we're asking you to join us in requesting

this feature from Apple," WalkScore.com says.

To see more about the new features planned for iOS 6, click here.

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