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West

A new day for rail line, state says

By **Matt Rocheleau** | GLOBE CORRESPONDENT | AUGUST 11, 2013

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State officials are promising more reliable service on the Framingham-Worcester commuter rail line after completing a deal last week to give the state “absolute” control over the line’s tracks.

Priority will be given to commuter trains — rather than freight trains, as in the past — along the 45-mile corridor when necessary, officials said.

Dispatchers and train crews will have a more direct line of communication, making it easier to have a train making local stops shift to an express schedule, or vice versa.

Commuter rail operators will be able to dispatch extra trains or engines without going through a cumbersome, time-consuming paperwork process first, officials said. The commuter rail lines will also see

significantly fewer heat-related speed restrictions.

And, officials said, crews will have greater speed and flexibility to respond to situations such as medical emergencies or downed trees, as well as to do maintenance.

“Controlling operations and maintenance along the line is a critically important part of our concerted effort to not only improve reliability, but also increase service between the state’s two largest cities,” MBTA general manager Beverly Scott said in an announcement on the changes to the service between Boston and Worcester.

State Representative Tom Sannicandro, an Ashland Democrat, applauded the development, and noted that the Worcester/Framingham commuter line experienced 100 percent on-time performance Tuesday, one day after the state Department of Transportation and the commuter rail service’s contractor, the Massachusetts Bay Commuter Railroad Co., acquired control of the dispatching of the tracks.

On-time performance means within five minutes of the scheduled time.

“People need a functioning commuter rail to get to work,” Sannicandro said in an announcement on the official transfer. “I use the commuter rail. I understand the frustration of waiting for a late train. With MassDOT taking over the line, we should start to see improvements.”

The Worcester/Framingham line had 93 percent on-time performance last year, higher than the systemwide 92 percent, the legislator said. The state agency’s goal is 95 percent.

Last week, area legislators met with Scott and Department of Transportation Secretary Richard Davey to ask for improvements in on-time performance along the line.

The state in 2009 entered an agreement to buy the tracks from freight-railroad operator CSX Corp. for \$50 million. Execution of the deal began about a year ago, when the state took ownership of the railroad right-of-way.

But other elements of the deal had to be completed before the state gained full control. Last week, the final



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steps of the deal were completed.

“By taking over the dispatching duties this week, the state can now give absolute priority to passenger service along the line,” Davey said in a statement.

Commuter rail dispatchers can now communicate directly with train crews instead of the often-delayed method of having to relay questions and directions through CSX dispatchers in Selkirk, N.Y.

Heat-related speed restrictions became a common and frustrating occurrence for riders this summer.

But state officials said those restrictions should be less frequent in the future.

“The CSX Corporation imposed speed restrictions on all of its railroads if temperatures exceeded 90 degrees anywhere on the East Coast. This corporate rule, which sometimes resulted in unnecessary delays along the Worcester/Framingham line, no longer applies,” officials said.

The state plans to more carefully monitor local temperatures, and will decide whether to impose heat restrictions on a case-by-case basis. Heat causes steel to swell, which can cause a railroad track to kink or bend, posing a derailment danger.

The state also plans to increase maintenance work to improve track conditions and to make rails less susceptible to heat problems.

The MBTA also plans to follow through this year on its previously announced plan to increase the number of round trips between Worcester and Boston to 20 this year.

Globe correspondent Jaclyn Reiss contributed to this report. Matt Rocheleau can be reached at mjrochele@gmail.com.

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