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MBTA may hire Bridj to provide late-night service

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KATHERINE TAYLOR FOR THE BOSTON GLOBE/FILE

Bridj is seeking to run a late-night, on-demand shuttle service for the MBTA.

By Matt Rocheleau

GLOBE STAFF OCTOBER 31, 2016

The Boston-based transit company Bridj is seeking to run a late-night, on-demand shuttle service for

the MBTA, hoping to fill the void left by the end of extended hours in March.

The private bus operator presented its proposal Monday to officials at the MBTA, which has twice experimented with late-night service before scrapping it.

Under the plan, riders would use Bridj's app to request a ride. The app sets a pickup site for passengers heading to similar destinations, then drops them off in a central location. Bridj already runs the service in the Boston area during the day.

"We believe that combining our data-driven model. . . with the expertise and support of the MBTA is a way to address this longstanding gap in Boston's transportation," said Mary Rose Fissinger, a Bridj representative.



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The company said it would charge the MBTA \$1.55 million per year to run 10 buses for five hours each night. The MBTA would determine the fares, which Bridj would collect through its app. No Charlie Cards or tickets would be used for payment.

MBTA officials said the proposal appeared competitive with what other private contractors might charge, and was substantially lower than what it would cost the MBTA to run the service. The proposal did not specify where the buses would run.

Board member Monica Tibbits-Nutt said she was intrigued by the on-demand service and the company's ability to track and analyze data to improve performance.

The MBTA's fiscal control board did not make a decision on the proposal. The MBTA, along with city officials, transportation advocates, and members of the restaurant and hospitality industries, plan to launch a survey soon to gauge demand for late-night service.

"We've got some data coming in that could be extremely valuable," said Joseph Aiello, the board's chairman.

The MBTA has offered late-night service twice in the past 15 years. In 2001, the agency launched a "Night Owl" bus program, which typically drew fewer than 1,000 people a night and was scrapped four years later.

Two years ago, the MBTA started a pilot program for late-night service, but ended the extended hours in March after it failed to draw enough riders to justify the cost, MBTA officials said.

Marc Ebuña, president and cofounder of [Transit Matters](#), an advocacy group that has proposed various ideas for late-night service and has been developing the forthcoming survey on late-night transit, spoke against the proposal.

The MBTA should have a "robust, competitive process" before launching any new initiatives, he said.

"We don't need a hastily conceived pilot that will likely fail because it isn't based upon the data and metrics that we are in the process of developing with the city and with the T," he said.

Bridj's unsolicited proposal was brought forward under a new MBTA policy that encourages third-party groups [to submit ideas](#) to improve the transportation system.

Also Monday, the MBTA presented a proposal to outsource its call center operations to a private company, Ameridial, which said it could cut in half the \$3.6 million the MBTA spends on its call center and complaint resolution.

There are now 28 people in the department. Under the proposal, about six workers would stay, though officials said that could change. Workers who lose their jobs could seek positions elsewhere at the agency.

The fiscal board asked MBTA officials to gather more information about the proposal.

Other efforts to privatize aspects of the public transit agency, including the [outsourcing of the MBTA's cash collection operations](#), have drawn significant resistance from union officials and others.

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