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Commuters frustrated as T makes weekend repairs to Alewife garage



STEVE COLMAN

A large hole and missing concrete on the second floor of the MBTA's Alewife garage.

By John Hilliard and Sophia Eppolito

GLOBE CORRESPONDENTS AUGUST 11, 2018

CAMBRIDGE — Transit police turned away commuters hoping to use the MBTA's Alewife garage Saturday morning, as crews worked through the weekend to repair the structure after falling concrete

damaged a car parked there earlier in the week.

Ben Kelley, who uses the Alewife garage daily during his work commute from Stow to Cambridge, said repairs are badly needed, where exposed rebar — steel wire used to reinforce concrete — is visible. He also worries that potholes will damage his car.

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“This is an issue that has been going on for a long time,” Kelley said in a phone interview Saturday. “So many people rely on this garage to get to and from the city conveniently. It’s shocking that the agency has ignored it until now.”

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The T initially closed off about 500 spaces on Thursday and Friday for repairs and inspections after falling concrete damaged the parked car Wednesday.

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On Friday, the T closed the garage — and its 2,600 parking spaces — to conduct repairs and a comprehensive engineering assessment “out of an abundance of caution,” T spokesman Joe Pesaturo said in an e-mail Saturday.

On average, about 25 agency employees and contractors worked on the garage at any given time on Saturday, he said.

An update on the work’s progress would be released Sunday, Pesaturo said.

“The work is continuing all weekend and crews are making progress, as the T makes every effort to minimize the closure,” he said.

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Governor Charlie Baker, who officially launched his reelection campaign at an annual picnic in Shrewsbury Saturday afternoon, touted upgrades and new investments made to the T under his administration.

He said the Alewife garage “was on the list early on for us,” and noted that the project was reviewed, put out to bid, and a contract awarded before Wednesday’s incident.

State officials would be communicating on a plan for the garage through the weekend and into the beginning of the week, Baker said.

“We’re obviously spending a lot of time paying attention to that and talking to folks . . . at the T about it,” Baker said.

In late 2017, a T consultant reported that the condition of many parts of the garage, which opened in the mid-1980s, risked “imminent failure” and recommended “immediate corrective action.”

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MBTA officials said Friday they solicited bids for repairs in July, and on Thursday, awarded a \$5.7 million contract to begin repairing beams, patch concrete, and clear the garage's drainage system next month. Up to 120 parking spaces will be taken out of commission during that work, according to the officials.

Pesaturo said the contract was not affected by the repair work being done over the weekend.

"The scope of the contract awarded Thursday has not changed. The contractor will address the deficiencies described in the thorough engineering assessment of the garage's condition," Pesaturo said of the September project at Alewife.

The T is also in the process of developing a long-term plan for the facility, Pesaturo said.

On Friday, MBTA officials recommended that riders who need to park before getting on the train use the lots at the Riverside, Oak Grove, and Wellington stations. Riders could also take the Fitchburg commuter rail, officials said.

On Saturday morning, Transit police directed commuters from a cordoned-off area near Alewife's parking entrance. Signs that read "Parking lot closed due to construction," along with traffic cones lined the street outside the station.

For weekend T riders expecting to using the garage, the closure put a crimp in travel plans.

Mark Ouellette, 54, of New Hampshire, said he and his daughter hadn't heard about the garage closure and were planning to park at Alewife Saturday. They were in town for a Def Leopard and Journey concert at Fenway Park Saturday night, he said.

A Transit police officer directed them to park at the Green Line's Riverside station in Newton, which they were not familiar with, he said.

"This is usually our go-to station," Ouellette said of Alewife.

Dante Suarez, 17, of Fitchburg, said he and his friend were planning on parking at the station overnight, but didn't know about the closure until he pulled in.

"We saw the sign, but we weren't sure," he said. "We were going to ask for the nearest place to park because we're not from Boston."

State Representative Kate Hogan, whose district includes Hudson, Maynard, Stow, and Bolton, used a Facebook post to [ask constituents how the closure affects their commute](#).

Among those who responded to the post was Kelley, who told The Boston Globe he has used Alewife for his commute since getting a new job in Cambridge in June.

He was concerned about the garage's condition Friday afternoon as he walked to get his car parked there.

"I was moving very fast to get out," Kelley said. "I really started to question my safety."

Without Alewife, Kelley said his roughly hourlong commute could grow to two hours or more if he has to use the commuter rail or another subway line.

And if other Red Line commuters aren't able to use the Alewife garage, Kelley said he was worried that people will try to drive into the city or use another T line — putting greater pressure on other parts of the state's transportation system.

"I'm really kind of nervous about it actually — I don't know what to expect," Kelley said.

Kelley said if he had the ear of Baker and T officials, he would ask them to get a firsthand look at the Alewife garage. "I would tell them to take a visit personally to this garage. I would like to know whether they would park their cars here," Kelley said.

Globe correspondent Jeremy C. Fox, and Adam Vaccaro and Matt Rocheleau of the Globe staff contributed to this report. John Hilliard can be reached at john.hilliard@globe.com. Sophia Eppolito can be reached at sophia.eppolito@globe.com.

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