



THINGS THAT WORK

A simple way to make Boston's subway a bit less chaotic

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PAT GREENHOUSE/GLOBE STAFF

Riders got on and off trains at Downtown Crossing station.

By [Matt Rocheleau](#)

GLOBE STAFF JUNE 26, 2017

Editor's note: This is part of a series exploring initiatives around Boston, the country, and the world that have succeeded or hold great promise, from government to business to culture. For more

stories, [click here](#).

It is standard subway etiquette: Passengers entering a train should wait for riders to exit first.

But at busy Boston stations during rush hour, that courtesy often goes out the window as riders face a human wall bent on pushing past them to get on board.

The result is frustration, discomfort — and even a risk of bodily harm. What's more, the disorderly process actually slows down everyone's commute.

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Other transit systems, including in New York, Montreal, and numerous cities in Asia, have made travel smoother, and a bit faster, by adding marked areas on subway platforms that remind waiting passengers to line up next to — not in front of — the train doors, allowing passengers to exit before others start to board.

It may save a matter of 10 or 20 seconds at any given stop.

“Those seconds don't seem like a lot to the average person, but they add up,” said Randy Clarke, vice president of operations and member services for the American Public Transportation Association and former deputy chief operating officer for the T.

MBTA officials recently tested such markings at a couple of Orange Line stations and were impressed by the results. They plan to roll them out to other stations eventually.

“There’s transit systems all over the country that do this,” said Jeff Gonneville, the T’s chief operating officer. “It’s certainly something we want to continue.”

The subway-boarding crush can be a pet peeve for riders, similar to such inconsiderate behavior as occupying more than one seat and loudly playing music or talking on the phone.

Gonneville said that in 2015, a T study found busy stations around the system had enormous “dwell times” — the term transit experts use to describe the length of time a train sits at each station.

That raised the question: “What can we begin to do to influence dwell time and maybe make some improvements to dwell time in our system,” Gonneville said.

One idea was the platform markings. The T in April 2016 [tested](#) green and red markings on an Orange Line platform at North Station.

There, the average dwell time was 63 seconds before markings were installed. In the [first month after](#) installing markings, dwell time fell to 42 seconds.

“That is a substantial number,” Gonneville said.

(The T also installed markings on an Orange Line platform at State Street Station, but officials said that test started later and did not produce enough data to draw conclusions.)

The agency expects to start installing markings at other stations within the next year, officials said.

For now, using the markings is only possible on the Orange and Blue lines because just one train model runs on each, so train doors always line up in the same spot on station platforms. (It requires precision on the part of train drivers, and they don’t line trains up quite right every time, officials acknowledged.)

The Red and Green lines use a few different train models. That issue will be resolved on the Red Line

once the T replaces that line's fleet, but that won't happen until the end of 2023.

Gonneville said that for now there are no plans to add them on the Green Line, but also didn't rule out that it could be possible down the road.

The subway in New York City uses such markings — “or step aside boxes,” as officials there call them — at several of the busiest stations, including Grand Central, said Metropolitan Transportation Authority spokesman Kevin Ortiz.

“They are effective in reducing dwell times,” Ortiz said via e-mail.

A spokeswoman for the Metro in Los Angeles said that system saw positive results from a [test](#) of such markings in 2013 and plans to install permanent markings systemwide.

Montreal began using the markings in 2008 in its subway, said Société de transport de Montréal spokeswoman Amélie Régis.

“They worked very well,” Régis said in an e-mail. “People were standing in line where they were supposed to be. They assured the fluidity.”

But she said officials removed the markings last year after the system rolled out two train types that have doors that line up at different spots on platforms.

Back in Boston, during a recent weekday afternoon rush hour at the Oak Grove-bound Orange Line platform in Downtown Crossing station, riders waiting to board sometimes stood aside for passengers to empty.

But in other instances, some riders had to slice and bump their way through the crowd, particularly until the first several people exiting had cleared a path.

At North Station, Leslie Guity, 50, of Dorchester, said she liked the idea behind the markings. On her commute to work on the Orange and Blue lines, she said, she encounters people on platforms blocking the doors “every day.”

“They stand right in front of the door. They don't even say ‘excuse me.’ They just rush right in,” she said.

But Guity said the markings at North Station are poorly designed and confusing.

T officials said those markings were for test purposes and they are deciding what more permanent markings should look like. They also plan to create an accompanying awareness campaign that will launch as markings are installed so people understand why they're there.

Gonneville said the T is being careful about how it crafts messaging for that campaign. He said he doesn't want riders to think the agency is blaming their behavior for all of the system's slowness.

Many delays are caused by other problems, including broken-down trains or failure of other equipment, that officials continue to work to resolve.

And, it may be some passengers crowd train doorways because they know space can be limited on trains and worry that if they don't beat other passengers aboard, they'll be forced to wait for another train.

Also, platform markings can only do so much.

"When those trains are packed and crowded, of course it's going to take longer to get people on and off," Gonneville said.



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Part of a series exploring initiatives around Boston, the country, and the world that have succeeded or hold great promise, from government to business to culture. Matt Rocheleau can be reached at matthew.rocheleau@globe.com. Follow him on Twitter [@mrochele](https://twitter.com/mrochele).

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