

Critical History of Transit Planning and Decisionmaking

Although the principal focus of this case assessment is transit planning, Boston's recent transit planning history can be understood only in the context of all the transportation planning for both highway and transit in the Boston area. Serious interest in making improvements to the transit system grew primarily in response to community opposition to proposed expressway projects. The following discussion is organized around three major phases of the planning and decisionmaking process: (1) the period of highway planning and the citizen reaction to it that culminated in the 1970 moratorium on highway construction; (2) the period of study called the Boston Transportation Planning Review (BTPR) during which transit issues came into focus; and (3) steps toward implementing the BTPR transit proposals in the period since 1972. The historical narrative is intended to provide a framework for the discussions that follow of the institutional context and technical work, in which particular emphasis is placed on BTPR and its aftermath. The history is summarized in a chronological listing that follows this section.

DECISION TO REEVALUATE HIGHWAY PLANS: THE MORATORIUM

In the late 1960's transportation issues in Boston centered around highway projects proposed during several decades of planning. Controversy arose as citizens and elected officials within Route 128 began to realize the extent of residential and open space displacement that would necessarily accompany expressway construction. The pressure increased until Governor Francis Sargent placed a moratorium on highway planning and construction in February 1970.

Beginning in 1948 the State, through the Department of Public Works, engaged in a growing highway construction program that secured widespread support among the State's business and industrial leaders. The culmination of this program

was to be a series of major expressway facilities within Route 128, including the Inner Belt (Route 695), a third harbor tunnel, the final extensions of State Route 2 and Route 1-93, and construction of Route 1-95 from Route 128 in the south, through downtown Boston and the new harbor tunnel, to Route 128 in the north.

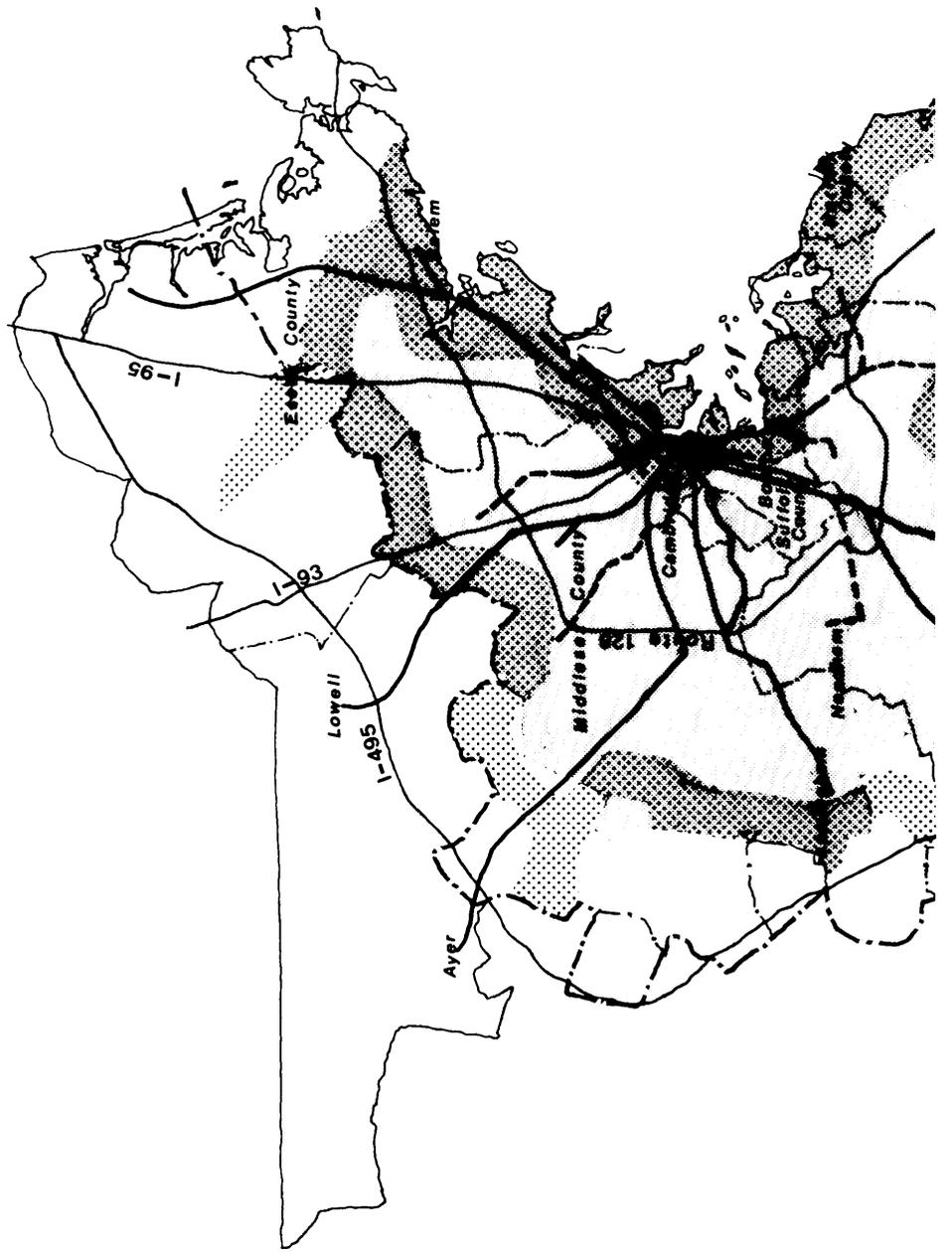
The Inner Belt—seen as the keystone of the entire expressway system—was to be the last of the three circumferential expressways serving Boston. It was to have encircled downtown Boston, passing through the Back Bay/Fenway institutional complex, crossing the Charles River, and continuing through Cambridge and Somerville.

This expressway system, which was rooted in the 1948 *Master Highway Plan*, was revised and expanded by the 1968 *Recommended Highway and Transit Plan*, a multiyear, \$2 billion highway and transit construction program affecting 152 of the State's 351 communities. The 1968 plan was a product of the Eastern Massachusetts Regional Planning Project (EMRPP). EMRPP was begun in 1962 as a joint undertaking of the Massachusetts Bay Transportation Authority (MBTA), the State Department of Public Works (DPW), the Metropolitan Area Planning Council (MAPC), and the Department of Commerce and Development.

Although the 1968 EMRPP plan did include a number of transit extensions and other improvements, it was clear that only the highway program was assured of the necessary local and Federal funding resources required for construction. Through State constitutional limitations on the use of gas tax revenues, the highway program enjoyed a ready and growing source of local matching funds. At the Federal level, the highway program was generously funded and, for interstate facilities, required only a 10 percent local matching share.

By contrast, transit construction projects required specific bonding authorization on a project-

^s In 1974, voters removed this limitation in a statewide referendum.



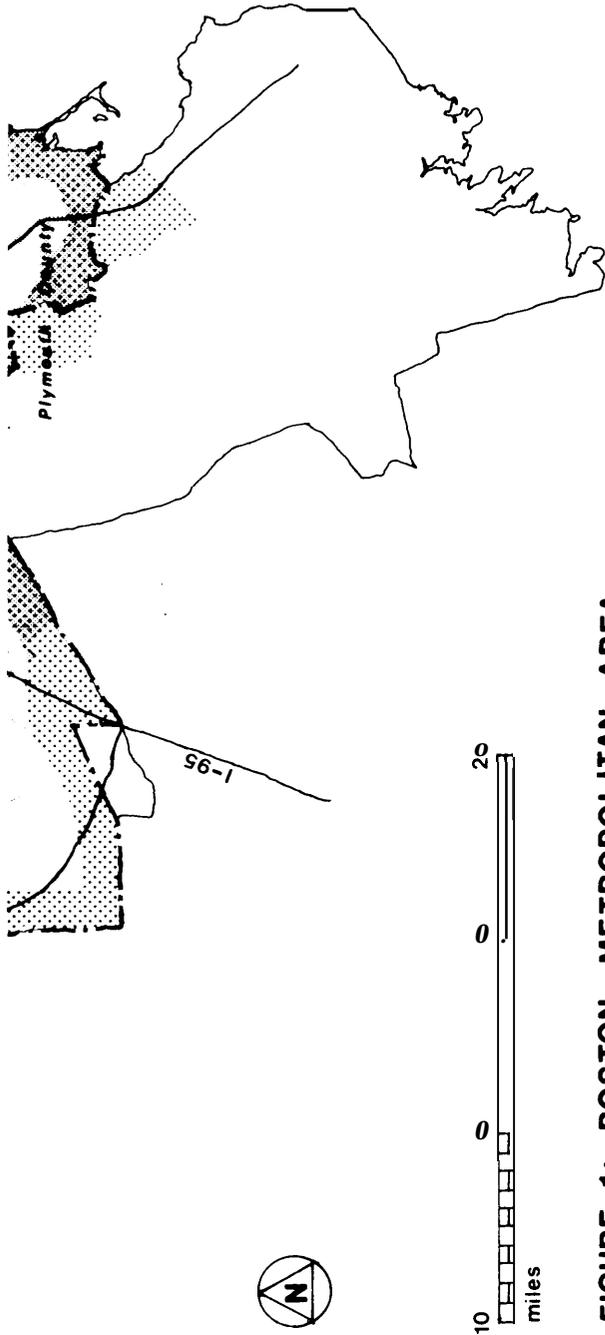


FIGURE 1: BOSTON METROPOLITAN AREA

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|---|---|--|---|
|  | SMSA Boundary |  | County Boundary |
|  | Metropolitan Area
Planning Council
Massachusetts Bay
Transportation
Authority |  | Existing Rail Transit
and Commuter Rail System
(including segments under
construction) |
| | |  | Proposed Extensions of
Rapid Rail System |

by-project basis, and the provision of bonding authority required a two-thirds affirmative vote on the part of the State legislature. Since many legislators resided in areas of the State that would not directly benefit from MBTA projects, and since the State normally assisted MBTA in defraying debt service related to capital construction projects, this legislative support was often difficult to obtain. Similarly, at the Federal level, little money was being made available for extensive transit improvement projects.

In this context popular concern over potentially destructive side-effects of highway construction began to grow. By February 1968, Cambridge and Boston had been successful undemanding a restudy of the Inner Belt. Federal Highway Administrator Lowell Bridwell committed the Bureau of Public Roads to two new studies, one to review the need for the road and the other to develop roadway design solutions that attempted to minimize anticipated adverse effects of the facility.

However, the Inner Belt was but one proposed element of the planned system. Encouraged by the Inner Belt restudy but apprehensive that the new studies would turn out to be "whitewash," local action groups continued to develop closer alliances and to organize protest rallies and demonstrations. Eventually, the Greater Boston Committee on the Transportation Crisis (GBC) was organized in 1968-69, and served as an umbrella organization that began to wield considerable political clout.

In 1969, Governor John Volpe resigned to become Secretary of the U.S. Department of Transportation. Governor Volpe, who had formerly served as Commissioner of Public Works and had taken a strong stand in favor of highway construction, was succeeded by Francis Sargent, also a former DPW Commissioner, who in the 1960's had approved the very expressway system that was now being called into question.

However, Governor Sargent also had served previously as Commissioner of the Department of Natural Resources. Continuing his strong interest in environmental matters, Sargent became concerned over the potential environmental degradation that could result from highway construction. Sargent and his policy advisors began to give favorable hearing to the antihighway forces. At one critical point in August 1969, Sargent refused to allow an immediate transfer to DPW of certain State-owned parkland in the Fowl Meadow that was essential for the construction of Route 1-9s.

The highway opponents also found support in Boston's City Hall, where liberal Mayor Kevin White had replaced former Mayor John Collins in 1967. During his 8-year term, Collins alined closely with the Chamber of Commerce and other groups that favored highway construction and had spoken out for the expressway system. Mayor White's political base, which was organized around neighborhood interests, made his administration sensitive to the growing concern over displacement and disruption. In fact, several of White's "Little City Hall" administrators were in the forefront of the antihighway (and antiairport expansion) transportation struggles. Mayor White eventually withdrew the city's support of the South End Bypass, a city-sponsored project that was essential to the efficient operation of the proposed Southwest Expressway (1-95).

Thus, by 1969, the stage was set for a complete reassessment of the State's transportation policies for the Boston area. Toward the end of the year, Governor Sargent appointed a task force, chaired by Professor Alan Altshuler of MIT, to study the State's transportation planning and decision-making process. Mayor White, other politicians, and spokespersons on the antihighways side strongly criticized the Governor for taking a middle course, and within weeks the task force's brief but sharply critical interim report to the Governor paved the way for the announcement of a general highway planning and construction moratorium in February 1970. Sargent suspended property acquisition in the proposed expressway rights-of-way and canceled the remaining portions of the Inner Belt design study. He proposed a larger "restudy," which became the Boston Transportation Planning Review (BTPR), to determine whether the new roads should be built, as well as where and how.

DECISION TO RECOMMEND TRANSIT IMPROVEMENTS: THE BTPR

Despite the long history of transportation-related controversy, transit issues played a relatively limited role in the Governor's moratorium

⁶ Displacement was a real concern, not a potential threat; DPW had begun land acquisition and clearance in several expressway corridors.

⁷ The moratorium was not applied to I-93, which was by then well into construction.



Highway construction issues dominated Boston's most significant recent transportation planning program, the Boston Transportation Planning Review

decision. The political issue was highway construction—and more importantly, the environmental and community impacts associated with highway construction. Transportation policy, as such, was not widely debated by the participants in the controversy, and there was little discussion of transportation quality or service needs.

Transit proposals had surfaced during the 1960's but drew little public attention. The Eastern Massachusetts Regional Planning Program had provided an extensive data base that MBTA used to prepare its *Program for Mass Transportation* in August 1966. The 1966 plan proposed a series of "action projects" costing an estimated \$340 million. The proposals included extensions of the Orange and Red Lines, replacements of rolling stock on the Blue and Green Lines, and elimination of elevated structures in Charlestown and South End/Roxbury. The 1966 plan was updated and revised by MBTA in 1969 based on continuing planning analyses conducted by ERMPP (which concluded its work that year). The 1969 revisions updated capital

cost estimates for the 1966 plan based on preliminary engineering work and inflation factors.

However, the MBTA plan did not figure prominently in the events of the following year. A number of loosely related factors account for this. First, highways presented an immediate, recognizable threat around which political action could be organized. Boston already had an established core transit system, and the highway versus transit choice was not posed as starkly as it might have been in a city with no rail transit services at all. Similarly, no major interest group opposed transit, and even prohighway interests agreed that transit was a valid type of transportation service, although of lower priority than highways. Furthermore, most of the proposed transit improvements contained in the 1968 EMRPP report were located along underused rail rights-of-way and would not require extensive displacement or disruption of the sort that often attracts the attention of political leaders. Finally, transit funding appeared too uncertain to allow

antihighway leaders to present transit as a viable alternative for the short-term future.

Moreover, very few people had a clear concept of the political or functional interrelationships between highways and transit. Two major and visible exceptions were then State Representative (now Governor) Michael Dukakis, and Professor Altshuler. Dukakis pressed Governor Sargent in 1969 to provide more highway money in the western part of the State, where he said it was needed, and to greatly expand mass transportation in Boston:

In the western part of the State, the imbalance of highway money is an excellent political issue. And the absence of an adequate rapid transit system is a damn good political issue in the east. s

For his part, Altshuler supported a joint funding mechanism for highways and transit and perceived the role transit should play in a total transportation system,

As the BTPR *Study Design* was being formulated during the latter part of 1970, however, increasing attention was being given to transit options. Under the direction of Professor Altshuler, the BTPR Steering Committee (composed of municipal appointees and a broad array of community organization spokespersons) defined a “sketch planning” process designed to facilitate consideration of a wide range of alternatives—including modal alternatives as well as highway location and design options. With all land acquisition and highway construction activities suspended until completion of BTPR, the pressing concerns over highway displacement and disruption began to relax, and the possibility of developing a transportation policy for Boston (as opposed to antihighway policy) appeared realistic.

Nevertheless, once the Study Design was completed and the BTPR consultant team selected, it was clear that the highway issues retained first priority, for both political and practical reasons. Considerable sums had already been expended to acquire rights-of-way and to prepare them for construction; Federal interstate highway monies were available and, at that time, could be spent only

on the designated highway facilities; and political commitments had been made at all levels to reach final highway decisions as quickly as possible. Moreover, the battle lines between prohighway and antihighway groups were still clearly and bitterly defined.

Meanwhile, there was no pressure to reach definitive transit decisions. Very few direct adverse impacts were attributable to any of the transit facilities under study, and those that were present were minimal in comparison to the adverse impacts of the proposed highway facilities. Although in 1971 the legislature had authorized \$124 million in bonds for transit facility construction, the ability to move forward was limited by the availability of Federal assistance and, more importantly, by the fact that several of the most important transit projects were to be built jointly with proposed highway projects, so that no real progress was possible until the highway issues had been put to rest.

Equally important, most of the key members of the BTPR consultant team had had considerable prior experience with major projects elsewhere in the country. They were prepared by training and experience to focus on highway issues and proved to be less well prepared for conceptualizing and detailing innovative transit solutions. Although MBTA had experienced transit planners on its own staff, the MBTA executive staff declined to participate actively in the technical work of the BTPR or to advocate forcefully an expanded transit program or an innovative transit solution. MBTA’s prime objective was to assure that nothing that occurred during the BTPR would significantly disturb MBTA preestablished plans and priorities—which had been cleared through the State legislature, whose members had been in the past, and would be in the future, required to approve MBTA’s bonding requests.

Despite these constraints, BTPR did identify and analyze a number of transit projects that had not received top priority in previous transit planning studies. These projects included (a) the Commuter Railroad Improvement Program (CRIP);⁹ (b) a proposal for circumferential transit service along the inner belt corridor; (c) analysis of replacement service for Roxbury and the South End; (d)

⁸ Lupo, Colcord, and Fowler, *Rites of Way: The Politics of Transportation in Boston and the U.S.* Boston: Little Brown, 1971. The long and often bitter history of highway opposition in Boston has been ably chronicled in this book.

⁹ BTPR, *Commuter Rail Improvement Program*. Boston 1972.

¹⁰ BTPR, *Circumferential Transit*. Boston 1972.

¹¹ BTPR, *Southwest Corridor Report*. Boston 1972.

studies of special mobility needs; 12 and (e) a bus tunnel alternative to the third harbor crossing. 13

(a) The proposed track bed, rolling stock, and station improvements recommended by the CRIP study were supported by Governor Sargent and have been incorporated into MBTA's 10-Year *Transit Development Program*. The Boston area's extensive commuter rail network had been sorely neglected for years. MBTA's rapid transit extension program favored the gradual replacement of commuter rail service by rapid transit extensions which would generally occupy existing rail rights-of-way. Suburban commuter rail patrons argued strongly that substitution of transit service often meant several years' suspension of any service during construction, and that the completed rapid rail extensions rarely served as large an area as the commuter rail system, despite the high capital costs involved. BTPR investigated the feasibility of upgrading and retaining the commuter rail system in light of the costs to MBTA for continued subsidization of commuter rail service. The CRIP study paralleled the State's negotiation for and subsequent purchase of the Penn-Central Railroad's trackage on the southern side of Boston, a step which has preserved some 140 miles of track for transportation purposes. (Similar negotiations with the Boston & Main Railroad for purchase of trackage to the north of Boston were completed in July 1975.)

(b) The circumferential transit service project is briefly described in MBTA's Transit Development Program but is not proposed for construction within the next decade. The concept was studied late in 1971 after Governor Sargent decided not to construct the Inner Belt expressway. The new facility was considered both because it could make use of lands already acquired by the State and because it could provide a much-needed transit link between the existing radial rapid transit lines. The possibility of connecting the Red Line in Cambridge with the Green and Orange Lines in the Back Bay/Fenway institutional complex in Boston was particularly attractive. Presently, large volumes of trips are made between these points, either by bus or by traveling by transit to downtown Boston and transferring to an out-bound rail car on the Orange

or Green Lines. The circumferential route could improve service on these and other already crowded lines. In a broad conceptual study of the circumferential line, both PRT and conventional transit systems were investigated, as well as alternative alignment locations and distances. The most extensive version given serious study would connect South Station in Boston to Sullivan Square in Charlestown.

(c) MBTA's proposed Orange Line Relocation and Extension would have resulted in a reduction of rapid transit service to two heavily transit-dependent Boston neighborhoods. Largely as a result of continued political pressure, these communities were able to direct the attention of BTPR toward an analysis of potential transit replacement services. Although the precise nature of these replacement transit services has yet to be defined in detail, the *10-Year Transit Development Program* does provide for "high standard" replacement service to each community as part of the Orange Line Relocation Program. This commitment represents a recognition of the need to balance a policy of suburban-oriented rapid transit extensions with a policy of continued quality service for transit-dependent inner-city neighborhoods.

(d) BTPR staff assisted several communities in analyzing the need for special mobility and coverage transit services in addition to existing bus and rapid transit services. Although very few concrete changes resulted from these studies, several new bus routes were established, and MBTA has begun to give more attention to management and other low-capital-intensive transit programs that serve special mobility needs or provide broader transit coverage. In addition to a reduced fare for the elderly, which was introduced prior to BTPR, recent innovations include the use of prepaid passes, "dime time" fares during midday hours, and increased express bus services.¹⁴

(e) As an alternative to a general-purpose third harbor tunnel, BTPR developed a two-lane bus tunnel option that would be open only to buses, taxis, airport limousines, emergency vehicles, and possibly multioccupancy automobiles. The bus tunnel would provide sufficient capacity to relieve congestion in the existing harbor tunnels but would not entail the cost or disruption of the

¹²BTPR, *Mobility Problems of Elderly Cambridge Residents*. Boston 1972, and BTPR, *Special Mobility Staff Report*. Boston 1972. See also, BTPR, *Study Element 2 Summary Report: Community Liaison and Technical Assistance*, Boston 1973.

¹³BTPR, *Third Harbor Crossing*. Boston 1972.

¹⁴The "dime time" reduced fare experiment failed to increase off-peak ridership on the subway system and was discontinued in August 1975.

previously proposed six-lane general-purpose tunnel. Although this facility was supported by Governor Sargent, the legislature has failed to remove a statutory restriction that prohibits construction of any new vehicular tunnels in proximity to the existing harbor tunnels.

STEPS TOWARD IMPLEMENTING TRANSIT IMPROVEMENTS

Although Governor Sargent dropped most of the major pending highway proposals and announced an aggressive transit improvement program for the Boston area during a statewide televised broadcast in November 1972, little tangible progress has taken place during the 2½ years since that time. A number of interrelated factors account for this failure to move forward with the region's transit improvement program.

First, despite the generally favorable press response and public acceptance of the Governor's transportation policy, some prohighway sentiment continued during the months following the BTPR study. The Governor and his transportation advisers came under backstage pressure for a full or partial reconsideration of various highway project decisions.

Second, the source of funding for the transit improvement program was not clear. Secretary Altshuler had been instrumental in lobbying for inclusion of an interstate transfer provision in the Federal Highway Act of 1973. Even though a transfer provision favorable to Massachusetts was enacted, a considerable amount of time and effort was expended by State officials in working out the details of the interstate transfer program with Federal officials. The more than \$600 million that was eventually promised to the State was essential to the definition of a credible transit construction program, and until this amount was finally committed, the State had difficulty in developing a workable schedule and list of priorities for the region's 10-year program.

Third, practical and political difficulties involved in the various transportation agency reorganizations also have occupied a substantial amount of staff time. These include the continuing consolidation of transportation planning and policymaking responsibilities within EOTC, the creation of both JRTC and CTPS (as well as the development of an open participatory planning

process within the JRTC/CTPS framework), and the restructuring of MBTA, each discussed elsewhere in this case assessment. Each major shift of powers and responsibilities has involved extensive interagency negotiations and compromise. At times these political realignments took priority over technical and administrative matters.

Fourth, UMTA declined to accept any of the draft environmental impact statements prepared by BTPR. UMTA judged these statements to be inadequate because, like the BTPR study process itself, they focused largely on highway facility alternatives. Thus, MBTA has been compelled to develop additional alternatives and to restudy the environment effects of each of the transit projects included in its current program. Both former EOTC Secretary Altshuler and the present secretary, Frederick P. Salvucci, have said that UMTA'S decision created unnecessary delays in the implementation of Boston's transit program, particularly due to the length of time consumed in UMTA'S reviews of the new studies, (UMTA—unlike the Federal Highway Administration—retains the responsibility for actually preparing and circulating the formal draft and final environmental impact statements despite its small, overworked staff.) Secretary Salvucci has argued further that the region's transit program should be exempt from strict application of environmental review procedures since transit projects are environmentally "clean," particularly in comparison with highway facilities. In any event, the two secretaries' arguments to date have been ineffective and, some critics say, they may have contributed to further delays in advancing projects for final approval and implementation.

Fifth, despite a continuing broad-based consensus in favor of the general transit policy underlying Governor Sargent's transit improvement program, opposition to specific transit project location and design details has arisen—as witnessed by controversies over the planning and design issues surrounding the relocated Orange Line in the southwest corridor; the Red Line extension from Harvard Square through Cambridge, Somerville, Arlington, and Lexington; and the Red Line extension from Quincy along the South Shore. In brief, local citizens and officials have expressed concern over potential environmental, land use, parking, and local street congestion impacts due to new transit construction and operation, especially in the vicinity of transit stations. In large part the

opposition has been aggravated by a lack of adequate information regarding the potential social, economic, and environmental effects of the various projects. However, each of the major interdisciplinary studies now underway (or soon to be initiated) ¹⁵ should provide the technical data required to conduct an informed debate on the issues, even if they do not fully resolve the points in controversy.

During the 1974 gubernatorial election campaign, the present Governor, Michael Dukakis, sharply criticized Sargent for his administration's lack of transit construction activity and promised to push vigorously at the regional, State, and Federal levels for increased transit assistance and project approvals. Nevertheless, despite a continuing commitment to transit progress, the Dukakis administration has not had any notably greater success in advancing the transit program into actual construction. The basic problems cited above, as well as the State's current and pervasive fiscal crises, continue to plague the program. MBTA's continually rising operating deficit also

affects progress toward transit improvements, as evidenced by the recent abandonment of MBTA's off-peak hours "dime time" fare experiment, which proved to have been unsuccessful in attracting new ridership.

At the same time, the long-term outlook for Boston's transit future remains optimistic. The basic consensus in favor of an aggressive and extensive transit improvement program has continued, despite differences over specific location and design details, the appropriate transit mode, and implementation priorities. Reorganization of the region's and the State's transportation agencies promises to improve transit planning and operation. The recent purchase of the Boston & Maine Railroad's trackage north of Boston for \$39 million (subject to approval by the bankruptcy trustees), like the previous Penn-Central system acquisition to the south, will provide a ready source of rights-of-way for transit and other transportation improvement facilities. Finally, the growing awareness and concern over environmental, land use, and energy consumption problems may tend to encourage transit programs in Boston, provided localized impact issues can be successfully resolved.

¹⁵See page 29