

MBTA Takes Strides Towards Accessibility

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The MBTA's accessibility policies are getting a major upgrade when it comes to priority seating and the RIDE, said officials from the Riders' Transportation Access Group (R-TAG) at a meeting held last Tuesday.

For disabled Bostonians, abundant and visible priority seating is one of the largest concerns when it comes to accessibility on public transport. Sefira Bell, the Senior Project Coordinator of the MBTA's Internal Access Monitoring program, outlined the MBTA's current stance on priority seating.

The MBTA's policy dictates that employees must ask seated customers to give their seat to a person with disabilities upon request, meaning that the person needing a seat must ask for assistance. Additionally, although they are required to ask them to move, employees cannot force a seated customer to give up their seat. This policy is in place because employees are trained not to assume some customers have disabilities and others do not.

New buses and trains are being introduced with increased quantities of priority seating and flip seats, which make public transportation easily accessible for customers with strollers, shopping carts, wheelchairs, and scooters.

However, as Bell said, "We can increase the number of priority seats all we want, but that won't stop people who don't really need them from sitting in them anyway."

New priority seating signs will be introduced that are "bigger, with a more visual design and stronger language." There will also be an increased focus on courtesy announcements, public awareness campaigns, and secret shopper programs to test functionality. Bell hopes that these steps will keep priority seats open for those who need them.

Meeting attendees were largely happy with these efforts, but many expressed their frequent discomfort at having to ask an already seated person to move for them.

David Brelsford, a Malden resident, was disappointed that many of the new cars on the Orange, Green, and Red Lines still do not have high visibility handicap seating. He recommended making priority seats different colors, similar to many metro systems in Asia. Additionally, Brelsford spoke with several pregnant women that were unwilling to take up priority seats, and suggested having some priority seats designated for certain groups, such as pregnant women and seniors.

While the priority seating initiatives seemed to generate positive feedback, the discussion surrounding the RIDE, a paratransit car service operating with the MBTA, was overwhelmingly negative. The service aims to assist those with disabilities preventing them from using the MBTA bus, subway, or trolley. Many meeting attendees had issues with RIDE contracted vendors such as cab companies, Lyft, and Uber being unaware that the people they are driving need assistance.

According to Ben Schutzman, Chief of Paratransit Services, the system is getting a major update. The RIDE is transitioning to a new software called Routematch to encourage more predictable and timely rides. The current system is complicated and hasn't been changed for fifteen years, so there is a high likelihood that the first days and weeks of using the new system

will be rocky, Schutzman said. However, he explained that “this is all in pursuit of a better system.”

Meeting attendees were given a refresher of the feedback submission process for The RIDE, as well as for R-TAG and MBTA, and were encouraged to come forward with any complaints or ideas for improvement. As Bell said, “Call it in—if we don’t know it’s broken, we can’t fix it.”

The priority seating initiatives and RIDE updates will be implemented within the next few months. It remains to be seen whether they will be as impactful as residents and officials hope.