The state’s 2012 bet on commuter-rail service has yet to pay off. Is it time to privatize?

By Mary MacDonald

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On the 7:45 a.m. train ride to Boston, via Wickford Junction, Andy Arsenian sat in a comfortable booth seat, his tablet on the table in front connected to free wireless. A few rows behind him, a fellow commuter took a business call.

All around them, they had plenty of privacy. The commuter-train car had just six or seven occupied seats. For Arsenian, this is routine. He’s come to expect few passengers on the morning commute.

“The issue [holding down ridership] is the length of time,” he said. “You’re talking about an hour and 50 minutes each way.”
Five years after train service was extended south from T.F. Green Airport to Wickford Junction in North Kingstown, the passenger volume remains light, and state and local officials are experimenting with solutions that will make northbound rail travel to Providence a viable commuting alternative.

In July, the R.I. Department of Transportation literally made the southern service free, kicking off a promotion through the end of the year that waives passenger fares between Providence Station and the stations at T.F. Green and Wickford Junction.

North of Providence, a new $40 million station is planned for Pawtucket, in a centrally located area that state and city officials say will welcome the new service. A design-build contract is expected to be awarded this month.

South of the capital, the plan is to get people to consider the train as a reasonable alternative to driving to work by themselves, and paying for gas and parking in Providence.

The state is even considering options to take the commuter-rail service in Rhode Island under state control, according to RIDOT Director Peter Alviti, who said officials are preparing to test the market for more-efficient solutions than working through a Boston hub.

“Rhode Island is one of the most densely populated states. And yet, our transit usage is relatively low,” Alviti said. “We’ve wrestled with that the last few years here. This program that we’re trying to go through, I think is going to help … answer the questions we have.”
WORTH IT?

A key factor driving transit usage is convenience; is it more convenient to take a train or a bus than a car? Another is cost, Alviti explained. Is it cheaper to take a train to work than driving yourself and paying for gas and parking? And finally, there is the train schedule.

Is the schedule robust enough to get you close to where you work, or live, and is the service frequent enough to make this a positive experience?

Historically, ridership has suggested that, for many people, the Rhode Island train service is not convenient or frequent enough to justify taking it.

In Providence, the number of parking spaces in lots or garages is measured in the thousands. Many employers either fully cover the cost of parking for their employees,
or subsidize it. And gasoline prices have been less than $2.50 a gallon for three years, among the lowest price per gallon for the past 10 years. So, on cost alone, train service struggles to compete.

“The market is showing us that,” Alviti said. “[Before the free promotion] there [were] 119 people taking the train from Wickford to Providence.” Historically, that’s the number of daily commuters, as determined by periodic RIDOT passenger counts. For so-called South County service, the stops at Wickford Junction Station and T.F. Green Airport, passenger counts are handled by RIDOT.

The Massachusetts Bay Transportation Authority, which operates the commuter service in Rhode Island and Massachusetts, handles traffic counts within Massachusetts and on the Providence line.

Providence Station has long been a star in the MBTA constellation of stations. It is generally considered among the top three MBTA stations in terms of passenger volume. In the most recent counts, conducted in April, average daily ridership in Providence reached 3,349 people. South of Providence, the traffic counts have been falling.

The state began the free rail service on July 10. Early results were promising.

Daily ridership increased to 314 in July, compared to 222 daily riders in July 2016, according to figures provided by the state. That’s roughly a 40 percent increase in ridership. But it remains well below the projected daily
ridership out of Wickford Junction of 1,500 passengers by 2020. At the time the projection was made in 2012, the communities of Washington County, including Charlestown, South Kingstown and North Kingstown, were among the fastest growing in the state. They accounted for half of the state’s growth between 1990 and 2000.

Cost pressures on car commuters also did not increase as expected.

In a report prepared in September 2005 for North Kingstown, as it was studying the creation of a transit-oriented development around the proposed station, traffic engineers Pare Engineering Corp., now known as Pare Corp., expected the train alternative would “become increasingly attractive as gasoline prices approach $3 a gallon.”

While transportation experts have consistently said they expected the commuter traffic at both T.F. Green and the Wickford Junction stations to climb slowly, the projections have not borne this out. A pattern of declining traffic at Wickford Junction emerged in 2016, according to RIDOT statistics.

Wickford Junction’s average daily traffic counts started in fiscal 2013 at 287, and climbed gradually for the next two years, reaching what is now a peak weekday average of 391 in fiscal 2015.
The following fiscal year, daily ridership fell for the first time, to 349. Through the third quarter of fiscal 2017, which ended in March, daily ridership had fallen again to 292.

A similar pattern has emerged at T.F. Green, a commuter-rail station that came online in 2010.

According to periodic counts conducted by RIDOT, inbound daily boardings at T.F. Green fell from an average daily tally of 242 in July 2016 to 175 in April of this year. Since the free-fare promotion began July 10, those daily counts have increased on average to 233 at T.F. Green.

Altogether, the promotion is expected to cost RIDOT about $102,000 in uncollected fares, according to a spokesman.

Arsenian, an executive at Bank of America who lives in South Kingstown, is skeptical the growth in riders will last. He takes the MBTA commuter rail about once a week to his Boston office. He’s been a consistent transit user since Wickford Junction opened in 2012.

In Providence, it’s another world. The Providence-to-Boston leg of the trip typically takes less than an hour, a convenience compared to driving through inbound traffic. “Once you get to Providence, it fills up pretty fast,” Arsenian said.

Other passengers on the 7:45 a.m. train one recent July morning said they use the MBTA service sporadically, or rarely. None interviewed said they had traveled because of the free promotion.

Cindy Wilson, who lives in North Kingstown, was traveling to Boston for the day to take in a museum. She takes the
train for convenience, to avoid the hassle of driving and parking.

“It’s easier to take the train into Boston than it is to drive and park. Plus, I get to read. It’s a much more [relaxed] way to travel than it is to fight traffic.”

What would get more people to do the same? More trains, she said, particularly heading back to Wickford Junction Station.

On the day she was traveling, for example, she had already determined she would need to finish up at the Museum of Fine Arts by 1 p.m. to catch a train home. Otherwise, she’d have to wait three more hours to catch a train that continues to North Kingstown.

“If I was going back to Providence” it wouldn’t be an issue, she said.

EXTENDING NORTH

The state is preparing for new service in Pawtucket and Central Falls, through development of a platform and stop on the existing Providence line into South Station in Boston. That project, largely financed through a federal grant and contributions from Pawtucket and Central Falls, is seen as providing transit to an underserved area and population north of Providence, and will likely attract commuters now traveling to...
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Pawtucket Mayor Donald R. Grebien said the lack of ridership south of Providence made it a bit harder for Pawtucket and Central Falls to get state and federal approval for that stop.

“We had to go through exceptional justification,” he said, “to make sure it wasn’t going to be like that.”

But given the density of the two affected cities, Grebien said advocates were able to make the case that the Pawtucket-Central Falls station would start with 1,000 riders daily. The two cities shared a station until 1959, according to the Pawtucket Planning Department. Train service stopped in the 1970s.

The estimate of new riders, provided by a consultant, is based on existing population, not on the potential for ridership drawn from what could be significant redevelopment around the new train station. The location is adjacent to more than 1 million square feet of vacant mill space. Potentially, this could become housing.

“Just having a train stop there, in that mill area, will change that whole area,” Grebien said. Expanded bus stops also will become a part of the extended development.

“If you look at transit-oriented development areas around the country, it is night and day what happens when a train station goes in,” said Jan Brodie, executive director of the Pawtucket Foundation. “It provides people access to jobs, housing, services, education, training, entertainment, recreation.”
TIME TO PRIVATIZE?

South of Providence, the boost in traffic from the promotion has come without an increase in service frequency or other enhancements.

RIDOT is exploring other options to make train service more sustainable.

‘The schedule is just not conducive to someone who needs to get to work by a certain time.’

A. RALPH MOLLIS, North Kingstown town manager

The most dramatic option includes privatizing the Rhode Island commuter-train service, by contracting directly with a service provider.

The Rhode Island service is provided through RIDOT, which reimburses the MBTA for operation of the Boston-based trains, under an agreement originally reached in 2008. The MBTA has since farmed out operation of commuter-rail services to a private company, Boston-based Keolis North America.

In the most recent fiscal year, which ended in June, the state allocated $6.6 million to fund the commuter-rail service. That cost includes payments to Amtrak and MBTA, as well as insurance and operation and maintenance of Wickford Junction Station, according to a state spokesman. Construction of the station and garage in 2012 cost $44.7 million, according to Charles St. Martin, a RIDOT spokesman.

The tracks through Rhode Island are owned by Amtrak. The MBTA accesses them through an operating agreement with RIDOT, Alviti said.
Because the commuter-rail service is hinged to Boston, the schedules are developed with the Bay State in mind. The trains themselves are designed for Boston-level traffic, according to Stephen Devine, a RIDOT administrator who oversees passenger-rail operations.

At least some of the 10 scheduled, weekday round trips to Wickford Junction are conducted with double-decker trains, which are not what Rhode Island necessarily needs, Alviti said.

In addition to talking with MBTA about providing services on weekends, which have never existed south of Providence, RIDOT is considering whether to broaden services by doing it themselves.

“I’d like to find out … [if] there is a way we can do it better and cheaper.’
PETER ALVITI, RIDOT director

“We started a few months ago, doing a deep dive looking into what the MBTA can do, what it can’t do and why,” Alviti said. “Peak periods [are] quite a challenge for them to be able to give us more frequency during rush hours.”

The constriction relates to the design of the MBTA hub at South Station in Boston, according to Devine. It becomes a choke point during rush hours. “Without an expansion in additional capacity and trackage there, it really limits increasing the trains [to Rhode Island], particularly in the peak period,” he said.

Taking over the services themselves, however, would allow RIDOT to contract out the operations to a company that only has to cycle between Wickford Junction and Providence, and which might allow for future expansion.
When asked for comment, a spokesman for Keolis referred a reporter to the MBTA. A spokesman for the MBTA did not immediately respond to requests for comment.

**QUONSET STOP**

Through a request for proposals, which could be issued in the next year, RIDOT is going to test the market.

“Part of what I’d like to find out here is whether or not there is a way we can do it better and cheaper,” Alviti said.

“It’s not a very complex kind of thing that requires a lot of study. We’re talking about a three-stop commuter train ping-ponging back and forth, and what, a 20-mile track?”

One of the potential benefits of state control is better frequency of service and lower operating costs, per passenger. Smaller companies might be more responsive and effective, state officials said.

“When you’re [a] part of the MBTA system, you get the whole big train set,” Devine said. “Eight bi-level coaches and a locomotive are not really what we need. They’re not going to uncouple them. The way they operate their system, the Providence-line cars could end up on the Worcester line in the same day.”

If RIDOT were to take control of the services, it could then look at other options, Alviti said.
These include adding train services, beyond Amtrak, to the University of Rhode Island in South Kingstown, and adding service to Quonset Business Park, which has parking constraints for autos.

“There are going to be increases at Quonset Point in employment,” Alviti said. “There is a considerable constraint [in parking] there.”

Eric Moffett, president of Seaview Transportation Co., said his company has had discussions with Quonset Development Corp. about trying to bring passenger trains and buses to Quonset Business Park, an employment base for nearly 11,000 people.

“There certainly is some potential,” he said. “I know there’s demand.”
But demand, he said, works two ways. It requires enough trains, or people will continue to drive.

Right now, he says, commuter rail could be extended from the base along its existing tracks to North Kingstown, but the rail service is Boston-based, so it’s not operating on a schedule that complements the North Kingstown business park.

Seaview Transportation Co. provides freight service for park tenants, including transportation of cars, liquid and solid bulk, and heavy equipment. But it also runs passenger service, including the annual “Trains to Planes” program that provides a rail link to the site for people attending the annual Rhode Island National Guard Open House Air Show.

If the state were to redirect the same amount of money it now pays to the MBTA to provide rail service in Rhode Island to another provider, it could end in more-frequent service. The continuing connection to Boston would have to be made in Providence.

“That gets you weekend service that’s not offered today, and more-frequent [weekday] service,” Moffett said.

And the state is already in the process of entering an agreement with URI that would provide the university with parking spaces at the Wickford Junction garage, to alleviate parking shortages that are resulting from the construction of new buildings on campus.

Amtrak, which runs trains through Rhode Island, stopping at the Kingston village station, would be the presumed carrier, “unless we provided that as an additional service,” Alviti said.