

Ayanna Pressley and Ed Markey want to eliminate public transit fares. Here's how.

The two Massachusetts Democrats are proposing a federal grant program for local governments that make their transit systems free.



MBTA passengers shelter under glass in Kenmore Square Station in Boston. —Lane Turner / The Boston Globe

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By [Nik DeCosta-Klipa](#), Boston.com Staff

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Rep. Ayanna Pressley [has said she loves the idea of a fare-free MBTA](#).

Now, the Massachusetts congresswoman is proposing a federal program to encourage officials across the country to eliminate public transit fares.

Pressley and Sen. Ed Markey introduced a bill Friday to create a \$5 billion grant program to support local governments that implement fare-free bus and rail

systems and otherwise invest in ways to increase transit access in historically underserved communities.

“Our public transit systems are meant to provide communities with the mobility and freedom to access critical services, but far too many in the Massachusetts 7th and across the country lack reliable, safe, and affordable transit service,” Pressley said in a statement.

“By supporting state and local efforts to implement fare-free public transit systems, we can provide low-income workers and families, seniors, and individuals with disabilities with improved access to jobs, education, and medical care, all while simultaneously reducing traffic congestion and greenhouse gas emissions,” Markey added.

The bill is the second time Markey and Pressley have collaborated on legislation this week; on Thursday, the two Massachusetts Democrats [proposed a federal ban on facial recognition technology](#).

It also comes on the heels of a letter Pressley and two-dozen other Democrats sent to Rep. Nancy Pelosi, the House speaker, [calling for a \\$250 billion investment](#) to support [hard-hit public transportation agencies](#) in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The bill introduced Friday — officially named the Freedom to Move Act — would give out the grants to offset the cost of lost fares, which have [been the primary concern of skeptics of making public transit free](#).

For example, before the pandemic, MBTA fares accounted for nearly \$700 million in revenue, or roughly a third of the agency’s annual budget. MBTA bus fares are a small fraction of that, but still [add up to over \\$100 million](#).

[Some smaller American cities](#), including Lawrence, have made their bus systems free at a much lower cost. Others have [suspended fare enforcement during the pandemic](#).

But regardless of cost, Pressley’s office says transit should be treated like a public good, like fire departments or schools, which the government provides regardless of citizens’ ability to pay.

“The Freedom to Move Act invests heavily in our public transit systems so that states and localities can offer safe, high-quality, and fare-free rides, and would ensure that everyone in [a] community—including our essential workers who depend heavily on public transportation—can access jobs, food and essential services like education and health care,” the Boston Democrat said.

Under the legislation, competitive, five-year grants would be awarded to municipal, county, and state governments based on their plans to implement fare-free transit. According to a senior Pressley aide, options range from making their entire system free to eliminating fares on certain routes or modes, particularly in places that are currently underserved.

The program would also require localities to show how they would make bus service more “safe, frequent, and reliable,” as well as how they would close transit gaps, where the lack of affordable public transportation exacerbates economic and racial disparities in terms of access to jobs, education, and health.

In addition to offsetting the cost of eliminating fares, the grant funds could be used for bus network redesigns, bus-only lanes, infrastructure improvements, and covering the operational costs of meeting the demands of increased ridership, including hiring more employees.

Grant applicants would also have to end any policies that [criminalize fare evasion](#).

The bill requires grants to be awarded to both urban and rural governments and directs the U.S. transportation secretary to issue a report within three years on whether the program helps local governments achieve their transit access goals.

Advocates are confident that it would.

The legislation has been endorsed by a coalition of both Boston-area and national environmental and transit advocacy groups, including the Transport Workers Union, which represents 150,000 transit employees nationwide.

“The legislation would allow public transit to live up to its promise of improving the quality of life for everyone,” said John Samuelson, the union’s president.

Boston City Councilor Michelle Wu, who has [championed the idea of eliminating MBTA fares](#), said Friday that “all communities benefit with cleaner air, safer

streets, and faster commutes.”

“Public transportation is a public good, and I am grateful for the leadership of Representative Pressley, Senator Markey and this coalition to move us closer to realizing the promise of equity and opportunity for every community,” Wu said in a statement.

According to her aide, Pressley is optimistic that the Freedom to Move Act will gain traction as the House considers [the INVEST Act](#), a major infrastructure bill introduced earlier this month that includes provisions aimed at improving public transportation.

Last fall, Pressley co-founded the Future of Transportation Caucus aimed at shifting federal investments toward public transit and away from cars — where legislation has historically focused at the expense of many low-income communities of color. For example, researchers found that Black people, who [disproportionately use public transit](#), [spend more time commuting](#) than other racial groups, an inconvenience that has [downstream consequences](#) on economic mobility.

Given the importance of “connectivity,” Pressley told Boston.com after founding the new congressional caucus that transportation is ultimately a “social justice issue.”

“We can do the work of making a more livable city, and jobs that treat people with dignity, and housing that is quality and affordable, and all of those things,” she said at the time. “But if people can’t navigate the city to get to work, to get to childcare, to get to school, it really is all in vain.”

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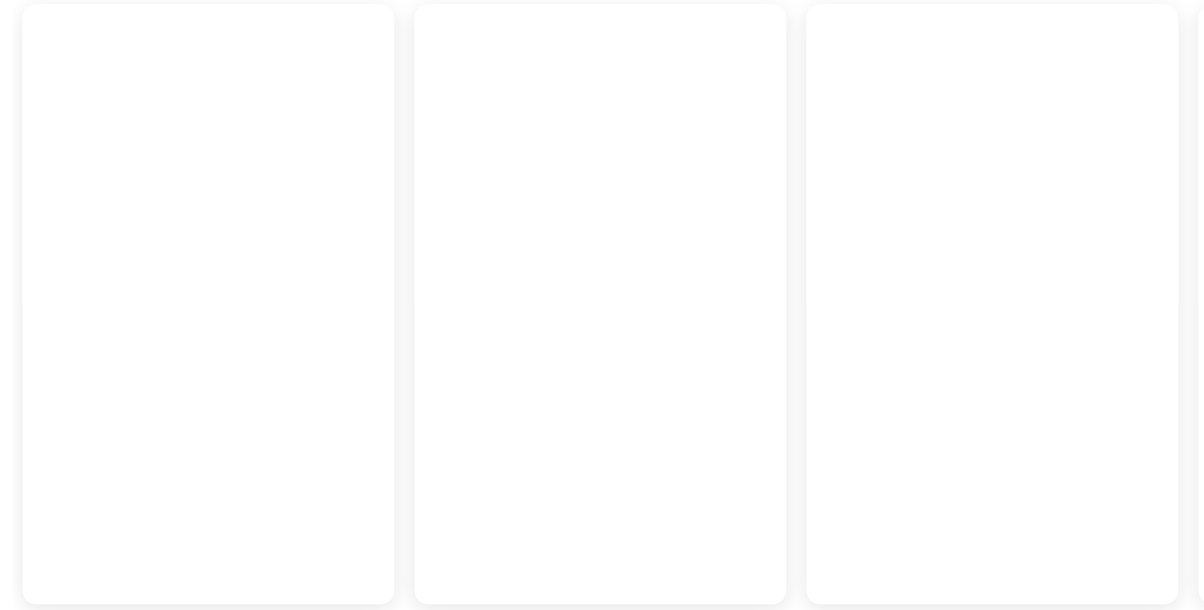
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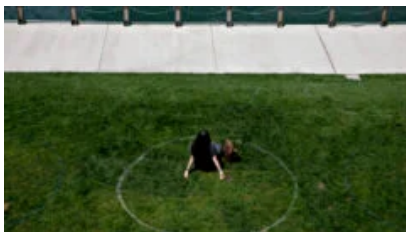
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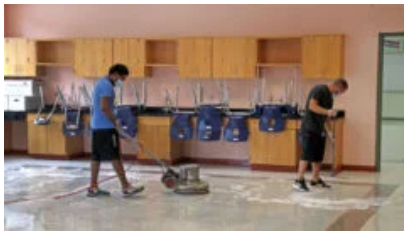
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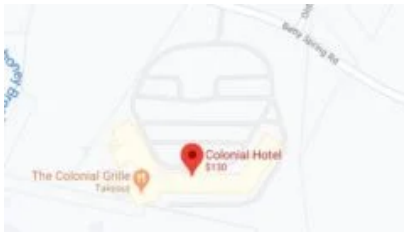
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