

OPINION

Should free public transit be offered to neighborhoods of color in Boston?



BOSTON, MA – FEBRUARY 3: An Orange Line train is seen at Downtown Crossing on February 3, 2020 in Boston, Massachusetts. (Staff Photo By Angela Rowlings/MediaNews Group/Boston Herald)

By **PETER LUCAS** |

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There is no such a thing as a free lunch.

There is no free anything because somebody else always picks up the tab.

But there soon may be free bus rides for some people, though, if a pair of Boston city councilors get their way.

Yet, if the MBTA is going to be free for a chosen few, why not in the name of social and economic justice make it free for everybody?

People with an ounce of commonsense know that there is nothing truly free. It may be free for you, like a ride on a Boston bus, but not free for me or the taxpayers paying for the MBTA bus driver and the bus.

A toll-free MBTA is not a new idea; it has been around for years.

The idea got new life last week when Boston City Council President Kim Janey and Councilor Michelle Wu, joined by Rep. Nika Elugardo, proposed that buses in the Black and Brown community in Boston be free.

It was also pointed out that the MBTA in effect provided free bus rides on the routes by allowing riders to board through back doors during the coronavirus pandemic to avoid interaction with the bus drivers who collect the fares.

“What COVID-19 has shown is that we can have free buses,” Janey said.

These free buses would be on the MBTA’s 26 and 28 bus routes that service Dorchester, Roxbury and Mattapan where most people of color, and low-income earners, live.

It would cost the MBTA — and the taxpayers — some \$36 million, a sum they say could be made up by a one cent increase in the gasoline tax.

“This is a racial justice issue, this is an economic justice issue,” Janey said at a press conference.

If so, perhaps the plan should be extended to cover other low-income sections of the city and its environs, like East Boston, the South End, Chelsea and Revere, for instance.

Perhaps the subway and commuter rail could also be made free for everyone and paid for by whopping tax increases on businesses and high-income earners.

It will be interesting in this increasingly woke era to see how the MBTA, Boston Mayor Marty Walsh and Gov. Charlie Baker respond to the free bus proposal.

The MBTA has shown sympathy in dealing with racial injustice and police brutality demonstrations by recently announcing that it would no longer bus Boston cops to Black Lives Matter and other demonstrations or looting spree.

Providing free bus service to low-income people in minority districts would not only extend MBTA progressive policy, but be compatible with recent actions by Mayor Walsh to combat racial and economic injustice in the city.

Some critics have privately complained about Walsh giving in too easily to the demands of left-wing activists to defund the Boston cops, or for too easily giving in to demands that the Abraham Lincoln statute in Copley Square be taken down, or for removing the beheaded Columbus statue in the North End.

“He’s so bad he makes Kevin White look like Winston Churchill,” one longtime Boston political observer said.

White was a four-term mayor who served from 1968 to 1984. He was mayor during the turbulent years of forced busing, a decision by federal Judge Arthur Garrity to deal with racial imbalance in the schools.

White’s name surfaced in the wake of busing and alleged systemic racism charges made by Suffolk County District Attorney Rachael Rollins and Karilyn Crockett, Walsh’s new \$160,000 chief of equity and inclusion.

Crockett called the period of forced busing “a fiery state of crisis.” Rollins referred to it as the “ugly past.” Both were critical of alleged racism by previous mayors like White, Ray Flynn and Tom Menino.

Forced busing in Boston took place over 40 years ago when neither Crockett nor Rollins were around. It was an epic and tragic failure. It was a very turbulent time when elected officials, like White, were charged with enforcing a controversial law they had nothing to do with.

White was no racist. He worked hard to keep the peace during those troubled times. He was so sympathetic to the Black community that white critics called him Mayor Black. Crockett and Rollins should do some research before calling people racists. Walsh, too.

There is a statue of White behind City Hall. Walsh can see it from his window. Look quick, Marty, before that’s gone, too.

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