

IDEAS

Milton isn't a rapid-transit community, no matter how many times the state says it is

The requirement that Milton zone for thousands of new housing units is based on the false premise that its antiquated Mattapan Line counts as 'rapid transit.'

By [Carine Hajjar](#) Globe Staff, Updated March 14, 2024, 2:59 a.m.



The Mattapan Trolley crosses Capen Street. If not for the trolley's brief foray through a corner of Milton, the town would not have to contend with the state's new zoning requirements for housing in communities served by the MBTA. LANE TURNER/GLOBE STAFF

The charming orange trolleys of the MBTA's Mattapan Line look like a quaint relic of yesteryear, something that would fit right in at Disney's Main Street USA or in "Mister Rogers' Neighborhood."

What these rolling museum pieces *don't* look like — and what nobody who actually rides them on the 2.6-mile line between Ashmont and Mattapan Square would call them — is “rapid transit.”

And yet in the eyes of the state, that's exactly what they are, a determination that is the basis for classifying my hometown of Milton as a “rapid transit community” under the state's new housing law, the MBTA Communities Act. That designation, in turn, triggered a requirement that the town zone for thousands of units of new housing. Milton voters rejected the rezoning last month, and Attorney General Andrea Campbell subsequently sued the town in an effort to force it to comply with the law.

It's a puzzling conflict, for the simple reason the trolley, which the T characterizes as a branch of the Red Line, should never have been lumped in with conventional subway lines like the Blue Line in the first place. It's nonsensical to subject Milton to the same requirements as Cambridge or Brookline. The state should defuse the conflict with Milton by either acknowledging that reality and reclassifying the town into a more appropriate category or, better yet, by taking steps to improve service enough to make Milton a real rapid transit town.

How bad could the trolley be, you ask? If you've never had the pleasure of riding the Mattapan Line, let me tell you about it.

The trolleys, which were built in the 1940s, frequently break. The line often stops running when it snows (even though the T has a track-clearing machine, [Snowzilla](#), specifically made for clearing the route). There is virtually no convenient parking, severely limiting its usefulness for commuters. Every other rapid transit line gives riders a one-seat ride into downtown Boston. Going downtown on the Mattapan Line, though, requires first waiting for the trolley and then waiting for a Red Line train at Ashmont.



In a 2016 photo, a trolley passed over the grade-level crossing at Central Avenue in Milton, one of two places on the Mattapan Ashmont High Speed Trolley Line where the tracks intersect with surface streets. LANE TURNER

The controversy in Milton might have looked different if the T had followed through on promises to upgrade the line more quickly, which would have especially benefited the lower-income communities of color that it disproportionately services. In 2019, the T committed [\\$127 million for upgrades](#), including updates to eight out of nine trolley cars and renovations to the stations. But just like your morning commute, it's inching along. The project was supposed to take eight to 10 years. So far only two trolleys have been refurbished, and repairs are partly done on three others. And even when the T finishes the project, a renovated 80-year-old trolley line is still an 80-year-old trolley line.

I stopped taking the trolley years ago, but I took it again recently to compare it with my preferred commute — driving to North Quincy and getting on the Red Line there.

On good day, it takes about an hour and 10 minutes to commute from my family home in Milton to the Globe office.

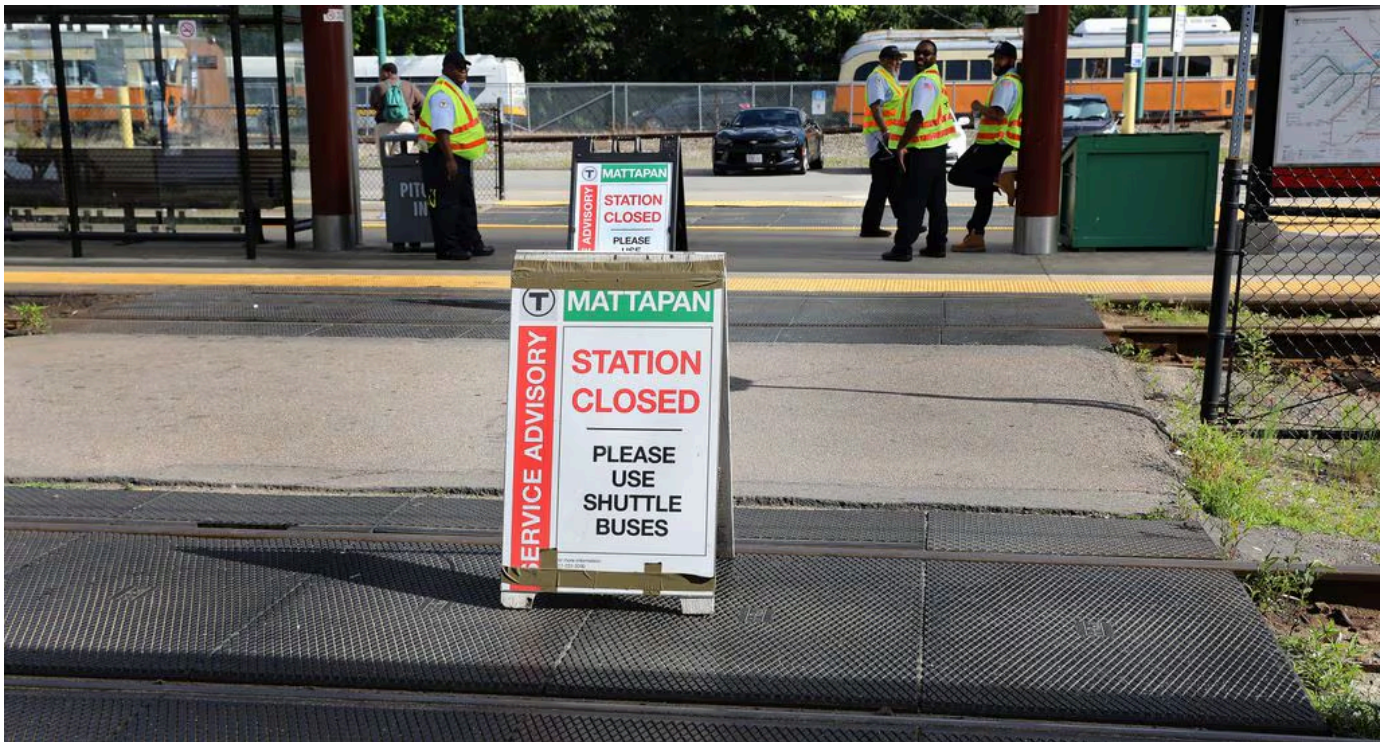
That's about 20 minutes to drive to North Quincy and park. (And that's because I deliberately dodged the school-drop-off madness that unfolds on Milton's one-lane roads — add at least

another 10 if I didn't.) When I get to the station, I might get lucky and have to wait only five or 10 minutes for the next inbound train. But often a finicky Charlie Card scanner or a lengthy search for a parking spot means I miss a train. Then, an endless 15 to 20 minutes loom ahead. Once I get on the train, I wait a slow eternity as we inch toward JFK station through the Red Line's "slow zone."

This is my *preferred* commute.

The trolley is actually a shorter drive away for me than the North Quincy stop and, if everything goes smoothly, a tiny bit faster. The problem is that only three of the stations — and only one of the Milton stops — have parking. There are also few bus routes from Milton to the trolley, and none a short walk away. To get to the station, I had to get a ride from my mom (thanks, mom!), which skews the comparison a bit and is also not a sustainable transit model.

Once you board the trolley, it can indeed be high-speed, but only if the stars align. On my sunny, clear commute, I clocked about six minutes between Central Avenue and Ashmont. But [expect delays](#) and cancellations if it snows or rains or if the creaky old cars need a little rest (as most 80-year-olds do). In January, shuttle buses had to replace trolley service when one of the cars [got stuck](#) at Butler Station due to a "mechanical issue." Two other trolleys were sent to dislodge the first, but all three ended up getting stuck in the process, suspending trolley travel for about seven hours. Besides a penchant for flakiness and the parking issues, the trolleys also don't connect to many feeder buses from other parts of Milton.



Signs in 2019 warned riders about one of the Mattapan Line's frequent closures and service interruptions. PAT GREENHOUSE/GLOBE STAFF

Now, as far as I'm concerned, *nowhere* on the T has “rapid” transit. But Milton is in a class of its own, as the state itself has acknowledged in other contexts. In 2020, a state-funded review of Milton's [municipal vulnerability preparedness](#) found that the town's “public transportation system is somewhat limited.”

Milton residents voted no on the zoning plan for a combination of many factors: NIMBYism over more congestion, fears of accommodating hundreds of children into schools that are already at capacity, puzzlement over how the state expects to add more volume to jam-packed East Milton.

But their best defense is the mere truth: Milton is not a rapid transit town, and it's unfair to treat it like it is.

However, Milton could be a rapid transit town, and should be. The state's long-term goal is correct: Massachusetts needs more housing, and towns like Milton will have to be willing partners — if they are properly supported by the state. We won't get there by strong-arming towns into doing all the hard work or by applying selective housing policies that fail to address a broader market issue. The state can induce housing by creating a friendlier business climate for housing developers — and by fixing the T so that it provides the type of fast, reliable public transit that people want to live and build around.

If the state wants Milton to comply with the rules set out for rapid transit towns, its first steps shouldn't be dictates and lawsuits. Its first steps should be to actually make Milton a rapid transit community — and to put the Mattapan trolleys in a museum where they belong.

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