

MILTON AND THE MBTA COMMUNITIES ACT:
RECLASSIFICATION RESEARCH SUMMARY FOR POLICY MAKERS
JULY 2023

I: BY THE MBTA’S OWN ADMISSION, THE MATTAPAN HIGH SPEED LINE WAS NEVER CONVERTED TO RAPID TRANSIT

Between 1967 and 1969, Milton residents successfully fought the extension of the Red Line’s Ashmont service to Mattapan Station. The “proposed conversion of the high-speed Mattapan trolley line to rapid transit by extending the Red Line (Cambridge-Dorchester) from Ashmont to Mattapan,” stated a 1969 MBTA report, was prevented thanks to “litigation brought forward by the Town of Milton.”¹ Due to fierce opposition from Miltonians, the MBTA eventually withdrew the threatened red line extension, and the rapid transit Red Line was never extended to Mattapan. To this day, the Mattapan line remains a highly unique detached suburban trolley system essentially untouched from when it opened in the 1920s. It should not be considered rapid transit.

II: THE MATTAPAN TROLLEY SERVICE IS DISTINCTLY DISSIMILAR AND OPERATIONALLY INFERIOR TO RAPID TRANSIT

- The historic Mattapan-Ashmont Trolley operates on a short, self-contained, stand-alone route with its own two termini and 8 trolley stops, spanning a short distance of a little over 2 miles in Milton and Dorchester. Unlike all other MBTA rapid transit lines (Orange, Red, Blue, Green, Silver), the Mattapan Trolley offers no direct, single-seat route to downtown Boston. Milton is the only MBTA Rapid Transit Community, as defined by DHCD, without such a direct link to downtown.



Figure 1 Six red line cars waiting to be cycled into service at Ashmont (July 2023)

¹ “Fourth Annual Report (Covering the period October 1, 1967 – October 31, 1968) of the Board of Directors of the Massachusetts Bay Transportation Authority.”

- Riders wishing to travel inbound must disembark at Ashmont before traversing an open-air walkway—an inconvenient feature of the newly designed Ashmont Station—waiting on the platform, and finding a seat on a Red Line train. Here, they experience a requisite terminal dwell time as Red Line trains are cycled into service. Dwell times can vary and are often over fifteen minutes long. Only after completing two unlinked trips, navigating the station at Ashmont, waiting on platforms for two separate trains, and a lengthy dwell time at Ashmont does the passenger eventually arrive in downtown Boston. At Ashmont, Mattapan Line riders lose priority at the instant they disembark the historic trolley. Passengers compete with all others feeding into Ashmont’s rapid transit terminus, especially those arriving by bus.



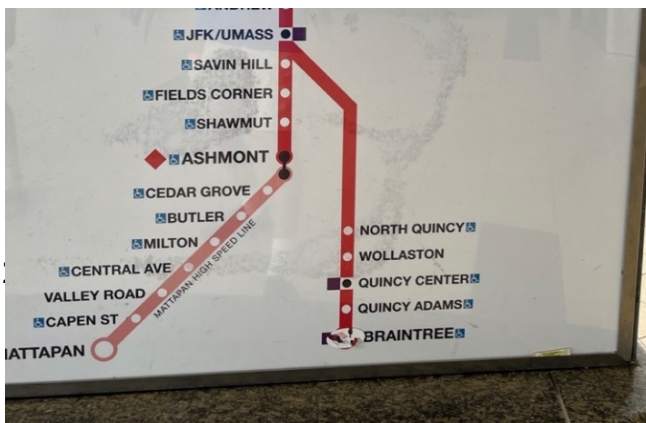
- In capacity and ridership levels, the trolley operates much like a bus. A Mattapan trolley PCC car can only seat approximately 38. At peak service, only four individual cars operate on the line. Unlike LRV vehicles operating on the Green Line, Mattapan trolleys remain unlinked. In fact, they are the only single-vessel rail vehicles in the entire MBTA system.
- The low ridership on the Mattapan Line distinguishes it from any other MBTA light rail service. In fact, many of the MBTA’s bus stops experience higher average weekday boardings than some of the stops on the Mattapan Line. In 2018 and 2019 the MBTA, citing the need for operational flexibility, even considered replacing the current WWII era PCC trolley cars with a bus service as a part of the Mattapan Line Transformation

Figure 2 Stop sign on tracks at Central Ave. (July 2023)

Initiative. The proposal to replace the Mattapan Line trolley with a new bus line was dropped due to the public’s incorrect perception that busses offer a lower quality of service than the current trolley cars. This proposal proves that even the MBTA admits replacing the current service with a bus line would not result in a lapse of service and would actually improve service. The conversion of the

Mattapan line to a bus route is still favored by many in MBTA management and in Milton.

- The Mattapan Line operates on a semi-exclusive alignment that features two at-grade crossings in



Milton: one at Capen Street and the other at Central Avenue. At both crossings, the Mattapan Trolleys must come to a complete halt at a stop sign, check for pedestrians and car traffic, and proceed slowly across the shared grade while yielding. Unlike many rail crossings, there is no retractable crossing gate that ensures the trolley's right of way at the intersection.

III: WHAT WOULD MILTON LOOK LIKE TODAY IF THE MATTAPAN LINE WERE TRULY RAPID TRANSIT? HISTORY: LESSONS FROM THE PAST.

Had the MBTA's 1967-1969 plan to convert the Mattapan Trolley into rapid transit been realized, Milton would look very different than it does today. In the fall of 1967, the MBTA proposed the construction of a train yard and 144 car storage facility at Butler Street in the Neponset Marshes to replace the Eliot-Bennett yard at the Red Line's northern terminus at Harvard, the future site of the Harvard Kennedy School of Government. This initial plan necessitated the extension of the Red Line to Butler. Soon thereafter, however, the MBTA revised its plan to include the extension of the Red Line all the way to Mattapan. A new train yard was to be constructed in the large swath of land off the Neponset in Milton near where the Harvest River Bridge now spans the river. Much of the Capen Street neighborhood would have been acquired by means of eminent domain, with all the parklands abutting the river razed for the construction of a heavy rail train yard. With more than a dozen bridges, underpasses, street crossings, and two viaducts, the conversion of the Mattapan Line to rapid transit would not only be difficult to accomplish and



Figure 4 View of the Neponset River from the Harvest River Bridge. (July 2023) Under the MBTA's 1967-1969 proposal, all of the land on the left bank in Milton would have been converted into a train yard, drastically altering the landscape of this serene setting.

expensive, but would have drastically altered service delivery in Milton. Under the proposal, the MBTA would remove five out of the six intermediary stops between Ashmont and Mattapan to account for lengthier acceleration and deceleration process of longer red line heavy rail trains. (On the Mattapan Line today, all of Milton's four stops are within a one mile stretch of track) Only the trolley stop at Milton would be spared from removal. This meant that the town would lose its Capen Street, Valley Road, and Central Avenue stops. At Central Avenue, it was proposed to raise the tracks over the grade crossing in an elevated viaduct to segregate the Red Line's third rails. In 1967, the Town of Milton's Executive Secretary, James Sullivan, summarized the town's position on the proposal. From the onset of the fight to stop the Red Line extension, "The Board of Selectmen," wrote Sullivan, "has taken a firm position in opposition to this proposal,

which is definitely not in the best interest of Milton or Boston... The proposal would increase the cost of this service annually from \$506,150 to \$1,293,825 and this to serve only 3,000 riders. Many Milton citizens have also registered their objection to the plan which would eliminate three out of the four stops Milton currently has on the MBTA.”² By 1968, town leaders and concerned citizens organized around the Board of Selectmen’s coordinated campaign to stop the proposal. By the end of the year, wrote Milton’s new Executive Secretary John Cronin in his 1968 report to the town, “The Mattapan to Ashmont rapid transit extension and car barn proposal is currently the subject of intensive restudy by the M.B.T.A. as a result of the Milton’ Board of Selectmen’s opposition which consisted of litigation, news releases, legislative pressure, protest meetings, and the issuance of more than 500 Position Papers to transit and government leaders.”³ On December 19, 1969, the MBTA, facing pressure from Milton, approved a new site at Dover Street in Dorchester for the new train yard (MBTA Cabot Yard), thus ending the threatened extension of rapid transit to Mattapan. The town’s small land parcel adjacent to Central Ave., recently acquired by the developer of the Henries condo development, had subsequently been sold to the town by the MBTA when it was no longer needed for a viaduct. To this day, the Mattapan line remains a detached suburban trolley system essentially untouched from when it opened in the 1920s. It is truly a heritage railway and a vestige of the gentle suburban trolley network that connected communities across suburban Boston in centuries past—a far cry from the speedy modern rapid transit networks operating in the state today. Unlike the Green Line, the Mattapan High Speed Line was never integrated into the rapid transit red line branch. As of the most recent MBTA Mattapan Line Transformation meeting in June 2023, there are still no plans to integrate the Mattapan High Speed line into rapid transit.

IV: CONCLUSION

Any rapid transit designation should not rely purely on convention, bureaucratic fare policy, or arbitrary categorization. Instead, Milton’s transit categorization by DHCD and the MBTA should be based on an analysis of the existing physical characteristics and operational ability of the Mattapan Line as well as a detailed comparison of the Mattapan Line to other transit systems within the MBTA network. It is abundantly clear that Milton’s classification as a “rapid transit community” under DHCD’s MBTA Community Act Guidelines fails to account for the unique qualities of the Mattapan Line that distinguish it from the rest of the MBTA and rapid transit systems. There is no guarantee that the Mattapan Line Transformation Initiative will achieve desired results. The project—already several years delayed—is over a decade away from completion. Even if the transformation is completed, it will not address several of the claims brought forth in this memorandum that support reclassification, namely, the fact that riders travelling to downtown Boston must disembark at Ashmont before continuing their journey. A review of the MBTA’s own historical records reveals that the Mattapan Line was never

² “Report of the Executive Secretary” in “Annual Town Report” (Town of Milton, 1967), p .167

³ “Report of the Executive Secretary” in “Annual Town Report” (Town of Milton, 1968), p .225.

incorporated into rapid transit by the MBTA. Sufficient irrefutable evidence supports these claims. Milton's elected officials, led by the Select Board and Town Administrator, must act quickly to address this erroneous classification by way of a formal written petition to the MBTA Board of Directors and the Executive Office of Housing and Livable Communities (formerly DHCD) in order to achieve reclassification to adjacent community status. Reclassification will ensure that Milton, its transit riders, and all residents are treated fairly and equitably.