Calculating the right price for commuter rail

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Riders on the MBTA Commuter Rail know that the network is significantly more expensive than the T's local bus and subway service. It's due for a change now.

For any trip on the Commuter Rail within I-95, local bus and subway service is often cheaper. It costs $7 to travel from Needham Heights to South Station and from Waltham to North Station. Route 59 to the Green Line in Newton? $2.40. Route 70 to the Red Line in Cambridge? $2.40.

These examples are not just anomalies within the system. The commuter rail gets proportionally more expensive closer to the Boston terminals. With the significant difference in cost, it's clear why the commuter rail is not a popular option for many in the Greater Boston area, especially in communities closer to downtown. In 2018, Waltham saw about 500 passengers board the Fitchburg Line each day. At the Riverside Green Line station in Newton, over 1,800 passengers boarded the Green Line that same day.

That trip from Waltham to North Station is 10 miles at a $7 fare, which works out to be 70 cents per mile. That trip from Needham Heights costs 51 cents per mile. The $2.40 rapid transit fare is a smaller 21 cents per mile for a similar 10-mile journey to Waltham.

The commuter rail's zone system includes 11 numbered zones representing the distance traveled from Boston. Most stations served by the T's local bus and subway service are located within Zones 1A, 1, and 2. With the T's fare transformation program underway and regional rail

studies from the T and the advocacy group TransitMatters, now is the optimal time to change the zone fares to be more economical and make the commuter rail a more viable option.

The way to do this would be to set all fares within Zones 1A, 1, and 2 at $2.40, even with the subway fare. The subway fare is equal to 21 cents for every mile traveled. Fares for the outer zones would be set proportional to the $2.40 for Zone 2. For example, Worcester is in Zone 8 and currently costs $12.25 to travel from South Station. This new proportional fare system would go down to $8.50. This new price comes from where the average Zone 8 boundary is – 40.6 miles away from Boston. This is the average distance of where the outer edge of Zone 8 is — 40.6 miles at 21 cents per mile is approximately $8.50.

It is worth mentioning that commuter rail already has prices at this cheaper proportion. The commuter rail gets proportionally cheaper as the distance from Boston increases. In North Kingstown, Rhode Island, Wickford Junction is the only Zone 10 station in the network. The 63-mile journey from Wickford Junction to South Station along the Providence Line costs $13.25 each way, equivalent to 21 cents per mile.

A fare change like this would be incredibly beneficial to the entire Greater Boston area, as high fares are often a barrier for many who find it cheaper to drive to their destinations. With the current climate concerns, taking people out of private vehicles and onto public transportation with cheaper fares is a smart idea for the T to adopt.