

The Red Line: A Commuter's Catch-22

By Prithvi G. Tikhe

CAMBRIDGE, MA - “THIS TRAIN IS ON STANDBY,” announced the conductor on the outbound Massachusetts Bay Transportation Authority’s (MBTA) Red Line to Alewife. “WE APOLOGIZE FOR THE INCONVENIENCE.”

I could hear my fellow commuters sigh, and I could see some roll their eyes. Some cursed in disbelief. A man clenched his teeth and complained to his wife about being stranded again on the Red Line. Amidst the frustration, a guy wearing a Boston Red Sox hat and a woman soaked from the rain talked and laughed.

The doors of the car caught me off-guard, and I almost fell on the platform – the doors opened, closed and opened again. The crowd at the Kendall/MIT platform pushed through the car to find their own imaginary space, while a lady scoffed at a passenger for occupying a seat beside her with grocery bags.

“If there is a delay, it is always a signal or a switch issue,” said Victoria Randall, 27, a consultant from Dorchester, who commutes on the Red Line daily between Shawmut and Alewife. “I don’t know what the MBTA can do to remedy the problem permanently or for a long period of time.”

According to *The Boston Globe*, the MBTA estimated that between a quarter and a third of all subway delays are the result of signal issues. MBTA officials say they plan to spend \$352 million to improve the signal systems on the Red and Orange Lines before new subway cars for each line arrive by 2023.

John Anderson, a passenger recently moved to the city from Dallas.

“I can get to where I need to go pretty quickly, and if you look at Google Maps and compare driving times versus your commute times they go neck-and-neck,” he said. “Look at that guy; he’s going to be stuck in this train for a while.” I turned around to see a man with his face in his hands.

About 15 minutes later, the doors closed and the train moved.

Stephane Dumas, an immigrant from France, finds the Metro in Paris to be faster than the Red Line.

“I am surprised to see that in 2017, the flash light signals the conductor to close the doors at rush hour,” he said. “It seems to be a rather low-tech system.”

Much to my relief, the train no longer stalled and I found a seat after the train left Harvard Square.

Sophie Green, a student, occasionally rides the Red Line, but said the MBTA should reorganize the stops along the major hubs of the city and add one in the Mattapan/Dorchester area.

“If the MBTA had no budget problems and infinite time, they should redesign the entire system,” she said.

On overhearing us, an engineer from Somerville, Amanda W., offered a solution for the utopian world where MBTA has no budget problems, which small business owner, Oliver Mak, said is “never going to happen.”

“Actually there has been significant improvements in the quality for last 10 years: the

Red Line has some new cars, AC failures have become less common,” Amanda said. “The MBTA has been doing as much as they can at least to update that part of the T.”

I was curious what a visitor thought of the Red Line, so I called Aathmika Krishnan, a native San Diegan, who was a summer intern at Massachusetts General Hospital.

She said she appreciated the MBTA’s Red Line during her time in the city.

“In comparison to cars, the Red Line is very efficient, quick, and often limits travel time,” Krishnan said in a phone interview. “The Red Line is older and does break down occasionally, but serves its purpose of transporting people in a quick and efficient manner.”

The train is not the only problem along MBTA’s Red Line.

In response to my question about the general condition of the Red Line stations, Sean Duggan, a salesman who commutes from Braintree, said the MBTA definitely needs to fix the flooding, which happens whenever it rains or the snow melts at Alewife station.

“It is ridiculous when you are coming into work in your dress shoes and pants and you have to hike them up like you are wearing a skirt, despite which it is soaked by the time you get to work,” Duggan said. “I am surprised no one has fallen down.”

The train stopped again at a signal between Davis and Alewife.

“TRAFFIC AHEAD OF US,” announced the conductor. “WE WILL BE MOVING SHORTLY.”

A passenger raised his arms and shook his head.

A few minutes later, a train passed by in the opposite direction, and commuters started to head towards the door.

The train crawled into the station before coming to a halt.

“LAST STOP, ALEWIFE; DON’T FORGET YOUR BELONGINGS,” an automated recording said. “THANK YOU FOR RIDING THE T.”

I would like to retreat into the utopian world where the Red Line is free of problems and is a smooth sailing system, but winter is coming, and, according to Sheena Ernest, a makeup artist from Portland, Maine, “That’s usually when they have the most problems.”