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Sciortino gets boost on MBTA bailout bill

By Auditi Guha

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SOMERVILLE - The nation's oldest public transport is in a financial crunch. A bill sponsored by area legislators to have the state foot the MBTA's bill before it gets any worse was recently seconded by the Transportation Finance Commission.

Rep. Carl Sciortino is the lead sponsor of the MBTA Debt Relief Bill, which calls for the state to provide an annual reimbursement to the MBTA for the money it pays toward its "legacy debt" — funds the MBTA is still paying the city of Boston for the Big Dig — which would amount to about \$280 million a year.

"As a daily T rider myself, I see the impact of the MBTA's finances being in a mess with a lack of maintenance, unreliable service and an inability to make expansions," Sciortino said. "This bill would help reduce the debt burden of the T and help get their finances in order."

Legislators who have signed off on the bill believe this is the best way to ensure that the Green Line extension project can be on track.

"I think it's a really good idea," said Sen. Patricia Jehlen, D-Somerville. "It would make us much more like to get the green line extension in a timely manner."

"Forward funding is ruining the MBTA," said Rep. Denise Provost, D-Somerville. "We have to look at a number of solutions but it is clear that if we stay with forward funding alone that maintenance will be deferred and service will suffer."

The MBTA devotes 27 percent of its annual budget or \$363 million to pay off debt, and it is the authority's largest single expense, according to information from the Massachusetts Public Interest Research Group.

The MBTA's funding has also suffered because its external funding source has fallen short of the Legislature's expectations. In 2000, the Legislature allocated to the MBTA 20 percent of the state's 5 percent sales tax as a way to replace most annual allocations.

According to the Mass. Public Interest Research Group, until this debt problem is solved, the MBTA will continue to request rate hikes to bridge its operating deficits, and will do nothing to address its backlog of necessary service improvements. Without action, the problem will only get worse.

"If we don't address this, we will continue to see more of the lack of maintenance and increasing fares," Sciortino said.

In January, the MBTA raised fares on the subway from \$1.25 to \$1.70 for riders using the CharlieCard and to \$2 for people using the CharlieTicket or cash. Bus fares also rose from 90 cents to \$1.25.

The bill, filed Jan. 10, was recently discussed by at Transportation Committee hearing. Both the House and Senate chairs were supportive and plan to incorporate it into transportation reform, Sciortino said.

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