

STARTS & STOPS

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MBTA getting set to buy long-needed locomotives for commuter rail

By Noah Bierman, Globe Staff | March 7, 2010

The MBTA is finally getting ready to buy locomotives for its commuter rail system, a long-delayed purchase that is vital to getting the 70,000 people who depend on the trains every day to get to work on time.

Engine failure is one of the major sources of delay for commuter rail trains and the T's locomotive fleet is very old. Of the 80 locomotives owned by the transit system, 43 were built before 1988, many in the 1970s. Locomotives are supposed to last about 25 years each.

The T's dire financial situation - coupled with potential legal problems over bidding - has stalled and scaled down promises that have been made for years. The current plan is to buy 20 trains.

The T would not give out a cost estimate before it negotiates a final contract, but previous estimates would put the cost at more than \$100 million (the federal government is expected to pick up 80 percent of the tab).

Bids were due last month and the first of the new locomotives is expected to roll out in two to three years, said MBTA spokesman Joe Pesaturo. He would not say how many companies bid, again citing the ongoing negotiations.

As recently as 2007, the T had pledged to buy 38 locomotives. The number was dropped to 28 as the agency struggled under multibillion-dollar debt. At the end of 2008, the T was on the verge of awarding a \$148.5 million contract to Vossloh Espana S.A., a Spanish unit of a German company.

But a challenge over federal "Buy America" requirements initiated by the losing bidder, MotivePower Inc. of Boise, Idaho, left the T worried about a costly legal battle, regardless of which company it chose. In January 2009, then-general manager Daniel A. Grabauskas halted the project temporarily. The process was restarted in the fall.

Commuters can only hope this time is the real deal.

Walking group has a major footing in transportation

There probably aren't many people who consider themselves antiwalking. But that didn't stop a half a dozen local activists from gathering for drinks at Jacob Wirth two decades ago to imagine a prowalking group.

"They were very unfriendly times for pedestrians," explained Ann Hershfang, one of the original organizers. "The sidewalks were too narrow. They tended to disappear in places. The walk/don't walk lights never said 'walk.'"

So maybe they had too much time on their hands. But the idea stuck. And 20 years later, WalkBoston is one of the region's most influential transportation groups, a model for similar advocacy organizations around the country that followed it.

They've given out walking maps of the city at the Democratic National Convention in 2004, coordinated walk-to-school programs that combat obesity, pushed hard to replace the old elevated highway with green space and walkways, and been an occasional thorn in the side of developers and bureaucrats who they believed weren't giving pedestrians a fair shake.

Hershfang thinks one of the group's biggest accomplishments is its imprint on the consciousness of local residents and decision-makers: getting people to recognize the difference between places that are comfortable to navigate for walkers and those that pose challenges. Are the walkways too narrow? Lacking in shade? Do traffic lights give people enough opportunity to cross the street?

"It hasn't been in the policy making, it hasn't really been high on the list," said Wendy Landman, WalkBoston's current executive director. "And that's changing, both at the state and the federal level."

Over the past two years, Massachusetts and the city of Boston have put more emphasis on pedestrian and bicycle access as they rebuild old bridges and roadways. The new governor-appointed, five-member board that sets policy for the state transportation system includes former WalkBoston president Liz Levin .

The federal government has recently linked departments that deal with transportation, housing, and the environment, a recognition that the places we live, the air we breathe, and how we get around are dependent on each other in many ways.

Landman noted the link between walking and physical health and pointed out that people who use public transit are far likelier to walk or bike as part of their trips.

But does walking really need its own advocacy group? Isn't that like being in favor of breathing or eating?

"I don't think we're advocating for anything weird," Landman said. "It's the club that everybody belongs to, so they forget that they're members, in a way."

That doesn't mean there aren't conflicts between cars and pedestrians. Just ask anyone stuck in traffic as walkers dart in front of them without regard to the traffic lights. And there is already lots of controversy over plans to permanently reduce the width of the Boston University Bridge from four lanes to three to allow better access for bikes and walkers.

Landman said the balance swung too far toward the car in the second half of the 20th century. Fears about the negative effects of reconfiguring traffic on cars often prove less dramatic than opponents expect, she said.

In the meantime, the group is encouraged by national statistics showing that more people are choosing to walk and use bicycles to get around. And they are hoping state lawmakers pass a bill, now moving through the Legislature with support from Mayor Thomas M. Menino, that lowers prevailing speed limits in urban areas from 30 to 25 miles per hour.

This Thursday, WalkBoston will celebrate its 20-year milestone with - a walk, of course. After a tour of South End walking improvements, the walkers will gather to hand out the coveted Golden Shoe awards for transportation advocacy at their annual meeting and birthday party. ■