

**MAKING TRANSIT FREE, FREQUENT,
AND RELIABLE:**

**MASSACHUSETTS SHOWS THE NEED
FOR FEDERAL INVESTMENT
IN FARE-FREE TRANSIT**

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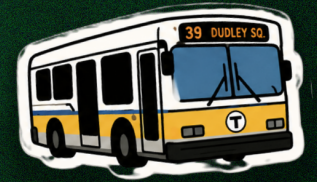
MASSACHUSETTS HAS EMERGED AS A NATIONAL LEADER IN FARE-FREE TRANSIT POLICY

American families are facing an affordability crisis, and transportation is a major part of the problem. Every trip to work, school, medical care, childcare, or the grocery store carries a cost, and those costs add up quickly for families already stretched thin by rising rent, food, and utility bills. Yet, policymakers have an evidence-based way to lower daily travel costs while strengthening public transportation: fare-free transit. Massachusetts has put that policy to the test, and the results are clear. When fare-free transit is backed by reliable operating support, riders save money, ridership grows, and communities get a stronger transit system.

Massachusetts has emerged as a national leader in fare-free transit policy. Massachusetts is home to several long-running fare-free systems, including in the Merrimack Valley and Worcester, which offer insight into both the immediate and sustained effects of eliminating fares. In Boston, federal investments from the 2021 American Rescue Plan helped jump-start fare-free service on three of Boston's busiest bus lines. Then, in 2023, 2024, and 2025, the Massachusetts Department of Transportation (MassDOT) awarded \$47.5 million to regional transit authorities (RTAs) to pilot fare-free service across three phased pilot programs. Separately, in 2024, the Massachusetts Bay Transportation Authority (MBTA) launched its Income-Eligible Reduced Fare program, offering additional evidence that lowering fares can increase access and ridership.

Together, these programs created a broad statewide test across agencies serving rural, urban, suburban, seasonal, and college communities.

THE MASSACHUSETTS EVIDENCE POINTS TO FIVE CORE LESSONS. FARE-FREE TRANSIT:



1. LOWERS COSTS FOR RIDERS.
2. BRINGS RIDERS BACK TO TRANSIT.
3. LEADS TO LONG-TERM RIDERSHIP GAINS.
4. MAKES TRANSIT EASIER TO USE AND OPERATE.
5. WORKS BEST WHEN PAIRED WITH OPERATING SUPPORT.

These lessons make a clear case for federal support for fare-free transit programs. Congress should build on the Massachusetts model by passing the *Freedom to Move Act*, which would create a \$25 billion grant program to help communities make transit free, frequent, and reliable without forcing transit agencies to choose between eliminating fares and improving service.

Massachusetts has shown that fare-free transit can lower costs, increase ridership, and strengthen service when it is backed by sustained public investment. *The Freedom to Move Act* would give communities across the country the resources to achieve the same results.

Massachusetts is showing the nation that fare-free transit works best when it is sustained and supported. Data from Massachusetts' pilot program, individual regional transit agencies, and Boston's fare-free buses illustrate five important lessons about fare-free service.

1. FARE-FREE TRANSIT LOWERS COSTS FOR RIDERS

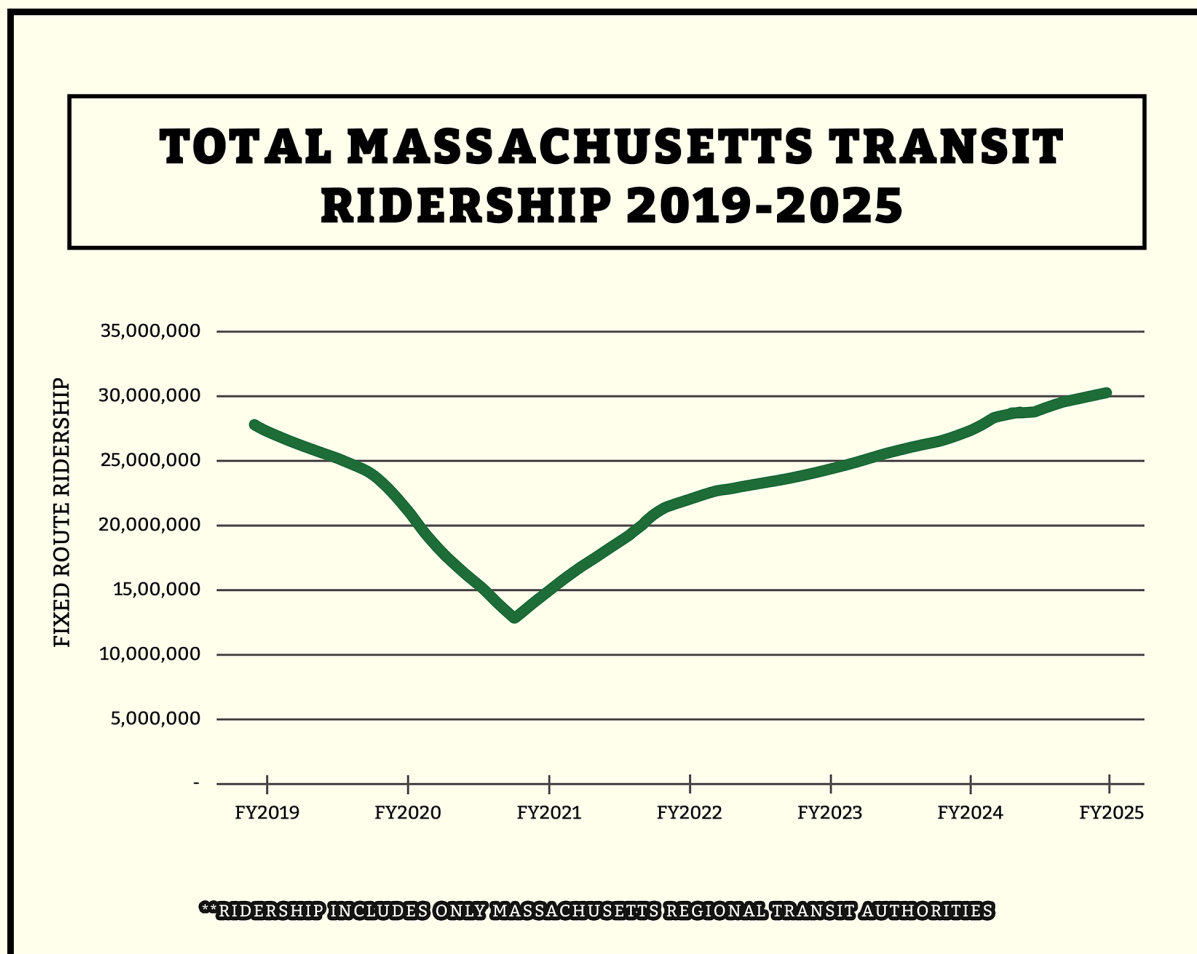
First, providing fare-free service immediately eliminates the cost of fares. Transit fares are a significant cost for many riders who are also facing higher costs for groceries, rent, and utilities. Consequently, eliminating those fares can result in significant — and important — savings for riders, who are disproportionately likely to be low-income.¹ That makes fare-free transit especially important for low-income workers, students, seniors, people with disabilities, and families without reliable access to a car. For example, when the Merrimack Valley Regional Transit Authority (MeVa) went fare-free, a MeVa bus rider saved an average of \$230 annually by avoiding fares.² Riders are using these cost savings to help pay for internet and cell phone service and groceries.³

Similarly, after Boston eliminated fares on three of its most popular bus lines, more than a quarter of riders reported saving more than \$20 per month.⁴ More broadly, across Massachusetts RTAs in 2025, riders saved roughly \$52 million across 26 million free bus rides.⁵ Families can use these savings for other critical household needs, including buying new school supplies for their children, paying the internet bill, or affording rising grocery prices.



RIDERS SAVED ROUGHLY
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Second, fare-free transit saves riders even more money by making it cheaper to switch from more expensive forms of travel, such as traveling by taxi, by rideshare, or in a private car. For example, families can save roughly \$2,000 per year by replacing just 20 percent of their car trips with a different means of travel, such as free transit.⁶ The savings are even greater if fare-free transit allows a family to forgo owning a car — or a second car — altogether, because owning one car costs more than \$10,000 annually in car payments, fuel, insurance, and maintenance costs.⁷ These are significant savings.



Massachusetts provides important evidence that fare-free transit can reduce transportation costs beyond the farebox by helping riders shift trips away from more expensive forms of travel.

Since 2021, as Massachusetts RTAs have introduced fare-free programs at different times and with different conditions, RTAs have typically seen major increases in ridership after going fare-free, often either outpacing previous growth in ridership or reversing declining ridership.⁸ Some of that growth reflects service improvements, post-pandemic recovery, and other local factors, but the consistent increases in ridership across the phased adoption of fare-free transit by the RTAs strongly suggest that fare-free service contributed to higher ridership. Additionally, evidence shows that free transit didn't just boost ridership, it replaced more expensive trips for many riders.

IN THE MERRIMACK VALLEY, 19 PERCENT OF MEVA'S FREE BUS TRIPS WOULD OTHERWISE HAVE BEEN TAKEN BY PRIVATE VEHICLE, TAXI, OR RIDESHARE.

That reduction matters for the family budget.⁹

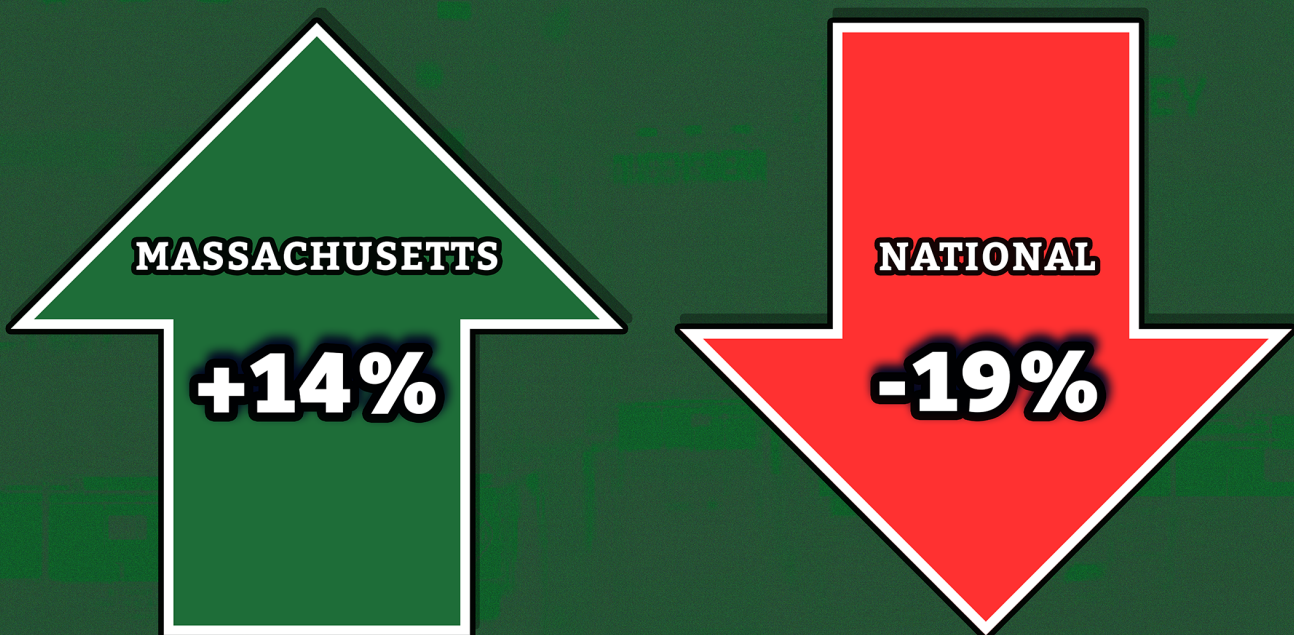
Taken together, the Massachusetts fare-free program offers strong evidence that fare-free service saves riders money and gives people a lower-cost alternative to cars, taxis, and rideshare.



2. FARE-FREE TRANSIT BRINGS RIDERS BACK TO TRANSIT

Fare-free transit can help public transportation recover from severe shocks and ridership declines. Following the COVID-19 pandemic, transit ridership declined dramatically. Even six years after the onset of the pandemic, national transit ridership is at only 81 percent of pre-pandemic levels.¹⁰ That decline matters beyond transit agencies' finances: when fewer people ride transit, more people are pushed toward cars, worsening congestion, increasing household transportation costs, and making roads more dangerous. Today, compared to pre-pandemic metrics, traffic congestion has increased¹¹ and road deaths remain far too high.¹² Restoring and exceeding pre-pandemic ridership is therefore central to building a safer, less congested, and more affordable transportation system — and Massachusetts shows that fare-free transit can help do it.

2025 TRANSIT RIDERSHIP COMPARED TO PRE-PANDEMIC LEVELS



**RIDERSHIP INCLUDES ONLY MASSACHUSETTS REGIONAL TRANSIT AUTHORITIES

Massachusetts provides some of the strongest evidence that fare-free transit can accelerate ridership recovery. In 2025, two years after launching its fare-free pilot, fixed-route ridership across Massachusetts's 15 RTAs was 14 percent higher than 2019 levels, the first year since the pandemic that transit ridership exceeded pre-pandemic levels.¹³ This recovery was notably strongest among transit agencies with continuous fare-free service.¹⁴ Across all 15 agencies, seven saw higher ridership in 2025 than in 2019, and all seven offered some continuous fare-free service. In fact, agencies with the longest-running fare-free programs had the greatest recovery in ridership relative to pre-pandemic levels.¹⁵

For example, Worcester, which has offered fare-free service since 2020, notably exceeded pre-pandemic ridership by 2022¹⁶, and its transit ridership is now 60.7 percent higher than pre-pandemic levels, the highest among any of the RTAs.¹⁷ Similarly, in Boston, the city's fare-free bus routes saw ridership recovery that outpaced the bus system as a whole.¹⁸

Taken together, the Massachusetts fare-free program has not only resulted in higher transit ridership year over year but is also helping drive ridership back *above* pre-pandemic levels — a major achievement compared to the rest of the country.

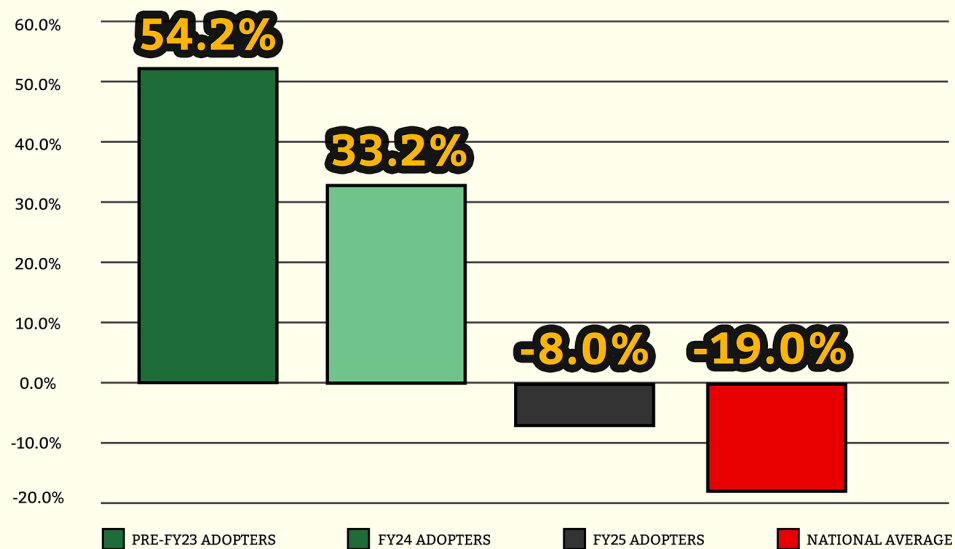
The core lesson is straightforward: when communities remove fares and sustain or expand service, riders come back.



3. FARE-FREE TRANSIT LEADS TO LONG-TERM RIDERSHIP GAINS

Massachusetts RTAs show that the boost in ridership from fare-free service is not a short-term trend, but a long-term strategy to increase ridership. Ridership gains above 2019 levels appear to be more pronounced among the agencies that have offered fare-free service the longest. Agencies that have offered fare-free service since 2023 or earlier saw a 54 percent increase in fixed-route ridership over 2019 levels.¹⁹ Agencies that began continuous fare-free service in 2024 still saw a 33 percent increase in fixed-route ridership over 2019 levels.²⁰ These data confirm an initial trend identified in MassDOT's 2024 report: agencies with long- and medium-term fare-free service saw ridership increases above 2019 levels.²¹

2025 RIDERSHIP COMPARED TO 2019, BY FARE-FREE ADOPTION



**RIDERSHIP INCLUDES ONLY MASSACHUSETTS REGIONAL TRANSIT AUTHORITIES

The data also show that fare-free service is not magic: the largest ridership growth may come in the first one or two years after fares are eliminated and then stabilize to smaller but reliable ridership gains. Agencies with fare-free service dating back before 2023 saw less growth from 2024 to 2025 than agencies that implemented continuous fare-free service in 2024. But that does not weaken the case for sustained service. Those longer-running fare-free systems still grew year over year and remained above 2019 levels, showing that fare-free service can produce durable gains even after the initial surge moderates.

Offered Fare-free Service Pre-2023	Offered Continuous Fare-free Service Starting in 2024	Offered Continuous Fare-free Starting service in 2025	Did not offer continuous Fare-free
100 percent of agencies saw ridership increases over 2019	60 percent of agencies saw ridership increase over 2019	20 percent of agencies saw ridership increase over 2019	0 percent saw ridership increase over 2019



4. FARE-FREE TRANSIT MAKES TRANSIT EASIER TO USE AND OPERATE

Fare-free transit can also help increase ridership because it makes riding transit easier and smoother. In Massachusetts, riders reported that eliminating fares made transit simpler and more convenient. Riders no longer had to worry about finding cash or navigating fare systems; Cape Ann Transportation Authority riders appreciated not needing cash, Southeastern Regional Transit Authority (SRTA) riders expressed gratitude for free fares, and Montachusett Regional Transit Authority riders cited better accessibility and convenience.²² For riders who depend on transit for daily needs, that simplicity matters: no fare means no searching for exact change, no rationing trips, and fewer barriers between people and the places they need to go. To that end, MeVa also reported that rider complaints dropped by nearly half after fare-free service began and have remained low even as ridership grew substantially.²³

Agencies reported operational benefits as well. Eliminating fares reduced negative farebox-related interactions, shortened boarding delays, improved on-time performance, and made service easier for operators to manage. MeVa found that fare-free service saved staff time equivalent to three full-time employees and cut in half the time buses spent boarding and deboarding passengers;²⁴ Nantucket Regional Transit Authority, Lowell Regional Transit Authority, and MetroWest Regional Transit Authority also reported reduced times boarding and deboarding.²⁵ These improvements do not mean fare-free service eliminates every operational challenge; some RTAs also reported crowding, capacity pressure, and isolated rider-management issues. But those challenges reinforce the case for sustained operating support rather than weakening the evidence that fare-free service can make transit easier to use and operate.



5: FARE-FREE TRANSIT WORKS BEST WHEN PAIRED WITH OPERATING SUPPORT

Fare-free transit is not a no-cost policy; it is a high-value transportation investment. Fares account for a relatively small share of RTA operating funds, but agencies still need to replace lost fare revenue, manage higher ridership, and address the capacity and demand-response cost pressures that can come with successful fare-free service. As the Massachusetts example has illustrated, with reliable state and federal support, transit agencies can offer free service without compromising fixed-route offerings, service reliability, or accessibility.

MASSACHUSETTS SHOWS THAT FREE FARES AND BETTER SERVICE DO NOT HAVE TO BE COMPETING GOALS.

With support from the state, transit agencies such as MeVa and SRTA were able to reject that false tradeoff by eliminating fares while also expanding hours of service. Those service improvements likely contributed to ridership growth, but they do not explain the full increase. The SRTA saw a 42 percent increase in passengers per vehicle hour,²⁶ and MeVa reported an increase in ridership per revenue mile of service — evidence that ridership grew even after accounting, in part, for expanded service.²⁷ The lesson is not that fare-free service solves every transit challenge. Instead, fare-free service can work alongside better service when agencies have the resources to do both.



That is why sustained operating support matters. Fare revenue is only one piece of regional transit budgets, but losing it still creates real fiscal pressure, especially as successful fare-free programs attract more riders and increase demand for fixed-route and paratransit service. Massachusetts's state investment helped agencies absorb those pressures while continuing to operate fare-free service. Unsurprisingly, participating regional transit authorities reported that they would need continued support from the state or other sources to keep fare-free service in place. For communities that want free, frequent, and reliable transit, the policy choice cannot be fares or service. It has to be sustained investment in both.

MASSACHUSETTS DID NOT PROVE THAT TRANSIT AGENCIES CAN DO MORE WITH LESS. IT PROVED THAT WHEN PUBLIC AGENCIES RECEIVE RELIABLE OPERATING SUPPORT, THEY CAN LOWER COSTS FOR RIDERS, INCREASE RIDERSHIP, SIMPLIFY AND EXPAND SERVICE, AND IMPROVE MOBILITY.



THE NEED FOR A NATIONAL INVESTMENT IN FARE-FREE TRANSIT

The affordability, safety, and climate crises facing our country demand serious federal investment in public transportation. Daily travel is breaking household budgets, car-centric roads contribute to tens of thousands of deaths each year, and transportation remains the nation's largest source of greenhouse gas emissions. Fare-free transit is not the only answer to these challenges, but the Massachusetts experience shows that it can be a powerful tool: **lowering costs for riders, increasing ridership, simplifying service, and helping more people choose transit over more expensive forms of travel.**

**FARE-FREE TRANSIT ALSO
ADVANCES CORE NATIONAL
TRANSPORTATION GOALS.**

Fare-free transit also advances core national transportation goals. Federal transportation policy is built around safety, congestion reduction, economic mobility, reliable infrastructure, and environmental sustainability. Massachusetts shows how fare-free transit can support those goals in practice: riders saved money, ridership increased, some trips shifted away from cars, and agencies reported simpler, more efficient service. These are not merely local benefits. When transit becomes more affordable and more useful, communities can reduce household transportation costs, ease traffic pressure on roads, expand access to jobs and services, and move toward a cleaner, safer transportation system.

The Massachusetts lesson is not that agencies can eliminate fares without resources. It is that fare-free transit works best when agencies receive sustained operating support. Fares are only one piece of transit budgets, but replacing that revenue and managing higher demand still requires funding. That support is especially important as transit agencies continue to recover from the COVID-19 pandemic, rebuild ridership, and stabilize service after years of disruption. Fare-free service can reduce some costs associated with fare collection, farebox maintenance, and fare enforcement, but it is not a substitute for robust transit funding. Without public investment, agencies can be forced into the wrong choice: free fares or better service. Communities deserve both.

Additionally, compared to smaller agencies, larger transit agencies may struggle to eliminate fares entirely. These larger agencies may have significantly higher operating costs — in some cases because they provide light and heavy rail service — making it difficult to replace lost fare revenue. These larger agencies still need and deserve significant federal investments to keep fares low while offering better service. For instance, the MBTA has shown that even reducing fares can yield increases in ridership. Riders enrolled in the MBTA's Income-Eligible Reduced Fare program ride the MBTA system four times as frequently as the average full-fare transit rider, with enrollment in the program increasing by more than 50 percent in its second fiscal year.²⁸ MBTA is doubling down on these successes and recently announced offering free transit to seniors who no longer drive.²⁹ Offering fare-free service for specific populations is a good step for larger agencies who may otherwise struggle to reduce fares. The MBTA's program is further evidence of the benefits of reduced fares.

The **Freedom to Move Act** provides the federal framework for scaling the Massachusetts experience across the country. It would not force fare-free service on any community. Instead, it would make a historic investment in transit operations and give communities the resources to eliminate fares, expand service, or do both. The bill would invest \$25 billion over five years in transit systems to support fare-free service and stronger operations. Massachusetts has shown what is possible when communities receive sustained support: riders save money, ridership grows, transit becomes easier to use, and more people have a real alternative to driving.

Congress should pass the **Freedom to Move Act** and help deliver better, safer, cleaner, and more affordable transportation for every American who drives, rides, rolls, or walks on our public roads.

¹ Phineas Baxandall, Free Buses Advance Equity, Massachusetts Budget and Policy Center (Mar. 2021), <https://massbudget.org/2021/03/24/free-buses-advance-equity/>.

² MeVa Fare Free Evaluation and Business Case (Feb. 2025), https://mevatransit.com/wp-content/uploads/2025/02/MeVa_Fare_Free_Analysis_02042025.pdf.

³ Id.

⁴ City of Boston Fare Free Program Mid Program Report (Mar. 2023), <https://www.boston.gov/sites/default/files/file/2023/03/Fare%20Free%20Mid%20Program%20Report.pdf>.

⁵ Data was derived from MassDOT Transit Analysis (July 24, 2026).

⁶ States Can Quantify the Benefits of Climate-Friendly Transportation Options with RMI's Smarter Modes Calculator, Rocky Mountain Institute, <https://rmi.org/states-can-quantify-the-benefits-of-climate-friendly-transportation-options-with-rmis-smarter-modes-calculator/> (last visited Mar. 17, 2026).

⁷ Transit Savings Grow as Auto Costs and Gas Prices Increase, American Public Transportation Association (Sept. 27, 2023), <https://www.apta.com/wp-content/uploads/APTA-POLICY-BRIEF-TransitSavings-09.27.2023.pdf>.

⁸ Fare Free Pilot Program for RTAs, MassDOT Rail and Transit Division, 20 (Mar. 2025) (finding significant ridership gains among RTAs that launched fare free programs in the second half of fiscal year 2024 and explaining that “the introduction of fare free fixed route service . . . was a driving factor behind the increase”); Annual Report on the Fare Free Pilot Program, MassDOT Rail and Transit Division, 15 (Mar. 2026) (finding significant ridership gains among RTAs that went fare free in fiscal year 2025, along with even stronger gains for those RTAs that went fare free in fiscal year 2024).

⁹ MeVa Fare Free Evaluation and Business Case, *supra* note 2.

¹⁰ Jared Bonina and Matthew Dickens, APTA Public Transportation Ridership Update, American Public Transportation Association (Apr. 2026), <https://www.apta.com/wp-content/uploads/2026/04/APTA-POLICY-BRIEF-Transit-Ridership-04-08-2026.pdf>.

¹¹ David Jen, Traffic jams are worse than ever – experts blame hybrid work, a COVID legacy, American Society of Civil Engineers (Mar. 23, 2026), <https://www.asce.org/publications-and-news/civil-engineering-source/article/2026/03/23/traffic-jams-are-worse-than-ever-experts-blame-hybrid-work-a-covid-legacy>.

¹² Fatalities Facts 2024, Insurance Institute for Highway Safety, <https://www.iihs.org/research-areas/fatality-statistics/detail/state-by-state> (last visited July 16, 2026).

¹³ Annual Report on the Fare Free Pilot Program, *supra* note 8, at 14.

¹⁴ Id. at 11-12.

¹⁵ Id. at 16.

¹⁶ Resurging Regional Ridership, Worcester Regional Research Bureau, 23-03 (Apr. 2023), <https://www.wrrb.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/04/Resurging-Regional-Ridership-FINAL-VERSION.pdf>.

¹⁷ Annual Report on the Fare Free Pilot Program, *supra* note 8, at 13.

¹⁸ Niki Griswold and Jamie Moore-Carrillo, Boston to keep three MBTA bus routes free to ride through June, but long-term plan is unclear, The Boston Globe (Feb. 20, 2026), <https://www.bostonglobe.com/2026/02/20/metro/boston-fare-free-bus-pilot-funding-deadline/>.

¹⁹ Annual Report on the Fare Free Pilot Program, *supra* note 8, at 15.

²⁰ Id.

²¹ Fare Free Pilot Program for RTAs, *supra* note 8, at 17.

²² Annual Report on the Fare Free Pilot Program, *supra* note 8, at 33.

²³ Id. at 34.

²⁴ Id. at 8.

²⁵ Id. at 34.

²⁶ Phineas Baxandall, Fare-Free Public Buses are Yielding Results in Southeastern Massachusetts, Massachusetts Budget and Policy Center (Jan. 13, 2025), <https://massbudget.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/01/SRTA-Free-Fares-1.pdf>.

²⁷ MeVa Fare Free Evaluation and Business Case, *supra* note 2.

²⁸ Massachusetts Bay Transportation Authority, MBTA Income-Eligible Reduced Fare (IERF) Program Continues to Successfully Grow, Serving Nearly 45,000 Riders with Enrollment Surpassing FY26 Projections (July 16, 2026), <https://www.mbta.com/news/2026-07-16/mbta-income-eligible-reduced-fare-ierf-program-continues-successfully-grow-serving>.

²⁹ Press Release, Governor Healey Announces New MBTA Affordability Initiatives, Extends Commuter Rail Savings Through Fall (July 28, 2026).