


RTA Zero Fare Policy Brief 3: Benefits to Agencies: Zero Fare Gets People There

Zero Fare Speeds Boarding Times

- Zero fare allows for faster passenger boarding at stops and therefore quicker overall travel times.
- The typical time to pay a transit fare varies from 2 - 5 seconds for electronic fare cards and passes, and as much as 15 to 30 seconds to pay with coins at the farebox.
- High volume transit stops may have 10 to 20 people board at once, and even three or four out of 20 paying with cash and getting change can delay a bus by 2 minutes or more.
- Zero fares eliminates the fare payment process, so the bus can keep moving.

Case Study: Zero Fare Speeds Boardings in Boston

A recent pilot of zero fare service in Boston found that riders were able to board the bus 23% faster by not having to interact with the farebox. Over the course of a day, this saved nearly 5 hours of dwell time at stops.

 Bus Operations Data	Route	Pre-pilot Dwell Time per Passenger (sec)	During Pilot Dwell Time per Passenger (sec)	Actual change (sec)	% change
	28	7.7	5.9	-1.7	-23%

The MBTA Route 28 saw a 38% increase in ridership during the Zero Fare Pilot in 2021, and ridership reached 99% of pre-pandemic levels, which was the highest pandemic-era ridership recovery in the MBTA system. Even though ridership went up 38%, faster boarding times kept peak hour delays low.

Additional Benefits of Zero Fare: Fare Collection Cost Savings

- Managing/securing cash costs money. Transit agencies pay for armored cars to take large sums of cash to banks, audits to ensure money is accounted for correctly, maintaining and upgrading payment systems, and overall financial management.
- Expensive collection and counting equipment is required at bus garages. Broken fare boxes need money to be repaired.
- It takes trained staff who know how to use and maintain these machines to manage collections.
- Fare recovery, what the passenger pays to use the service, can be as low as 10 to 15 cents on the dollar of general operating expenses, and sometimes even lower.
- In agencies with lower farebox recovery levels, the cost to collect the fares may exceed 50% or more of the fares collected.

Reduced Passenger and Operator Conflicts

- The most common source of conflict between passengers and transit staff occurs when passengers do not have money to pay the fare. Zero fare removes this tension and can reduce conflict and stress on operators.