

The Next Stop Remains to Be Seen

Right on schedule, the 7:45 am MBTA commuter train arrives at Wickford Junction, where more than two dozen passengers hop on for the ride north. Some are heading to Warwick or Providence, others all the way up to Boston.



The rail service began with great fanfare a year ago, the culmination of more than a decade of planning and a \$44 million investment by taxpayers to build the station and an adjacent four-story 1,100 car parking garage. The garage itself accounted for \$25 million of the total cost.

A year later, the Massachusetts Bay Transit Authority-run service is attracting about 200 daily riders, most going to Boston. But just 80 people a day are paying the \$4 parking rate needed to help offset a half a million dollar annual bill to maintain the mammoth garage. The state needs 500 vehicles parking and paying daily to break even.

Rhode Island Department of Transportation (DOT) Director Michael Lewis says the commuter rail service is very much a work-in-progress, but he is satisfied so far with the numbers the trains are drawing most weekdays. There is no weekend service.

“The total numbers using it are less than we had hoped in the early years. We always knew this was going to take time and I’m not talking months,” Lewis told *The Hummel Report*. “This is years to have the ridership grow to what predications were when the project was planned.”

Those predictions are that 1,500 passengers will ride daily out of Wickford Junction within seven years, and three-quarters of them will pay to park.

“With the employment growth expected in the Providence area and in the state over time, the 2020 projections are that the parking garage will be virtually full,” he said.

It is a long way off from what we saw at the garage last month. One day there was a total of 71 cars on the first and second levels. The third level and the fourth, which is an outside deck, were totally empty.

Lewis says Wickford Junction is where the Providence train station was with the MBTA commuter rail to Boston when it first started in the late '80s, and he's confident one day it will be where the Providence service is now - one of the most popular services on the line.

It is the taxpayers, though, who will have to pick up the tab until then.

That's because the state has a contract with a private company to maintain the garage. Lewis says the price is about \$45,000 a month, more than half a million dollars per year. It is a beautifully landscaped facility, with extensive shrubbery, lush grass, and flowers planted around the garage. The interior of the garage is immaculate and looks much the way it did a year ago when it first opened. Add to that the cost of electricity and snow plowing and the maintenance costs exceed \$650,000 a year.

But DOT figures show revenues generated by parking and concessions brought in just under \$58,000 over the first 12 months, which means a federal grant the state secured had to pick up the difference.

The revenue figures were lower than expected because the DOT offered free parking and rides on Wednesdays during February and March - one of the promotions Lewis hopes will help bring in more passengers.

Lewis says there are also many passengers who are dropped off and don't pay for parking - something we saw frequently on our visits to the station last month. One day, dozens of kids from a local elementary school in North Kingstown arrived for a field trip to Boston - an ideal use for the train service - but most of those who came did not use the parking garage.

Hummel: You seem like the manager who's looking at 9-inning game and isn't worried about his pitcher getting rocked in the first couple innings.

Lewis: I think that's a pretty good analogy. It doesn't mean when somebody hits a triple off your starter, you're not wondering, 'Hmmm ... was this a good call?'"

But it's likely to be years down the line before we know for sure.

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