

New Bedford Intercity Express: Service Elimination

May 2022

I. Description

The New Bedford Intercity Express (NB9X) is an express route between the SRTA New Bedford Terminal and the Fall River Terminal. It was started in August 2020 with grant funding from MassDOT as a mitigation measure for COVID-19. The express service was intended to reduce the number of passengers traveling between New Bedford and Fall River on the New Bedford Route 9 – Intercity (NB9) and promote social distancing as a COVID-19 mitigation measure.

The grant funding was extended in July 2021 and the service continued unchanged until January 2022. In response to depleting grant funds and to maintain operations through the end of June 2022, the service was reduced by eliminating trips on Saturday and on weekdays between 10:15 AM and 5:15 PM on January 31, 2022. The measure was intended to extend grant funds with an anticipation that funds would be reissued in July 2022 to continue operations. The funding was not reissued to support continued operation and the route will need to be removed from service by June 30, 2022.

II. Proposed Changes

The service will be eliminated.

III. Title VI Equity Analysis

In accordance with the SRTA 2022 Title VI Program, a Title VI Equity Analysis is required for any service change that permanently decreases a route's daily revenue mileage by more than 25%. The weekday revenue miles of the NB9X are 403.3 and Saturday revenue miles was 345.7. A complete elimination of service represents a Major Service Change which requires a Title VI analysis and a public hearing.

A. Disparate Impact Analysis

A disparate impact occurs when a major service change produces adverse effects on a population that is 60% or more racial minority. The NB9X is a unique route in the SRTA system in that it operates express between the SRTA terminals and does not make stops along its route. Typically, the disparate impact analysis would evaluate the population residing along the route, however due to the unique nature of this route, ridership data and demographics collected through on-board surveys was used for the analysis.

The most recent on-board surveys were conducted in June 2019, prior to the NB9X being introduced, however data was collected on the NB9, which shares a common origin and destination at both SRTA terminals. Additionally, automatic passenger counting data collected on the NB9 since 2019 suggests that most passengers travel the entire length of the route, traveling between terminals. For this analysis, it is assumed that the NB9X and the NB9 share similar demographic characteristics.

Survey data indicates that 43% of riders on the NB9 and by extension, the NB9X identified as a racial minority. Based on this data and in accordance with the SRTA Disparate Impact Policy, there is no finding of a disparate impact by eliminating the service on the NB9X.

B. Disproportionate Burden Analysis

A disproportionate burden occurs when a major service change produces adverse effects on a population that is 60% or more low-income population. The NB9X is a unique route in the SRTA system in that it operates express between the SRTA terminals and does not make stops along its route. Typically, the disproportionate burden analysis would evaluate the population residing along the route, however due to the unique nature of this route, ridership data and demographics collected through on-board surveys was used for the analysis.

The most recent on-board surveys were conducted in June 2019, prior to the NB9X being introduced, however data was collected on the New Bedford Route 9 – Intercity (NB9), which shares a common origin and destination at both SRTA terminals. Additionally, automatic passenger counting data collected on the NB9 since 2019 suggests that most passengers travel the entire length of the route, traveling between terminals. For this analysis, it is assumed that the NB9X and the NB9 share similar demographic characteristics.

Survey data indicates that 75% of riders on the NB9 and by extension, the NB9X identified as a low-income. Based on this data and in accordance with the SRTA Disproportionate Burden Policy, there is disproportionate burden on low-income riders by eliminating the service on the NB9X.

IV. Discussion

The finding of a disproportionate burden is expected since many of SRTA customers identify as low-income. Ideally, the finding would cause consideration for an alternate service plan that reduces the impact the loss of service has on low-income riders. However, the NB9X has been funded through a grant issued by MassDOT. The grant funding is no longer available to SRTA; continuing operation of the NB9X would have to be funded through the SRTA fixed route operating budget. Unfortunately, fixed route operating costs have been outpacing increases in funding to support operations and because of this, the NB9X is financially unsustainable.

Eliminating service is not preferred and it is the goal of SRTA to ensure that when service is eliminated, customers continue to have options to make their journey. The NB9X is a parallel service with the NB9, offering the advantage of a trip that is half the time between New Bedford and Fall River. Eliminating the service does not leave customers without a means to make the trip, however it lengthens the time needed for the trip.

When a Disparate Impact and/or Disproportionate Burden analysis results in a finding, SRTA has the obligation to avoid the impact or burden as a first response. If the impact or burden can not be avoided, reasonable attempts must be made to minimize the effects and provide a mitigation measure. For the elimination of the NB9X, the continued operation of the NB9 provides a reasonable mitigation. The NB9 operates a longer span of service than the NB9X and operates more frequently during the peak hours of SRTA fixed route service; the NB9 departs from both New Bedford and Fall River terminals every thirty minutes on weekdays between the hours of 9 AM and 5 PM. SRTA customers will continue to have service between New Bedford and Fall River, as was the case prior to the implementation of the NB9X.

The elimination of the NB9X represents a net loss of service for SRTA customers. Reasonable efforts have been made to ensure that customers will continue to have options for their journey. The service reduction is not the preference of SRTA, however the operating budget for the fixed route system must balance with available funds. Keeping the NB9X in service would require substantial reductions in service elsewhere in the fixed route system. Considering that the NB9X is a parallel service, eliminating the service is the most feasible option with the lowest possible impact on the communities served and the customers of SRTA.