

NB9X – Intercity Express: Service Reduction

January 2022

I. Description

The New Bedford Route 9X – Intercity Express (NB9X) is a commuter express route that originates at the SRTA New Bedford Terminal and provides a direct connection to the SRTA Fall River Terminal via an express service that operates on Interstate 195. Funding for the route was provided by the FY21 Regional Transit Authority Discretionary Grant Program which is administered by MassDOT for the purpose of providing pilot program funding for new service trials. Funding for the route was extended for FY22, however the grant funds will expire without additional funds available to support continued operation of the service past June 30, 2022.

The service was initiated on August 24, 2020 and has been unchanged since its inception. Weekday service begins at 6:15 AM and concludes at 8:15 PM; Saturday service begins at 8:15 AM and concludes at 8:15 PM. The route operates with sixty-minute (60) headways with departures from New Bedford terminal at :15 past the hour and from Fall River terminal at :45 past the hour. Ridership on the NB9X has averaged 103 passengers per weekday and 80 passengers per Saturday. With regards to the SRTA System Performance Metrics, year to date in FY22, the NB9X outperforms the system average for Passengers per Revenue Hour (10.57 compared with the system average of 18.24) and Passengers per Trip (4.40 compared with the system average of 6.59). The NB9X underperforms the system average for Passengers per Revenue Mile (0.30 compared with the system average of 1.14). Passengers per Revenue Mile is likely due to the fact the route is lengthy and only has one location passengers can board.

II. Proposed Changes

The NB9X is proposed to be eliminated from service after June 30, 2022. Prior to June 30, service will be eliminated on Saturdays and reduced on Weekdays from 14 trips per day to 7. Service will operate from 6:15 AM to 10:15 AM and from 5:15 PM to 8:15 PM. No service will be operated after June 30, 2022. The reduction in service does not affect the route alignment, the NB9X will operate as an express service between the SRTA terminals and primarily travel on Interstate 195.

III. Title VI Equity Analysis

In accordance with the SRTA Title VI Program, route changes that result in either an increase or decrease of route mileage or revenue by more than twenty-five (25) percent are considered a Major Service Change and require a Service Change Equity Analysis to determine whether the change will have either a disparate impact on minority populations and/or a disproportionate burden on low-income populations. The service reduction represents a fifty (50) percent reduction of route miles and the elimination represents a 100% reduction of route miles. Both the service reduction and the elimination reduce route mileage in excess of the Major Service Change threshold.

Table 1: Major Service Change Calculation

	Existing	Proposed	Change
Weekday			
# Trips	28.00	14.00	-50%
Rev. Miles/Day	406.00	203.00	-50%
Rev. Hours/Day	11.67	5.83	-50%
Saturday			
# Trips	24.00	0.00	-100%
Rev. Miles/Day	348.00	0.00	-100%
Rev. Hours/Day	10.00	0.00	-100%

A. Disparate Impact Analysis

Disparate Impact Analysis measures the effect of the service change on racial minority riders of the NB9X. The analysis used ridership as the measure for comparison and relied on ridership surveys taken in 2019 to determine minority and non-minority riders of the SRTA system. Survey data was not available for the NB9X as it was not in-service at the time surveys were taken in 2019, however data is available for the New Bedford Route 9 – Intercity which serves common end points at both SRTA terminals. For the purpose of this analysis, the survey data collected on the NB9 was assumed to represent the ridership on the NB9X as well.

The SRTA Disparate Impact Policy defines a disparate impact as one that affects racial minority populations twenty percent (20%) more than racial non-minority populations. Applying this policy to the proposed service change, the survey data suggests that of the monthly average ridership of 3,109 on the NB9X, approximately 1,337 (43%) are identified as racial minorities and 1,772 (57%) are identified as racial majority. Approximately 25% fewer racial minorities ride the NB9X than racial majority. The proposed change will affect minority riders; however, the difference does not exceed the policy threshold of impacting racial minorities 20% more than the racial majority and therefore does not represent a disparate impact.

	Avg. Monthly Ridership	Racial Minority Riders	Racial Non-Minority Riders	% Difference Minority and Non-Minority
NB9X	3,109	43% 1,337	57% 1,772	-14% -25%
SRTA System	165,308	46% 76,042	54% 89,266	-8% -15%

B. Disproportionate Burden Analysis

Disproportionate Burden Analysis measures the effect of the service change on low-income riders of the NB9X. The analysis used ridership as the measure for comparison and relied on ridership surveys taken in 2019 to determine low-income and non-low-income riders of the SRTA system. Survey data was not available for the NB9X as it was not in-service at the time surveys were taken in 2019, however data is available for the New Bedford Route 9 – Intercity

which serves common end points at both SRTA terminals. For the purpose of this analysis, the survey data collected on the NB9 was assumed to represent the ridership on the NB9X as well.

The SRTA Disproportionate Burden Policy defines a disproportionate burden as one that affects low-income populations twenty percent (20%) more than non-low-income populations. Applying this policy to the proposed service change, the survey data suggests that of the monthly average ridership of 3,109 in the NB9X, approximately 2,332 (75%) are identified as low-income and 777 (25%) are identified as non-low-income. Approximately 200% more low-income individuals ride the NB9X than non-low-income. The proposed change exceeds the Disproportionate Burden Policy threshold of impacting 20% more low-income than non-low-income riders and represents a disproportionate burden.

Table 2: Disproportionate Burden Analysis Results

	Avg. Monthly Ridership	Low-Income	Non-Low-Income	% Difference Minority and Non-Minority
NB9X	3,109	75% 2,332	25% 777	50% 200%
SRTA System	165,308	81% 133,899	19% 31,409	62% 326%

C. Public Participation Plan

In accordance with the SRTA 2019 Title VI Program Major Service Change Policy, SRTA is tasked with engaging underserved populations to provide a method for the public to provide comments on the proposed service changes and equity analysis. To ensure the public has the opportunity to comment on the service change SRTA will:

- Post the proposed changes on www.srtabus.com
- Provide an opportunity for the public to submit comments via email, phone call, and voicemail. Written comments in the form of a letter mailed through the United States Postal Service will also be accepted.

IV. Discussion

The NB9X was initially implemented as a pilot program with grant funding provided by MassDOT. The initial grant was meant to address crowding issues on SRTA busiest route, the New Bedford Route 9 – Intercity (NB9) as a COVID-19 mitigation measure. Express service between the New Bedford terminal and the Fall River Terminal was meant to provide customers who planned to travel between both terminals a faster travel time with fewer passengers on-board. Reducing passengers on-board allowed for more social distancing, an effective measure to protect passengers against the spread of COVID-19. At the beginning of FY22, funding was extended for an additional year with the idea that the route improved travel for the region’s workforce and could reduce commuting times and provide for more timely connections for customers in New Bedford and Fall River. This was an important improvement to address transportation barriers to those returning to the workforce when the regional economy began to restart after COVID-19 shutdown closed businesses and jobsites.

Continued grant funding for the route is uncertain and the SRTA Fixed Route operating budget cannot support continued operation once the FY22 grant has been fully expended without changes or service reductions on other routes. Additionally, SRTA has faced labor shortages through the fall and winter of FY22 that is placing undue stress on system operations. The labor shortage is making it a challenge to operate all scheduled trips on both fixed route and demand response services. To provide immediate relief to the problem and minimize service disruptions, the NB9X service is proposed to be reduced by eliminating service on Saturday and mid-day on Weekdays until June 30, 2022, when the route is proposed to be eliminated. Reducing the service in the interim ensures that operators are available for service on the scheduled fixed route service.

The NB9X was selected as a candidate route for reduction because it is the only route which shares both start and end points with another SRTA route, the NB9. This parallel service mitigates the effects of the reduction because NB9X customers continue to have an option to travel between both SRTA terminals. The compromise, however, is that the travel time on the NB9 is nearly twice the amount of time on the NB9X. Given the short history of operation of the NB9X, it is very likely that customers using the route were previously using the NB9 and are familiar and accustomed to the longer travel time.

The alternative option to retain service through both the labor shortage and the full expenditure of the grant funding would be reduce or eliminate service on a different SRTA route. This option is least preferred because there are no alternate corridors in the SRTA system in which more than one fixed route option is available. Essentially, reducing or eliminating service elsewhere could have a greater impact on the SRTA minority and low-income riding populations by eliminating or reducing options for travel. This a less than desired outcome to preserve service on one route that provide duplicate service to another.

V. Recommendation

Reducing and eliminating service is impactful for anyone that relies on the service. SRTA serves a predominantly low-income population with few alternatives to public transit, especially for a trip as lengthy as the journey between downtown New Bedford and downtown Fall River. For the area residents that rely on the NB9X, reducing, then eliminating, the service will impact their daily lives by increasing their travel times. This is not an insignificant change, as it will add at least a half-hour to a one-way trip or more one hour to their round-trip commute. However, keeping the NB9X in service is not an option due to the fiscal constraints of fixed route operating budget.

The alternative to reduce service elsewhere has the potential to have more far-reaching negative impacts since the people that rely on those routes have oriented their lives around the availability of transit. They may have chosen their residence because it was close to transit, or they chose their job because they could reliably travel on the fixed route system. When the problem of retaining duplicate service that offers a shorter travel time is presented in the context of eliminating service elsewhere in the system where no other travel option is available; when the consequence of that decision is disrupting an individual's housing and/or job choice, the least impactful option is to reduce, then eliminate the NB9X. Reducing and eliminating service is an undesirable option, regardless of the service being reduced. However, eliminating service on the NB9X minimizes the impact of the service change to the furthest extent possible given the conditions under which the recommendation is being made.