

For South Shore commuter buses, a slow roll back

With a new owner, the Plymouth & Brockton line was looking to turn a corner before the pandemic. Now it's making a cautious comeback.

By **Angela Yang** Globe Correspondent, Updated July 15, 2021, 11:39 a.m.



One of Plymouth & Brockton's new buses left the South Station bus terminal and headed to Hyannis. MATTHEW J LEE/GLOBE STAFF

The timing could not have been worse for Winthrop Sargent when he bought the Plymouth & Brockton Street Railway Co. in 2019. Less than a year later, the pandemic put the brakes on the bus company's operations, just as Sargent, principal of the Pembroke investment firm Winthron Capital Advisors was investing in better buses and

P&B INVESTMENT WITH WITHTOP CAPITAL ADVISORS, WAS INVESTING IN BETTER BUSES AND improved technology for an antiquated business that had been family-owned since 1948.

Two months after getting a new fleet of buses on the road, P&B remains a long way from its pre-pandemic ridership levels. Many of the South Shore and Cape Cod commuters on whom it relied to supplement trips to Logan Airport are working from home, making the trip into Boston less frequently, or opting to drive instead of being packed on a bus.

P&B is running 16 round trips daily from Hyannis to Logan, compared with 29 before its pandemic-induced shutdown in March 2020. It has also established a new route from Hyannis to T.F. Green Airport in Warwick, R.I., with six runs a day.

The company says a revised schedule will take effect Saturday and roll out online next week. Sargent said it will continue adding trips as demand warrants. As of mid-July, P&B was serving about 25 percent of the riders it had before COVID-19, he said.

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“We’re in the business of trying to earn a profit, so we gradually want to get into the runs and not waste up a bunch of capital on a group of operations that didn’t make any sense,” Sargent said. “I would say a high percentage of our ridership understands what we’re doing.”

The conservative comeback approach makes sense, according to Jarred Johnson, executive director of the transportation advocacy group TransitMatters. Though ridership for city buses grew stronger as soon as service returned in Boston, longer-distance routes haven't been as popular.

Many suburban commuters south of the city have the option to work from home, Johnson said, and likely own a car — which is why the Southeast Expressway is among the most crowded highways in the country.

For those who have returned to using P&B, they've been enjoying a ride that's a significant upgrade over the company's old, and often unreliable, buses. The new motor coaches have improved air filtration and are equipped with collision-mitigation systems. Like the old ones, they also have Wi-Fi. The investment was part of Sargent's plan to turn over the fleet every six or seven years to maintain efficiency.

Returning regulars will also notice that it now costs more to commute by bus. While single-ride fares have remained the same since 2017, according to Sargent, the company has “reduced the amount of discount we were providing passengers” who commute. For example, a 10-ride pass from Plymouth to South Station that previously cost \$73 is now \$96.

“The industry in general has come to find out that the profit models that they were instituting were a path to failure,” Sargent said. “Some major carriers who are not able to come back, it's because . . . they were running on slim, if at all, profit margins. So being a low-cost carrier is definitely not an avenue to success.”

But bus lines such as P&B have a longtime reputation for being more affordable than rail, and Sargent said he is confident riders will remain loyal, despite the significant increase in prices.

“One rider said to me, ‘I know cheap gets you a broken-down bus.’ I see more interest in getting to their destination on a timely basis and safety, and that's what we provide.”

Johnson, however, believes the added expense is likely to discourage some commuters from traveling by bus, pushing more of them to choose automobiles instead.

“I’d imagine a lot of them are saying it’s just not worth it,” he said. “Now that the prices are higher, that really does take out a big value proposition.”

The result, he said, could be added congestion on roads that are already way over capacity. Johnson said Massachusetts needs a “fundamental shift” in the way it thinks about transportation.

Josh Ostroff, interim director of the policy advocacy coalition Transportation for Massachusetts, said he hopes the state Department of Transportation takes the opportunity following the pandemic to aid in the recovery of private bus lines and other forms of mass transit.

He said congestion has returned to pre-pandemic levels on many roadways, contributing to a loss of productivity that harms the economy while releasing emissions that impair public health.

“We are not pricing our roads in a way that we could to address demand issues,” Ostroff said. “Giving an express lane to buses and charging a congestion fee to single-occupancy vehicles is sound policy. That is an area for the state to explore.”

P&B, like other bus lines across the country, also has long struggled to hire and retain drivers.

To help mitigate that, P&B has partnered with the Army by signing on to the Partnership for Youth Success program Under the program, service members leaving the Army — particularly those from transportation units — will get a guaranteed job interview with the company. Sargent said he hopes to hire veterans as drivers, mechanics, and administrative staff.

Despite the bumps facing the industry, Johnson said, he predicts bus travel will continue to play a key role in work commutes. Rail lines don’t reach many places, and people from

more rural or lower-income communities will always rely on buses, he said.

Johnson said he understands the apprehension people may have about being in the tight confines of a bus, especially if they are immunocompromised, but those concerns need to be kept in perspective.

“One of the things that we all have to do, whether it’s media, elected officials, or other folks, is make sure that we are not falling prey into unfairly stigmatizing [public] transit,” he said. “Because people are eating inside at restaurants that are relatively full. Clubs and bars are open. People are crowding just the same.”

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