

DPU and MBTA plan to increase staffing to address growing concerns on the T

At a hearing of the state Legislature's Joint Committee on Transportation Sept. 14, Chair of the Department of Public Utilities [Matthew Nelson](#) said his department requires increased staff to better respond to repeated safety incidents on the T and MBTA shortcomings detailed in a [90-page Federal Transit Administration safety report](#).

"Our fundamental goal is to identify the problems and make sure that the people in charge of those problems are addressing them," Nelson said. "We've had a long history of overseeing rail and right now is the first time we're really seeing the MBTA have the problems to the degree they're having in the last couple of years."

Nelson said the DPU plans to double their team, hiring six more auditors.

Still, in their second hearing this year regarding transit safety, committee co-chairs Lynn Democrat [Senator Brendan Crighton](#) and Mattapoisett Democrat [Representative William Straus](#) questioned Nelson for over 90 minutes concerning the DPU's oversight of the MBTA.

"You never rang the alarm, you never brought it to the attention of the FTA," Crighton said. "I am wondering why we are just now hearing about all the members of this [MBTA] oversight committee."

Nelson said the DPU has "acknowledged deficiencies" and has worked in coordination with the MBTA and the FTA to remedy safety risks.

"We've been on-site of every major accident analyzing what happened and what has gone wrong, and our fundamental goal is to try to ensure the MBTA is taking the right steps to make those improvements," Nelson said. "We aren't releasing press releases, that's not what our nature is."

Chair of the [MBTA's Board of Directors](#) Betsy Taylor also spoke regarding adjustments to the T's safety management practices but said she didn't know how much improvements would cost.

"I don't have a number for you today, but... the T is commencing a workforce assessment which will talk about the levels of staff needed to have the right kind of safety culture, to have the right reporting and asset management," Taylor said. "When we have those systems in place, we will know how many people we need."

MBTA bus driver Tony Hobbs and Jeb Mastandrea, an MBTA mechanic and machinists union president also answered questions from the committee about their workplace experience.

“We’re the frontline. We’re the boots on the ground,” Hobbs said. “It’s us that bring the buses out. It’s us that helps make sure that those passengers are safe. There are a lot of things that come in between that.”

The bus driver of 23 years referenced the too-quick circle checks bus drivers complete before beginning their routes and how many MBTA employees are stretched thin.

“As machinists, we cover all of that work in the facilities: nine bus garages, seven train facilities as well. We have 11 employees,” Mastandrea said. “I find it very challenging that we don’t have time to even do preventative maintenance because we spend our days putting out fires.”

The FTA identified similar shortcomings in its reports, [citing](#) inadequate training of the MBTA workforce and ineffective communication from the MBTA to its workers regarding safety protocol.

Despite requests for a representative to attend the hearing, Straus said the FTA declined to respond to Legislature inquiries.