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**ViewPoint: Uber pilot program drops cost for customers**

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The success of a pilot program initiated last year is turning The Ride, a critically important MBTA program that assists those with disabilities that prevent them from accessing regular fixed-route transit service, from a symbol of the T’s financial woes to one of the authority’s rebirth.

Under the pilot, The Ride contracts with [Uber and](http://companies.bizjournals.com/profile/uber/100242/?mkt=boston)[Lyft](http://companies.bizjournals.com/profile/lyft/123687/?mkt=boston) to provide transportation when appropriate. Previously, the MBTA used fully equipped vans for most trips, even though Ride users require wheelchairs less than 80 percent of the time.

Pilot customers save an average of 34 minutes on each trip and can schedule trips five minutes before they want to leave instead of a full day in advance, which was formerly the case. Given the improved service, it should come as no surprise that demand has increased; the number of trips has shot up by about a quarter. Despite the sharp rise in demand, overall expenses have dropped under the pilot. The reason is simple: the average cost per trip has fallen from $31 to $9.

At a recent event marking the 10,000th trip provided by Uber and Lyft, Gov. Baker announced that the pilot will be extended to all users of The Ride. And not a moment too soon. Last year the program cost about $110 million — 11 times its 1991 budget. Despite the success of the pilot program, overall Ride expenses are on a path to be $10 million over budget this year.

In addition to lower per-trip costs, the appropriate use of on-demand vehicles will also cut vehicle-related costs by reducing the number of vans the MBTA is responsible for providing.

A 2015 [Pioneer Institute](http://companies.bizjournals.com/profile/pioneer-institute/1287229/?mkt=boston) study proposed reforms similar to those being implemented in the pilot program and projected that they would save between $347 million and $492 million over six years if implemented program-wide. The sharp increase in demand may reduce overall savings, but the MBTA could have bigger problems than too many happy customers.

The T finally appears to be on a course toward better service and financial sustainability. Thanks to a number of reforms ranging from strategic use of outsourcing to renegotiating a contract with its biggest union, it is cutting costs, increasing revenue, and improving efficiency and customer service.

If that continues, we might someday look back on the winter 2015 meltdown as a blessing in disguise.

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