[**Chieppo: T must seize money-saving moment**](http://www.bostonherald.com/opinion/op_ed/2017/10/chieppo_t_must_seize_money_saving_moment)

Restructuring bus maintenance a no-brainer

[**Charles Chieppo**](http://www.bostonherald.com/users/charles_chieppo) Monday, October 16, 2017

2:19

Here’s another one for that bulging “It could only happen in Massachusetts” file.

Outsourcing bus maintenance would save $11 million a year and bring three of the MBTA’s nine garages into the 21st century. The work would continue to be performed by the mechanics (albeit slightly fewer of them) who do it now, and they would remain members of the same union, earning among the highest salaries in the industry.

A slam dunk, right? Not here. While Gov. Charlie Baker remains strongly behind the proposal, his appointees to the MBTA Fiscal and Management Control Board are reportedly wavering in the face of fierce opposition from the Machinists’ Union.

Organizations that operate vehicles generally have maintenance plans. They know how many miles various parts are likely to last before failure and replace them before they reach that point. The practice saves money and dramatically improves reliability.

But the MBTA doesn’t have either a maintenance plan for its buses or a working software system. Nor does it have standards for how long specific repairs should take.

The industry standard is for 80 percent of vehicle maintenance to be scheduled and 20 percent to be completed in response to failures. Those figures are reversed at the T, according to a 2016 bus maintenance efficiency study commissioned by the authority.

In 2015, the most recent year for which data are available, the MBTA again had the nation’s highest bus maintenance costs per hour of bus operations. Costs were more than 70 percent above the average for the five U.S. transit agencies most similar to the T.

Most of the jobs impacted by outsourcing would be those of bus maintenance supervisors and managers, all but two of whom belong to other unions with agreements that prohibit them from turning a wrench. Absent outsourcing, replacing them with working supervisors and competent managers is virtually impossible.

The proposed plan is hardly ground breaking; U.S. transit agencies routinely outsource bus maintenance. You need not look far for an example, because the proposal simply replicates what Massachusetts Regional Transit Authorities already do. At the RTAs, bus maintenance costs $1.09 per vehicle mile; at the T it’s $3.85.

Failure to act on bus maintenance would affect the MBTA’s cost structure for the next decade. And with the T approaching the end of the three-year exemption from the commonwealth’s anti-privatization law it was granted in the wake of its 2015 winter meltdown, we now have what is likely a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to get costs under control.

But it’s not just about stabilizing MBTA finances. Every penny saved from these best practices is additional money that can be invested in the system. These investments bring the T a step closer to being able to finance mobility enhancements that would improve quality of life for millions in Greater Boston, and help attract the likes of Amazon and countless other employers that rely on being able to efficiently move people and goods.

*Charles Chieppo is a senior fellow at Pioneer Institute, a Boston-based think tank.*