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## Those B&M cutbacks Storm record marred as equipment fails

By Fred Pillsbury  
Globe Staff

Feb. 13, a week after the Blizzard of 1978, the MBTA's commuter rail trains, operated by the Boston & Maine Railroad, carried 77,000 passengers, about 2½ time as many as normal.

B&M president Alan Dustin is proud of that record and he is even more proud that the trains were never forced to stop running during the storms of January and February, although service got pretty slow.

Dustin is not so proud, though, that the MBTA decided a week ago to cut commuter service by 25 percent for a 60-day period to repair its equipment.

Not that he disagrees with the decision. But it irks him as a railroad man to have to reduce service — and just as things seemed to be going fairly well.

Before the storm, ridership was rising at a "great rate," according to Frank Fotta, the B&M's general manager of commuter service, up 8 percent last year, although it dropped a bit in November and December.

Since service was cut, commuter rail has been carrying about its normal load. The trains have been very crowded, however, and complaints to both the B&M and the MBTA have soared.

"But service is more reliable with the cut schedule," Fotta said. "We're

able to buy some time now." Because of heavy passenger loads, he said, most trains are at least 10 minutes late.

What happened surprised neither Dustin nor Fotta. They and MBTA officials have been afraid something like this would occur for years.

The MBTA's equipment is an ancient hodgepodge of locomotives and coaches and diesel rail cars inherited from the B&M, the New Haven, Penn Central and other railroads. It owns a number of coaches that are 60 and 70 years old. Yesterday, MBTA spokesman Ken Campbell said, nine unlighted, unheated coaches were pressed into service because they were considered better than nothing.

Of the MBTA's 25 locomotives, 21 were in operation before the storm. But after the storm, only 11 were going. Of 78 rail cars 38 are now operating decently, 26 are operating on only one of their two engines and 14, in Campbell's words, are "totally knocked out." They date back to the 1950s.

Why is the commuter rail equipment in such bad shape? It all goes back to 1964, according to Dustin, when the Interstate Commerce Commission gave the B&M permission to give up its passenger service. The MBTA was to keep the commuter service going by paying for the B&M's losses.

"But the MBTA kept the lid on the maintenance of the vehicles," Dustin said. "When I came in 1973 you could see that the Budd cars had not been maintained, for instance. There had been no rebuilding, batteries had not been replaced, suspension systems hadn't been kept up."

In 1976 the MBTA bought the B&M's passenger equipment and rights way. That meant that Federal funds — up to 90 percent — could be obtained for buying new equipment and repairing and maintaining the old.

"But it's still a long and arduous process," Dustin said. He and Fotta said that commuter rail service and schedule should be back to normal within the 60-day period but they do not foresee any major improvements in the immediate future, although five new locomotives and 25 new coaches will start arriving in the fall and a rebuilding program has commenced.

With new equipment, they said, the B&M could have snapped back to normal in a day or so after the storm.

What would it take to bring the MBTA's commuter rail stock up to date? Fifty new locomotives and 150 coaches would do it, Dustin said.

The price today would be about \$100 million, the price of depressing a mile of the Orange rapid transit line.