MBTA should run trains from Worcester to North Station

LAST YEAR, the state purchased the Grand Junction railroad, a little-used but strategically located 3-mile rail line that connects Allston and Cambridge via a graffiti-covered trestle underneath the BU bridge. It's not every day that the state acquires a fully intact corridor through a bustling urban center, and the property has planners daydreaming of bike paths and streetcars. For now, though, the best — and most economical — use of the land is a proposal by Lieutenant Governor Tim Murray to run MBTA commuter rail trains on the existing tracks.

Under the proposal, which is being studied by the MBTA, a few trains on the Worcester commuter rail line would split off from the main route, cross into Cambridge, and then reconnect with the commuter rail routes into North Station. The idea offers two immediate benefits. It would provide an additional destination for commuters, and also relieve congestion at South Station, which is struggling to handle the growing number of MBTA and Amtrak trains on its 13 platforms. Expansion at South Station is planned, but that could be years away. Even if South Station expands, running commuter trains into Cambridge may prove worthwhile anyway, since it creates an opportunity to open a station near the growing employment hub of Kendall Square.

Since the Grand Junction is already in use — a daily freight run carries fruit and vegetables, and the MBTA uses it to shuttle equipment between the northern and southern halves of its network — adding commuter trains to this mix should not be costly. The MBTA is still crunching the numbers as part of its feasibility study, but estimates new signalling and crossing gates needed for commuter rail operations could cost $5 million to $10 million.

Nobody would mistake the route, which crosses six city streets, as a perfect solution to the commuter rail system's capacity problems. Many Cantabrigians are wary, and have rightly insisted that the MBTA ensure any additional trains don’t cause endless traffic tie-ups. But in a season of constrained budgets, officials are right to be looking for creative ways to make better use of what they already have.