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State transportation projects in jeopardy

By Will Richmond

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FALL RIVER - Imagine a pothole left unattended that continually grows, becoming larger and larger to the point it begins swallowing vehicles and future transportation projects.

That is essentially the outlook for the Massachusetts transportation system, according to a wide-ranging coalition recently created to push for an increase in state transportation investment.

The Massachusetts Transportation Investment Coalition was formed in the wake of a report released in 2007 that found the commonwealth faces a \$15 billion to \$19 billion maintenance and operations funding shortfall over the next 20 years.

The Transportation Finance Commission, which developed that report, recommended that the state needs to undergo reform and revitalization principles to ensure the current infrastructure system remains safe and future projects can be completed on time.

The Transportation Investment Coalition was created to ensure those goals are met.

Coalition member John Pourbaix, who serves as the executive director of the Construction Industries of Massachusetts and served on the now-inactive Transportation Finance Commission, said the Massachusetts Highway Department is borrowing more than \$225 million for operations alone. Those funds pay for the salaries of 1,400 state employees, rent, office supplies and programs such as summer grass cutting. Pourbaix said the Massachusetts Bay Transit Authority is being "strangled" with debt service, the state's Turnpike Authority is operating at a deficit and the Department of Conservation and Recreation has no money for construction while the agency's existing systems are "literally falling apart."

With a laundry list of problems already in play, matters could soon be getting worse, following the rejection of the federal government's fiscal 2008-11 Transportation Improvement Program for Massachusetts.

The rejection, according to documents between the federal highway and transit authorities and the state, is due to a lack of state funding for transportation projects.

Federal officials told the state that without approval of a pending transportation bond or other funding mechanism, the federal funds are not available.

The rejection puts local projects such as the reconstruction of Route 79 in jeopardy.

"The federal rejection of the TIP doesn't happen very often," coalition member Jessica C. Conaway said. "This should be a major wakeup call to the extent that problems are so severe it would really behoove us to start looking at these problems now."

Comments from federal transportation officials indicated concerns that the state is not spending enough on bridge maintenance or the highway system. They suggested more safety projects are also needed. With the state failing to put its own money into the transportation infrastructure now, projects that should be completed in the near future are being delayed, which causes the cost to rise sharply.

Roland Hebert, Southeastern Regional Planning and Economic Development District transportation planning manager said that if the new Brightman Street Bridge had been completed five years ago, the cost would have been \$100 million lower.

Coalition members said the state has to be prepared to raise revenues to fix the problem. Although they are not yet endorsing any specific plans, possibilities mentioned included raising gas taxes, implementing more tolls and developing public/private partnerships.

Members say efficiency reforms, such as using private flagmen on projects, would result in slightly less than \$2.5 million in savings.

In the meantime, as maintenance is held up and weight limits are reduced on bridges or roads are closed, coalition members say everything from public safety to economic development will be affected.

"Now is not the time to sit on our hands on this issue. This is too important," Conaway said. "The needs are too severe and too many, and this is something that seriously has to be looked at, otherwise the holes will get bigger and the problems more severe."

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