

OUR VIEW: Rough road ahead, 02-29-08

The Herald News, Fall River
Thu Feb 28, 2008, 05:35 PM EST

If you can't get there from here, the economy will go nowhere.

The region's failing transportation infrastructure has become one of the most critical issues facing the SouthCoast and the state. It's more than just an annoyance for drivers forced to swerve around Grand Canyon-sized potholes for fear of cracking their axles. The failing bridge and highway system impacts everything from public safety to economic development. Some tough choices have to be made — and quickly — to turn around the old, crumbling, debt-ridden Massachusetts transportation system.

The Transportation Finance Commission estimates the commonwealth faces a \$15 billion to \$19 billion shortfall in maintenance and operations of roads and bridges during the next 20 years. That does not include any new construction, just maintenance of existing structures. The Massachusetts Highway Department is already going into serious debt, borrowing more than \$225 million for operations alone. None of that money even goes into the roads; it pays for salaries, rent, office supplies and interest on the debt.

And the situation will only get worse once the commonwealth feels the effects of the federal government's recent rejection of the Transportation Improvement Plan for Massachusetts. The reason for the rejection of this critical federal disbursement? Massachusetts' failure to invest in its own infrastructure.

"The federal rejection of the TIP doesn't happen very often," said Jessica C. Conaway, member of the Transportation Investment Coalition, formed after the Finance Commission's damning report. "This should be a major wake-up call."

Indeed, the government and residents alike need to realize how dire the situation is. In the SouthCoast alone, the Brightman Street Bridge must be closed for two weeks every six months to keep it operational. The Braga Bridge has not been painted in recent memory (painting is the most important way to prevent corrosion on steel structures, so critical that some bridges employ perpetual paint crews). The Berkley/Dighton Bridge is restricted to one lane to reduce weight and prolong its life. The Lees River Bridge is scheduled to close next week for nine months to be rebuilt.

And that's just the bridges. The roads in the area are in dire straits as well, ravaged by neglect and the freezing and thawing of winter, impacting public safety. Route 138 in Somerset is so bad, ambulances have to avoid it because the jostling prevents rescue workers from inserting IVs into patients' veins.

Road conditions also stifle economic development. Route 79 through Fall River has been slated to be relocated to make room for waterfront redevelopment for years. The Route 24 Exit 8A ramp in Freetown is being delayed, holding up development plans for the Fall River Industrial Park and the Freetown Riverfront Business Park, not to mention increasing the project's cost.

What new companies would want to locate in a region with a failing infrastructure?

"The transportation system is critically underfunded. It needs a long-term solution," said John M. Pourbaix Jr., executive director of Construction Industries of Massachusetts and a TIC member. "We have to get it funded to be safer and be competitive. It's a tremendous problem. We need a longterm solution."

The TIC has recommended increasing revenue dedicated to transportation through a hike in gasoline tax and road tolls. With the price of gas soaring to all-time highs, that's sure to be an unpopular proposal. Unfortunately, it's a necessary step. Those who use the roads have to pay for their upkeep.

At the same time, MassHighway needs to drastically improve its practices. The department spreads itself too thin across concurrent projects, resulting in long delays that multiply project costs. The department needs to operate more efficiently, dedicating resources to fewer projects at once so inflation doesn't kill the bottom line.

Change won't be easy and it's going to be costly to everyone. But it simply must be done.
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