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## **A case for regional transit funds**

By Stan Rosenberg and Daniel Bosley | February 7, 2009

"REMEMBER the Regional Transportation Authorities!" Admittedly, as rallying cries go, that one is somewhat less inspiring than, say, "Remember the Alamo" or "Remember the Maine." But as Beacon Hill begins to address the needs of the transportation system, the members of the Legislature's Regional Transportation Caucus will be sounding that message relentlessly.

And why the concern? There are 15 regional transportation authorities in the state. They serve 231 of the state's 351 communities, and they provide approximately 25 million rides a year. Yet as various ideas about reorganizing the state's transportation systems and addressing transportation needs have been floated, there has been little talk about the authorities. There's been talk of increasing some tolls and raising the gas tax, but that's been done only in the context of how it might benefit the Massachusetts Bay Transit Authority, the Big Dig, and other transportation needs of the urban center inside I-95.

That's fine. No one is disputing the importance of the MBTA, an organization that received \$768 million in taxpayer support last year, compared with the \$58 million for RTAs, or the need to finish paying off the Big Dig. Those issues must be addressed, but so must the public transportation needs of areas outside of metropolitan Boston.

The state needs a comprehensive plan that not only helps urban professionals get to their jobs in Boston, but also helps elderly rural residents get to their medical appointments. It's no exaggeration to say that the lives and livelihoods of a lot of people, especially in rural and suburban areas, depend on safe, reliable public transportation, the very service that regional transportation authorities provide.

The Regional Transportation Caucus will propose doubling operating funding for the authorities over a five- to seven-year period in order to expand services, improve reliability, and create more flexibility in routes. In addition, it will call for increased capital funding to modernize fleets and facilities, and insist on management reforms to improve the administration of the 15 authorities.

The inclusion of these elements in a comprehensive transportation plan would build on the success of the Regional Transportation Caucus last year when the Patrick administration moved aggressively on a proposal in the Transportation Bond Bill to place regional transportation authorities on a "forward funding" system. Forward funding eliminates the borrowing required by the "lag funding" system and will save state taxpayers \$2 million to \$5 million in interest payments each year.

The issue of transportation policy is likely to take center stage in Washington and in state houses across the country as tens of billions of dollars may be earmarked for transportation infrastructure nationwide as part of the economic stimulus package. What will make the coming discussions especially important is the fact that transportation policies will have direct impacts on the economy and the environment. All the more reason to remember the regional transportation authorities.

For example, a car is often a necessity in rural areas. And although gasoline prices are currently at a five-year low, it is unreasonable to believe they will stay that way as oil reserves dwindle. Moreover, it seems to make good sense to give rural residents public transportation options so that they can leave their cars at home whenever possible, thereby saving money and gas and protecting the environment. Again, adequately funded regional transportation authorities can play a key role in this dynamic by providing quality mass transit services now and by helping to lay the

groundwork for more commuter rail systems in the future, a development that would have enormous economic impact outside Greater Boston.

We need to rethink the ways we get around. We need new ideas and a comprehensive plan that includes everyone in this state, from the daily MBTA rider to the person who has never been to Boston and relies on a bus in Fall River or Chatham.

We need to remember the regional transportation authorities.

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