

Proposed Mass. gas-tax hike still on road after DiMasi's exit

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BOSTON -- Momentum for the politically unpopular idea of raising the gas tax during a recession has not slowed down, even after the departure of Sal DiMasi, who as House speaker advocated for an increase.

The signs include a public acknowledgment from the new speaker that a gas-tax hike might be inevitable, along with a new advertising campaign funded by some of the most powerful interest groups in the state.

DiMasi, a Boston Democrat, promoted the idea of raising the state's 23.5-cent gas tax as an alternative to higher tolls on the Massachusetts Turnpike and in Boston's Big Dig tunnels.

His replacement, House Speaker Robert DeLeo, D-Winthrop, appears to be of the same mind after he called a gas-tax increase during his first term "a pretty good bet" Thursday night.

The debate in the Legislature figures to pit region against region, with Greater Lowell lawmakers largely opposed to increasing the tax to avoid higher tolls on roads not used by their constituents. It may also force a showdown between the House and Senate, which has been resistant to discussing new revenue options before reforming the state's transportation bureaucracy.

Two new radio spots from a transportation-reform coalition that touts the necessity of a gas-tax increase will begin airing in select cities across the state next week, including Lowell.

Our Transportation Future, a coalition of interest groups including the Massachusetts Municipal Association and MassPIRG, plans to start running the two infomercials, starting Monday, for two weeks.

The ads, which will air on WCAP in Lowell along with stations in Lawrence, Boston, Springfield, Worcester and on the South Shore, are an attempt to raise awareness about the state's infrastructure needs, and also give cover to politicians who may be reluctant to support a gas-tax increase. Neither spot mentions that gas tax directly, but refers listeners to the group's Web site where there is research supporting a gas-tax hike.

Citing a report by TRIP, a Washington-based transportation-research group, the characters in the infomercials discuss the \$718 million spent every year by Bay State motorists -- \$156 per driver -- on repairs to vehicles due to unnecessary wear and tear.

"This is an issue that affects people at every juncture, their quality of life and the quality of the roads, bridges and trains that they depend on," said Amy Lambiaso, a spokeswoman for Our Transportation Future. "People on Beacon Hill need to know that people in their districts are concerned about this," she added.

The Senate this week filed its proposal to reform the state's transportation system, with Gov. Deval Patrick expected to follow suit with a plan of his own later this month.

The Senate plan would consolidate the Massachusetts Turnpike Authority and MBTA into one agency and force health-care and pension changes on those employees to save an estimated \$2.5 billion over the next 20 years.

The transportation funding gap has been projected by the Transportation Finance Commission to be closer to \$19 billion over 20 years.

While the Senate plan did not include any new revenue suggestions, the governor has not ruled out a gas tax, higher Turnpike tolls, new border tolls or other ideas to help pay for maintaining the state's roads, bridges and rail lines.

"Stay tuned," a Patrick aide told The Sun when asked whether Patrick planned to introduce new revenue proposals.

Senate Ways and Means Chairman Steven Panagiotakos said the new budget realities facing the state have not warmed him to a gas-tax increase.

"The Senate president said it well, that it's reform before revenue. Before we get to revenue, we have to see what the structure will be," said the Lowell Democrat.

Panagiotakos said even if new revenue is needed to fund infrastructure repair and the state's public-transportation system, a gas tax may not be the right answer.

"Given the enormity of the cost for maintaining our highways and bridges, reform alone probably won't get us there. But I don't know how far away we'll be, and I think we should wait on talking about revenue," he said.