

# Divisive debate likely on Mass. gas tax hike

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BOSTON — Will Massachusetts drivers have to dig deeper in their wallet to pay at the pump in the coming year?

New House Speaker Robert DeLeo seems to think so. When pressed in a recent NECN interview, he said it was "a pretty good bet" a gas tax hike would be approved this year.

The emotional issue of a gas tax increase — coming on the heels of volatile prices at the pump last summer — will be one of the stickier issues as Statehouse leaders try to shape a major overhaul of the state's debt-ridden transportation system this year.

What hasn't been spelled out is how large the tax increase could be, or where the money would go.

Gov. Deval Patrick has called the gas tax a "serious alternative" to staggering, proposed toll hikes on the Massachusetts Turnpike and the Boston Harbor tunnels. DeLeo, D-Winthrop, hasn't taken a position on the gas tax and is said to be exploring all the options, his comments on NECN notwithstanding.

Senate President Therese Murray, D-Plymouth, has been resistant, saying the Senate won't even consider raising the gas tax until the state's transportation bureaucracy is reformed.

"We have no intention of taking up a gas tax until we reform and reorganize the transportation agencies," Murray said in an interview, while not ruling out the need for a hike in the future.

## 'Waste in the system'

Senate leaders filed a 268-page bill last week that reorganizes the state's quasi-independent transportation agencies and takes back extra benefits for MBTA employees. The plan is projected to save \$2.5 billion over the next two decades, in part by eliminating expensive outside consultants to state authorities.

"There is a lot of waste in the system," Murray said. "To ask the public to put more money into our pockets, I don't think it's realistic until we show them we are looking to pull back and reform what we have so it is accountable and responsible."

The state charges taxes of 23.5 cents per gallon of gas. Since 1991, it has been raised only once, a 2.5-cent per gallon charge that was dedicated to a fund to clean up underground storage tanks.

Michael Widmer, the president of the influential, business-backed Massachusetts Taxpayers Foundation, served on a state panel that recommended increasing the gas tax by 11.5 cents a gallon. The panel said it was needed to help close a \$15 billion to \$19 billion gap in transportation funding over the next 20 years.

"I think the situation is very fluid," Widmer said. "My sense is all three leaders, the Senate president, the speaker and the governor understand how desperate the transportation funding picture is and that new revenues are necessary. So I think there's quiet agreement on that."

Two years ago, many legislators scoffed at the panel's recommendation. Since then, the debt problems at the Turnpike Authority, which is saddled by the Big Dig, have only worsened. The MBTA is also staggering under debt.

Proposals for stark toll increases have shaken legislators whose constituents use the Tobin Bridge, harbor tunnels and Turnpike every day.

Patrick has said a gas tax would have to be part of a long-term plan to address the state's transportation needs, and not as a short term fix for tolls.

Widmer put the odds of transportation reform and a gas tax hike at "better than 50/50 ... but how and where the money goes, I think is very much up for grabs."

The transportation panel believed every region of the state needed to be guaranteed infrastructure improvements from a gas tax increase. Legislators from areas outside metro Boston would be sure to insist on it.

## **Big Dig debt looms large**

Rep. Stephen R. Canessa, D-New Bedford, filed legislation this year to create a commission to study the fairness and structure of the state's entire tax and fee system. He said constituents have a hard time keeping track of local and state fees when they set a household budget.

"There have been many proposals that have been put forth relative to the issue of the gas tax, and I need to see the details," Canessa said.

"As a legislator from Southeastern Mass., what I'm concerned about is I don't want to see the debt of the Big Dig passed onto constituents who for the most part don't benefit from the Big Dig."

Rep. Jeffrey Perry, R-Sandwich, called for a gas tax holiday when gas prices were sky high last summer. He said the economic crisis was an opportunity for Beacon Hill Democrats to deliver on overdue reforms instead of a tax hike.

"When push comes to shove, what we are starting to see is no reform getting done and people looking toward taxes," Perry said. "Let's get rid of the Turnpike. Let's merge it with MassHighway. Let's look at

the MBTA. Let's look at what we get for cost savings before we even consider increasing the gas tax on people who are struggling to make ends meet every day."