

Beverly's Grant: Gas tax support part of broad solution

By Bobby Gates

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Beverly, Mass. -

Beverly's state representative said she signed on to a bill to increase the gas tax because she wants it to be part of the Legislature's discussion about solving the state's transportation funding woes.

Mary Grant, D-Beverly, said the bill proposes adding 29 cents on to the existing 21-cent-per-gallon gas tax and would also include eliminating every tollbooth in the state.

Billion-dollar debt loads in three key state transportation systems has prompted the taxation debate.

The state faces an estimated \$1 billion deficit annually to maintain its transportation infrastructure, according to a 2007 study, not including a \$5 billion debt at the MBTA and a \$2.2 billion debt at the Turnpike Authority, which includes the Big Dig debt.

The bill's lead sponsor is David Linsky, a Natick Democrat.

In addition to eliminating tolls, Linsky's plan would earmark 11 cents of the tax increase for the Massachusetts Turnpike Authority and create a stable funding source for the MBTA, regional transit authorities, local road and bridge projects and the state highway department.

If approved, it would make the Massachusetts gas tax the highest in the nation.

Grant said the gas tax hasn't gone up since 1991 and it is not tied to an increase in the consumer price index or the cost of living.

Grant said she's heard from constituents who both support and oppose a higher gas tax.

Beyond the transportation bills she supported — which also include proposals to establish a high-speed toll collection system on I-93 and a mandate that tolls collected on a specific road go towards maintenance of that road — Grant said she's expecting a comprehensive transportation reform proposal from the state Executive Office of Transportation.

"All of these proposals are very rough," Grant said. "My name is on the bill because I think that we have to discuss it, not because I think 29 cents is the answer."

Grant said she favors a combination of tolls and a gas tax, but said without Linksy's bill a higher gas tax wouldn't be on the table for the Legislature to consider as part of a long-term funding solution for the Turnpike Authority and transportation maintenance.

"It's the only proposal that has a gas tax as part of the solution," Grant said.

Without supporting the gas tax bill, "in essence I'd be passively saying that tolls are OK."

A proposal last year from the Turnpike Authority to double tolls pushed the issue to the forefront, Grant said.

An increase in the tolls would cost a daily toll payer more than \$1,000 annually versus \$150 annually for a driver who pays the gas tax.

"At first blush things aren't always what they seem," Grant said.

The Turnpike Authority needs a steady, reliable revenue source so that its credit rating doesn't suffer, she said.

"If we don't determine some stable way to pay for things going forward we will have to pay penalties and fees," Grant said. She's concerned about what it would cost if the Turnpike Authority's bond rating sinks or if its loans are called.

While the gas tax bill was proposed by a MetroWest legislator who wants to eliminate all tolls, Grant said tolls collect money from people who use certain roads more often than others and also charge people who may be buying gas out of state.

"Those who use the road more often maybe should pay to use the road," Grant said. "If tolls were maintained there would be no need to go that high, to a 29 cent gas tax increase."

A solid transportation network is key to a strong economy and high quality of life, Grant said, using the Longfellow Bridge as an example, where a lane of traffic was closed for a time because of safety concerns.

"Nobody wants their business in an area that is struggling with their transportation system," she said.

But the bill has just been proposed and it's so new it hasn't been assigned a bill number or posted to the House of Representative's Web site and Grant said she didn't have a copy of the bill that she could provide. Soon it will be assigned a bill number, posted to the Web and a public hearing will convene at a later date, she said.

"Every member of the public can have a direct say on all of the options and I expect there will be more as the finances are better understood," Grant said.

