

Straight talk on transportation

February 21, 2009

THE STATE'S dysfunctional transportation system can't be fixed without bold leadership. Governor Patrick provided that yesterday. He offered a comprehensive plan to squeeze out waste, reorganize a tangle of agencies, and bring in much-needed new money - via a 19-cent hike in the gasoline tax - to maintain infrastructure and pay down debts.

Given a better choice, no one would dream of asking for a tax hike now; Patrick himself plainly doesn't like doing it. But the cost to maintain the current system has ballooned to perhaps \$19 billion beyond existing revenue streams, precisely because past administrations resorted to quick fixes and fiscal games as Big Dig costs swelled and the MBTA sank deeper in debt.

At some point, responsible adults need to step in and deal with the problem honestly.

In his speech yesterday, Patrick noted the reforms his administration has put through - most notably an end to the wasteful practice of using police details on all road construction projects. And he promised more: a crunching of numerous agencies and authorities into a streamlined transportation agency, as the state Senate has suggested; changes to the MBTA's overly generous "23 years and out" pensions; and other cost-saving recommendations made by the Transportation Finance Commission.

The tax hike would, among other things, help pay off debts, support MBTA services, and raise money for regional transit agencies, road improvements, and rail projects outside Boston.

The plan isn't perfect. Commuters in Boston's western suburbs have long been paying too much of the costs of the Big Dig, and they deserve at least some toll relief. Patrick's gas tax plan isn't big enough to provide that. Then again, it would avert an imminent round of toll increases.

Patrick summarized the problem nicely: "It really doesn't matter that we got here under somebody else's watch," he said, "or because of somebody else's short-sighted judgments. This is where we are. And we are all here together." His plan will bring discomfort to drivers, public-employee unions, and legislators, who have a tough vote ahead. But it is a genuine, well-thought-out effort to solve a horrendous problem.