

Wednesday, February 25, 2009

## State Transportation Reform: Serious Leadership for Serious Times

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Last Friday, Governor Patrick rolled out his comprehensive plan to reorganize and refinance the state's transportation system. To no one's surprise, most of the subsequent media coverage has focused on the Governor's call to raise the gas tax by 19 cents a gallon (meaning the average driver will pay about \$2 more per week at the pump).

I had a chance to talk to the Governor and to Transportation Secretary Jim Aloisi before the announcement of their plan and I can assure you that they expected a firestorm. Neither of them wants to increase taxes on anyone - especially during an economic downturn. As the Governor said on Friday, "this is a crummy time to ask people to contribute more."

But anyone who has followed this issue seriously already knows that there's really no way around the need for new revenue. To get our troubled system back on track - a necessary step toward revitalizing our overall economy - it won't be enough just to cut or consolidate (although we have to do that, too). If we want roads, highways, transit, rail and bus services that can support a 21st Century economy, then we have to pay for them - and raising tolls and T fares is neither the smart way to do it nor an adequate way to meet the need.

Here in Somerville, we know that good transportation facilities are crucial to our future economic and physical health. We know that the Green Line Extension, a new Orange Line station at Assembly Square, the long-delayed repaving of Washington Street, the thorough renovation now underway along Somerville Ave - and all of the other state-supported transportation projects in our city - will make this a better, stronger community in which to live, work and raise a family. We know and understand that transportation isn't just good for economic development: it's essential.

But here's something you might not know unless you read the fine print: the Governor's transportation reorganization and refinancing plan is a model of how to deal with a fiscal crisis in government. It strikes a fair balance between the need to, on one hand, achieve

meaningful reform and savings and, on the other, put new revenue into the system so that it stops accumulating debt and starts doing its job for the people of Massachusetts.

If you read the plan (which is online at <http://www.youmovemassachusetts.org/>), you will find out that it abolishes the Turnpike Authority, eliminates 300 jobs, ends the special provision that lets MBTA workers retire on full benefits after 23 years of service regardless of age; curbs health insurance costs; and increases transparency and accountability across the entire system.

Of course, all of these things could have and should have been done long ago, but before Governor Patrick, no one did. No one could be bothered to ask the citizens of the Commonwealth to wake up and face the true cost and true value of their transportation system until these reforms were made part of the package. But now Governor Patrick has done just that, setting the stage for a fair and reasonable effort to reinvest in our essential transportation infrastructure.

Like President Obama with the economic crisis, the Governor is taking responsibility for a problem he inherited. For nearly two decades, as the state steadily deferred essential maintenance and as the budget for the spiraled out of control, our Commonwealth dug itself into an ever-deepening hole of wishful thinking. All of us - the public, its elected leaders, the business community - pretended that someone else was going to reform the system. Someone else was going to repair the roads and bridges, and build the new transit links that would reduce congestion and pollution. Someone else would work with unions to manage their health care and retirement costs. But now - with our economy in decline, our debt soaring and our infrastructure in tatters - that wishful thinking has to stop. It turns out that the "someone else" is us.

The gas tax hasn't been increased by so much as a penny since 1991. To paraphrase Secretary Aloisi, can you think of any other major commodity that hasn't seen a price increase in eighteen years? During the same period, the real buying power of the gas tax has decreased by one third. Is our transportation system one third less important to our economy than it was in 1991? Is it one third less essential to our daily lives?

Governor Patrick deserves enormous credit for his courage in taking on this vital reform. And, when you add them up, the advantages offered by his proposals - for Somerville and the entire Commonwealth - far outweigh the costs. Whether you're interested in a stronger economy, or cleaner air or more livable neighborhoods, I urge you to join me in supporting every element in this reform package.