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Urgent action needed on transportation

By Eric Bourassa

Our transportation system is the lifeblood of the Bay State economy, not to mention a huge factor impacting our environment and quality of life. If we can't get employees to work on time and safely move goods and services, we're in trouble. And this is exactly the problem we're moving toward today.

Across Massachusetts our transportation network has a funding deficit, estimated at \$15 billion to \$19 billion over 20 years. This gap will impact every state resident as our roads and bridges deteriorate and public transit is reduced.

While "sky is falling" prognostications can be unproductive, one unfortunate commuter on Storrow Drive last month discovered this to be true when a chunk of concrete fell from an underpass and crashed through the rear windshield.

Others encounter our disinvestment in transportation by the potholed roads that cause an estimated \$718 million in auto repairs for Massachusetts drivers.

Meanwhile, public transit users on the MBTA face a 25 percent fare increase and 50 percent off-peak service cut. Imagine Beantown coping with half the number of Green Line trolleys after an evening Red Sox game. Or the congestion caused by a commuter rail system more expensive than parking in downtown Boston.

The solutions to this problem, however, are clear — a combination of cost saving reforms, agency streamlining, and new revenue. The recent proposal by Gov. Deval Patrick includes many of these elements, as well as an equitable distribution of transportation dollars across the state in the form of dedicated gas tax to road and rail projects outside Greater Boston, and improved funding for the 15 regional transportation authorities that many low-income individuals beyond Route 128 rely on.

But we must remember that the economic growth created and sustained by a well-maintained road, bridge and rail network benefits everyone. For example, the sales tax that helps fund the MBTA, fuels the economy of Greater Boston, which in turn generates 50 percent of the state's jobs and 73 percent of the population. The income and business taxes on this growth are then distributed across the state to fix roads from Pittsfield to Provincetown.

Another way for drivers to appreciate public transportation, for example, is to think of every person on the subway, bus or commuter rail as one less automobile clogging our highways, emitting pollution, causing accidents, and making auto insurance even more expensive.

Solutions to this problem must include a series of reforms that reduce overhead, trim overgenerous employee benefits, and make sure transportation projects are completed on time and within budget. Thankfully, the governor's proposal includes all the reforms recommended by the state's bipartisan Transportation Finance Commission.

Achieving these reform goals are critical, not only for the money savings, but also for restoring public confidence tarnished by the cost overruns of the Big Dig.

But reforms alone will not close the deficits highlighted by Finance Commission. In fact, of the commission's 28 recommendations, three-fourths of the funding to plug the gap comes from two revenue ideas: increasing the state gasoline tax and implementing electronic tolling on major state roads when that technology is ready.

While these revenue proposals are contentious, they are absolutely necessary. The gas tax has lost over a third of its value due to inflation since it was last updated in 1990. And using gas tax to fund our transportation network makes sense because it is equitably distributed across all users. We all share the pain, and we all share the gain.

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