

GLOBE EDITORIAL

## **Selling the gas tax**

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WHEN Governor Patrick unveiled his transportation plan last month, the underlying policy was on target: The system of roads, rails, tunnels, airports, and ports needs to be streamlined - and it needs more money to pay down debts and reduce a maintenance backlog projected at up to \$19 billion over 20 years. So the governor endorsed crucial reforms, including changes to employee health insurance and pensions, and stuck his neck out by proposing a 19-cent hike in the gasoline tax.

Selling the plan in the Legislature will be a huge challenge. In Saturday's Globe, for instance, Senator Steven Baddour ascribed talk of a gas tax hike to the "Boston elite." And he cochairs the Transportation Committee. But as that committee begins hearings this week, lawmakers need to level with voters about the state's transportation woes.

There are a few good signs. House Speaker Robert DeLeo has expressed support for a gas tax hike - albeit not 19 cents. Meanwhile, the state Senate, under the slogan "reform before revenue," has offered a detailed reorganization plan of its own. But Senate President Therese Murray has also noted the need for new revenue eventually.

Patrick's administration didn't win many hearts Tuesday, when the Massachusetts Turnpike Authority board voted for toll hikes that will take effect unless the Legislature raises the gas tax. The authority is responsible for the debt from the Big Dig. Its bond rating is at risk. But many lawmakers doubt the authority's numbers - and don't like being cornered into any decision.

The governor's plan has also brought out geographic resentments. While the tax hike does steer money into regional transit authorities and road maintenance, the value of retiring Big Dig debt and supporting the MBTA may not be self-evident in Western Massachusetts and Cape Cod. Yet drivers in Greater Boston - particularly in the western suburbs - have long been paying for the Big Dig through turnpike tolls. And nearly three-quarters of the state's population lives in the T service area. If all of its riders drove instead, the transportation system - and the state's economy - would grind to a halt.

Patrick has offered a comprehensive plan. But Saturday's Globe reported that a smaller gas tax hike, perhaps 9 cents, is gaining momentum in the Senate. That would likely be too small to put transportation needs statewide on sound footing but big enough to choke off future efforts to raise revenue.

Fixing the transportation system will take leadership. The state gas tax hasn't been raised since 1991. Past administrations have resorted to gimmicks - delaying maintenance, borrowing money to pay workers, making ill-advised deals with Wall Street. A real solution is long overdue.