

# Patrick pays house call to talk up gas tax

*Woman rethinks proposal after Springfield visit*

By John C. Drake, Globe Staff | March 2, 2009

SPRINGFIELD - To gather support for his proposed 19-cent gas tax hike, Governor Deval Patrick launched a statewide campaign yesterday in the home of a woman who had called the idea "unconscionable."

Sitting in front of a fireplace in Teresita Alicea's home, Patrick blamed the need for the gas tax hike on a failure by previous administrations to address a looming transportation funding crisis.

"Our grandparents sacrificed with less income to build this infrastructure," Patrick said. "We're asking for the equivalent of a large cup of coffee a week to maintain it for the next generation. I don't think that's unreasonable."

Afterward, Alicea, who is a lawyer, said she had been persuaded by the governor's hourlong discussion to reconsider her opposition to the plan, as did several of her neighbors, about a dozen of whom had gathered alongside reporters invited by the governor's office. With cameras rolling, Patrick planted a kiss on Alicea's cheek before he left the house.

Patrick aides said the Western Massachusetts give-and-take would be the first of several small-scale gatherings this week as part of his campaign for the plan, with others taking place in Central Massachusetts, the South Coast, the North Shore, and the South Shore. Many legislators have come out against Patrick's plan, saying the increase, which would leave the Bay State with the nation's highest gas tax, is unpalatable.

Lawmakers who are considering alternative proposals, including more modest gas tax hikes, have scheduled public forums of their own across the state. Patrick yesterday urged the Legislature to act soon on his proposal.

Patrick said the other aspects of his transportation reform plan, including abolishing the Massachusetts Turnpike Authority and funding regional transportation authorities and rail projects, had gotten lost in the hype over the gas tax hike and that he wanted to take his case directly to residents.

At yesterday's discussion, the governor labored over the details of his proposal, faced head-on the criticism that Central and Western Massachusetts residents were being forced to pay off debts from the Big Dig even when they don't use it, and described other tax and fee hikes that he is considering or has set aside.

"I'm interested in engaging directly with people, because I think that people are prepared for the complexity," Patrick told reporters after the discussion. "If I have to do more of this to get those messages out, I enjoy it. By the way, it also refines my own thinking."

Alicea, who wrote in an e-mail to the governor's office that "my entire neighborhood is up in arms about the outrageous gas tax proposal," said Patrick's willingness to speak to her neighbors was surprising, and caused her to rethink her view of the proposal.

"I wrote a very intense e-mail to the governor's office, and the next thing I know the governor is sitting in my living room talking to my neighbors," said Alicea, who said she has supported Patrick since his gubernatorial campaign. "I think he was extremely logical. There were things I found out

that I didn't know. He is a master communicator, you know, and there is a lot of logic in what he says."

He said that given the number of trips he has made to Western Massachusetts - Patrick has a home in the Berkshires - he felt comfortable striking at the knee-jerk criticism among many in the area who consider any funding for transportation to be unfairly charging them for the Big Dig.

"We're going to have to get past . . . policy-making [based] on regional grievance," Patrick said. "And I say that among friends. I think my western Massachusetts bonafides are sound."

Some drivers filling up at Dorchester gas stations yesterday said they would urge Patrick to limit any increases.

"It's ridiculous," said Nick Sakas, 54, of Boston. "We're going to be paying the highest gas tax in the country all because of mismanagement of the Big Dig."

Sakas said he would tell the governor to "find another way" to address transportation funding issues.

But Greg Govostes, 43, of Woburn, said he understands the state needs the cash and that a gas tax increase, as opposed to a toll hike, spreads the burden evenly.

"If it's 19 cents, then fine," Govostes said. "Just don't come back and say you need another 19 cents next year."

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