

Mar 5, 2009

Gas tax boost on tour

IN WORCESTER STOP, GOV. CITES PATTERN OF NEGLECT

By Lisa Eckelbecker TELEGRAM & GAZETTE STAFF

leckelbecker@telegram.com

WORCESTER — Massachusetts has put off important improvements to its roads, bridges, rails and public transportation systems for too long and now faces bills that cannot be resolved without government reform and additional funding, Gov. Deval L. Patrick told area residents.

“We have a very serious problem, and if we don’t deal with this problem, it will affect our economic future and our quality of life,” Mr. Patrick told about 200 people packed into the children’s room of the Worcester Public Library.

During a 90-minute forum, Mr. Patrick fielded questions and defended his call to raise the state gasoline tax by 19 cents per gallon. The current tax of 23.5 cents per gallon has not gone up since 1991, except for a 2003 change that added 2.5 cents per gallon for an underground tank storage fund.

The state could be facing \$15 billion to \$19 billion in repair and maintenance bills over the next 20 years, the governor said, largely because it deferred projects and the difficult decisions about how to pay for them. Motorists are also paying \$718 million a year on vehicle repairs linked to poor conditions on the state’s roads, he said.

The federal government’s stimulus package could bring about \$1 billion to the state for road projects, but that one-time infusion would not address longer-term issues, he said.

“This is all about choices,” Mr. Patrick said. “This is all about dealing with a chronic pattern of neglect that goes back a long time.”

Mr. Patrick’s proposal has sparked debate at a time when the nation is mired in recession. A group of Massachusetts business organizations has come out in support of a 25-cent gas tax increase. Some state legislators have discussed a 9-cent hike. Online petitions urge no increase. Mr. Patrick has been traveling across the state to pitch his proposal, including a session with residents in Fall River on Tuesday, testimony before a legislative committee yesterday afternoon in Springfield and a forum with residents last night in Natick.

A higher gas tax would hurt businesses that use big vehicles, Richard Froggatt of Princeton, who runs his own concrete pouring business and drives to work in a large vehicle that carries his work materials, told the governor yesterday.

“At a time like this, we’re hurting. We’re not even doing many construction projects,”

said Mr. Froggatt, who added that his trips “cannot be done in a Prius.”

Others questioned whether money raised by a higher gas tax would lead to repairs on secondary roads and improvements in public transit. It remains inequitable that people who live outside Boston bear the greatest burden for the support of the Massachusetts Turnpike, the state’s east-west corridor, said Jose L. Garcia of Northboro, who suggested that the state eliminate turnpike tolls except at the state borders and raise the gas tax.

“We are paying for \$15 billion worth of construction that we can barely use,” Mr. Garcia said in an interview after the forum. “Boston wins, Worcester loses again.”

Mr. Patrick said his proposal to increase the gas tax would dedicate the extra revenue to specific efforts: 4 cents to roll back tolls on the turnpike and Boston tunnels; 6 cents to maintain Massachusetts Bay Transportation Authority services and prevent fare increases; 1.5 cents to regional transportation authorities; 1.5 cents to regional road projects; 3 cents to rail projects; 1 cent for innovative projects; and 2 cents to begin paying transportation workers who are now paid with borrowed capital funds.

Mr. Patrick said he would also merge six different transportation agencies into one organization with four divisions. Reforming pension and retirement activities would save money, Mr. Patrick said. About 300 positions would be eliminated.

The higher gas tax would also be structured to increase over time at the rate of inflation, the governor said.

“It’s not capped, but it’s predictable,” Mr. Patrick said.

Scott A. Robbins of Millbury, who asked whether a tax hike could be structured to end at a certain date, called the governor’s answer reasonable and realistic.

“Unless there’s something else in place, I can understand why there isn’t an end date,” Mr. Robbins said. But “I’ve never heard of a tax that’s been stopped.”

Others questioned whether the turnpike could be sold to a private operator. The governor’s answer: He’s not philosophically opposed to public-private programs, and the state has put turnpike service stations up for bids, but other states and municipalities that have gone private have seen tolls shoot up.

Mr. Patrick said that if legislators send him a tax-hike bill that does not include the reforms he seeks to transportation agencies, he will not support it.

“I am not going to sign it, because it seems to me we need both,” he said.