

Gas tax grievances

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IF A hearing last week in Springfield is any indication, the debate over the future of transportation in Massachusetts could degenerate into an unproductive fight over whose regional grievance is worse.

Convening at Springfield Technical Community College on Wednesday, the Legislature's Joint Committee on Transportation heard testimony on Governor Patrick's plan to overhaul the state transportation bureaucracy and raise new revenues through a 19-cent gas tax hike. But to judge from some of the testimony, one might think Patrick had proposed a giveaway to Greater Boston.

At the hearing, one speaker called the governor's plan a "direct insult to people who live outside [Interstate] 495," noting that the first 10 cents of the increase would go to prevent higher tolls on the Massachusetts Turnpike and Boston Harbor tunnels and to preserve MBTA service without raising fares. Others said motorists in the western part of the state drive long distances and have scant options for public transit.

And Joseph Wagner, the Chicopee state representative who co-chairs the Transportation Committee, raised the widespread objection that impending turnpike toll increases in the eastern part of the state are what's driving the transportation debate.

But something had to. The state's Transportation Finance Commission estimated in 2007 that the system will be short up to \$19 billion over 20 years. Continuing to punt on the issue - and using regional inequities as a reason - would be irresponsible.

In truth, commuters in Eastern Massachusetts have real complaints right now. Ever since the Turnpike Authority took over responsibility for the Big Dig, Pike users east of Route 128 have been saddled with the cost. New toll hikes would only heighten the unfairness. Boston-area lawmakers at the hearing also pointed out that \$7 tunnel fares would be poisonous for businesses and residents from East Boston to Lynn, and that T fares have risen several times since the gas tax was last increased in 1991.

In his testimony Wednesday, Patrick sought to tamp down geographic resentments. Massachusetts has the highest transportation debt in the country, he said, and that hurts the state's ability to invest in any improvements anywhere. Patrick's proposals and the Senate's reform-only plan would help by squeezing out bureaucratic costs. But more money is vital.

Wagner and his Senate co-chair, Steven Baddour of Methuen, both said flatly that a 19-cent gas tax hike isn't going to happen. But a smaller hike means backing away from a

comprehensive solution. There are plenty of regional anxieties to go around, and they shouldn't be an excuse for letting the Commonwealth's transportation troubles continue to fester. ■