

Focus on transportation helps fuel growth

Sunday, March 08, 2009

By JAMES A. ALOISI Jr.

I have had the privilege of visiting the Pioneer Valley on several occasions in the past few days and weeks to hear from local leaders and residents and speak honestly about the transportation crisis.

From the Berkshires to the Cape, we all rely on a robust transportation system to get around, whether for work, school, vacation or visiting family. Unfortunately, decades of neglect and inaction have left that system of roads, bridges and public transit broken and unresponsive to the needs of residents. Along the way, we stuck future generations with the multi-billion dollar bills caused by crushing debt and put off the tough choices to tomorrow.

The Transportation Finance Commission has said that "the real cost of this neglect will be felt in our regional economy and in our way of life." "Business as usual," they wrote, "will not suffice."

Building a stronger transportation system will secure our economic future and allow us to make the targeted investments that will lead to economic growth and new jobs for communities throughout the commonwealth. We must find a fair solution, today. The price of inaction is too steep. The economic vitality of the Springfield area and all of Massachusetts depends on it. As Gov. Deval L. Patrick has said, we are in this together as one commonwealth, and we must join together as one state and one people to solve this crisis.

I encourage the people of Western Massachusetts to take a close look at the governor's groundbreaking Transportation and Economic Security Plan at www.mass.gov/youmovemassachusetts. You will see a fair plan that makes unprecedented investments in regions outside Boston. For the first time ever, we write into law a new funding structure that ensures all regions receive funding for transportation projects in proportion to their gas tax contribution.

We all agree that there must be an end to the status quo - there must be aggressive, long-lasting reforms. Reforms to date have already saved taxpayers more than 83 million dollars in staff reductions, slashed overtime costs, and canceled consultant contracts at the Turnpike Authority and MBTA.

The governor's plan builds on the Senate's strong reform plan with an aggressive set of long-lasting reforms to streamline our transportation bureaucracy, curb out-of-scale pension benefits, and put an end to the old way of doing things. We will:

Abolish the Turnpike Authority and create a unified transportation agency with four divisions: highway, rail and transit, aviation and port, and the Registry of Motor Vehicles.

Streamline the simplified system with 300 fewer transportation employees and create a new system that is more open, responsive, and accountable to the public.

Pass meaningful pension and benefit reform - end the "23 and out" at MBTA and fold all T and turnpike employees into the state health care system.

Stop the practice of using capital dollars, or debt, to pay for hundreds of MassHighway employees and put those dollars back where they belong - into road maintenance.

But we can't just fix today's problems. We have a duty to future generations to build a stronger transportation system that can fuel economic growth in every corner of the commonwealth. A group of statewide business leaders recently endorsed a 25-cent increase in the gas tax to confront this funding crisis and create economic growth. The governor proposes to invest an additional 19-cent gas tax to boost economic growth across the state, pay off billions in debt and avoid fiscal ruin.

The gas tax has not been raised since 1991 and has decreased in value over time. Every penny of the current gas tax has been devoted to roads and highways and transportation, but the cost of everything including the materials to make our transportation system work has gone up substantially in 18 years. We invest 6 cents of the gas tax increase in funding for projects outside of Greater Boston:

Targeted regional road, bridge, and public works projects to promote local economic growth. The dollars paid by the Pioneer Valley in gas tax would come back to this region to support these projects. The bill also targets additional grants to revitalization of Gateway Cities including Chicopee and Springfield.

Invest in regional rail projects, such as new stations for the Connecticut River Line between Springfield and East Northfield to expand service on Amtrak's Vermonter, and partnering with Connecticut to connect Springfield and Hartford with commuter rail.

Strengthen regional transit, a 66 percent annual statewide increase. Pioneer Valley Transit Authority could maintain or expand service and access for many elderly and lower-income residents. For those citizens, PVRTA is their only transportation option.

These are substantial investments in regional rail, road, and bridge needs that exceed \$150 million annually. These regional investments are critical to the economic future of the Pioneer Valley and can only happen if we raise the necessary revenue.

Fundamental reform coupled with the gas tax will free our transportation system from crippling debt, make long-awaited investments necessary to improve service and

reliability, and build an open and accountable transportation agency that supports economic growth, regional equity and responsible environmental stewardship.

It is the fair solution for this region and fair for the state as a whole.

James A. Aloisi Jr. is Massachusetts secretary of transportation.