

Stasik: Taxes, tolls and people, all in this together

By John Stasik/Guest columnist

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"We are all one Commonwealth. We are all in this together. We are going to have to solve this together." These statements summarize the basic policy driving Governor Patrick's plan for relieving the gripping transportation crises we face in Massachusetts. The Governor's remarks, presented to a packed audience last week at the Morse Institute in Natick, were informative, hopeful, and realistic.

The Governor's own calculations show that there is a long way to go to resolve this dilemma. What is needed is a solution that is fair to every segment of the Commonwealth and still generates sufficient revenue from every possible source. The long term solution is not a choice between taxes or tolls but instead assessing both taxes and tolls.

According to the Governor, if an increased gas tax alone were used to relieve the transportation burden, the projected tax would be 75 cents per gallon. Such an increase is not practical. So, the governor has proposed a 19-cent increase, leaving the equivalent of 56 cents a gallon to come from other sources, including tolls.

However, increasing tolls selectively throughout the Commonwealth raises serious questions about inequity. Since the 1997 enactment of the Metropolitan Highway system bill, MetroWest commuters have been unfairly burdened with funding a major portion of Central Artery debt through increases in Turnpike tolls, even though fewer than 15 percent of MetroWest commuters use the Central Artery. This fundamental imbalance has been ignored for more than a decade.

The Governor's plan is more comprehensive and equitable than any proposal offered so far.

The Governor has proposed a gas-tax increase while maintaining tolls at current locations at current levels. However, the plan does not go far enough. In addition to a comprehensive tax increase there should be included a more comprehensive tolling plan throughout the Commonwealth.

Drivers in every part of the Commonwealth will pay higher gas taxes if the governor's plan is enacted. Fairness demands that everyone using high-maintenance highways, such as I-90, 95, 93, and 495, and the heavily traveled tunnels and bridges-Central Artery, Zakim, Cape Cod Canal-should share the cost. In addition, more comprehensive tolling would equitably impose a toll on those from other states driving in Massachusetts.

We should not stop there. As technology improves and alternative energy sources are available for travel, revenues could be increased through the use of transponders, varied tolling schemes, carbon imprint fees, and other yet-unthought-of sources.

Revenue sources should be as expansive and comprehensive as possible. The more the cost burden is distributed among all users, the more equitable sharing the burden becomes. Spreading the cost also reduces the regressive nature of the user fee, one of the biggest downsides of a sales tax.

As the governor said, "We are one Commonwealth. We are in this together. We are going to have to solve this together."

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