

Transportation, planning experts back 19-cent gas tax hike

By Rosemary D'Amour/Daily News correspondent

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BOSTON —

A panel of state transportation and planning experts yesterday strongly endorsed the governor's plan for a 19-cent gas tax increase, calling it essential to maintaining the state's infrastructure that some say has been chronically underfunded in MetroWest.

The forum included organizations representing transportation business and planning interests, who warned that the state faces a fleeting chance to raise additional money for its fractured highway system.

"We only have one shot at this vote," said Marc Draisen, executive director of the Metropolitan Area Planning Council. "We better not blow it by doing something really small that won't solve the problem."

A Better City, the infrastructure planning and development group that co-sponsored the panel discussion with the Dukakis Center for Urban and Regional Policy, said lawmakers should consider an increase as high as 25 cents to meet the state's transportation needs.

Although it would only take a four-cent increase to cover Turnpike debt and avoid toll increases affecting MetroWest commuters, Draisen, a former legislator, said even with the governor's proposal, many transportation projects will still be underfunded.

The state is facing a possible \$19 billion funding gap over the next 20 years just to maintain the existing system, and every transportation agency is or will be running a structural deficit, said panelist Marc Cutler, vice president for Cambridge Systematics.

Much of the debt the state carries is a result of financing projects such as the Big Dig, which carries the issue of regional equity, panelists said. Although Boston is the main hub for the state, the cost of transportation debt from city projects trickles into the rest of the commonwealth.

"People do have a Boston-centric anger," said Jeffrey Mullan, panelist and undersecretary for the Executive Office of Transportation. "What I hear when I travel around is 'if you have to raise revenue, please, please do it equitably.'"

The fuel levy hasn't been raised in Massachusetts since 1991, and has lost a third of its buying power because of inflation, Cutler said.

Stephen Silveira, former Transportation Finance Commission chairman, said that although the idea of a high gas tax may seem daunting to residents, it wouldn't impact them very much.

"A lot of people vastly overestimate what they would be paying with this gas tax," said Silveira, who moderated the panel.

With the proposed increase, the average driver would be paying an extra \$8 to \$10 per month, Silveira said. People who couldn't afford the increase, he said, are most likely not driving cars.

"In that sense, the gas tax seems to be a little self-policing," Silveira said.

The panel found that drivers are actually paying more in the long run, even without a tax increase. Poor road conditions in the state have commuters paying \$718 million per year, or an average of \$300 per household, in vehicle repair costs.

The coalition Our Transportation Future, which includes businesses and planning interests, including A Better City, recently sponsored a survey gauging public opinion on the proposed gas tax.

The survey, conducted at the end of February by Opinion Dynamics, found that 54 percent of 600 people polled would support a 20-cent gas tax increase, if it created jobs in the state.