

Transportation infrastructure needs work

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Talk of increasing the gas tax has become so overwhelming in recent weeks that it has caused many residents to hyperventilate at the prospect.

But what we should be more worried about is the future we will face as a Commonwealth if new revenues aren't part of a transportation reform plan endorsed by our elected officials.

The days of ignoring the problems - the closed roadways and the detours around structurally deficient bridges - must be put to an end. For each day we delay, the problems get worse, for our children and grandchildren and for our Commonwealth's economic vitality, and they get more expensive.

Massachusetts is not alone in its transportation problems. By tackling the problem honestly, we can once again demonstrate why we lead the way in so many industries. Devoting our energy and our resources to ensure we are attracting emerging industries in the life sciences and clean energy sectors will not achieve the intended results if our infrastructure cannot sustain our current development, much less any growth that comes with additional investments.

Fixing the state's transportation infrastructure - our roads, bridges, trains, and buses - so we can easily and safely move goods and people around the state is the foundation to a successful economy. It is so critical, and very telling, that many of our state's traditionally conservative statewide business groups: the Massachusetts Taxpayers Foundation, the National Association of Industrial Office Properties and the Massachusetts Business Roundtable this week endorsed raising the gas tax by as much as 25 cents.

It is certainly important that our economy receives every strategic boost we can give it right now, and it is equally important that residents in all parts of the state drive on safe roads and bridges. An increase in the gas tax dedicated to roads and bridges addresses both of these priorities.

Massachusetts, like states across the nation during these last few months, is losing jobs at an alarming rate, with 250,000 people now reportedly collecting unemployment checks and 6.9 percent of the state's residents without a job. An infusion of funds to get transportation projects across the state off the ground not only has the ability to be an immediate economic stimulator by putting thousands of people back to work, but can serve as a signal to employers desperate right now for a turnaround.

Roughly 72 percent of the \$201 billion in products shipped annually from Massachusetts is transported on our highways. The commercial trucking industry in Massachusetts is projected to grow by 43 percent by 2020.

For years, we have seen the condition of the Commonwealth's transportation infrastructure going from bad and to worse. And while our elected leaders have rightly begun by looking to reform the structure and management of our transportation agencies and adopt measures that can offer savings, the larger reality is that we have a system that is on the brink of exhaustion and requires \$15 billion to \$19 billion in immediate needs. It is a system that must be reformed and that must have new revenues in the form of a higher gas tax.

We cannot ignore the problem and push it off to another day. It took unprecedented leadership to build the interstate highway system that launched the national economy we have today. It will take similar leadership to ensure it is sustained for our grandchildren.

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