

A taxing situation

By Yvonne Abraham, Globe Columnist | April 12, 2009

Turning off a few lights on a bridge won't do it.

Neither will stranding suburban commuters without trains on nights and weekends. And, as infuriating as this is, neither will nixing pension windfalls and other state boondoggles.

The hole we're in is far too deep to be filled by any - or all - of the cost-saving measures suddenly de rigueur on Beacon Hill.

Massachusetts has money problems that go way beyond this recession - problems that Beacon Hill bigs have kicked down the road for 15 years, hoping somebody else would solve them.

Our giant deficit is too big to kick any further. The disastrous transportation debt won't budge.

It's time for guts, because what we need here are new taxes. But so far, guts are in distressingly short supply on Beacon Hill.

The governor has suggested a bunch of ways to raise money - a 19 cent gas tax increase, as well as levies on candy and alcohol, among others. House and Senate leaders issued a statement last month acknowledging the need for new revenue. But since then, most of the men and women who lead us have run for cover.

They are terrified of raising taxes because they reckon their constituents will boot them out as punishment.

That would have to be quite a backlash. After all, losing reelection in Massachusetts is only slightly more likely than Mayor Tom Menino inviting his opponents to debate. Unless you happen to be photographed shoving money in your underwear, or you hang around Lowell asking women if they're wearing any.

There's no question some voters would be angry. Nobody wants to pay more for gas, or dinners out, or Jolly Ranchers - especially now.

But we're looking at a \$4 billion deficit next year. Over the next 20 years, we'll be \$19 billion short of what we need just to maintain our transportation system, let alone improve it.

So far, we've been offered half-measures that would force some of us to shoulder a burden that should be everyone's to share.

Legislators are preparing slash-and-burn budgets that will hack away at our children's educations and erode care for the most vulnerable. And the Turnpike Authority wants toll hikes that stick it to commuters from the north and the west for the criminally expensive Big Dig, while others get to use it for free.

The mess we're in is not of our making, but it belongs to all of us - not just those of us who take the Ted, or depend on the state for housing and healthcare. But those arguments don't seem to be swaying the men and women of the Massachusetts Legislature, many of whom seem perfectly content to let other people's constituents twist to save their sorry behinds.

"As of right now, I haven't sensed the support," for tax increases among House members, Speaker Robert A. DeLeo told reporters on Wednesday.

Way to lead, Mr. Speaker. Makes one nostalgic for the ethically challenged Sal DiMasi, whose early backing of a gas tax increase now seems doubly courageous.

Over in the Senate, the mantra is "reform before revenue." Only nobody's talking about the revenue part.

"Not many relish taking a tax vote," Ways and Means chairman Steven Panagiotakos told our Matt Viser, in a comic understatement. "Over here, we've been very serious about reform before revenue. I think we need to continue along that road."

Until when, exactly?

The state's hotheaded transportation czar, James Aloisi, got into big trouble a while back for calling "reform before revenue" a meaningless slogan. He later said he was sorry. No apology necessary, Jim. You're looking more right by the day.