

GLOBE EDITORIAL

Cars, trains, and pols

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SELDOM have the Commonwealth's transportation woes seemed more tangible than in Friday's Globe, which carried one story about potentially drastic cuts to MBTA service and another about four former T officials who retired with generous pensions only to be hired back as consultants.

The MBTA's situation is emblematic. The agency has a \$160 million deficit that it can't realistically close through fare hikes. It is a crucial part of a transportation network whose projected costs will exceed available revenues by perhaps \$19 billion over the next two decades. But revelations of hackery and waste - at the T and other transportation agencies - are undermining efforts to get more state money.

As the Legislature and the Patrick administration debate how to overhaul the state's transportation system, the challenge is to weed out the abuses that waste resources and erode public confidence - without losing sight of the need to get more money into the system.

The state Senate and House deliberately postponed any discussion of money, but both have now passed separate bills that include at least some necessary reforms. While neither offers the comprehensive solution that the Commonwealth needs - and neither contains any revenue - a conference committee can stitch together the most productive parts of both.

Some reform, no revenue

Reform doesn't necessarily require major changes in the state's transportation bureaucracy. And there's some danger that too much fiddling will create confusion without generating many efficiencies. Nevertheless, the most conspicuous change in both bills is the creation of a super-authority that would take over the responsibilities of multiple current agencies.

The House would merge the Massachusetts Turnpike Authority and the Mass. Highway Department into a super-authority, whose board of directors would also oversee a legally separate MBTA. The Senate would put the T into its new super-authority. The authority approach ostensibly leads to professionalism and provides some insulation from political pressures.

These approaches contrast with the Patrick proposal, which would combine multiple transport agencies under the governor's office. This plan would arguably give him too much power over tolls and fares, but the governor would at least be directly answerable for the transportation system.

By contrast, there would be little accountability in the 11-member board proposed by the Senate. This model would be far too unwieldy, all the more so because the bill sets specific requirements for where board members should come from and which interest groups they should represent. Far more realistic is the House approach: It would set up a sleeker board with five members. In the House proposal, the governor would chair the board, and the secretary of transportation would be the authority's chief executive officer, responsible to the board.

But the conference committee shouldn't take the House measure unaltered. Why commit the governor to chairing a board with many technical responsibilities? A secretary could serve as chief executive and board chair. Granted, Governor Patrick's transportation secretary, James Aloisi, has been ruffling feathers on Beacon Hill lately, but policy shouldn't be based on pique.

Pensions and more

The shape of the bureaucracy is far less consequential than reforming the overly generous fringe benefits that some transportation employees receive. Both the House and the Senate bills change rules that allow MBTA workers to retire after 23 years of service, regardless of age. But the new minimum age of 55 would apply only to new hires, so savings won't materialize for years.

The Senate also went easy on the MBTA's high healthcare costs. The state's Group Insurance Commission has a good record of keeping costs down, but the Senate only set up a study that might or might not lead to putting the agency's employees into that money-saving plan. The House, wisely, would mandate it.

The Senate bill does, however, forbid the hiring back of retired employees. The provision, which isn't included in the House bill, would keep the MBTA from repeating the abuse that the Globe's Andrea Estes reported on Friday.

Meanwhile, as the House debate continued into the late evening Tuesday, a raft of dubious amendments with uncertain consequences crept into the bill without sufficient public discussion. One would alter an arcane legal definition in a way that could reduce the portion of the turnpike that can produce toll revenue to pay off Big Dig debt. Other amendments would place controls on the size of toll hikes and set new restrictions on which facilities toll revenues can be spent on.

Before pushing forward with a transportation overhaul, potential snakes like these need to be taken out of the bill.

Unfortunately, some of the most important reforms aren't included in either the House or the Senate bill. Neither would address the costly health benefits enjoyed by T retirees. Neither would end the costly practice of paying MassHighway employees with borrowed money, because fixing that requires a reliable revenue source up front. Without taking these steps, the Legislature can't come close to achieving the \$2 billion or so in potential

savings that the blue-ribbon Transportation Finance Commission identified two years ago.

Then again, the commission also made it clear that even those savings aren't enough to keep the state's transportation system going. The conference committee needs to come up with a bill that ends the worst abuses and represents a credible down payment on reform. And legislators need to move on quickly to the harder job of bringing new revenue into this troubled system.