

A transportation standoff

July 13, 2009

WHEN THE MBTA proposed a fare hike of nearly 20 percent last week, it highlighted the basic problem with transportation - and the politics of transportation - in Massachusetts: Many users of the state's roads and rails are paying both too much and too little.

Huge debts incurred by the Massachusetts Bay Transportation Authority and the Massachusetts Turnpike Authority have put upward pressure on transit fares and highway tolls. And yet the money coming into those agencies, and into the state's transportation network as a whole, hasn't been enough to keep roads and transit systems in good working order. A blue-ribbon commission estimated the likely maintenance backlog at up to \$19 billion over 20 years.

Governor Patrick's 19-cent gas tax plan would have put the whole system on sounder footing - and spread the pain to drivers across the state. But legislative leaders, knowing that plunging revenues would produce a yawning hole in the state budget, opted instead to raise the sales tax to preserve a wide variety of services. And although the Legislature passed a transportation reform package, which included an overhaul of the bureaucracy, lawmakers declined to raise the gas tax as well.

Part of the sales tax hike will be allocated to transportation. And the MBTA will get \$160 million of that - about what Patrick's plan would have generated. But the T's finances have worsened, officials say, and the agency is now asking for more money at the worst possible time for its riders.

Creaking under debt

Nearly a third of the T's operating budget goes to paying debt - a proportion that gives the agency little maneuvering room in bad times. It has now proposed to increase a variety of fares by an average of nearly a fifth. In practice, that means a 50-cent increase in the cash subway fare, and \$5.50 commuter rail fares even at stops that are relatively close to Boston. The package would raise \$69 million a year, and the agency says it would avoid major service cuts. But the hikes understandably struck many riders as excessive and premature.

As a matter of transportation policy, a stiff fare hike at the MBTA has major consequences for other parts of the transportation system. Even people who never take the T suffer if higher fares push more commuters out of public transit and into their own cars.

Meanwhile, many T riders plainly aren't persuaded that the transit agency is as lean as it could be.

In response to such concerns, General Manager Dan Grabauskas has cited lower overtime costs, cuts in the number of take-home cars, and furloughs for non-union employees. Those are helpful steps. But nagging doubts remain. A recent article by the Globe's Noah Bierman indicates that the T could save nearly \$30 million a year just by eliminating the second attendant on subway trains. Second attendants disappeared from the Blue Line - without incident - more than a decade ago. The potential savings from following suit on other lines would represent a major chunk of the \$69 million the agency hopes to raise through the proposed fare hike.

One obvious way to build confidence with fare payers is to identify more efficiencies in the agency's operations. To be sure, labor contracts and political pressures by employee unions constrain the ability of T managers to carry out cost-saving changes unilaterally. This process also requires consistent support from elected leaders.

Last month, the Legislature did make significant reforms in MBTA employee benefits; the changes should produce tens of millions of dollars a year in savings. But the process paid backhanded tribute to the power that public employee unions usually wield on Beacon Hill: A conference committee included the reforms in a 175-page bill that came out late at night, and leaders pushed it through before the unions had a chance to mount major opposition.

Hearings loom

When public hearings on the proposed hikes begin this summer, T officials will face a skeptical audience. Yet they're not the only ones with questions to answer.

Under the new reform law, numerous transportation agencies - including the T, the Highway Department, and the Turnpike Authority - will be crunched into one. How will a fare hike at the T affect other modes of transportation? How might the new structure be used to relieve the pressure of Big Dig-era debt on the T and the Turnpike Authority? As for the projected maintenance backlog, if Patrick's gas-tax plan isn't the answer, what is?

The proposed T fare hikes are only part of a larger problem - the debts that are strangling the transportation system. The whole point of overhauling the bureaucracy is to promote rational, comprehensive planning. Now's the time to start. ■