

# Transportation wreck averted

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WHEN A conference committee gives birth to a 175-page bill late in the evening and legislative leaders have plans to bring it up for a vote the very next day, good-government types brace for bad news. And yet the transportation bill that House and Senate negotiators disgorged Wednesday night was a vast improvement over earlier legislation from either chamber. It would simplify a Byzantine bureaucracy while fixing some of the worst inefficiencies in the system.

Lawmakers and the governor's office were still sorting through the details of the complex measure yesterday, even as the Senate and House were rushing to pass it. And at least one major problem was already apparent: The restructuring described in the bill can work only if the Legislature comes up with more money for transportation.

The changes are significant: The measure would promote better planning by bringing the beleaguered Turnpike Authority and most of the state's other transportation agencies under a new Department of Transportation - an entity led by a secretary and a board appointed by the governor.

Crucially, the bill would also save tens of millions of dollars a year through changes to MBTA benefits, such as moving T employees into the Group Insurance Commission. One disappointment is that, while the legislation would abolish the "23 and out" provision that allows some T employees to start collecting pensions in their early 40s, the change would only affect future hires.

More immediately troublesome are two unfunded mandates. One is intended to keep Mass. Pike toll payers from footing even more of the cost of the Big Dig. Fair enough; commuters in Boston's western suburbs have suffered plenty. But restricting these revenues without providing for new ones will make it harder to pay staggering debt bills. Similarly, the legislation also demands that the state stop paying permanent employees with borrowed money. But to make the change, the administration needs more operating money now.

Governor Patrick's much-maligned 19-cent gas tax plan would have raised about \$500 million, enough to deal honestly with these problems. Legislative leaders have floated plans to direct perhaps \$275 million from a likely sales-tax increase to transportation. But the transportation bill itself contains no money at all.

Still, it does include some vital reforms. Public-employee unions wield enormous power on Beacon Hill, and House and Senate negotiators showed political spine by taking them on. Patrick would in no way denigrate that achievement by kicking the measure back to

the Legislature if any hidden flaws emerge. The governor should do so only as a last resort. The compromise measure looks like a clear step toward reform