

GLOBE EDITORIAL

Think big on transportation

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NOTHING concentrates the mind of local drivers - and the elected officials who keep close tabs on public sentiment - like the possibility of paying \$4 to drive into Boston on the Mass. Pike and \$7 to use the Harbor tunnels. Last week, the Massachusetts Turnpike Authority board voted for stiff toll hikes in an effort to keep up debt payments for the Big Dig. That move only underscored what's wrong with the way the state pays for transportation: It isn't logical. It isn't fair. And it isn't adequate.

An expansion of the gasoline tax, which has been frozen since 1991, is the fairest, most broad-based way to generate money to fix the state's many transportation problems. The Turnpike Authority's financial crisis has created an opportunity. Governor Patrick and the Legislature should work out a comprehensive plan that uses a gas tax hike not just to pay for the Big Dig, but also to put the debt-ridden MBTA on firmer financial footing, repair crumbling roads and bridges, and cut or eliminate existing tolls.

Opposition on Beacon Hill is beginning to thaw. In an important about-face, House Speaker Salvatore DiMasi said Wednesday that he would push for a gas tax increase as an alternative to what he called "the excessive proposal now on the table for doubling some tolls." In reaching this conclusion, DiMasi is siding with a vocal contingent of lawmakers from Boston's western suburbs, who have long fumed that commuters who use the east-west turnpike are paying disproportionately for the north-south Big Dig.

There are other efforts afoot to change the transportation financing system. Earlier this month, the Patrick administration outlined a restructuring plan that would give the Big Dig to the Massachusetts Port Authority. On the Globe's op-ed page yesterday, state Senate President Therese Murray and Senator Steve Baddour, who co-chairs the Joint Committee on Transportation, raised the possibility of public-private partnerships - which is to say, of selling or leasing out a toll-generating bridge or tunnel to a private company in exchange for up-front money that could be used to pay down debt. The two senators also argued for reform of the state's transportation bureaucracies before seeking new revenues.

No matter what the scenario, new revenues are needed. The Transportation Finance Commission estimated last year that Massachusetts will need as much as \$19 billion more over the next two decades just to keep up existing infrastructure.

What lawmakers shouldn't do is use a modest bump in the gas tax to prevent the current round of toll hikes on the eastern Mass. Pike - and then drop the issue. They have the

chance to deal boldly with all the state's transportation troubles at once, and they ought to use it. ■