

Transportation funding nears crisis

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The Cape coastal environment is an irresistible attraction for residents and visitors, and its transportation system is crucial to the region's prosperity and quality of life. State officials need to get serious, however, because the commonwealth's transportation system is in trouble.

A report issued last year by the bipartisan Massachusetts Transportation Finance Commission revealed that nearly every transportation agency is suffering budget shortfalls. Together they face an astounding \$15 billion to \$19 billion funding gap over the next 20 years just to maintain our existing highway, transit and local road infrastructure. The transportation panel, convened in 2004 by Gov. Mitt Romney and the Legislature, points to an impending transportation crisis for the commonwealth.

This lack of funding spells deep trouble for the Cape, one of the fastest-growing regions in Massachusetts for the past 20 years. Cape Cod's economic base relies on a travel-dependent population, including tourists, second homeowners and retirees. The resort industry alone generates 30 percent of the region's employment. Crumbling roads and bridges and deteriorating public transit could impede commerce and undermine the Cape's natural and historic charm.

A recent report by the Massachusetts Association of Regional Planning Agencies found numerous examples of critical transportation maintenance projects that lack funds in Barnstable County and elsewhere.

At the top of the Cape list are structurally deficient bridges in Falmouth, Dennis and Chatham. The poor condition of these bridges could result in closure. The Chapoquoit Road bridge in Falmouth, for example, provides the only access route to homes in the area. If further deterioration in condition caused closure of the Upper County Road Bridge in Dennis, its average traffic of 10,000 vehicles per day would shift to already heavily congested Routes 134 and 28.

Investments in transportation improvements contribute to economic growth. Some solutions that respond to Cape transportation needs include:

- Improvements being considered in the Hyannis Access Study, a multiagency effort under way since 2006 to improve access in and around the Cape's commercial hub and to the Barnstable Municipal Airport. According to Massachusetts Transportation Facts 2004, when combined, Cape and Islands domestic flight operations outnumbered those of Logan Airport by 29,000 annually.
- The Cape Cod Rail Trail bike extension would connect the 22 existing miles of bike and walking trails from Dennis to the Hyannis Transportation Center. This

- would allow for car-free travel throughout the whole Cape with links to bus and ferry.
- For our existing roads, a real-time traffic information system would help reduce traffic congestion and auto emissions, and improve safety. The information system would include road cameras, 24-hour Internet and radio updates, and sensors to monitor heavily congested access routes.

Stirred to action across the state, an alliance of unlikely partners created the Massachusetts Transportation Investment Coalition to find solutions to the statewide funding crisis. The Construction Industries of Massachusetts, the Metropolitan Area Planning Council, A Better City, the Massachusetts Building and Trades Council, the Conservation Law Foundation and many others have come together to prevent deterioration of our transportation system and to advance strategic projects that will provide immense economic and environmental benefits to the Bay State.

Public officials must also rise to the challenge. In September, the Transportation Finance Commission proposed a series of recommendations to address both cost savings and new revenues. No painless "silver bullet" will fix our funding gap, and the solution will surely require political compromise. State decision makers must implement cost-saving measures and identify new and sustainable resources for transportation to safeguard our transportation system into the future.

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