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Column: State's roads, bridges need prompt attention

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Great strides are being made in Massachusetts in economic development with aggressive support for growing industries and new technologies. Recent investments in the life sciences and clean energy sectors are the most recent cases in point. These targeted industry investments are central to creating the next round of growth and prosperity, and economic development.

The efficiency of our transportation system in Massachusetts is as critical a component of the state's economy as any other investment we are called upon to make to assure our competitiveness. Our economy can only grow if we can efficiently transport materials and goods, and if our employers can easily access to customers, markets and workers. Some 72 percent of the \$201 billion in products shipped annually from Massachusetts is transported on our highways. The commercial trucking industry in Massachusetts is projected to grow by 43 percent by 2020. In the simplest of terms, it is impossible to attract new businesses without a safe and strong transportation infrastructure to move goods and people around.

The economic crisis that has gripped the nation for the last several months and the impact it has had on the resources has larger implications here at home than many realize. For years, we have seen the condition of the commonwealth's transportation infrastructure going from bad and to worse. And while our elected leaders have rightly begun by looking to reform the structure and management of our transportation and adopt measures that can offer savings, the larger reality is that we have a system that is on the brink of exhaustion and that requires \$15 billion to \$19 billion in immediate needs.

A year-and-a half has passed since the special Transportation Finance Commission released its recommendations on how the state should fill this gap. The governor and the Legislature deserve great credit for approving a record amount of bond funding in 2008 as well as for an aggressive program to begin fixing the state's more than 500 deteriorating bridges. These are good first steps, but we need to resurrect the sense of urgency with which the commission's recommendations were first received and move forward in a more comprehensive manner.

In the short term, there are renewed discussions in Congress of an economic stimulus package that could include a massive funding effort to focus on aging roads and bridges in Massachusetts and around the country. These are projects and needs that exist on the drawing boards and that are ready to go, but for funding. They would create a significant

number of new construction jobs at the very time the economy needs dramatic stimulus. Undoubtedly, state government will be called on to match these federal resources with its own funds. Despite the fiscal challenges we face, we must find the wherewithal to seize this unfolding opportunity.

Talk of a stimulus package offers another additional step we can take to avert the impending crisis in our overburdened transportation system. Beyond this opportunity, however, lies the continuing need to comprehensively address the ongoing investment needs in a manner that is sustainable and places transportation investments on the same plane as other important measures the state government has taken to assure our future economic competitiveness.

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