

## Mass. moves -- badly

June 24, 2008

MASSACHUSETTS political leaders have known for years that the state has a severe transportation financing gap, but it hasn't yet registered with the average citizen. Yesterday, a coalition of public-spirited groups explained that the crisis is apparent every time a motorist lurches over a patched-up highway or an MBTA passenger is delayed by a train breakdown.

According to a report commissioned by the Massachusetts Transportation Investment Coalition, 585 bridges in the state are structurally deficient, the most heavily traveled being the Interstate 95 span that crosses the Newburyport Turnpike in Lynnfield. A stretch of North Road in Westfield is number one on the list of deteriorated highways. There may be no immediate safety hazard, but with truck and automobile transportation essential to the state economy, no highway should linger in substandard condition.

With the spike in gas prices, ridership on public transit has increased markedly, and the MBTA has worked hard to accommodate all its riders. Years of inadequate investment, however, have meant that 82 percent of the transit rolling stock is in poor or marginal condition, and 84 percent of commuter rail coaches are in similarly poor shape. Continual repair keeps most of them going, but the threat remains of unreliable service.

The coalition comprises 21 groups ranging from the American Automobile Association, Conservation Law Foundation, Construction Industries of Massachusetts, and the Western Massachusetts Economic Development Council. Its members will spend the next few months going around the state explaining the extent of the problem. The coalition's findings ought to encourage legislative candidates to make transportation finance an issue this fall.

It's a hard sell. A special commission established by the Legislature issued two reports last year spelling out the problem, and figured it would cost \$15 billion to \$19 billion to fix it. Governor Patrick responded last month with a \$3 billion bridge repair program. This is only a down payment.

That commission proposed a series of financing options, including an increase in the gasoline tax. The coalition itself declines to make specific recommendations, leaving it up to the Legislature and the governor to make the choices next year.

The only revenue increases allowed without legislative approval are increases in transit fares or toll hikes. That's unfair to transit riders and toll payers. This is a statewide problem, and requires a solution that spreads the burden to fix it. State officials shouldn't wait for a tragic road or bridge collapse to show leadership on this issue. ■

