

# Grudging support for gas tax hike in poll

**Funding option favored over increase in tolls**  
**By Noah Bierman, Globe Staff | December 21, 2008**

Massachusetts residents are more willing to embrace higher gas taxes to repair the state's crumbling transportation system than any other proposed solution, including higher tolls or more booths at the state's borders, a Boston Globe poll shows.

In fact, higher tolls - as recently proposed by the Massachusetts Turnpike Authority with Governor Deval Patrick's support - are by far the least popular among an array of suggestions that have been floated to fix the state's transportation woes.

Patrick has called it a bad time, with the economy sagging, to raise the gas tax. House Speaker Salvatore F. DiMasi has said he would prefer a tax hike, which affects motorists generally, to toll hikes that burden only some.

When those polled were asked to choose between raising tolls on the turnpike or raising the gas tax, the tax won out 48 percent to 42 percent. The feelings about taxes or tolls varied considerably depending on where respondents live - toll hikes were the clear preference of those from the state's west and southeast sections, who are least likely to pay them.

But even some who do not regularly drive on toll roads object to the hikes.

"It's outrageous," said Steve Edelheit, a 62-year-old college teacher from Brookline who seldom pays tolls and responded to the poll. "Why should it fall on the backs of those folks to pay for the Big Dig?" The lingering costs of the \$15 billion tunnel project and the resulting financial crisis for state roads and public transit have vaulted transportation funding to the top of the state's political agenda.

But residents - by a more than 2 to 1 ratio - say the final product was not worth the time and money invested in it. Sixty-five percent said the Big Dig has had no impact on their travel time, and some said it has even made trips longer. Fifty-four percent said they were at least somewhat nervous driving through the tunnels, which claimed a life in 2006 when a ceiling panel collapsed.

"You've got two-thirds of the people who say it wasn't worth it, but they're going to have to pay for it," said Andrew E. Smith, director of the University of New Hampshire Survey Center, which conducted the Globe's poll. "That makes a political problem."

The poll of 501 Massachusetts residents, which was conducted Dec. 11 through Dec. 18 and has a margin of error of plus or minus 4.4 percent, also measured the popularity of statewide political figures, several of whom are at the center of the transportation debate. DiMasi, although unknown by many of those polled, is viewed the least favorably. Since the Globe's last poll in September 2007, his favorability rating has dipped from 26 percent to 15 percent, as he has become enmeshed in multiple state and federal ethics investigations involving the lobbying efforts of his close associates. In the latest survey, the number of residents who view him unfavorably has grown from 20 percent to 41 percent.

In contrast, Patrick has seen his favorability rating grow from 57 percent last September to 64 percent, even as his constituents appear to be increasingly nervous about jobs and the faltering economy, the poll indicated.

Attorney General Martha Coakley's popularity is similarly high, 58 percent, with only 12 percent viewing her unfavorably; Patrick, by contrast, had an unfavorable rating of 24 percent. And, although the position of state treasurer is normally low-profile, Timothy P. Cahill, a potential candidate for governor, has a relatively strong rating - well-liked by 43 percent of those polled and viewed unfavorably by just 8 percent.

Another statewide issue, casino gambling, has grown slightly in popularity since last year's Globe poll, even as its chances appear slimmer in the Legislature. Fifty-seven percent of those polled favor it, while 40 percent oppose it, compared with 53 percent who supported it last year.

The Legislature, which earlier this year was preoccupied with Patrick's failed effort to legalize casinos, will turn its attention in January to the sagging finances of its transportation agencies. Both the Turnpike Authority and the Massachusetts Bay Transportation Authority are running deficits as they struggle to pay off billions of dollars in debt.

The Turnpike Authority last month gave preliminary approval to a proposal that would charge drivers \$7 at the Sumner and Ted Williams tunnels, up from \$3.50 now, and \$2 at the Weston and Allston booths, up from \$1.25. Meanwhile, the MBTA may consider steep fare hikes and deep cuts in bus, train, subway, and light-rail service over the next year.

Many politicians have been loath to endorse raising the state's gas tax, even though a key government commission recommended doing so last year. But the Globe poll suggests that a gas tax increase may be the most palatable.

Not one of the available options drew more than 40 percent approval when those polled were asked for an up or down vote.

"None of them are popular," Smith said, "but it's the least unpopular option. It's the medicine that people know that may taste the best going down."

Residents in the poll roundly oppose leasing out the turnpike to a private company - a proposal that has been floated by the state Senate - or charging drivers by the mile by putting a computer chip in inspection stickers - an idea recently raised by Patrick. Placed head to head against other money-raising options, a higher gas tax wins in every case.

Residents said they would prefer a higher gas tax to an MBTA fare increase, 51 percent to 37 percent. They prefer the gas tax to adding tolls to other highways - 48 percent to 37 percent.

Comparing the gas tax hike with a turnpike toll increase drew the slimmest margin, at 6 percentage points - 48 percent for a gas tax to 42 percent.

The preferences on the gas tax and tolls reflected geographic biases. Residents of Greater Boston, who are most likely to use toll roads, prefer a gas tax. Residents of Central, Western and Southern Massachusetts, who are less apt to pay tolls, would rather not raise the gas tax.

"When you raise the gas tax for those of us who live off of Route 2, how fair is that?" said Beth Atwood, a 43-year-old fitness center owner from Orange. "It only goes back into Boston. We never see it out here."

That schism is also reflected in the political debate. Legislators from Boston, the North Shore, and the western suburbs - whose constituents most frequently use the turnpike and airport tunnels - have led the charge against toll hikes and proposed replacing them with a higher gas tax.

The poll also indicated geographical differences in how people perceive the Big Dig's beneficiaries. The farther people live from Boston, the more likely they are to think the project benefited Boston residents. Boston residents themselves were less likely to believe the project helped their city than others who responded to the poll.

"When I'm on the motorcycle, I can see every crack," said Marie Salami, a 72-year-old Dorchester resident who reluctantly rides her Harley-Davidson through the tunnels. "It's terrible."

Similarly, the T earned relatively high marks for quality - 52 percent of all respondents rating it excellent or good. But those who actually ride it have a worse impression - 45 percent rate it excellent or good.

While the poll suggests that political leaders might be able to sell a gas tax increase to Massachusetts residents, they would not have carte blanche. A plurality of those who responded, 47 percent, said they would accept an increase of only 5 cents per gallon. Support dropped as the increase got higher. A 5-cent increase might head off the current toll increase, but it would not allow officials to take down existing tolls or forestall an MBTA fare hike.

"You've got to make a strong pitch for why that's necessary first," Smith said. "If you're a politician, you've got to lay out a case for it."