

Editorial: State must reinvest in transportation

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When the Big Dig was officially declared complete at midnight on Jan. 1, it left behind a political class sick of arguing about highway work and a federal transportation agency skeptical about Massachusetts' ability to get things built on time and within budget. It also left behind a long list of road repairs and improvement projects neglected for years while billions were sucked into the Central Artery/Tunnel project.

Beyond that, the end of the Big Dig left a vital construction industry with nothing left to build. Since the extension of the MBTA's Red Line in the 1970s, one major project after another - the Boston Harbor cleanup, the MetroWest Aqueduct, the expansion of Logan Airport, the Boston Convention Center, the widening of I-93 - have provided work for thousands of Bay State construction workers. Suddenly, those workers are unemployed, adding downward pressure on a slumping economy.

The situation is exacerbated by a standoff between state and federal officials over transportation project funding. Last month the feds rejected the state's five-year transportation improvement plan because the state had yet to enact the bond bill authorizing borrowing for the state's share of the capital spending.

That action put \$615 million in approved construction projects on hold, and the clock is ticking. The projects can't be advertised for bids until the bond bill passes, and construction typically can't start until six months after the projects go out to bid. Even if Gov. Deval Patrick's \$4.8 billion bond bill passes tomorrow - unlikely given the lack of urgency that legislative leaders bring to nearly every issue - we'll be deep into the construction season before work can begin.

The Legislature can - and should - pass the bond bill swiftly. But that's just the beginning of the work that must be done for the state's aging transportation infrastructure. The Transportation Finance Commission, a blue-ribbon panel created by the Legislature, reported last year that the state needs as much as \$19 billion in additional funding over the next 20 years to fix up existing highways and railroads.

Even that won't address the real needs. The state's regional planning agencies have compiled a long list of unfunded transportation improvement projects, most of them not included in the MTF recommendations.

Projects in the agencies' "The Work Undone" report include MetroWest priorities such as improvements at I-495 interchanges with Rte. 9 and the Mass. Pike, widening and reconstruction of Rte. 85 in Hudson, the Cochituate rail trail in Framingham and Natick and fixing the historic bottleneck at the train crossing on Rte. 126 in downtown Framingham.

Catching up with this backlog will take more than the authorization to borrow more money. The state must come up with new revenue, preferably with a steep, if phased-in, hike in the gas tax. The MTF also recommends a move toward "open road tolling," allowing tolls on highways that don't have tolls now. The state also must rein in spending through some overdue reforms, including hot-button issues like using civilian flaggers to replace police officers now required at construction sites and reductions in the generous benefits paid to state employees in transportation agencies.

None of these steps will be easy for the state's politicians, which is why Patrick and leaders in the Legislature have mostly ignored the MTF recommendations. But ignoring reality won't stop roads and bridges from crumbling. It's time political leaders faced the problem and developed some backbone.

The economic imperative may help. Public construction projects are a time-tested response to recessions, especially if the work needs to be done anyway. And many of the projects awaiting funding, including several here in MetroWest, are specifically designed to aid economic development. All kinds of jobs depend on upgrading the infrastructure, not just construction.

Other states see this logic and are pressing forward with ambitious transportation plans, even raising taxes to do so. It's time Massachusetts got over its Big Dig complex and started reinvesting in roads, bridges and mass transit. The longer we wait, the more expensive it will get.