

YOUR VIEW: Funding mass transit requires difficult choices

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In early December, the federal transit and highway administrations rejected Massachusetts' statewide Transportation Improvement Plan. Anticipated federal dollars slated for transit and roadway projects will not be forthcoming until the state can prove it has put up the money to match these federal funds.

The federal decision makes it urgent that the Legislature pass Gov. Deval Patrick's recently filed transportation bond legislation that includes funding for commuter rail service to SouthCoast.

When it comes to public transportation, the region's transit network must expand to keep pace with its growing needs. As growth has shifted outward, new passenger rail and other forms of public transportation provide a vital role in connecting people to their workplaces and communities. Public transit allows the clustering of people together around vital centers without choking that vitality in traffic congestion and parking hassles. Anyone lucky enough to use subway or commuter rail instead of being stuck on the roads during the first snowstorm of the season knows what I'm talking about. New England's character and quality of life will be strangled if future growth simply puts more cars on the road.

A thriving transit system will also require a cure to what ails the MBTA. No plan is yet in place to fix the MBTA's massive \$5.2 billion debt, a third of which was unfairly foisted upon the transit system from costs that more properly belong to the Big Dig. Merely paying the annual debt service consumes more dollars than the MBTA collects in fares. The state should reduce this debt to help the MBTA accommodate its new capacity.

Facing this challenge will require difficult choices. The commonwealth's bipartisan Transportation Finance Commission recently found that Massachusetts faces a \$15 billion to \$19 billion transportation funding gap over the next 20 years. While borrowing is a good start, and recommendations to trim transportation costs outlined in the commission's September report make sense, they only fix a smaller part of the problem.

The commission's main recommendation for new revenue is an 11.5-cent increase to the state gas tax. This levy, which has been frozen since 1991, would generate approximately \$345 million annually. Compared to traditional tolling, collection of the fuel charge is over a thousand times more efficient. Nine gasoline wholesalers pay about 70 percent of the tax, costing the Department of Revenue less than one percent of revenue collected. And according to the Finance Commission, an 11.5-cent increase would cost the average vehicle an additional \$66 annually — less than a cup of coffee each week.

State leaders must get serious about addressing our long-term transportation problems, especially to improve and expand public transit. A federal thumbs-down is just the wake up call we need.

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