

## **Fixing our Transportation System**

With the snow and ice finally melting and the end of winter (hopefully) near, it seems there is hardly a road in Massachusetts without a pothole. We may not have to contend with slippery roads, but dodging potholes is no fun either. Unfortunately, the poor condition of our roads is just one sign of the serious problems facing the state's transportation system.

We have a huge backlog of deficient bridges -- more than half of our 4,925 bridges according to the Federal Highway Administration -- as well as a backlog of many critical road and transit projects across the state. The Transportation Finance Commission concluded in a 2007 report that we are facing a funding gap of \$15-19 billion over the next 20 years to properly maintain our roads, bridges, and public transit infrastructure.

The Big Dig has rightly been nicknamed "The Big Debt." About \$4 billion of this debt is being shouldered by the MBTA and the Turnpike Authority, crippling their ability to make badly needed investments and threatening their financial solvency. The cost overruns, shoddy workmanship, and poor oversight of the project have also undermined the public's confidence in our transportation system.

We have six different agencies, some public and others quasi-public, that are responsible for managing our transportation system. Historically, these agencies have not worked well together, and there has certainly been no comprehensive, integrated transportation strategy.

We all pay a high price for the deficiencies in our transportation system. First, safety is compromised, as we saw with the tragic death of Milena Del Valle, who was crushed by faulty concrete ceiling panels in the I90 connector tunnel in 2006. Second, it is estimated that we spend more than \$700 million each year (or an average of \$300 per household) on car repairs due to the poor condition of our roads. Third, poorly maintained roads and inadequate public transit contribute to growing traffic congestion, which costs drivers both time and money. Lastly, we are putting our future economic growth at risk because a well functioning transportation system is an essential component of our modern economy.

We cannot afford to wait any longer to address these issues and begin to correct the years of neglect and poor management.

I'm pleased to see that transportation reform is finally getting the attention on Beacon Hill that it deserves. Governor Patrick recently released a comprehensive plan, and members of the legislature and business community have also introduced their proposals.

In evaluating these ideas and crafting an effective reform package we should consider a few key principles:

1. *Reform and restructure our transportation agencies.* This will result in cost savings as well as improved management, coordination, and integrated planning. These reforms need to create a culture that is focused on performance, accountability, and spending every taxpayer dollar wisely.
2. *Ensure safe, well-maintained roads, bridges, and other transportation infrastructure.* We should focus on meeting maintenance needs before pursuing new projects. We can learn from the experience of other states. Utah, for example, prohibits the construction of any major new capital project until the Legislature has appropriated 1.1% of the replacement cost of existing state facilities for capital improvements.
3. *Provide sufficient resources for public transit to keep fares reasonable, improve service, and maintain equipment.* If we don't take action the MBTA will be forced to raise fares by up to 25% and reduce service. This would discourage people from using the subways, buses, and commuter rail at exactly the time we need more people to choose public transit.
4. *Encourage environmentally-friendly policies.* Examples of such policies include smart growth to reduce sprawl, traffic calming measures, bicycle and pedestrian routes, and incentives for more fuel efficient vehicles.
5. *Raise the revenue necessary to fund our transportation system in the fairest, most efficient way possible.* Even with consolidation and streamlined management of our transportation agencies along with pension reform, we will still fall far short of the revenue required to address the \$15-19 billion funding gap. In these tough economic times it is difficult to ask people to pay more, but we don't have a choice if we want to fix our transportation system. Large toll increases on the Mass Pike and Harbor Tunnels and/or adding new toll booths on other highways are unfair, inefficient, and will funnel more traffic into residential neighborhoods. An increase in the gas tax is the fairest, most broad-based approach for raising the necessary revenue. The gas tax in Massachusetts (currently 23.5 cents/gallon) has not been raised since 1991 and has declined in real value by 33% since then. Many other states have much higher gas taxes, including New York (42.5 cents/gallon), California (48.7 cents/gallon), and Connecticut (47.2 cents/gallon). Governor Patrick has proposed a 19 cents/gallon increase, with each penny increase to be allocated to a specific transportation need. This is a reasonable starting point but there will no doubt be a healthy debate regarding the appropriate size of any gas tax increase. We should also strive to provide mechanisms that help offset the burden on low-income families.

It would certainly be easier politically to just continue down the same path. However, business as usual will not fix our broken transportation infrastructure and threatens our economy. We need to act now.

I welcome your feedback on transportation reform or any other issues. Please visit our new website at [www.RepJasonLewis.com](http://www.RepJasonLewis.com). You can also reach me at 617 722-2060 or by email at [Jason.Lewis@state.ma.us](mailto:Jason.Lewis@state.ma.us).

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