

A Good Transportation System is Necessary for Public Safety and a Healthy Economy

By State Representative Mary E. Grant (6th Essex District – Beverly)

For at least a decade, our Commonwealth has avoided a frank and probably boring public discussion of the cost of maintaining our transportation infrastructure and the cost of our debt. The debt has been spread around to the Mass Turnpike Authority, the MBTA, and Massport. Administrations throughout this period knew the debt was being heavily under-funded. It requires guts to have the politically unsavory discussion of revenue. Who wants to pay more for anything? Instead, there have been discussions and spending on more flashy projects such as a fly over bridge on route to Cape Cod and expansions of rail and transit. Any project can be shown to have merit but in any organization, including our households, regular bills and maintenance must be paid or the basics crumble, and here we are talking about roads, bridges, and reliable mass transit.

Well, our bills have come due. It will now cost us money to ignore them. Junk bond status, short-term loans called in with penalties, or a bankrupt MBTA is a disaster we must avert. Frankly, that is the cost we cannot afford especially in this economy.

Last December the Mass Turnpike Authority announced the need to double the tolls on the Metropolitan Highway System in order to pay off their debt coming due. This independent authority can only raise revenue through tolls to cover their bills. The MTA has proposed raising tolls to equal \$7 on the Callahan Tunnel, the Ted Williams Tunnel and on the Mass Pike inside Rte. 128, beginning this summer. The Tobin Bridge, which is part of Massport, has historically aligned its tolls with the Callahan Tunnel and we can expect this would happen before long. The toll increase is worth more than \$1000 a year in transportation costs for individuals traveling from these two regions to and from work. The Turnpike Authority acknowledged the tolls would increase again in a few years. In addition, the MBTA is under crushing debt and is proposing a 25% fare increase, a proposal that discourages its use and puts us back in fuel guzzling automobiles. Lastly, there is very little maintenance money in the Massachusetts Highway Department.

At four heavily attended hearings in the Commonwealth this December, the public clearly stated the toll proposal was unacceptable to citizens and businesses, as all who use the roads were not sharing the cost, and the tolls were being used for debt payments, not just maintenance of the roads. In the current funding plan, a subset of the public is shouldering the debt of our Commonwealth as a whole. Time has come for a comprehensive discussion about stable financing of our crumbling, debt-laden transportation system.

A Transportation Finance Commission was established several years ago and issued a report that contained a fiscal analysis of the system. It is approximately a \$20B problem. This report contained a comprehensive revenue proposal including tolls, gas taxes, administrative restructuring and reforms.

Restructuring and reforms are always a necessary first step. The startling finding is that major reforms and restructuring, while necessary, would cover only a small fraction of the problem. Several bills have been filed in an attempt to get all parts of this revenue proposal on the table for discussion. The proper balance and weight to each part is yet to be determined, and each bill will have public hearings which allow for input from all.

Some of these bills include: major reform and restructuring measures, freezing of all tolls, increase in gas tax, electronically toll Rt. 93 north and south, limit toll charges to the cost of maintaining the road used and remove some of the debt burden from the MBTA.

Good transportation is essential to a healthy economy. To continue ignoring the deterioration of ours is a detriment to our future. Maintenance is part of public safety and cost containment. Restructuring and reform is a given. It does not cover all costs but is a necessary step. All types of revenue must be discussed as we must pay our bills in a fair way. No one proposal is the answer. I support all of these bills in part as I believe we must have the comprehensive conversation or the status quo will remain. The status quo is not good for our region as it places us at an economic disadvantage individually and regionally.

There will be hearings on these proposals at which all citizens are free to comment. There is no commitment to a particular amount of any new revenue at this time except the commitment of the Mass Turnpike Authority to toll increases. I have a commitment to fairness, responsibility, efficiency and to the long-term economic health of this Commonwealth.

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