

My View: Good transportation system necessary for public safety, healthy economy

Mary Grant

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For at least a decade, our commonwealth has avoided a frank public discussion of the cost of maintaining our transportation infrastructure and the cost of our debt.

The debt has been spread around among the Massachusetts Turnpike Authority, the MBTA, and Massport. Administrations throughout this period knew the debt was being heavily underfunded. It requires guts to have the politically unsavory discussion of revenue. Who wants to pay more for anything?

But just as in our households, regular bills and maintenance must be paid or the basics crumble. Here we are talking about roads, bridges, and reliable mass transit, the true costs of which have been ignored.

Well, our bills have come due. It will now cost us more money to ignore them. Junk-bond status, short-term loans called in with penalties, or a bankrupt transportation agency are disasters we must avert.

Last December the Turnpike Authority announced a plan to double existing road and tunnel tolls on the Metropolitan Highway System this spring in order to pay off their debt coming due. This independent authority can only raise revenue through tolls to cover their bills. The Tobin Bridge, which is part of Massport, has historically aligned its tolls with the Sumner Tunnel and we can expect this will happen before long as well. Those toll increases would cost North Shore commuters around \$750 a year.

In addition, the MBTA is under crushing debt and is proposing a 25 percent fare increase, a proposal that discourages its use and puts us back in fuel-guzzling automobiles. Rail commuters from Beverly would see increased costs of \$550 per year.

Lastly, there is very little maintenance money in the Massachusetts Highway Department budget.

At four heavily attended hearings of the Turnpike Authority this December, the public and elected representatives of the North Shore and MetroWest region 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 particular roads. Under the current funding plan, a subset of the public is shouldering the debt of our commonwealth as a whole. Thus the 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 recently issued a report that contained a fiscal analysis of the system. It is approximately a \$20 billion problem. Its more recent report contained a comprehensive set of recommendations including administrative restructuring and reforms, tolls, and an increase in the gas tax.

Restructuring and reforms must happen. But the startling finding is that major reforms and restructuring, while necessary, cover only a small fraction of the problem.

Several bills have been filed in the Legislature in an attempt to get all parts of this transportation issue on the table for discussion. Some of these bills include major reform and restructuring measures, freezing of all tolls, limiting toll charges to the cost of maintaining the road used, increase in gas tax (proposed with the assumption of no tolls), and electronic tolling on Route 93 north and south.

There was no single, comprehensive proposal, as it all happened quickly. But the regions affected by the toll increases — the North Shore and MetroWest — felt that others had to be part of the revenue solution. The proper balance and weight to each part is undetermined, and each bill will have public hearings that allow for input from all.

The governor issued a comprehensive proposal last week to which all of us can now respond. He, too, has made it clear — no revenue without reform.

He proposed major restructuring and reforms to the system, as well as suggesting a gas tax with dollars dedicated to mass transit, as well as roadways. His proposal would cost a daily commuter from Beverly a little under \$120 per year. (According to the governor, residents spend \$718 million per year in car repairs because of the condition of our roadways.)

Good transportation is essential to a healthy economy. To continue ignoring the deterioration of our system 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.

Revenue must be discussed, as we must pay our bills in a fair way.

No one proposal is the answer. I have supported these bills in part as I believe we must have the comprehensive conversation or the status quo will remain. And the status quo, which is an increase in tolls and fares only, is not good for our region as it places us at an economic

disadvantage individually and regionally. Increased fares on mass transit push people back into their cars.

It is fiscally irresponsible to ignore the problem. We should not continue to put tax dollars toward higher financing fees. We should put them toward a stable transportation system, the benefits of which we all share.

There will be hearings on all proposals at which any citizen is free to comment in person or in writing. We may also have the Secretary of Transportation come to our region to discuss the transportation situation. The only commitment to revenue at this time is the commitment of the Turnpike Authority to toll increases and the MBTA to fare increases.

My commitment is to fairness, responsibility, efficiency and to the long-term economic health of this commonwealth.

Mary Grant of Beverly was recently reelected to her fourth term as representative for the 6th Essex District.

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