

New Bedford Standard Times

Our View: It's time to get serious about transportation

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Gov. Deval Patrick has been ever clear in his belief that commuter rail will bring economic growth with it, even as it brings other environmental and quality-of-life benefits along the entire route.

And word out of the governor's office last week represents the strongest and clearest signal yet that before too many years pass, there will be a rail route to carry people between the state capital and Southeastern Massachusetts.

"The governor will not sign a transportation financial plan unless funding for South Coast Rail is included," Lt. Gov. Tim Murray said Thursday while on SouthCoast. He was commenting on Patrick's refusal to accept a state financial plan unless it specifically includes funding for South Coast Rail, which has been a dream of this region for decades. "We've made these investments in other parts of the state and it's SouthCoast's turn."

That is music to the ears of us in SouthCoast, which has been left a transportation backwater as our tax dollars went everywhere else except here. Nothing holds more promise for our entire region than commuter rail, and we are glad that Patrick has pledged to make South Coast Rail a reality. The administration's commitment to the project notwithstanding, this year's budget process will require a commitment from more than the state's top two executives, because of how expensive it will be to do.

That means, Dear Taxpayer and Dear Legislator, wherever you live in Massachusetts, that the realization of South Coast Rail depends on your commitment, too. Patrick is expected to release his plan on Monday (He postponed the Department of Transportation's original release to ensure that every region of the state was represented). The DOT's task is herculean. The department's secretary, highway snow plowing and median strip mowing are all being paid for in the budget with borrowed money. There isn't enough to maintain roads and bridges that are in good repair, not enough to fix what's in disrepair, not enough to run MBTA buses and trains, not enough to take on new projects.

State Rep. William Straus, the chairman of the Joint Committee on Transportation, told the Standard-Times editorial board recently that if we go on as we are, our state will become one big transportation museum, stuck in 2010. When asked if this would be the year to successfully address our transportation challenges, he said, speaking to all Bay Staters: "If you want to."

Let us be clear: We want to.

Because we like paying taxes? No, but because we know that failing to meet our duties now will mean not only a bigger bill later, but lost opportunity to bring new jobs and new businesses to every corner of Massachusetts. The adage "penny wise and pound foolish," when applied on a scale as big as the Commonwealth of Massachusetts, means billions of dollars, even trillions, as the decades roll out. Consider the folks who regularly drive through Freetown and what it cost for every vehicle to negotiate detours around the four bridges damaged in March of 2010. That extra gas and extra time are taxes, too. Straus explained that there are a number of ways to raise revenue to fund the transportation needs that press so hard and that loom so large: Every 3 cents added to the gasoline tax raises \$100 million; hiking the sales tax from 6.25 to 6.4 percent would raise another \$100 million; raising registry fees 25 to 30

percent would raise \$100 million; raising the sales tax on cars by eight-tenths of a percent would raise \$100 million.

Those represent a partial menu of choices, which Straus called the "Ugly prospect that awaits me and my colleagues next session."

It's high time, however, to recognize that doing nothing is a policy choice, too, but that the long-term costs to the environment, public health, economic development and education are a far greater burden than the near-term taxes we'll need to spend to maintain and develop a modern, effective transportation system.

Patrick's boldness emboldens us. We urge readers to consider the cost of doing nothing. We urge legislators to listen to constituents, but also to courageously take the heat for the good of the entire state.

It's not just SouthCoast. The whole state has waited too long to give transportation the attention it needs.