

The Republican.

Editorial: Transportation funding will spark Western Massachusetts' economy

By [The Republican Editorials](#)

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The region's economy is only as good as its transportation network.

As Timothy Brennan, executive director of the [Pioneer Valley Planning Commission](#), put it: "Transportation moves people, but transportation also moves the economy – or it doesn't."

And here in Western Massachusetts, it doesn't.

Without substantial public investment in roads, bridges and rails, the region's economy is doomed to struggle and stagnate. And without a reliable and affordable regional transit system, low-income families that depend on buses to get to work, community colleges, the grocery store or the doctor's office will never get a chance to break the cycle of poverty.

During an Editorial Board meeting at The Republican last week, Brennan, along with other members of Transportation for Massachusetts, a coalition of organizations working to create safe, convenient and affordable choices for Bay State citizens, outlined the transportation crisis facing the state.

- [The MBTA](#), which serves 175 communities in Massachusetts and 1.24 million passengers faces a deficit of about \$133 million, the highest debt load of any other public transit system in the nation.
- The 15 regional transit authorities that serve 256 communities face significant deficit and a repair backlog totaling \$150 million. And they only receive a third of the funding the MBTA receives from the state.
- More than 400 bridges are structurally unsound across the commonwealth.

Current funding mechanisms – [a gas tax](#) that hasn't been raised since 1991, inadequate sales tax revenues and federal funding that has not kept up with the state's pressing needs – are woefully adequate, forcing Massachusetts to borrow just to keep the transportation system functioning, said Kristina Egan, director of the coalition.

Brennan, who had just returned from Boston where he lobbied for funding for Western Massachusetts, said the two most pressing transportation projects facing the region are the [reconstruction of Interstate 91](#) viaduct that runs along downtown Springfield, which is expected to cost \$350 million, and reinvestment in the regional transit authority, which has been forced to cut fares and routes to stay operational.

Gov. [Deval L. Patrick](#) is expected to announce transportation budget priorities Monday and Brennan is hopeful that the Pioneer Valley will get its fair share of funding.

There are some promising developments on the transportation front with the start of renovations at downtown's [Union Station](#) and the scheduled construction of a north-south commuter rail line linking Springfield with Connecticut and New York – developments Brennan says will be a “game changer.” Once that north-south link is completed, Brennan said the region will push for an east-west route.

In the meantime, the state must find a way to develop a long-range, generational fix for the broken transportation system, drawing from many sources, Egan says. Financing a transportation network that is worthy of the demands of the 21st century won't be easy, given the public's distaste for government spending.

But without that investment, the economy won't be able to fully move into the 21st century.