

Forum touches on taxes, transit Planners seek smart solutions

By Steven H. Foskett Jr.
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WORCESTER — Increasing public transportation offerings and access is crucial to economies in cities like Worcester, but meeting that demand must be tempered with the need to keep taxes low enough to help businesses grow, members of a forum at Clark University said Monday.

Framed around a recent Mass-INC report on investing in public transportation in Gateway Cities, called “Reinventing Transit,” the forum looked at ways to smartly offer more service to public transportation users, and spotlighted challenges riders face, particularly in lower-income populations.

The forum featured Jack Foley, vice president for government and community relations at Clark University; Stephen O’Neil, administrator of the Worcester Regional Transit Authority; Richard B. Kennedy, president of the Worcester Regional Chamber of Commerce; and Terrie Cherry, a member of Neighbor to Neighbor and a public transportation user group.

Looming large in the background of the discussion was Gov. Deval L. Patrick’s proposal for \$1.9 billion in tax increases and fees to fund expanded transportation and educational initiatives. Mr. O’Neil said the WRTA is poised and ready for more resources; he had a quick answer for what he would do with the \$11 million in increased funding his agency would receive under the proposal.

“We would put more service on,” Mr. O’Neil said, adding that the WRTA, if funded according to the current proposal, would be able to add midnight service in the city.

Mr. O’Neil said the midnight service would benefit people working second and third shifts. This dovetailed with the MassINC report’s focus on connecting public transportation to jobs. Ms. Cherry said the midnight service would be welcomed, but said that for people who rely on public transportation to get to work, increasing the number of routes is also important. She said she is a personal care attendant, and her job requires her to go from place to place during the day. She said she lives past Tatnuck Square, so she must catch the right bus back home, or faces an \$18 cab fare.

But Mr. Foley said midnight service would immediately get use from college students. Coupled with the soon-to-be-completed WRTA hub at Union Station, expanded service would allow Clark University students to get to and from events downtown and hot-spots like Shrewsbury Street and the Canal District.

Mr. Kennedy said that as the way people work has changed, so too has the way they get to work. Gone are the days of workers emptying out of neighborhoods filled with three-deckers to get to a nearby factory. These days, the major employers in the city require a commute. Adding to an earlier point made about the importance of connecting youth with employment at an early age, Mr. Kennedy said the biggest impediment to summer job placement for youth is getting them to work.

That requirement for mobility enforces a cycle of poverty among lower-income populations in the city, said Russ Lopez, a professor at Northeastern and Boston University who worked with Neighbor to Neighbor on a public transportation survey targeting Hispanic residents in several cities across the state, including Worcester.

Mr. Lopez said that according to the survey, 33 percent of respondents said they have had to forgo a basic necessity to pay for transportation in the past. He said the average income of 70 percent of the people surveyed was less than \$20,000 annually, and said 88 percent of respondents said that in Worcester, it was not easy and convenient to walk from their house to a bus stop or train station.

Nobody faulted Mr. Patrick for a lack of ambition with his \$1.9 billion plan, but forum members and legislators in attendance expressed concern about how to pay for it, and if that is even feasible.

Mr. Kennedy said the business community would rebel against a “take-it-or-leave-it” tax increase. Mr. O’Neil said he supports a plan floated that would put more emphasis on an increase in registry and licensing fees, and an incremental increase in the gas tax.

Ms. Cherry said she didn’t support any increase in the gas tax because that, too, disproportionately impacts the poor, and Mr. Foley, who also serves on the School Committee, wondered whether the transportation part of the governor’s proposal should be broken out from the education component.

State Sen. Michael Moore, D-Millbury, and state Rep. Mary Keefe, D-Worcester, both said they are pushing for more parity in transportation funding between the Boston area and the rest of the state.

“We really have to defend our own region and the rest of the state,” Ms. Keefe said.

Mr. Moore said Central Massachusetts already feels the brunt of the Massachusetts Turnpike tolls, and had concerns about raising additional fees to fund Boston public transportation.

“There is too much of a perception that people outside Route 128 are funding the transportation system,” Mr. Moore said.