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DeLeo calls for scaled back transit plan

By Martine Powers
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House Speaker Robert A. DeLeo will advocate for a significantly smaller transportation finance plan than the one proposed by Governor Deval Patrick, according to a speech he plans to give to business leaders Thursday morning.

In a copy of the planned remarks, DeLeo delivers the clearest indication yet of how Patrick's ambitious transportation proposal — which includes billions of dollars in increased gas and sales taxes, as well as higher tolls and a vehicle emissions tax — has been received by influential state lawmakers.

The text of DeLeo's speech calls for a pared-down approach to financing the state's beleaguered transportation system, and could deliver a sobering blow to transportation advocates who had hoped to see the investments in roads, bridges, and transit that Patrick's plan would deliver.

"I'm worried that the administration's proposal places too heavy a burden on working families and businesses struggling to survive," DeLeo wrote in the text of the speech, to be delivered to the Greater Boston Chamber of Commerce. "If we are to pass a new revenue package, I believe it should be far more narrow in scope and of a significantly smaller size."

The tepid reaction to Patrick's proposal brings more uncertainty to the Massachusetts Bay Transportation Authority, which faces aggressive fare hikes and cuts in service without millions in additional state funding to cover a \$130 million deficit in a close to \$1.9 billion budget. On Tuesday, MBTA officials laid out budget-balancing measures that could include raising fares by as much as 33 percent, eliminating dozens of bus lines, and curbing nighttime and weekend service on T and commuter rail trains.

DeLeo's speech floats the idea of an initiative he hopes to introduce to the state's community colleges to provide more education in science and math.

"I . . . agree with the governor that these areas cannot be sufficiently addressed without the injection of additional revenue," DeLeo's speech states. "I do differ on the amount of new revenue that Massachusetts' families and businesses should be asked to contribute."

He suggests cutting costs.

"One obvious area where I'm certain savings can be achieved is in the way we fund our operating expenses," reads the text of DeLeo's speech. He praised the streamlined savings achieved by merging the state's transit, highway, turnpike, and other agencies to create a unified Massachusetts Department of Transportation in 2009.

Those are the kinds of cuts DeLeo wants to see more of.

“Right now, we borrow to pay operating costs and ultimately, we’ll pay \$1.75 in principle and interest for every \$1 we borrow,” DeLeo’s speech continues. “As anyone who has run a household can tell you, you’ll never get ahead by paying routine bills with a credit card. We have to wean ourselves off of this system.”

But DeLeo recognizes that putting transportation finances on solid footing requires more than just cost-cutting.

“Even as we continue to look for efficiencies, we are committed to developing, and we will develop, a well thought-out and fair new source of revenue to help fund a transportation system.”

Some of those cost-saving measures will be brought forward at a March 12 oversight hearing within the state Legislature’s Joint Committee on Transportation, DeLeo said. [He told the State House News Service](#) on Wednesday that he hopes to legislate the transportation finance plan separate from state budget talks.

DeLeo’s speech represents a middle-of-the-road approach, which echoes recent assertions from Republican leaders that more cost cuts could feasibly be squeezed out of the state’s transportation system.

But other lawmakers disagree. At a Transportation for Massachusetts forum Tuesday, Representative Carl Sciortino of Somerville and Senator Katherine Clark of Melrose called for comprehensive support of the aggressive investments outlined in Patrick’s plan.