



Infrastructure needs our help

By Michelle Ciccolo

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The first lighthouse in America was built here in Massachusetts in 1716. In a world of Google Maps on our phones and GPS in our cars, to most of us, lighthouses are nothing more than nice tourist attractions. It wasn't always this way. Before there was a Mass Pike, the oceans and rivers were our highways. It was lighthouses that ensured ships arriving with new citizens and those leaving with locally made products had safe passage. These beacons guided economic prosperity to our doorstep.

From America's first commercial canal to the first computers, Massachusetts has long recognized the connection between modern infrastructure and economic prosperity. This has put us at the cutting edge of the industrial and tech revolutions.

In 2013, however, Massachusetts' transportation infrastructure is a roadblock to economic prosperity. Last year, CNBC ranked America's top states for business. Despite being first in access to capital and third in education, we finished 28th overall because we come in an abysmal 45th in transportation and infrastructure. Every day, our lackluster transportation infrastructure hurts our ability to attract companies that would bring good-paying jobs to our state.

Crumbling roads, traffic jams, and limited public transit options have become a fact of life across the state. Here in Hudson, we have a bridge in our downtown that has been closed since 2006 because of its hazardous condition. For seven years and counting, the bridge outage has caused detours and deterred residents and shoppers from accessing goods and services offered along Hudson's Main Street.

Moreover, despite the fantastic road reconstruction happening along our commercial Route 85, we had to wait 15 years since the project was first initiated to get to this stage of construction. We are extremely grateful to MassDOT for advancing this project. It's not MassDOT's fault that it lacks adequate resources to do all the good and worthy projects communities want and need. However, can anyone seriously imagine telling a business: "We'd love to have you come here but you'll just have to wait 15 years for us to improve the infrastructure before you can relocate ..."?

There can be no doubt that the lack of adequate infrastructure deters economic and business activity.

We find ourselves in this situation because of decades of short-term fixes that underfunded our roads and public transit. As a result, we relied too heavily on borrowing, leading to increasing debt service costs. By underfunding basic operations, we've been forced to use capital funds to mow lawns, clear the roads of snow and keep buses and trains running. This is not a sustainable way to provide for our transportation needs and unduly burdens the next generation with irresponsible debt. Today's students will be paying off the state's credit cards for years to come.

The roads and public transit we currently have exacerbate regional inequality. To connect people to jobs and services, there must be sensible, reliable public transit and safe, congestion-free roads and highways. Moreover, we cannot forget that even in suburban and rural communities, there are residents without cars or sharing vehicles among many workers per household. These people need transportation alternatives including bicycle and pedestrian options, and regional transit.

With highways that are more than 50 years old and rail lines built in the 1800s, we desperately need to rebuild and grow our transportation system to keep up with the future and ensure a strong economy for every region in the state. States which do not invest adequately in the future fall into decline, fail to retain young talented workers, and encourage flight to other states where there is more opportunity.

Make no mistake about it, we are at a crossroads. Other cities, states and countries are doing the hard work of building for the next 100 years. Doing nothing is not an option. To remain competitive in a global economy, we need a transportation system that will even allow cities and towns like Hudson to maintain quality local roads and sidewalks which connect our state and deliver economic prosperity to all 351 towns and cities.

Centuries on, the lighthouses that continue to dot Massachusetts' shore stand as a testament to the powerful impact that building a modern transportation infrastructure has on the economy. In 2013, we have the opportunity to do the same with a system of modern roads, bridges and public transit that will bring an economic boon to every corner of this state and ensure prosperity for all.

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