

Bills seek equity in state transportation spending

By Josh Stilts
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PITTSFIELD -- Two transportation bills proposed Monday could drastically alter the way Massachusetts residents get around.

Co-sponsored by Rep. Tricia Farley-Bouvier, D-Pittsfield, the "Act Relative to Transportation Investment, Regional Fairness and Countability to State Policies" and "An Act to Establish a Vehicle Miles Traveled Pilot Program" are designed to create regional equity and accountability when it comes to transportation spending.

According to Farley-Bouvier, the Massachusetts Department of Transportation can't afford its day-to-day operational costs and have been using state bonds to pay for them.

"Right now, DOT borrows money in state bonds to mow the lawn and plow the roads," she told The Eagle. "We're spending \$1.75 for every \$1 of operational costs because of the interest of those bonds."

The bill would also prevent the department from dipping into its capital budget and instead ensure the funds from that account were being used to improve infrastructure of all Massachusetts towns, but especially border towns, which she referred to as the 24 "gateway" cities.

"We need to invest in economically distressed neighborhoods. These gateway cities have been neglected in the past and we aren't seeing any growth," she said. "By investing in public transportation in those areas, it provides a piece of the economic puzzle. I've seen the disparity in the transportation investments in the Boston area and have learned how important it is to economic development. People need to get to work, young people want to get to their activities without having to own a car and we need to meet the transportation needs of our senior citizens."

Every year, Berkshire County sends nearly \$30 million to the Massachusetts Bay Transportation Authority and, Farley-Bouvier said, the county isn't getting its money's worth.

The bill would also require that any transportation investment of more than \$15 million has to show that it benefits creating economic development and reduces greenhouse gas emissions.

Lizzi Weyant, advocacy director for Transportation for Massachusetts, said the group strongly supports both the bills as they would create better business opportunities and a better quality of life.

"It would give cities and towns a bigger voice to speak about which projects should be completed," Weyant said. "It will also create more public transportation options across the state."

The other bill would create a voluntary pilot program to study the effectiveness and sustainability of an individual driving tax as an alternative to Gov. Deval Patrick's recent proposal of raising the gas tax to help pay for the \$800 million to \$1 billion transportation reform he set forth.

According to Farley-Bouvier, the pilot program would be a catalyst to for the conversations about transportation reform.

The idea is that drivers in Massachusetts would be taxed potentially on where people drive, when they drive, what they drive and how far they drive.

Using a transponder, similar to the devices used to pay for tolls along the turnpike, driver's mileage and the time at which they drive would be tracked and then transmitted to a database.

Because the program is still in the initial phase, it's unclear if people would be taxed yearly, monthly or at the gas pump, Farley-Bouvier said.

If the bill passes, anyone who signs up for the pilot program would be guaranteed not to be taxed any more than the gas tax at that time.

"We want to invest in transportation in a equitable way," she said. "We need to assure the Berkshires has a seat at the table and fair share of those investment dollars."