

Straus sees hope for Rail in conference committee

By Ariel Wittenberg
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NEW BEDFORD — With the transportation finance bill in the hands of a conference committee, Rep. William Straus, D-Mattapoisett, said he is confident the South Coast Rail project will receive at least some funding "down the road."

As passed, both the Senate and House bills would close the MBTA's operating deficit and fund it with \$500 million in new taxes. But the Senate bill would also include \$100 million more in transportation funding by drawing money from other parts of state government.

Straus, who is on the conference committee, said that once the MBTA's operating deficit is being funded with taxes, the state will be able to use its bond capacity to borrow money for more capital projects, like South Coast Rail.

Both the House and Senate bills mention South Coast Rail by name as a project that should receive some of that funding, which Straus said is an encouraging sign.

"There is no disagreement between the two bills, so it won't need to be discussed in committee," Straus said. "It's already in the bills. It can't be taken out."

How much funding would go toward South Coast Rail will depend, in part, on reconciling the amount of transportation revenue raised by the House and Senate bills.

"In terms of what becomes available for new transportation projects, there is a range that is yet undetermined," Straus said, adding that "It is too early for predictions."

Conference committee members have not yet begun debating the bill, instead meeting in small staff meetings to identify the "main issues for face-to-face discussion," Straus said.

He would not say how long the process would take.

Straus said one obstacle to South Coast Rail being funded is the uncertainty surrounding its permits. Those permits depend on the completion of an environmental assessment by the Army Corps of Engineers, which has declined to identify a date when its study will be completed.

"Our intention in the House is to provide for South Coast Rail regardless of its scheduling," he said. "But as the state identifies its spending plan and how they borrow money, they are going to look at what projects are ready to go to construction."

Kristina Egan, director of Transportation for Massachusetts, said her group is concerned "that there are some tough tradeoffs that lie ahead."

Calling the fight for funds a "Hunger Games," Egan said there is "not enough money to do many of the worthy capital projects."

That South Coast Rail is mentioned in both bills is somewhat comforting that it is a state priority, Egan said. Still, she said, South Coast Rail remains "in competition" with other projects including the Green Line Extension, which is also named in both bills.

"On top of that, you also have roads and bridges that need to be repaired," she said.

Sen. Mark C. W. Montigny, D-New Bedford, who is not part of the conference committee, said he did not want to make any predictions about the outcome.

But, he said he wanted to remind committee members that this could be SouthCoast's last chance for rail because Gov. Deval Patrick is sympathetic to the project.

"We need economic justice in this region and this could be our last shot," he said.