

At UMD panel, speakers detail need for better bus service in region

By Jo C. Goode
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A new Southeastern Regional Transit Authority bus is shown being put into service in 2010. A recent survey of SRTA in New Bedford revealed that many people felt they were losing out because service didn't reach certain destinations at certain times, according to a UMass Dartmouth official.

DARTMOUTH — Loss of economic opportunity, lack of access to health care facilities and a burden on the work force are just some of the problems with the region's bus service detailed by speakers at a panel discussion on Thursday during a forum on investing in public transportation for economic growth.

The event was sponsored by the Boston-based think tank MassINC and held at the University of Massachusetts Dartmouth. MassINC also presented its findings on a study of improving regional transit authorities — including the Southeastern Regional Transit Authority — in Gateway Cities around the state.

It was the sixth of 10 forums conducted around the state as Gov. Deval Patrick, his administration and public interest groups lobby for a huge transportation spending package that will likely be whittled down by the Legislature.

Under Patrick's plan, regional transit authorities would receive \$400 million over the next decade to replace aging buses and upgrade facilities. Funding could also increase an extra \$100 million in next year's budget, and about \$1.1 billion over a decade, under Patrick's proposal. There are 3.6 million people across the nation who don't receive adequate health care because of a lack of transportation, said Kerry Mello, the community benefits manager for Southcoast Health System.

"Access is the biggest issue in terms of our patients," Mello said.

There has been a lot of discussion recently in investing in public transit and the cost, but Mello said there are a lot of hidden costs when a state doesn't invest in transportation.

Last year, Southcoast Health System paid \$18,000 in cab vouchers to emergency room patients to get them home after treatment, and the health group's social workers report they spend half their day dealing with their patients' transportation problems, Mello said. Cancer patients who often need daily treatments have trouble getting to that care.

A recent survey of SRTA riders in New Bedford revealed countless stories of how people were losing out on economic opportunities because bus routes didn't take riders where they needed and at times they required SRTA service, said Colleen Dawiki, project manager for UMass Dartmouth's Urban Initiatives.

Youth, with the highest unemployment rate, are losing out on employment opportunities because the jobs they are applying for have sporadic and often last-minute hours. Without reliable transportation, they aren't getting employed, Dawiki said.

Roy Nascimento, president and CEO of the New Bedford Area Chamber of Commerce, said he consistently hears from his membership that bus service isn't available when employees need it to get to work.

"We need a transportation system that's efficient, effective and viable that meets the needs of employers and job seekers as well," Nascimento said.

With the focus on transportation in the commonwealth and on Beacon Hill, Ben Forman, MassINC's research director and executive director of the Gateway Cities Initiative, said it is an opportunity to have a real discussion about the needs of the regional transit authorities in the Gateway Cities.

The MassINC study shows that residents in Fall River, on average, spend more money on transportation than on housing, Forman said. Providing reliable and affordable transportation will result in more consumer spending in addition to connecting people with viable employment opportunities, he said.

"I believe we have come to a point where we finally need to answer one question: Are regional transit authorities social service agencies or engines of economic development?" said Erik Rousseau, SRTA administrator.

Regional transit authorities are doing an adequate job as social service agencies giving a certain level of mobility to those who need it most, Rousseau said, but as engines of economic development they have a long way to go to provide suitable service for the SouthCoast.

From employees in the fish houses of New Bedford who need to be at work at 5 a.m. to the people who want to go to religious services on Sunday, many riders' needs are not accommodated by SRTA because it doesn't provide bus service when they need it.

"We have to make some sacrifices, take some measured risks on new initiatives. We cannot say no simply because it hasn't been done before," Rousseau said. "... The SouthCoast deserves weekend and night service just like Boston and many of our peer regions."