

Gateway Cities report ties transportation to economic health

By Auditi Guha
February 27, 2013

A new MassINC report provides a road map for putting transportation funds to better use in once-prosperous industrial cities that have fallen on hard times and need an economic boost.

Released Tuesday, the "Reinventing Transit" report cites the heavy economic toll of insufficient transit in the Gateway Cities, which include New Bedford and Fall River. The report also underscores the strong support for transit investment among voters in these communities and provides suggestions for using potential regional transportation revenue for short- and long-term economic growth.

State Transportation Secretary Richard Davey said Tuesday in a teleconference that the administration believes the recommendations are important and "will lock in jobs and attract economic activities to Gateway Cities."

Just 7.3 percent of Gateway City residents ride public transit to work, significantly lower than the state average of 9.2 percent, the report said, also noting that those less able to drive have less access to employment opportunities.

The report suggests short-term economic gains by connecting more residents to viable job opportunities and long-term gains from connecting these cities to the urban core and existing transit networks.

"People spend up to 40 percent of their income just trying to get from work or school. That number is staggering," said Jean Fox, chairwoman of the Freetown Board of Selectmen.

If the report's recommendations were adopted, it would make Gateway Cities "more attractive for businesses, bite less into residents' pocketbooks, and help them become more active consumers in their communities," Fox said.

The report also has recommendations for the proposed increase in funding for Regional Transit Authorities (RTAs) if used toward service expansion and improvements that are tied to economic growth.

"As state leaders debate and structure new RTA funding, it is critical they rethink the role of regional transit as a major driver of economic growth, particularly in Gateway Cities that are

primed for transit-oriented development," said Ben Forman, MassINC research director and executive director of the Gateway Cities Innovation Institute, said in a press release.

Local transportation advocates and officials are pleased with the report.

"I think it's an important continuation of the discussion around the role of transportation and revitalization of midsize cities like New Bedford," Mayor Jon Mitchell said. "The RTAs around the state have long been ignored by Beacon Hill and have taken a back seat to the MBTA."

"This isn't about Boston versus other transit. Most of our commuters use the MBTA and RTAs to get around," Davey said. "Our customers expect all of their transit systems to be working well."

The report "certainly emphasizes the needs we have long been talking about," said Rep. Antonio F.D Cabral, D-New Bedford. "I am going to continue fighting (for it) and working with the Patrick-Murray administration so transportation options get to cities like New Bedford."

Stephen Smith, executive director of the Southeastern Regional Planning and Economic Development District, said he is a strong supporter of transit improvements in this region as well as the Gateway Cities concept. However, he warned about the current economic climate.

"There is a strong link between economic development and transportation but we have to pay for it; we cannot get it for free," he said.

The report also cites new polling information from MassINC indicating Gateway City voters are more supportive of public transit than others in the state. Nearly three-quarters of Gateway City voters are reportedly willing to pay \$50 more per year for improvements in the state's transportation infrastructure, 10 percentage points more favorable than others.

"People in Gateway Cities clearly want the additional services," Forman said in teleconference Tuesday. "They are much more hungry for it than the average voter in the state."