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## How to get the state transportation system back on track

By George Bachrach and Richard Dimino

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*An MBTA train. Boston Globe photo/Evan Richman*

Voters get angry when government sidesteps hard decisions and “kicks the can down the road.” Sooner or later, bills come due and must be paid. We see that now with our transportation system. To the credit of Governor Patrick, House Speaker Robert DeLeo, and Senate President Therese Murray, all appear ready to make hard decisions.

Our livelihoods are rooted in transportation. Roads and bridges keep our economy moving, connecting workers to jobs and companies to customers. Public transit allows thousands of people to get to jobs, and provides affordable access to all, particularly those seeking new jobs in a bad economy. Buses and para-transit bring independence to seniors and those with disabilities. Sidewalks and bike paths create more livable communities.

We risk losing all if we allow our transportation system to crumble. The public has rightfully demanded “reform before revenue.” State government and unions heard the call. Transportation

agencies were consolidated, staff and overhead cut, pensions controlled. While more can be done, much has already been done.

Despite cutbacks, the MBTA is the most indebted transit system in the country running ancient subway cars and trains. Regional bus systems strain under mounting costs, ending evening and weekend service. Roads are riddled with potholes, and 400 bridges remain structurally deficient. Without adequate operating funds, MassDOT continues to pay for salaries and snowplowing by running up more debt. This is unsustainable.

The good news is the Legislature can fix this now, but it will cost money.

According to the independent Transportation Finance Commission report in 2007, and MassDOT's recently released plan, a billion dollars annually is necessary to deal with the debt, get the system into a state of good repair, and make needed enhancements and strategic investments. In the MassDOT, an overwhelming amount of the billion dollars would repair and maintain our current system, with only a fraction going toward expansion and modernization.

Additional revenue sources are needed. Options considered by the Legislature must sufficiently fund transportation and be dedicated to transportation while not causing negative impacts on the economy.

Revenues must be enough to end the current crisis, maintain the system, and allow us to modernize and grow our economy. We believe there are five areas to focus on:

**Fix the finances.** We must stop the bleeding of the highway and public transportation agencies by eliminating the structural deficits. Next year the highway system faces a shortfall of \$240 million and transit's shortfall is \$140 million. We must stop paying for daily operations by borrowing and passing the debt on to our children. For every dollar we borrow, our children will owe \$1.76. We must pay the bill now.

**Maintain and modernize.** Regional transit systems across the state should be forward funded and receive sufficient funding to operate at night and on weekends to increase access to jobs, education and health care. The MBTA must be adequately funded to relieve its backlog of repairs and provide safe and reliable service to the growing number of riders. We must fix our crumbling roads and bridges while eliminating dangerous intersections and reducing congestion.

**Fair funding.** Since all regions are paying into the transportation system, all should benefit fairly. Investments should reach all corners of the state. We must guarantee that every dollar advances the Commonwealth's goals of growing jobs and providing access for all.

**Transparency, efficiency, and effectiveness.** Taxpayers need to know how their money is being spent, in one easy-to-understand, easy-to-find place. We need clear metrics that measure the performance of our investments. We need to know how many bridges have been fixed and subway cars repaired or replaced. We also need to improve the MassDOT's ability to deliver projects on time and within budget while also advancing new transportation technologies this will give confidence that our agencies are spending sensibly and wisely.

**Sustainability.** The state has an ambitious plan to fight global warming and reduce greenhouse gases. Reducing emissions from the transportation sector is key. Transportation investments should also support the state's goal of tripling the amount of people taking public

transit, biking and walking. This will relieve road congestion, reduce pollution, and offer healthy and affordable transportation choices.

Patrick and the Legislature have rightly focused on the need to invest in transportation. If we do nothing — or only the bare minimum — it will cost our economy today and we will pay far more in the years to come. The cost of doing too little is too big at this point. We will deny ourselves economic development opportunities and lag behind our competitors who are making a different choice — to invest in their future.

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