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## House approves transportation finance compromise

By Ariel Wittenberg  
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Area legislators praised a transportation bill passed by the House and Senate with veto-proof majorities Wednesday, pointing out that it directs funding to the South Coast Rail project.

But opponents of the plan, recommended by a House-Senate conference committee, immediately panned the deal. The final bill only raises taxes by \$500 million, or half the estimated \$1 billion that Gov. Deval Patrick originally recommended for South Coast Rail and other transportation projects.

Transportation for Massachusetts, a coalition advocating green and affordable transportation, questioned whether the conference committee's promised \$800 million in revenues by fiscal 2018 will ever materialize.

Patrick also cast doubt on the reliability of the same \$800 million promise, vowing to return the bill to the Legislature without his signature.

The measure was passed by a 105-47 vote by the House and 34-6 by the Senate. The bill does not include any immediate funding for South Coast Rail.

But Rep. Bill Straus, D-Mattapoisett, the House transportation chairman and a member of the conference committee, said he is "very happy" that South Coast Rail and the Green Line Project are "the only two that are earmarked or identified in the tax bill."

Rep. Antonio Cabral, D-New Bedford, called the new bill "good for the SouthCoast.

"It frees up the state's bond capacity for future projects, like South Coast Rail," he said.

Sen. Mark Montigny, D-New Bedford, said Wednesday that while he was pleased that the new bill increases transportation funding over the next five years, he is not yet celebrating a South Coast Rail victory.

"I think it's very important for us to have a healthy dose of skepticism on this," he said. "The less we celebrate it the less we lead on the community."

Montigny previously said he would not vote for the bill if he thought the governor would veto it. He said he voted for the bill Wednesday but "I reserve my right to go with him if he sends us back an amendment or a veto to the bill."

"I want to see exactly what his analysis is on the numbers," he said.

In a statement issued by his office Wednesday evening, Patrick said he could not support the bill because it fails to account for a revenue source that will not be available in the future. While the statement did not specify that source, it was an apparent reference to tolls on the western portion of the Massachusetts Turnpike that are scheduled to be taken down in 2017.

Without those tolls, the Patrick administration believes the \$805 million in new transportation funding the bill promises by fiscal 2018 would not be achievable.

Transportation advocate Kristina Egan, who directs Transportation for Massachusetts and who was formerly the state's manager of the South Coast Rail project, said her group is similarly "concerned" that the revenue projections anticipated for future years "may be too optimistic."

She said the bill does not address the possible end of the turnpike tolls in 2017, which would reduce transportation funding by \$135 million per year, on average.

"We're worried some of the funding for the future either isn't real or isn't solid enough," she said.

She added that "South Coast Rail is still at risk" despite being named in the bill.

"It's still going to be competing against a lot of high-priority projects," she said. "We're glad it's mentioned but there needs to be some funding to back it up."

The bill passed by the House and Senate would raise taxes by \$500 million to close the MBTA's operating deficit and fund the agency for the coming fiscal year. It would also commit the state to larger transportation spending levels that will reach \$805 million by 2018.

That additional spending would be funded by directing revenue specifically to transportation needs that currently goes to the state's general fund.

The taxes funding the bill include a 3-cent-per-gallon increase in the gas tax and a per-pack tax increase on cigarettes of \$1. Most of the new taxes in the bill would take effect July 1.

Material from State House News Service and The Associated Press was included in this report.