

Report: State must invest in Fall River transportation

By Jo C. Goode
February 26, 2013

FALL RIVER — For residents in the Gateway Cities of Fall River and Taunton, it may not come as a surprise, but a report released Tuesday by MassINC says inadequate public transportation in those communities causes service gaps for the employed, doubled commute times, and is a factor in lower-than-average work force participation.

The report indicates that Gov. Deval Patrick's recent proposed funding increases to regional transit authorities by way of improved and expanded services and capital investment will improve local economies in the short and long-term, "especially if you want them to be truly vibrant and liveable," said Ben Forman, MassINC research director and executive director of the Gateway Cities Innovation Institute.

"Data shows that (when) money (is) infused in Gateway Cities public transportation, that ridership increases. It a good reason to believe that it's a 'build and they will come' scenario, that those services will be utilized," said Forman in a conference call yesterday.

Riders of the Southeastern Regional Transit Authority in Fall River and New Bedford have seen a 20 percent reduction in service between 2002 and 2010, with riders of the Greater Attleboro Taunton Regional Transit Authority experiencing approximately 15 percent fewer transportation runs.

And for several decades in Gateway Cities like Fall River, jobs have become decentralized as industry, and in particular manufacturing, leaves struggling small to mid-size cities. Fall River has one of the lowest labor force participation rates among the 16 Gateway Cities, more than six points lower than the state average.

The 24 Gateway Cities, as defined by Massachusetts law, are Barnstable, Brockton, Chelsea, Chicopee, Everett, Fall River, Fitchburg, Haverhill, Holyoke, Lawrence, Leominster, Lowell, Lynn, Malden, Methuen, New Bedford, Pittsfield, Quincy, Revere, Salem, Springfield, Taunton, Westfield and Worcester.

The Legislature defined a Gateway as a city with a population greater than 35,000 but less than 250,000, a median household income and a per-capita income below the statewide average, and a rate of educational attainment of a bachelor's degree or higher that is below the state average.

Richard Davey, secretary and chief executive officer of the Massachusetts Department of Transportation, said the agency believes investing in transportation in Gateway Cities can lock in job opportunities for those communities.

MassDOT has outlined a plan that not only calls for restoring services but would fully fund the regional transit authorities with an increase of \$100 million and \$400 million over 10 years for new buses to expand services and replace older vehicles and upgrade technology and facilities.

In Fall River, SRTA is in the middle of building a \$5.2 million state-of-the-art bus terminal on Fourth Street.

Davey said that with the proposed South Coast Rail, SRTA will play what he call “a critical role” in public transportation improvements in Fall River.

Results from a public opinion poll conducted by MassINC in February shows that Gateway City voters have a much higher rate of support for public transportation than other Massachusetts voters, Forman said.

Asked whether increasing bus service in their community would have an impact in their lives, nearly half identified it as a “major difference,” a response that was 10 percent higher than voters living in other towns and cities.

Nearly 80 percent of the Gateway Cities voters said connecting people to jobs is a “very strong” or “somewhat strong” argument for investing in public transportation.

Other recommendations include the marketing and branding regional transit to increase ridership and improve overall attractiveness of Gateway cities, improve service quality through new technologies and creating stronger links between transportation and land use planning.