

The New York Times

Massachusetts Plan Starts Small for Big Upgrade to Rail System

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March 25, 2013



Evan McGlinn for The New York Times

Gov. Deval Patrick has envisioned a \$13 billion overhaul of the state transportation system. The Downeaster runs between Boston and Portland, Me., in a partnership with Amtrak.

BOSTON — Later this spring, Bostonians eager to flee to Cape Cod for the weekend will have an option other than sitting in bumper-to-bumper traffic for 70 miles and fuming along with everyone else.

Starting May 24, they can hop a train to Hyannis, where regional buses, ferries and rental cars will await to whisk them out to the beaches, islands and wind-swept dunes.

The train, the first passenger service to the cape since 1995, is one small piece of a major \$13 billion transportation overhaul envisioned by Gov. Deval Patrick. That overhaul is aimed chiefly at repairing and upgrading worn-out bridges, roads and commuter lines in Massachusetts, but about 20 percent of it would go toward reviving train service to the cape and elsewhere in the state.

Mr. Patrick said that upgrading these in-state routes would spur economic development. It would also provide important links for Amtrak's long-range plans to establish high-speed train service throughout New England.

The package is the most sweeping and future-oriented of Mr. Patrick's tenure. But it faces some high hurdles. It would require a major tax increase. And it faces a skeptical public still recovering from what people here call the Big Dig hangover — the multibillion-dollar debt from the nation's most expensive highway project.

Mr. Patrick, a Democrat, had nothing to do with the Big Dig but the project deferred investments that he says should have been made in aging infrastructure and increased repair costs that are necessary now.

"The plan is ambitious," said Stephanie Pollack, a transportation specialist at the Dukakis Center for Urban and Regional Policy at Northeastern University. "And it's depressing that this is considered ambitious when most of the money is going to fixing what we have now."

But, she said, "this is probably the first time in decades that Massachusetts has stepped back and said, 'Here's what we need to do for the next quarter century.'"

In addition to service to the cape, Mr. Patrick has proposed reviving service from Boston to Fall River and New Bedford as well as from the Berkshires to the Connecticut border to enable future service to New York City. He has proposed extending service to Medford. He has also called for an \$850 million expansion of the number of tracks at Boston's South Station to accommodate more commuter lines and longer-distance Amtrak trains. The station now is a major bottleneck that causes serious delays.

Amtrak's plans for high-speed rail include service from Portland, Me., to New York City along an inland route through Springfield, Mass., and one between Boston and New York that would cut travel time to 90 minutes from the current three hours and 40 minutes.

To pay for his transportation package, as well as some new education programs, Mr. Patrick has proposed \$1.9 billion in new taxes, one of the biggest levies Massachusetts has seen in a

generation. He would raise the state income tax to 6.25 percent from 5.25 percent and lower the state sales tax to 4.5 percent from 6.25 percent. Residents who make more than \$102,000 a year would shoulder most of the burden.

Mr. Patrick, who is not seeking re-election in 2014, is spending much of his political capital trying to convince both citizens and legislators that “high-impact” transportation projects can pay for themselves.

For example, the governor’s administration says, the South Coast rail line to Fall River and New Bedford would cost \$1.8 billion, but it would create 3,800 jobs and generate \$500 million a year in economic growth.

“The public will pay more if they see their sacrifice is actually going to net them a specific good,” said Richard A. Davey, the state’s transportation secretary, who is conducting an aggressive campaign to help sell the governor’s package. It includes a Web site that allows residents to see exactly what the spending would mean in their localities.

But the tax proposal has drawn ridicule from Republicans and a cool reception from the legislature, which is overwhelmingly Democratic. The speaker of the House, Robert A. DeLeo, wants to downsize the governor’s wish list, which is leading to intense negotiations over which parts of the package might be cut. At the same time, Mayor Will Flanagan of Fall River, for example, says he will hold the governor to his promise to veto the entire package if South Coast rail is dropped.

The proposal comes as passenger trains, particularly on routes under 400 miles, are rebounding across much of the country and proving a boon to economic development.

“American passenger rail is in the midst of a renaissance,” said a new report from the Brookings Institution, which attributed the increase in part to partnerships between Amtrak and the federal and state governments.

One of the most successful of those partnerships is the Downeaster, which has been running the 100-plus miles between Boston and Portland since 2001 and was extended up the Maine coast to Brunswick in November. Massachusetts paid for track upgrades within its borders, but Maine pays for the train and Amtrak runs it.



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The governor's plan calls for an \$850 million expansion at Boston's South Station to accommodate more commuter lines and longer-distance Amtrak trains.



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Mr. Patrick hopes revived service to New Bedford can lead to economic growth.



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The governor has proposed a plan to ease the bottleneck of trains at Boston's South Station and lay the groundwork for Amtrak's planned high-speed trains throughout New England.

Ridership on the Downeaster, which serves lobster rolls and clam chowder in its cafe car, has climbed steadily. Its success has allowed it to increase the number of round trips and speed up travel time while spurring economic development along the way.

“The value we get out of it is tremendous,” said Patricia Quinn, executive director of the Northern New England Passenger Rail Authority, which manages the Downeaster. She said

hundreds of new housing units had been built close to the train stations, and old mills had been transformed into office and retail space.

“There is \$300 million in development ongoing,” she said.

Such regional trains are catching on in some unlikely places.

In Virginia, the legislature last month approved tax increases proposed by Gov. Bob McDonnell, a Republican, to pay for a transportation package that would, among other things, help restore in-state passenger train service.

In New Hampshire, a black hole in New England’s passenger train network, gains by Democrats have resulted in support for study of a Capitol Corridor train between Boston and Concord.

Perhaps the most ambitious state rail project in the country is the planned 520-mile bullet train in California between Los Angeles and San Francisco, though projected cost estimates have run as high as \$100 billion.

In Massachusetts, the train to the cape, called the CapeFlyer, will cost a modest \$21 million over five years. It is able to start Memorial Day weekend — before legislative action on the governor’s package — because it is a pilot project that extends a commuter line, so the tracks and train cars already exist. The service will be limited to weekends, which is when car traffic piles up.

“We only need to carry 700 folks a weekend to break even,” said Thomas S. Cahir, administrator of the Cape Cod Regional Transit Authority, which will operate the Flyer. “We anticipate we will exceed that.”

Considering that 250,000 people drive on and off the cape every weekend, the train might reduce traffic by less than one percent.

Nonetheless, said Julie Quintero-Schulz, the transit authority’s mobility manager, “we’re trying to provide an alternative service to lessen the traffic congestion.”

Though the Flyer’s impact might be minimal, any early success could help the governor build momentum for his proposal as he and the legislature settle in for some hard bargaining.