

OPINION

EDITORIAL

Transportation fix sorely needed

Revenue plan a major challenge for McGee

State Sen. Thomas McGee, D-Lynn, who last week was reappointed as Senate chairman of the Joint Committee on Transportation, may have the most daunting task of any Beacon Hill lawmaker in the new session: to devise a plan to close an annual \$600 million to \$700 million transportation funding shortfall that his colleagues can support.



McGee

McGee is a strong advocate for a Blue Line extension to Lynn, something he said he discussed just two weeks ago with Gov. Deval Patrick and Transportation Secretary Richard Davey. But he said projects like a Blue Line extension, which is not currently on a long-range list of projects to be funded, will never be if Massachusetts does not first fix the transportation system it has, by closing the annual MBTA and Mass Highway deficits, and making necessary investment statewide to replace old bridges and redesign/repair shoddy and dangerous state roads.

Marc Draisen, director of the Metropolitan Area Planning Council, and Elizabeth Weyant, advocacy director for Transportation for Massachusetts, joined with McGee in a visit with The Item's editorial board on Monday, and stepped up their public pitch for investment to address a transportation system in crisis.

"The question is what is the cost per person and what is the cost (per person) not to do it," McGee said.

McGee said it's a given that decisions on revenue will have to be made, but at this point he is not committed to any particular tax or fee increase. He noted, however, that he has in the past supported proposals to raise the gas tax, noting that at 21 cents per gallon that Massachusetts today has a lower gas tax than many states, and more than 20 cents lower than New York and Connecticut.

One thing McGee said he would oppose is a move to increase existing tolls, which he said have long placed an unfair burden on North Shore and Metro West motorists.

Noting that those tolls today pay for debt on the Central Artery project, he said, "We need to fairly address how that money is taken in and what the money is used for. (Central Artery debt) money should come from the state, because it was a state project. It's very unfair for people on the North Shore and Metro West to pay for something that they're really not seeing any return on, all those (toll) dollars are just going to pay for debt."

Aside from obvious safety risks associated with aging transportation infrastructure, McGee said it's been proven time and again that transportation investment fosters economic development.

"The Central Artery project gets a lot of criticism, but it's the best thing we've done in my lifetime," he said. "It transformed Boston," he added, citing hundreds of millions in new transportation-centered economic development under way in South Boston, around Boston Garden and Logan Airport, and at Kendall Square in Cambridge.

He said he's confident the same will happen someday in Lynn. "GE took down its gear plant, that's 70 acres of open space right on a rail bed. What do you think the value of that is if you're thinking outside the box with a Blue Line car stopping there sits right on a rail bed," he said. "Imagine the economic boost to Lynn."

Draisen reiterated McGee's point, "We also support extension of the Blue Line to Lynn. The problem is we can't get any of these projects until we figure out a way to clean up what we have and maintain it."

And that, Draisen said, is a pay now or pay-more later scenario. "Every dollar we now borrow (for transportation), we pay back \$1.76," he said.

We can't imagine anyone taking issue with the need for transportation investment, but the high hurdle is clearly the revenue plan. Gov. Patrick's proposal for hikes in the income tax, gas tax, cigarette tax, a new tax on soda and candy, and routine increases in license and registration fees and MBTA fares, has not been generally well received. And with an economy still fragile and prices at the pump soaring once again, it's easy to see that McGee has among the toughest assignments on the Hill.



Modern times precedent for pontiff

Pope Benedict XVI's decision to retire Feb. 28, a well-kept secret announced Monday by the pontiff himself, took both the Roman Catholic Church and the wider world generally by surprise. But maybe it shouldn't have.

In 2010, Benedict said that if a pope felt no longer physically, spiritually and psychologically capable of handling the demanding duties of the office, then he had a right, even an obligation, to resign.

But apparently few of the faithful took this to heart. After all, no pope had resigned since 1415, more than 70 years before Columbus first sighted the Americas. The papal death-watch had become something of a tradition as aging pontiffs clung to life and office.

One wonders how much Benedict, 85, was influenced by his mentor and predecessor, John Paul II, who died a lingering death from Parkinson's disease in 2005 but struggled, often in heartbreaking fashion, to carry on until the end. One had to admire John Paul's strength of will, but still feel the pathos of the once-vigorous priest, who had weathered war and communism, shrunken within his robes and supported by attendants.

Benedict had contemplated a life in academe, as a theologian, but the



DALE McFEATTERS

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church kept calling on his obvious organizational talents. He was bishop of Munich for only three months before being made a cardinal in 1977. Four years later, John Paul named him leader of the Congregation for

the Doctrine of the Faith, the office that protects and preserves Catholic orthodoxy. Benedict was a tireless and sometimes blunt-spoken defender of traditional tenets. He fought off the ordination of women, and he was criticized as slow to react to the church's sexual-abuse scandal.

The timing of Benedict's decision indicates it was not arrived at casually. Lent begins this Wednesday, giving the College of Cardinals time to convene and elect a new pope by Easter, on March 31.

Benedict had barely announced his decision when he was criticized for not continuing the tradition of dying in office. But Benedict did what he thought was best for the church, "after having examined my conscience before God."

Preliminary plans call for him to leave the Vatican upon his successor's election, and then go to the papal retreat at Castel Gandolfo, just southeast of Rome. From there, he can enter a cloistered monastery where, in privacy and peace, he can take up the academic life he had planned when he entered the priesthood 61 years ago.

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Can Republicans bridge party's divide

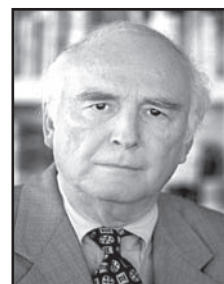
As president, Ronald Reagan issued his 11th commandment that Republicans should not speak ill of other members of the party. But the edict has languished, and it won't be restored unless the GOP ends its internecine warfare over what is more important: winning elections or being philosophically pure.

It is not difficult to foresee a time when the ultras break entirely from the moderates and bring about an upheaval, forming a permanent minority that stays true to its ideology but can't further it. That already has started. Anyone with the least bit of interest in politics knows that bad candidates may find enough support to defeat good ones in primary elections but certainly not to win the election that counts.

That happened in the last two elections. Unless the Republican mainstreamers can somehow pitch the Tea Party movement overboard, it's likely to recur two years from now. Republican candidates had a chance of gaining dramatically in the Senate last time out but nominated candidates whose wild, embarrassing ideas cost them the election.

In Indiana, for instance, the Republican Party paid an enormous price. County chairmen who were upset over Richard Lugar's support for the Obama administration's economic bailout sent the prestigious, 36-year incumbent packing — and then lost the seat when the obscure candidate of their choice, Richard Mourdock, alienated half of the nation's women.

The exercise duplicated one in Missouri, where Democratic Sen. Claire McCaskill was predicted to lose — until her GOP opponent, Todd Akin, started the anti-woman ball rolling with some illiterate, bewildering nonsense about the results of rape.



DAN K. THOMASSON

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In a conversation with several "true believers" just before the presidential election, I was amazed that they actually believed Mitt Romney would win. They'd become so convinced of the righteousness of their beliefs that they had lost touch with reality. In a biennial "pick 'em" contest, I won the money for a second time. When asked how, I explained that I'd merely chosen with my head, not my emotions. These weren't political novices, either. Joining me in shaking his head was a former chairman of the Republican Party.

Now former White House political guru Karl Rove has incurred the wrath of the far right by taking on turn-back-the-clock zealots.

He and others have begun the Conservative Victory Project, an effort

to select Republican candidates with a real chance of winning. One of the people Rove won't be supporting is Rep. Paul Broun of Georgia, who has announced he wants to run for the seat being vacated by Republican Sen. Saxby Chambliss. Chambliss is retiring at the end of next year rather than waiting to be shoved out by the Tea Party.

For those who haven't been paying attention, Broun is the doctor congressman who says that "evolution, embryology and the Big Bang theory" are lies "straight out of hell."

Move over, Mourdock and Akin. You were last year's embarrassments.

Could this end up splitting the GOP so badly that it can't recover as a major party? Should this war continue over what increasingly seems like the last haven for old white men, with little appeal to the overwhelming majority in a changing demographic? Would that lead to a third party, dramatically altering the nation's two-party political model? It was forged following the 1850s creation of the Republican Party and its first presidential candidate, John C. Fremont.

It is far too early for such hysterical predictions. But if there is any indication that such a trauma may be imminent, it's the fact that two Republican speakers — Florida Sen. Marco Rubio for the establishment and Kentucky Sen. Rand Paul for the Tea Party — are scheduled to give the rebuttal to President Barack Obama's State of the Union address tonight.

That should tell us something — and it just might not be good news for the Grand Old Party come next year's elections.

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