

STATE HOUSE NEWS SERVICE

Gov. Patrick unveils the what, but not the how, in transportation plan

By Matt Murphy
January 4, 2013

STATE HOUSE -- Lawmakers and Massachusetts residents will have to wait a few more days to hear how Gov. Deval Patrick plans to pay for the \$13 billion in additional transportation and infrastructure investments he believes are needed over the next decade to keep Massachusetts competitive.

As part of what has become a multi-step unveiling of Patrick's long-awaited transportation financing plan, the governor described a system in need of \$1.02 billion in additional annual revenue, money that would be used to fund expansion projects like South Coast rail and the Green Line extension to Medford and move transportation employees off the capital budget, where taxpayers are racking up interest costs associated with paying salaries.

Richard Davey said the plan, titled "The Way Forward: A 21st Century Transportation Plan," would bring the state's capital investment in public roads, bridges and transit to \$25 billion through 2024.

But Patrick said he would offer more specifics about his preferred method for generating the new revenue when he gives his State of the Commonwealth address on Wednesday night and files his budget a week later, delaying for the time being the more controversial aspects of the plan.

"What the public wants - a modern, convenient transportation network - and what the Commonwealth needs - accelerated, sustained economic growth - are exactly aligned," Patrick told a crowd of more than 100 people at UMass Boston on Monday, including municipal leaders and advocates for increased investment.

Patrick called the report, prepared in collaboration with, but no actual vote by the Massachusetts Department of Transportation Board, a "stark, clear-eyed, non-partisan and fact-based" analysis of what it will cost to fund the type of transportation system the public has demanded at hearings throughout the state.

"What's as plain as day is that we have choices to make. We can choose to invest in ourselves, to invest in a growth strategy that has proven time and again to work, or we can choose to do nothing. But let's be crystal clear and honest with each other. Choosing to do nothing is a choice too. That is a choice, and that choice has consequences," Patrick said.

Patrick continued, "It means longer commutes, cuts in services, larger fare and fee increases and a continuation of the self-defeating economics that leaves large parts of our population cut off from opportunity and growth. I choose growth. I hope you will too."

The administration appears to be trying to build support first around projects that key constituencies would like to see funded before addressing the levers that will be required to raise enough revenue to support those projects.

"This is about every taxpayer so I don't think it ought to be a question about how to avoid who shares lifting this burden. This is a burden we all share," Patrick said.

The report outlined a number of revenue options that would each generate \$1 billion a year. The ideas include a 30-cent increase in the gas tax, a sales tax hike to 7.75 percent, or an increase in the income tax from 5.25 to 5.66 percent, but Patrick did not suggest that he would seek to generate the funding all from one source.

The governor said some options were "more appealing to me than others," but suggested there was "room for debate about it."

Patrick said he would recommend that any sources of new revenue be comprehensive enough to not just plug holes in the MBTA budget - which faces a \$140 million budget deficit in 2014 - but to make needed investments throughout the system, be dedicated to transportation and be competitive with fees and tax rates charged by competitive states.

Sen. Thomas McGee, last session's Transportation Committee co-chairman, said he wasn't surprised by the scope of the problem laid out by Patrick, noting that a separate commission in 2007 identified a similar funding gap.

"We need to make the case that it's a crisis, and this is an important step in that direction," McGee said. The Lynn Democrat said his only preference for a revenue source is "what we can build a consensus on."

Patrick suggested a gas tax increase, alone, would not meet his criteria for keeping Massachusetts competitive. "It would take a tripling of the gas tax to fund this plan. It would put us way out of sync with our competitors in the region and nationally, actually, so that is not at the top of my list," he said.

John Jenkins, the chairman of the MassDOT board, said he heard from citizens across the state during public hearings last year that customers want more service, not less.

"The debate can no longer be whether to invest in our transportation system, but how to invest in a way that's responsible, adequate and supports economic growth," Jenkins said.

Lt. Gov. Timothy Murray, whose hopes for succeeding Patrick as governor could be tied up in the success or failure of any push for transportation revenues, said investments in transportation "unlock jobs."

"I have said time and time and time again that our transportation network is really the enabling network of our economy," Murray said.

Secretary Richard Davey, who delivered a detailed presentation on the administration priorities and the funding needed to meet their goals, said reforms will continue to be a part of the solution.

Claiming \$500 million in savings over the three years since the state went through a major consolidation of transportation agencies, Davey said another \$50 million could be saved by eliminating manual toll collectors and moving toward electronic tolling.

Davey said the report also envisions better performance and asset management, the sale or lease of unused MBTA property, partnerships with Massport and a consolidation of Registry of Motor Vehicle branches into regional "super centers" with additional self-serve kiosks at retail and municipal locales.

The plan would put \$5.2 billion in additional funding into roads, bridges and bicycle and pedestrian infrastructure; \$3.8 billion into transit infrastructure; and \$275 million into the RMV and local airports.

It would also address a \$684 million operating deficit over the next decade at the MBTA, MassDOT and regional transit authorities, including a shift of full-time employees paid through borrowing to the operating budget.

"The current system we have to day we cannot afford," Davey said.

The plan calls for \$1.18 billion to be invested in bridge repairs, \$1.25 billion in hundreds of local and regional highway projects, \$930 million for Interstate 91 in Springfield and the Interstate 93 and 95 interchanges in Woburn and Canton, and \$430 million for bicycle and pedestrian improvements.

Drawing applause from the crowd at UMass, including local leaders like Gloucester Mayor Carolyn Kirk, the plan also recommends an additional \$1 billion over 10 years be pay for Chapter 90 municipal road maintenance projects.

Davey said \$2.4 billion would be used to purchase new cars for the T's Red, Orange and Green lines, some of which were purchased as far back as 1969 for the Red Line and 1979 on the Orange Line. Unlike cars and trolleys purchased with federal funds, Davey said using state money would allow the state to require that those cars be built in Massachusetts, creating more jobs.

Another \$850 million would be used to replace MBTA and RTA buses, and \$300 million would go toward MBTA power and facilities upgrades to reduce frequency of delays and disabled trains.

Envisioning a expansion of commuter rail options that includes the South Coast rail extension (\$1.8 billion) and the Green Line extension (\$674 million), as well as rail service between Springfield and Boston (\$362 million), Boston and Hyannis (\$21 million) and a connection between Pittsfield and New York City rail (\$114 million), the plan also calls for an \$850 million expansion of South Station.

"If we want to expand service, we have to be able to accommodate it with an expansion of South Station," Davey said.

Rafael Mares, of the Conservation Law Foundation, said he didn't mind waiting a few days to hear Patrick's recommendations on a revenue source, suggesting he has seen a significant "shift in attitude" from lawmakers over the past two years over the idea of raising new revenue. "There shouldn't be any surprises for people that have followed this," he said.

Kristina Egan, director of Transportation for Massachusetts, said she believes lawmakers understand that their constituents want safe roads and bridges and better and more frequent service from trains and buses.

"I think there's an understanding that we have to do something or it's irresponsible," Egan said.