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TELEGRAM & GAZETTE

Report: Public transportation spending benefits Gateway cities

By Jacqueline Reis

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A new report from MassINC says the governor's proposal to increase transportation spending could be particularly important for Gateway cities such as Worcester, Leominster and Fitchburg.

The report released Tuesday, "Reinventing Transit," argues that inadequate public transit contributes to higher unemployment in Gateway cities and that improving public transit could help those cities attract businesses and residents. On average, labor force participation rates in Gateway cities are 2.5 percentage points below the state's overall rate of 68 percent.

Anyone who wants to work a late shift in Worcester or in any of the 21 communities served by the Fitchburg-based Montachusett Regional Transit Authority is probably well acquainted with the problem. Mohammed Khan, MART administrator, said in an interview that a lack of funds stops his buses at 7 p.m., and WRTA Administrator Stephen O'Neil said his buses are in the garage by 10 p.m.

Both Mr. Khan and Mr. O'Neil said they wish they could do more, and they welcomed the Patrick administration's recent proposal to spend \$1.5 billion in new state money on the state's 15 regional transit authorities over the next 10 years.

"I think for the first time, they recognize that there is a need all throughout the commonwealth," Mr. Khan said.

"Investing in the 15 RTAs across the commonwealth really can unlock economic opportunity," state Transportation Secretary Richard Davey said in a MassINC conference call Tuesday. The administration hopes to roughly triple the amount of operating subsidies it sends to regional transit authorities, pay them during the fiscal year instead of reimbursing them afterward, and add capital dollars for newer buses. While the Massachusetts Bay Transportation Authority tries to ensure its bus fleet averages no more than eight years old, regional transit buses are generally "several years older," Mr. Davey said.

Benjamin Forman, research director at MassINC and executive director of the Gateway Cities Innovation Institute, said the need comes from people such as manufacturing workers who travel to facilities that cannot be built in the city centers. Meanwhile, all types of employees are

seeing smaller and fewer raises, and teen employment is at a 40-year low.

“The days of having two or three cars in a household, I don't think we're going to see as much of that in the future,”

Mr. Forman said.

The decentralization of jobs over the past 30 years has been particularly strong in small to midsize cities like the 24 Gateway Cities defined by state law, according to the report.

In fact, fewer than a quarter of jobs in Greater Springfield and Worcester are accessible by transit in under 90 minutes, according to a 2011 Brookings Institution report cited in the MassINC analysis.

In Worcester, Fitchburg and Leominster, the three Gateway cities in Central Massachusetts, fewer than 5 percent of residents take public transportation to work, according to 2009-2011 averages.

The decentralization started with the rise of the automobile, which led many cities to remove electric streetcar networks and interurban rail lines. Fitchburg lost its streetcars in 1932, while Worcester's held on until 1945, according to MassINC.

More recently, the Worcester and Montachusett regional transit authorities have seen the steepest cuts in fixed-route service of any Gateway city between 2002 and 2012. Montachusett halved the amount of time it drives fixed routes, and Worcester cut nearly a quarter of its fixed-route hours, according to the report.

The regional transit authorities are funded with a mix of state and federal money, passenger fares and other services. While the governor's administration hopes to increase transit funding by using part of the state's sales tax, MassINC suggests improvements could be paid for partly with broad-based regional taxes such as a regional payroll tax by transit authority service area. Doing so would ensure local transportation meets local needs, instead of relying on a single statewide formula, the report states.

Boston-based MassINC is a nonprofit, independent think tank. The report is available online at www.MassINC.org, which also has information about forums on public transportation March 4 in Fitchburg and March 18 in Worcester.