

The Berkshire Eagle

Transportation funds can help spur economic growth

By Tony Dobrowolski
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State Rep. Tricia Farley-Bouvier, right, listens intently on Monday as MassINC research directory speaks at a transportation forum at Berkshire Community College in Pittsfield. (Stephanie Zollshan / Berkshire Eagle Staff)

PITTSFIELD -- If increases in public transportation funding do take place in Massachusetts, the Berkshire Regional Transit Authority can be a major contributor to the county's economic growth, according to a nonpartisan advocacy group.

MassINC, a Boston-based nonprofit, has compiled a report on the state's public transportation systems that provides guidelines on how investments in regional transportation can strengthen the economies of cities like Pittsfield. A vital public transit system is seen as key to overall economic growth because it boosts people's access to necessities like post-secondary education, jobs and doctors.

"I think that I would call [the report] a primer," said MassINC's research director Ben Forman on Monday during a meeting with The Eagle's editorial board.

"We're trying to provide people with information about why [regional transit authorities] are important, how we make them work, and if we're really going to make a big investment in them, how do we think about them," Forman said. "It's not just a service for people who are too young or too old to have a car of their own, but actually an asset that the community is proud of."

The report, "Reinventing Public Transportation for Strong Gateway City Economies," will officially be released by MassINC today. The group also discussed the report's findings on Monday at a transportation forum at Berkshire Community College. It was the first of 11 similar events that MassINC plans to hold across the state.

MassINC released a report last year that looked at the inequities in public transportation funding across the state. But the latest report highlights the link between public transportation and economic growth, and provides recommendations for state lawmakers to follow as they debate changes in public transportation funding this year.

The Department of Transportation and Gov. Deval Patrick's administration are calling for a \$1.5 billion increase in highway and public transportation improvements over the next decade, including spending in the state's 15 regional transit authorities which would give every region in the state an opportunity to revise and expand its approach to public transit at the same time.



Mass INC research directory Ben Forman explains the results of his nonprofit's research, which he said shows that more funding for public transportation in the state could provide a big boost to local economies. (Stephanie Zollshan / Berkshire Eagle Staff)

According to MassINC, if the DOT provided a \$100 million annual increase in state support for RTAs, state funding for the BRTA would rise from the current \$1.9 million to \$5.1 million in fiscal 2014, an increase of 168 percent. Further revenue could be raised from the implementation of a regional payroll tax that in Berkshire County could provide an additional \$6 million to \$24 million for the BRTA.

The establishment of such a tax would require approval by voters, Forman said.

According to recent data by the Berkshire Regional Planning Commission, the BRTA, which provides public transit via the "B" bus, needs \$8.7 million annually just to bring its transit operations up to an acceptable standard.

The report also found that residents of the state's 24 Gateway Cities, of which Pittsfield is one, who depend on public transportation have difficulty finding jobs. According to MassINC, labor force participation rates in Gateway Cities are 21.2 percent below the overall Massachusetts rate of 68 percent. In Pittsfield, labor force participation is 4 percent lower than the state rate.

"I don't know how well that is known in Gateway Cities," said MassINC representative Marjorie Malpiede. "It is actually quite different than it is in the non-Gateway Cities."

Copies of the report are available at massinc.org.