

EXPERT OPINION: A transportation vision for the 2020s

Chris Dempsey, the director of Transportation for Massachusetts, on what the future of transportation could — and should — look like in Boston.

By Chris Dempsey

As we barrel into the 2020s, years of underinvestment and neglect of Massachusetts' transportation system is clear to all of us who rely on shaky public transit, who battle our worst-in-the-nation traffic congestion, or who feel unsafe cycling in our neighborhoods or simply crossing the street. This coming decade has the potential to turn things around, but only if our state and local policymakers take action to fix problems that have compounded into a crisis statewide. With their leadership, here's what we all can look forward to:

Less traffic congestion: For generations, traffic congestion has felt like a fact-of-life of living in New England. The pervading sentiment is that we are eternally cursed by the Puritans' centuries-old crooked, narrow streets. But the 2020s should be the decade when we reverse this curse by borrowing strategies that have worked well in other parts of the country and the world.

An essential tool will be comprehensive and fair road pricing, which the Federal Highway Administration calls "the single most viable and sustainable approach to reducing traffic congestion." This isn't academic theory. It works. When Seattle put road pricing in place on its SR-520 bridge, vehicle volumes decreased by 34% and bus ridership increased by 38%. London and Stockholm — which have their fair share of crooked streets and bad weather — saw traffic drop 30% when they instituted congestion pricing. Greater Boston enters the 2020s as the only one of the 10 most populous regions in the country that does not use time-of-day pricing on its tolled roads. The unmanaged chaos of our "free" roads is failing drivers, bus riders, delivery workers — anyone who needs to get around. With the right political leadership from the Legislature and the governor, this will be the decade when we start to fix that.

Cleaner air: Transportation is the largest source of greenhouse-gas emissions and air pollution in Massachusetts. In addition to causing climate change, all those tailpipe emissions are filled with noxious chemicals that lead to higher rates of asthma, increased risk of heart disease, dementia in seniors, and low birth weights for infants of mothers who live close to busy roads.

To help address this problem, Massachusetts has led the push for the Transportation & Climate Initiative (TCI), a multi-state agreement to limit carbon emissions from transportation. TCI is based off a successful program in the electricity sector called the Regional Greenhouse Gas Initiative, which has reduced pollution and greenhouse-gas emissions while saving consumers and businesses money through energy-efficiency programs like Mass Save.

TCI will do the same for transportation. Early estimates are that the program can save the region \$10 billion in avoided public health costs, generate additional billions in consumer savings through rebates and incentives for more fuel-efficient (or fully electric) vehicles, and provide safe and reliable options for non-vehicle trips. Investments from TCI should be directed to neighborhoods that have suffered the most from pollution, and which are at the greatest risk from the changing climate.

More regular + reliable transit: Let's face it — the 2010s were not kind to the MBTA or transit riders statewide. The system hit a low in 2015, and has struggled to pull out of it. But the 2020s hold promise for renewal and improvement.

This decade will see the entire Red and Orange Line fleets replaced by new vehicles assembled in Springfield. And we can expect to see a new generation of longer Green Line "Type 10" vehicles that carry almost twice as many passengers as current vehicles. The 2020s will also see MassDOT and the MBTA take important steps toward a regional rail system that reinvents our "Mad Men"-era commuter rail system to fit today's dynamic economy. To get buses moving faster, we must see an increase in dedicated bus lanes on local streets — continuing a trend started by Everett and other municipalities in the 2010s.

We cannot limit transit improvements to Greater Boston. Regional transit authorities and rail across the state must see increased funding from the Legislature and expanded service in this decade.

A pedestrian and cyclist renaissance: The classic New England village was built around walking, and communities across Massachusetts would benefit from doubling down on that strength in the 2020s. In Greater Boston, this includes borrowing from Olmsted's Emerald Necklace to create an Emerald Network of shared-use walking and biking paths that connect the region's diverse neighborhoods and job centers. Across the state, this means investing in economically vibrant, livable city and town centers that are safe and comfortable for everyone because they are oriented more to humans and less to automobiles.

Massachusetts House Speaker Bob DeLeo has pledged a debate on transportation policy before the legislative session expires at the end of July. The House and Senate must seize this opportunity to get this decade off to the right start by passing a bold and significant transportation bill that makes this promising future a reality.

Chris Dempsey is the director of Massachusetts for Transportation, a coalition that "advocates at the state, federal, and local levels for transportation policies that are innovative, sustainable, and environmentally friendly." A founder of No Boston Olympics, which opposed the city's 2024 Olympic bid, Dempsey also previously served as assistant secretary of transportation for the commonwealth.