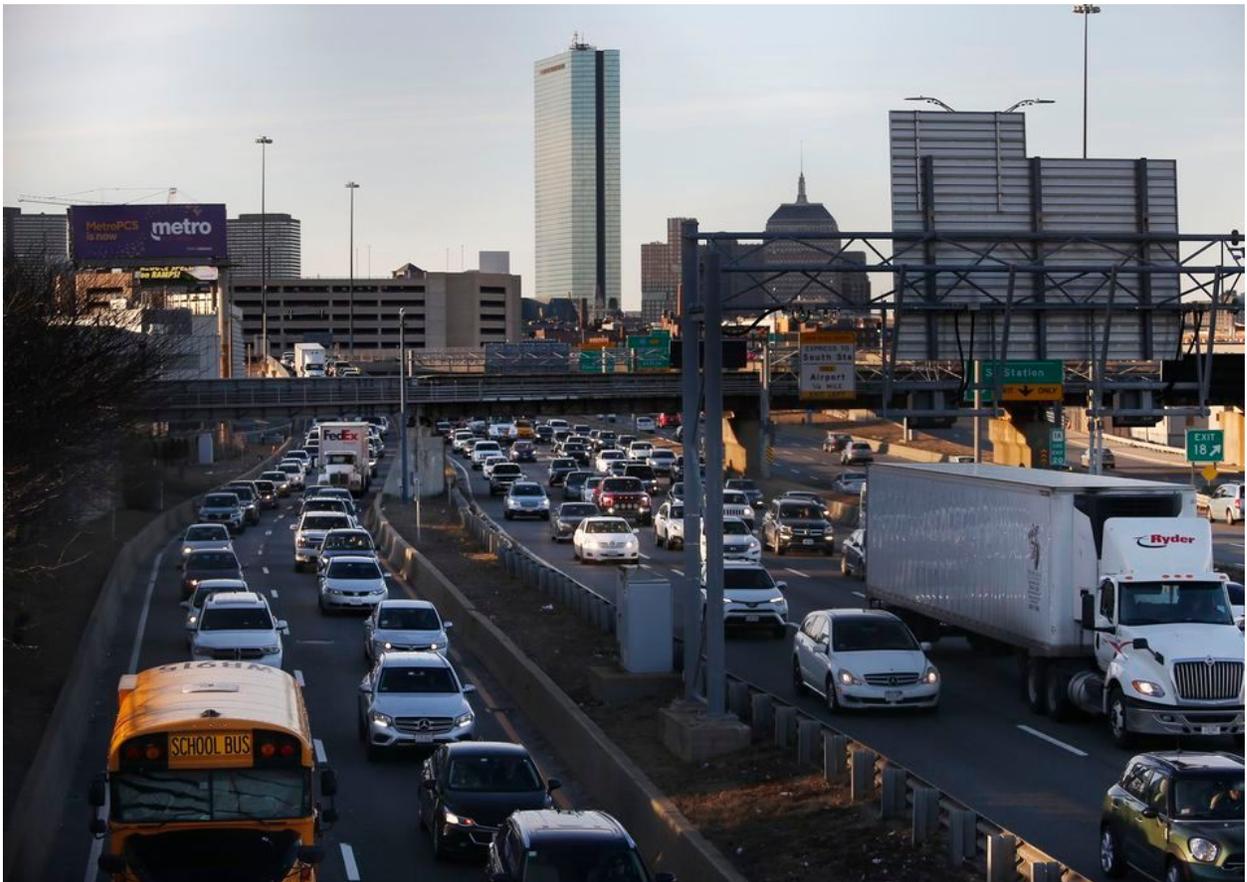


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Beacon Hill leaders don't have a plan yet to tackle transportation crisis

By Matt Stout Globe Staff, May 15, 2019, 7:52 p.m.



Bumper-to-bumper traffic on I-93 is just one of the transportation issues faced daily in the state. (JESSICA RINALDI/GLOBE STAFF)

Expletive-inducing gridlock on I-93. Unreliable MBTA trains. Deteriorating bridges and roadways. The list of transportation problems in Massachusetts is longer than most commutes.

But nearly five months into Beacon Hill's legislative session, none of the state's three budget proposals have included major transportation financing plans. House and Senate leaders have discussed — but have yet to offer — a legislative blueprint. And Governor Charlie Baker has signaled he's unlikely to back raising taxes for transportation priorities.

What many consider a looming transportation crisis is lacking something crucial: a road map from state leaders to address it.

“Most of our leaders are not describing a vision of what transportation should look like and proposing what we need to get there,” said Stacy Thompson, executive director of the transportation advocacy group LivableStreets Alliance. “Who is going to be our champion?”

That lack of a clear consensus persists even though there's resounding agreement among legislative leaders that addressing the state's transportation woes should be a priority.

House Speaker Robert A. DeLeo has urged the business community to propose ideas. Senate President Karen E. Spilka said congestion is people's first complaint in “every meeting.” Baker is in Washington, D.C., this week to [press for more federal infrastructure funds](#).

Details of possible legislation, however, rarely veer from broad terms. DeLeo said Monday he's interested in doing a “wider transportation piece” this legislative session that goes beyond addressing the needs of the MBTA, which itself is now [facing a \\$10 billion price tag](#) to update its aging system. “Everything,” DeLeo said, is on the table.

“I can say close to ditto,” Spilka said of her mind-set, DeLeo standing by her side after an unrelated meeting at the State House.

Asked Monday whether the state needed an omnibus transportation financing bill, Baker indicated his administration is focused on something

else: a transportation bond bill, where projects are funded across several years by borrowing money. Such bond bills, however, often do not rely on generating new revenues, which lawmakers have signalled an interest in pursuing.

The legislation's details are unclear, and Baker said he plans to file it within one to two months to lay out "how we would deal with transportation spending over the course of the next five years."

Taken together, their comments leave a lot of guesswork about what type of wider legislation will emerge and when. Congestion pricing and expanding what roadways are tolled have been floated as ideas to ease traffic. Some lawmakers have favored hiking fees on ride-hailing companies such as Uber or Lyft to generate funds.

Others, like Representative William M. Straus, House chairman of the Committee on Transportation, favor raising the gas tax, which lawmakers did in 2013 under their last major transportation financing bill. That legislation also tied future gas tax increases to inflation, but voters struck down that specific provision the next year.

"In order to get the roads and bridges and the transit system to a state of good repair . . . it's very hard to build that kind of financing without looking at the gas tax," Straus said last week.

But in a sign of the lack of consensus about the issue, DeLeo said that Monday was "the first I've heard" of Straus' comments on a gas tax.

Braintree Mayor Joseph Sullivan, a member of the MassDOT board and a former state representative, said among the lawmakers he's spoken to, there's a "serious focus" on getting a plan in place by the fall.

"I think there are a lot of good ideas. The challenge is how to get them to a refined list of items that everyone can coalesce around," he said.

The lack of clearly defined priorities stands in stark contrast to the State House's other big-picture debates on education and health care.

Baker months ago filed a bill to overhaul the state's education funding formula, and both the House and Senate, while still tinkering with legislation, have filed budget proposals that hint at their priorities for funding the state's schools. Baker, too, has said he is preparing a bill that could [change the state's health care landscape](#) after the House and Senate last session failed to reconcile differing legislations designed to buttress community hospitals and rein in medical spending statewide. (They're expected to take up legislation again this session.)

Yet, amid the debate about infusing the state's public transit systems with new money has been Baker's insistence that the T, for one, already has enough.

Baker has emphasized that the agency's five-year, \$8 billion capital plan is the largest it's ever pursued "by a mile."

But while the Republican has supported new taxes and fees for certain projects, such as funding climate change resiliency projects, Baker has dismissed raising taxes to fund transportation priorities as the answer "at this point in time."

There's also another push to go beyond simply dedicating more cash to solve problems.

"Whenever we get to the financing, we will insist that there will be no blank checks, to give an organization more money and hope they do the right thing with it," said James E. Rooney, president of the Greater Boston Chamber of Commerce, one of the business groups that have been meeting to generate ideas. "This is a very serious, urgent matter. And we can't wait two years to figure out what we're doing now."

Chris Dempsey, director of the advocacy coalition Transportation for Massachusetts, said he's encouraged by comments from Spilka and especially DeLeo, with whom he met two weeks ago, that there will be legislative action. But, he noted, if lawmakers can make some changes this

session — providing a “shot in the arm” — while keeping a larger conversation going, that too could be a meaningful step.

“There are often calls for a comprehensive bill that will fix everything in transportation forever,” Dempsey said. “But there is no silver bullet, and we’re going to need a lot of different steps. Let’s make progress where we can without raising expectations too high that this is going to be the perfect bill that will address everything for once.”