

# Senate still not taking up transportation revenues

Advocates say transit needs exacerbated by pandemic



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5

**BACK IN FEBRUARY**, the Massachusetts House passed a major transportation revenue bill centered on raising the gas tax.

The Senate never took up the bill. Nine months later amid a global pandemic, lawmakers considering this year's annual state budget have shown little interest in raising new transportation revenues, upsetting transit advocates who say with potential major MBTA cuts looming, the pandemic has only increased the urgency of raising new money for public transit.

"I can understand if the Senate feels like the mix of revenue items that the House proposed in March is not the right mix for whatever reason, but we do think that if that's the case, the Senate has a responsibility to present other options or other ideas that they are comfortable with rather than stymying the conversation completely," said Chris Dempsey, director of Transportation for Massachusetts, a coalition leading the push for more transportation revenues.

The House maintains that it already took the transportation revenue vote, and the ball is in the Senate's court. "In order to pass revenue, we need a dance partner, and we don't have one," Revenue chair Mark Cusack, a Braintree Democrat, said during the House budget debate.

Senate Transportation chair Joseph Boncore, a Winthrop Democrat, [said](#) in July that COVID-19 shifted the discussion from transportation needs to "a broader debate on what the state needs as a whole for revenue going forward."

But in rolling out the Senate Ways and Means budget proposal last week, which will be debated beginning Tuesday, Ways and Means Chair Michael Rodrigues said the Senate is not looking to raise taxes. Rodrigues said senators were able to craft a balanced budget using reserves.

"Now is the time to use those reserves and there was no need at this time in our opinion to impose new taxes in the commonwealth," Rodrigues said. "Our eyes are always open, we'll never say never, but we were able to utilize fiscal restraint, utilize federal money, and utilize our own reserves to pass a balanced budget."

Gov. Charlie Baker, a Republican, opposes raising the gas tax and has said he would veto any broad-based tax increases included in the budget.

One potential new transportation revenue raiser that senators will discuss during the budget debate is an amendment by Boncore that would raise fees on ride-hailing companies like Uber and Lyft. Both the House, in their transportation revenue bill, and the governor have proposed raising Uber and Lyft fees. Boncore's proposal is slightly different since rather than increasing the fee by a flat amount, the fee would be a percentage of the ride's cost, with higher fees for single rides and for rides during rush hour.

One other potential revenue-raising vehicle that is still pending in a conference committee is a transportation bond bill. The Senate included in its version authorization for regional ballot initiatives, where city and town voters could temporarily raise taxes to fund a specific transportation project. The question of whether to include any revenue provisions and which ones may be a sticking point in negotiating a final version.

Transportation advocates say they are generally frustrated with a lack of political will, particularly in the Senate, to take up transit-related revenue.

In addition to raising the gas tax and ride-hailing fees, the House bill would have eliminated a sales tax exemption for rental car fleets and raised the minimum tax paid by corporations.

Dempsey said he appreciates that the pandemic creates a difficult climate in which to ask any taxpayer to pay more. But he said the last few months – with massive proposed [service cuts](#) at the MBTA – have made clear that the transportation system needs more money. “Continuing to kick the can on the revenue conversation is not ultimately productive for where we need to be on transportation,” Dempsey said.

MBTA officials say they are making service cuts to align with service levels, since ferries and commuter rail trains are riding largely empty.

Stacy Thompson, executive director of LivableStreets, said the public transit system is chronically underfunded and the pandemic exacerbated its problems. She noted that essential workers traveling to hospitals or grocery stores never stopped using public transit. “To me we are choosing to make a crisis worse by not properly funding transit,” she said.

Thompson said while she hears lawmakers' concerns about whether it is an appropriate time to raise the gas tax, “I've never heard lawmakers say there's a good time to raise taxes.” She noted that lawmakers have repeatedly raised bus and MBTA fares, most recently in 2019.

Thompson said the House put together a package with “a number of solutions so that no one group was overly burdened” and she is “incredibly concerned” the Senate is not taking up meaningful transportation revenue.

Lee Matsueda, executive director of Community Labor United, a union-backed organizing group, said the Legislature and the transit system have a responsibility to look at every option to plug revenue holes before cutting service, which will be hard to bring back.

“While we're in a pattern of waiting to see what the federal government will do, I think there's an opportunity to look at other options and sources that were on the table,” Matsueda said. “It's hard to hear the state Legislature and governor say it's not the time.”

Lizzi Weyant, director of government affairs for the Metropolitan Area Planning Council, called it “short-sighted” to cut MBTA service, when investments in transit projects could be key to an economic recovery. Weyant acknowledged that COVID-19 derailed many transportation-related

conversations. While she believes there remains some appetite to have these conversations in the Legislature, “I feel like we might be starting to look to next session for some of those pieces.”