

THE SALEM NEWS

Column: Transportation bill is a chance to get things right

By Kim Driscoll and Bill Scanlon
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In the coming weeks, six senators and representatives will meet in a conference committee to reconcile the differences between transportation finance legislation that passed in the House and Senate. We urge legislators to carefully consider ways to make the final bill as strong, fair and long-lasting as possible, because there is a lot at stake for the North Shore and for the whole commonwealth.

Transportation investments are not a “wish list.” They are a “must list,” because getting around safely and affordably is absolutely essential.

First, let’s consider the big picture. After years of inaction while our transportation systems have decayed, the Legislature is finally working to correct these problems — and not a moment too soon. Gridlock, potholes, overcrowding and unsafe bridges are some of the most visible issues. Residents of every North Shore community can attest to that.

But just as important are the hidden problems with the way we have financed transportation: For years, the state has used borrowed money to pay for operations and salaries. With interest, that means that taxpayers are paying \$1.76 for every dollar we spend, foisting a huge credit card bill on future generations. Due to significant reform measures, outdated labor practices are on the way out, but they have left behind a climate of distrust that will be with us for a long while. And lastly, payments required for the Big Dig have shortchanged worthy projects all across the state. To be sure, reform is nowhere near complete, and the Legislature is right to demand results.

So we have a long way to go, but the Legislature and the governor have made a good start. By consolidating transportation agencies in 2009, legislating reforms to improve cost efficiency and shed costly practices, and developing a long-term vision, the commonwealth has finally shown a willingness to tackle transportation. And now, reform is inseparable from funding.

Both the governor and the Legislature have made transportation a centerpiece this year, and while there have been disagreements on the scope and details, there is unity in the goals and the necessity.

We know the costs of kicking the can down the road. We only have one chance to get this right. If we do, we will have the 21st-century transportation system we need. If we don’t, we will be facing a similar problem in just a few years, when it will come with an even-heftier price tag.

So let’s talk about the price tag. Many have spoken about the perils of raising taxes to pay for transportation, and no one understands that better than elected local leaders. In an economy still on the brink of recovery, this is not an easy vote.

But there is also a price to pay for doing too little and failing to invest enough money to meet our real needs. There is a price to deferring maintenance: delays and safety. There is a price to borrowing for operations: interest payments on future budgets. There is a price to asking future toll payers and MBTA riders to shoulder too high a cost: We will be left with a transportation system we simply cannot afford. And most of all, there is a price for setting our sights too low: Without adequate funding to fix and modernize our statewide transportation network, we will not attract the private-sector jobs and investment needed to grow our economy, here on the North Shore and throughout the Bay State.

We have two major requests of the transportation bill conference committee: First, make sure that there is enough money to fix our problems, including local roads, and second, make sure that there is enough money that we're not paying twice — in both higher taxes and in higher tolls and fees.

During the floor debate on Saturday, April 13, Sen. Joan Lovely gave an impassioned speech to her fellow senators in support of fairness. We are grateful for her leadership, and for her colleagues' votes to protect toll payers.

We ask the conference committee to keep fairness and local communities in mind as it develops its report. And we ask state leaders to ensure that the final legislation solves this problem for the entire state. The commonwealth is at a crossroads. Let's choose the path to prosperity, which means a solution that is fair, balanced and farsighted.

Kim Driscoll is the mayor of Salem, and Bill Scanlon is the mayor of Beverly.