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Time to seek transit solution is now, not later, says McGee

By Thor Jourgensen
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LYNN — State Sen. Thomas M. McGee said fellow legislators must decide over the next several months to spend taxpayers' money on fixing up the state's transportation network or accept the economic consequences resulting from inaction.

"We need as a Legislature to really do something in this (legislative) session. It's the thing that jump- starts the economy," he said.

McGee, state Senate chairman of the Legislature's transportation committee, and transportation spending advocates told Daily Item reporters and editors Monday the state must spend a minimum \$600 million to \$700 million annually over the next several years to fix up roads, bridges, public transit networks and highways.

How to pay for the fix-up cost is a question legislators cannot answer without help from Massachusetts' business owners and residents.

"The key is being able to make the case," McGee said.

He will talk about transportation spending on Thursday from 8 a.m. to 9 a.m. in Salem State University's Marsh Hall and he outlined Massachusetts' transportation costs recently for Saugus Chamber of Commerce members.

"Many didn't realize the hole the state is in on transportation," he said.

Gov. Deval Patrick in January proposed raising the state income tax and making other tax changes to cover major state expenses, including transportation needs and education. McGee said Patrick's plan is only one step toward defining a "consensus" for how to pay for transportation repairs.

McGee said the state's 21-cent gasoline tax has not kept pace with inflation and said other states have grappled with their transportation challenges by instituting open road tolling to raise money or hiking gas taxes.

"We need to find a fair way to get the dollars that we can build a consensus around in the Legislature," he said.

He said debate in the Legislature over Patrick's plan and transportation spending will unfold over the next six months.

McGee and Marc Draisen, director of the Metropolitan Area Planning Council, warned there is a cost associated with not spending money on transportation improvements. Rebuilding Copeland Circle on Route 1 is “now on the backburner,” McGee said, meaning traffic along the Revere-Saugus-Malden stretch of the highway will remain snarled instead of flowing smoothly between homes and businesses.

He pointed out how Boston’s Central Artery and Third Harbor Tunnel projects revived development on the city’s waterfront, and eased travel between Boston and Logan International Airport.

“This was a success story,” he said.

McGee said projects like the Blue Line rapid transit extension into Lynn could bring a transit stop to the former River Works gear plant site off of the Lynnway, and economic benefits to Lynn and the North Shore.

“People need to realize the regional importance of the Blue Line,” he said.

Draisen said borrowing money to pay for transportation projects costs the state \$1.76 for every dollar spent on improvements. Both men said Massachusetts and other states can’t turn to the federal government for money like the states once did in past decades.

“The reality is — given the current situation in Washington — the likelihood the feds are coming back into this the way they did in the ’50s and ’60s is remote,” Draisen said.