

Commuter Rail Communities Coalition

Coordinated Municipal Advocacy for Transformed Commuter Rail

Statement of the Commuter Rail Communities Coalition on Transportation Priorities and Funding – October 11, 2019

Our residents cannot wait decades for a gradual effort to address the serious maintenance needs now facing our roads and rails, nor the inadequate and unreliable service. Our growing economy demands that we improve and expand our transit system to accommodate our growing population and job base, meet the needs of transit-dependent residents, and address the increasing effects of climate change. By investing in public transit, we return benefits to the regional economy.

The Coalition's mission is to coordinate advocacy for all communities that are served by commuter rail, and to support planning efforts to transform the rail network to be a critical part of a modernized transit system for Massachusetts. The MBTA commuter rail system is an important piece of this system, and one that residents, commuters, and employers rely on every day.

The Coalition seeks to identify concerns related to near-term issues around budgets, service, and operations, identify ideas and best practices related to commuter rail issues and opportunities, and consider new approaches to the delivery of intercity rail services that can help the Commonwealth as well as our region to address important long-term planning and investment decisions, which will advance the strength and future of our MBTA rail system.

We commend our legislative leaders and Governor Baker for pursuing ways to fund the transportation system more fully, and we call upon them to give transportation revenue the urgent attention it deserves. Our Coalition understands that an efficient commuter rail system is only part of creating a 21st century transportation network that requires a holistic approach to transportation policy.

These are some of the priorities of the Coalition:

- We need a regional rail network that ensures equitable access to jobs, and ensures that our growing economy connects the workforce to job centers. A strong Commuter Rail system helps ensure that economic gains are distributed throughout the region.
- We need a rail system that is resilient to climate change, and that supports Massachusetts' climate goals for a reduction in greenhouse gas emissions. We should prioritize those investments that reduce greenhouse gas emissions and encourage more use of public transportation. All transportation projects must modernize our transportation system so that it withstands the effects of climate change, such as more frequent storms, increased flooding, and soaring temperatures. We should electrify our transportation system with renewable energy sources.
- Rail is part of a transportation network. We support innovative first- and last-mile connections to rail, including connections for reverse commuters and intra-corridor trips via partnerships with bicycle share and micro-mobility providers, Regional Transit Authorities, municipal transportation services, water transportation, and Transportation Management Associations.

- Our transportation and housing needs are linked; we support transit-oriented development and believe we should prioritize development and preservation of affordable housing near transit. We encourage public/private development of transportation facilities and new residential units.
- Transportation investment decisions should take the “people-first” approach championed by the Governor’s Commission on the Future of Transportation, prioritizing human mobility over the movement of cars and ensuring that more people use public transit, bike and walk to get around. This is particularly important as we look to bridge first- and last-mile gaps in our transportation system, requiring that we take a multi-modal approach to addressing these challenges.

These efforts will only succeed if significant new financial resources are available at the local and state level, and if municipalities have a say in how transportation dollars are invested. We do not now have enough revenue to meet our statewide transit needs, and the MBTA is underfunded to meet expected demand.

These are some of the funding options that should be considered:

Gas tax and other vehicle fees. A phase-in to higher gas taxes must be under serious consideration. The gas tax in Massachusetts was last raised by 3-cents in 2014. Compared to the other New England states, our gas tax is low, and it has not kept pace with the rising cost of our transportation needs. We should increase the gas tax by at least 15 cents, which would raise roughly \$450 million a year. Our registration and inspection fees are well below the national average, and should also be increased to keep pace with other states, and put on a regular schedule for modest and predictable increases.

Transportation Climate Initiative. Over one third of the Commonwealth’s overall emissions come from the transportation sector, and we must take immediate steps to reduce our transportation-related greenhouse gas emissions. The Transportation Climate Initiative (TCI) is a collaboration of Northeast and Mid-Atlantic states and the District of Columbia, which are working on a regional effort to cap, reduce, and charge a fee for carbon emissions from the combustion of transportation fuels, with proceeds invested in programs that enhance low-carbon transportation options and more resilient transportation infrastructure. Capping emissions at the wholesale level would generate millions of new transportation dollars, while helping Massachusetts to cut emissions and to comply with the goals adopted in the Global Warming Solutions Act.

Increased surcharges for Transportation Network Companies. While Transportation Network Companies (TNCs) like Uber and Lyft provide an important service, they also contribute directly to congestion in our communities by creating new car trips that would have otherwise been taken by transit, biking or walking. This increase in congestion also directly increases greenhouse gas emissions from the transportation sector, moving us in the wrong direction.¹ To curb congestion caused by TNCs, we need to encourage more people to take shared rides. We should increase the TNC fee so that it is more on par with other major metropolitan areas and allow those municipalities with significant MBTA service to levy an additional fee that can be reinvested in

¹ In 2018, TNCs added 0.5 percent to the total carbon emissions across Massachusetts. <https://www.mapc.org/resource-library/the-growing-carbon-footprint-of-ride-hailing-in-massachusetts/>

transit-adjacent infrastructure. A fee structure that gives an advantage to shared trips over single occupancy trips can serve to encourage shared rides.

Massachusetts should empower cities and towns to play a greater role in local transportation investments:

Municipal revenue-raising tools. In most other areas of the country, cities and towns are authorized to raise revenue to invest in local transportation priorities. Many such tools are unavailable in Massachusetts. Regional ballot initiatives, value capture tools, private parking taxation, and special assessment and transportation improvement districts are local options that should be available to cities and towns. While local options will not on their own raise enough money for transformative transportation improvements, local dollars can act as a down payment or match on larger transportation projects, help municipalities to address local needs, and give residents a greater say in addressing local transportation challenges.

Massachusetts should continue to look at other ways to encourage mode shift, moving more people out of their cars and onto transit:

Expanded tolling to other highways. Today, we unfairly toll one highway (the Mass Pike), one bridge (the Tobin), and two tunnels (the Sumner and the Ted Williams), while allowing drivers on all other roads to travel for free. Yet the Commonwealth must maintain all highways equally. Therefore, tolling should be introduced on other limited access highways across the Commonwealth. Massachusetts should work closely with the Federal Highway Administration to gain approval for increased tolling, and should ensure that toll revenue can be spent on a broad list of infrastructure investments, including transit improvements, since transit draws riders off the roads and reduces congestion. We should explore programs that aim to reduce congestion and encourage mode shift on our busiest corridors, including innovative tolling strategies to increase transit use in the same corridors. To avoid placing a disproportionate burden on low-income populations, we should incorporate exemptions for low-income commuters.

The Coalition believes that it is particularly important that we leverage all available avenues to raise revenue and consider our strategic partnership with a variety of quasi-public and private entities:

Commuter Rail operator. Massachusetts should think strategically about developing a stronger partnership with our current or future commuter rail operator. As we begin the next operator procurement, we should consider a long term agreement that incentivizes the operator to fund capital investments in the system to improve performance and service, and increase ridership.

Massport. As the Massachusetts Port Authority's scope and reach continues to expand, we should include them in conversations with MassDOT, municipalities, and other stakeholders, to create an interconnected and complementary program for travel throughout our region. This should include a review of mechanisms for ensuring that Massport participates appropriately in funding those elements of the transportation system that benefit the port and airport.

The Commuter Rail Communities Coalition believes that decision makers should be mindful of these principles and funding priorities in order to benefit the entire commuter rail network and the Commonwealth. Now is the time to address our existing transportation needs, to make our transportation system more resilient to climate change, and to make investments that will prepare our economy to compete far into the future.

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