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OPINION

Baker's climate program could help rural commuters

The Transportation and Climate Initiative could improve small-town transportation systems across Massachusetts.

By Stephen Kulik and Daniel E. Bosley Updated January 2, 2020, 1:05 a.m.



An alliance of Northeast and mid-Atlantic states are working on a pact aimed at lowering carbon emissions from cars, trucks and other means of transportation. A draft version of the agreement, known as the Transportation and Climate Initiative, was released Dec. 17, 2019. BILL SIKES/ASSOCIATED PRESS

Boston receives the lion's share of Massachusetts's public transportation funding. Last year, the state [allocated roughly \\$1 billion](#) to the crumbling MBTA. Meanwhile, in western Massachusetts, some public buses don't run on the weekends, leaving rural and small-town residents to drive nearly everywhere — whether to pick up groceries, visit the doctor, or commute to work.

Fortunately, Governor Charlie Baker is proposing a program that could improve small-town transportation systems across Massachusetts. The Transportation and Climate Initiative, a regional agreement involving 12 states and the District of Columbia, aims to reduce carbon emissions from cars and trucks and improve the ways people move around.

Under the TCI, large corporations that transport gasoline and diesel across state lines will have to buy allowances to emit certain amounts of carbon dioxide. These permits will generate considerable revenue for state governments — revenue that will enable them to fund better bus services, commuter trains, and broadband access for underserved communities.

The funds would make a real difference for small-town residents. The Baker administration estimates the TCI will raise up to \$500 million a year — more than six times the annual budget for bus service provided by the state's 15 Regional Transit Authorities.

RTA service in western Massachusetts is lacking. In Franklin County, buses don't run at all on nights or weekends. On weekdays, some buses run only every two hours. Such routes aren't much help for the high school athlete who needs to get home after practice — or the retail worker who needs to make a Saturday shift in Greenfield.

Commuter rail is also limited. Until last summer, Amtrak only had one train traveling through the Pioneer Valley, making its stop around 3 p.m — hardly commuter-friendly. In August, the Massachusetts Department of Transportation and Amtrak began twice-daily rail service, but it's in a trial period — and only slated to operate through fall 2021.

As a result, most residents from western Massachusetts commuting to Worcester or Boston have to take the Massachusetts Turnpike. More than 10,000 rural residents make the trek to Boston regularly, spending upwards of \$200 each week in gas and tolls. Commuters dream of 90-minute passenger trains to Boston.

That's where the TCI comes in. The program's revenue could fund more frequent buses routes and keep commuter lines operating throughout western Massachusetts. It could also defray the cost of a new commuter rail to Worcester or Boston — and help Pioneer Valley residents tap into Boston's hot job market.

In addition, TCI funds could give residents in the western part of the state more opportunities to work remotely. One in five Franklin County residents lacks a reliable internet connection. The state could use TCI revenues to expand broadband access in rural counties. With faster networks, some residents could skip their commutes altogether and work from home.

State officials could also use the money for tax credits to help consumers purchase electric vehicles. That would allow drivers to eliminate gasoline from their monthly budget and pocket the substantial savings on maintenance that electric cars can deliver.

Many rural and small-town residents support TCI in part because its benefits come at low cost. In a recent survey of nearly 430 rural and small-town Massachusetts voters, more than half said they would pay up to \$10 a month for clean transportation projects like those the TCI would finance.

Baker is leading the fight against climate change and he could help improve the lives of rural and small-town residents at the same time.

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