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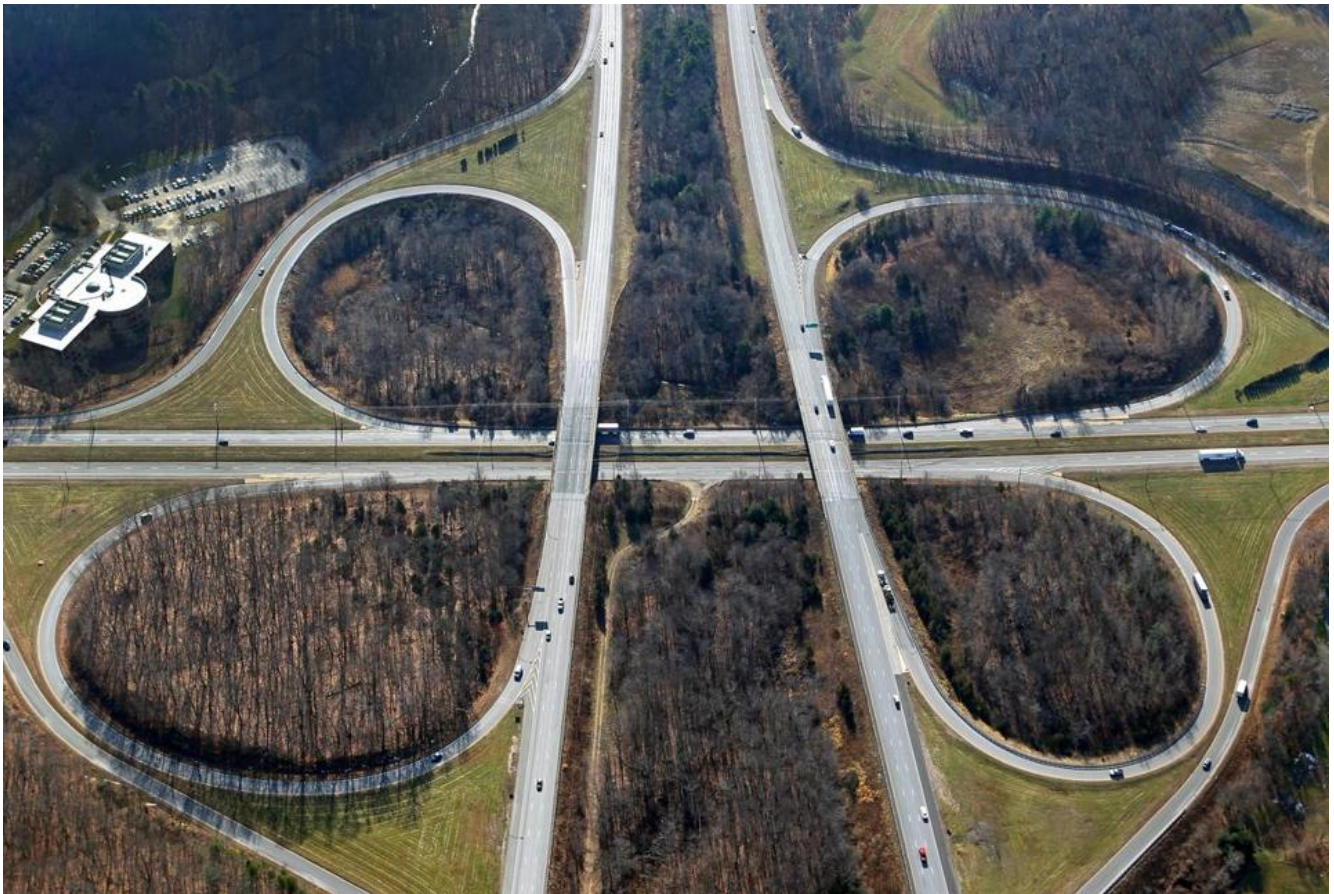


Governor Patrick approves commutation, grants four pardons

Transit officials say repeal could cost \$1b over decade

By Nicole Dungca

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DAVID L. RYAN/GLOBE STAFF

Last year, the Legislature approved an \$800 million bill that included a 3-cent increase in the gas tax to fund repairs to the state's bridges and roads. A key piece of the bill was a provision linking gas tax increases to the Consumer Price Index. That provision was repealed Tuesday.

Transportation officials are lamenting what they say is the loss of a projected \$1 billion in revenue and the opportunity to borrow even more for transportation projects over the next decade after voters repealed gas tax indexing Tuesday, undercutting the state’s landmark transportation funding bill.

While the effects of the repeal will not immediately be apparent, a number of planned transportation projects — from rail expansions to the upkeep of roads and bridges — could be delayed if legislators do not approve future increases in the gas tax, according to state transportation officials.

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But supporters of the repeal said the state has not lost any revenue, and legislators could still vote to increase the gas tax annually as needed.

Last year, the Legislature passed an \$800 million transportation finance bill that included bumping up the gas tax by three cents to 24 cents a gallon. One of the key pieces of the legislation also included linking the gas tax to the Consumer Price Index, which would allow it to increase yearly to keep up with inflation.

On Tuesday, voters passed the repeal by 52 percent.

Richard A. Dimino, the executive director of the non-profit A Better City, said he worries the repeal will undermine the safety of transportation infrastructure across the state. More than half of the Commonwealth’s bridges are structurally deficient or functionally obsolete, according to the Federal Highway Administration.

“This vote is going to delay our ability to get to those bridges and make them safe,” Dimino said. “We may have to shut them down. We may have to reduce lanes.”

Beverly A. Scott, the general manager of the MBTA, said the agency will now need to reevaluate its priorities, but said she did not know if any currently planned projects would be delayed. “There’s obviously going to need to be some re-sorting out because there’s going to be some re-sorting out because there’s going to be money that’s off the table,” Scott said.

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‘When one looks at all of the various initiatives . . . this will have an enormous impact.’

Scott noted that increased T and commuter rail fares would be unlikely to close the funding gap left by the repeal — the transportation finance bill caps fare increases at 5 percent every two years.

“I’m disappointed, but you dust your knees off and you get back in the race,” Scott said.

Question 1 arose in response to the 2013 transportation funding bill.

According to figures from the Massachusetts Taxpayers Foundation, the average driver pays about \$144 a year in gas taxes, and would have seen an approximate \$2.30 increase next year, based on indexing.

Michael J. Widmer, president of the Taxpayers Foundation, who helped campaign against the repeal, said the vote could have serious long-term consequences for transportation funding that was given a boost last year.

“When one looks at all of the various initiatives that this administration and others have put forward over the long-term, this will have an enormous impact on the state’s ability to fund those projects,” he said.

Widmer said he believed some of the biggest transportation projects, such as the South Coast Rail project that would provide commuter rail service from New Bedford and Fall River to Boston, could now be on the chopping block.

Holly Robichaud, a spokeswoman for the pro-repeal campaign, said gas tax indexing was tantamount to taxation without representation.

“I think people want accountability of their legislators, that they were going to abdicate their responsibility of the gas tax,” she said.

“If the money is truly needed, all they have to do is go and ask for it and make their case to the people,” Robichaud said. “They aren’t losing any dollars.”

But opponents of the repeal say history shows the difficulty of regular increases. When the Legislature passed the tax increase in the transportation package last year, it was the first time the tax was increased in more than 20 years.

“I don’t see the Legislature taking this on,” Widmer said. “I think the voters have spoken and the Legislature and the administration now have to deal with that reality.”

Mayor Joseph A. Curtatone of Somerville, who campaigned against the repeal, said Governor-elect Charlie Baker and the Legislature need to identify another funding mechanism to avoid the “real public safety crisis” of deferred maintenance of the state’s bridges and roads.

“Cities and towns are forced to supplement their own money by their own borrowing and putting pressure on their own taxpayers, to get our roadways to a good state of repair,” Curtatone said.

Nicole Dungca can be reached at nicole.dungca@globe.com. Follow her on Twitter [@ndungca](https://twitter.com/ndungca).



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