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## **New timeframe for Canton interchange project under consideration**

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By Matt Murphy, State House News Service

With an average of \$600 million in new financing now in place for transportation over the next five years, the Patrick administration is accelerating plans to reconstruct the Interstate 93 and Interstate 95 interchange in Canton over the protests of advocates who are urging transportation officials to slow the process.

While the administration views the project as a priority critical to the mixed-use Westwood Station development, many of the same groups who fought alongside Gov. Deval Patrick for a massive infusion of state tax dollars into infrastructure and transit improvements are crying foul.

The Boston Regional Metropolitan Planning Organization has scheduled a vote for Thursday morning to decide whether to add the Canton project to the Transportation Improvement Program (TIP) list of projects eligible for federal funding in Massachusetts. Though the state does not plan to use any federal funding for the \$200 million project, it must still be added to the list for federal review because it involves a federal highway.

The proposed amendment to the MPO's long-range transportation plan would push up the funding timeline for the Canton project from 2021 through 2025 to 2016 through 2020.

The Canton interchange was a key component of The Way Forward published in January by Gov. Patrick as an outline of his priority transportation projects and recommendations to fund the transit and highway systems with \$1 billion a year in new revenue.

The House and Senate, over the governor's veto, enacted a bill Wednesday that would impose a \$500 million tax increase and dedicate as much as \$800 million in new spending for transportation by 2018.

Transportation Secretary Richard Davey has said the smaller dollar figure than requested by the administration will force projects to be reprioritized, requiring choices about what can be afforded with the money available.

"People aren't going to like every project we select, but this is a priority of the administration," Davey told the News Service Wednesday, suggesting the Westwood Station development would deliver economic benefits beyond the highway improvements.

The Way Forward had also prioritized projects like the Green Line extension to Medford, South Coast Rail, the I-93 interchange in Woburn, the South Station Expansion and repair of the I-91 viaduct in Springfield.

"We don't have a concern with the project. We have a concern with jumping the gun

before the money is even voted on. It's more of a process issue," said Kristina Egan, of Transportation for Massachusetts.

In a letter to the Boston MPO this week, Egan and others argued that the project would have a negative impact on carbon emissions and do little to advance MassDOT's goal of tripling the number of commuters who walk, bike and use public transit.

Transportation advocates are also concerned that the size of the project will eat up limited financial resources without going through the new project selection criteria process the Legislature ordered MassDOT to develop in the new legislation.

"I do think it might be prudent for the Department of Transportation to first respond to the legislative mandate that speaks to creating a project selection criteria and then measuring the Canton project against other projects before they ask the MPO to vote because it will at least show some good faith," said Rick Dimino, president of A Better City.

Rep. William Galvin, a Canton Democrat, said the interchange project has been in the pipeline for years, and is a time sensitive venture given that Westwood Station developers are expecting to break ground on construction next month. Galvin said there were also public safety benefits in addition to the economic stimulus.

"The interchange is known as Dead Man's Curve for a reason," he said.

Davey said that the timeline of the project had been accelerated because there are smaller pieces of the project MassDOT wants to do "as quick as we can" to facilitate the Westwood Station development, including construction on the Dedham Street ramp and the widening of Dedham Street. The design of this project has also expanded to include the addition of travel lanes on the southbound side of I-95 from Route 128 to Neponset Street.

"I find it curious that folks are concerned about us moving a project that was very pronounced in our Way Forward and is really in phases," Davey said. "Advocates are concerned that it's a highway project and not a transit project. Their concern is a little disingenuous since I didn't hear any of these complaints when the MassDOT board voted last week to move the Green Line project forward."

Egan called the Green Line extension project "a different animal" because it has been on the TIP for years and is mandated by law.

Seth Kaplan, from the Conservation Law Foundation, said advocates are not suggesting that all projects come to a halt while MassDOT develops its new project selection criteria, but said it would be valuable to pause and think about the consequences of moving forward with the Canton project.

"We agree with the governor completely about the level of financial need. That pressing need means it's all the more important what money is coming in is spent in a very smart and targeted way. Every project you choose to fund you're implicitly choosing not to do something else," Kaplan said.

Davey said he disagreed that moving forward with the Canton interchange would preclude other major projects from getting the green light.

"We have a lot of other transit projects in the pipeline. Advocates shouldn't feel like we

sprung this on them. I don't think the suggestion from the Legislature was to stop all projects until we develop that (selection) criteria," Davey said.

Sen. Marc Pacheco, a Taunton Democrat, voted against the transportation bill Wednesday because it did not guarantee that South Coast rail to his district would get funded.

"Obviously that's one of the concerns I had with the bill in general. If your project is not designated you may never see it get done, so I don't blame the powers that be in any part of the state trying to get their projects designated. The problem is the benefits to some will be a negative for other regions," Pacheco said.

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