
Patrick thinks gas tax increase is unlikely

By Kyle Cheney

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Governor Deval Patrick told reporters that his administration has not developed a new financing plan for the state transportation system, but intends to craft one that will probably exclude an increase in the gas tax.

“We don’t have a plan yet,” he said on Thursday. “But we need a plan. We need to engage the general public in that plan and not sort of drop it on people. We need to deal with the fact that although we are making historic investments in our transportation infrastructure . . . there is more that needs to be done.”

Asked whether a gas tax would be part of that plan, Patrick said, “It would surprise me if it were.”

The administration has hinted for months that officials are looking for an opening to revisit new forms of transportation revenue to address needs in the state’s network of roads, rails, bridges, and maritime infrastructure, particularly with the likelihood that federal support will erode in the coming months.

In addition, MBTA officials have argued that they have run out of cost-saving opportunities and will have to revisit fare increases or service cuts without additional opportunities for new funding. It was that same quandary that led lawmakers to begin discussing transportation revenue in 2009, a conversation that resulted in a 25 percent increase in the state sales tax, partly dedicated to support the Massachusetts Turnpike and the MBTA.

After coming around to support an increase in the gas tax, citing the constitutional requirement that the proceeds may be spent only on transportation priorities, Patrick proposed an 11-cent increase in the tax in 2009. Lawmakers quickly shot it down in favor of the sales tax hike. Gas prices have since shot up.

During remarks to the Denver Metro Chamber of Commerce at a downtown Boston event Thursday morning, Patrick recalled his defeat on the gas tax.

“It went down in flames,” he said. “I got my head handed to me. I still think it’s a good idea, but it’s not going anywhere.”

Patrick described the need for “an adult conversation” about transportation revenues to shore up an aging system with multi-billion-dollar maintenance backlogs and crushing debt loads. His remarks echoed similar comments made by Lieutenant Governor Timothy P. Murray in recent weeks.

After the event, Patrick was asked when the “adult conversation” might take place.

“I don’t know, to tell you the truth,” he said. “We’re trying to sort out a couple of other things.”

Patrick’s discussion of transportation revenue dovetails with his recent visit to Washington, in which he huddled with President Obama shortly before Obama called on Congress to reauthorize hundreds of billions of dollars in transportation funding or risk stalling projects around the country and costing thousands of construction jobs. Obama made transportation infrastructure spending part of his recently filed American Jobs Act, contending that spending on infrastructure is a way to quickly

generate jobs.

Advocates for transportation funding in Massachusetts have long considered a menu of options for raising revenue without fare hikes or tolls on commuters. An April report from A Better City identified options that include additional motor fuel taxes, personal property tax on motor vehicles, a fee for vehicle miles traveled by drivers, emission fees, parking taxes, property taxes, the personal income tax, payroll taxes, carbon taxes, development impact fees, and a local option sales tax.

Since the sales tax increase, the Legislature and Patrick have shown little new interest in major tax hikes and face the likelihood that tax collection levels will trigger a \$114 million income tax cut in January.