

PATRICK OUTLINES TRANSPORTATION PLANS, STIRS TALK ABOUT NEW REVENUE SOURCES

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STATE HOUSE, BOSTON, NOV. 12, 2008.....Gov. Deval Patrick on Wednesday asked the public's support for providing new revenues for the state's transportation system, while promising he would take steps immediately to eliminate the Mass. Turnpike Authority, restructuring Big Dig debt and redistributing the agency's roadway oversight to the Mass. Port Authority and the Highway Department.

The proposal calls for higher tolls, unspecified Massport revenues, registry fees, savings, and "a centralized transportation agency." Patrick, whose plan requires legislative approval, said the state would remove Turnpike tolls west of Route 128 while raising fees at the remaining tollbooths and seeking modernized toll collection methods.

"We will need the support of the public, including an openness to new ideas and potential new revenue sources," the governor wrote. Patrick has publicly opposed raising the 21-cent-per-gallon state gas tax.

In an op-ed posted on Boston.com late Wednesday, Patrick made his most detailed statement yet about a long-promised transportation reform that has lagged while the administration has sought smaller-bore reforms, including targeted Turnpike layoffs, civilian flaggers at some construction sites instead of police details, and crackdowns on toll evaders.

Delivered just over a week after Election Day, the proposal will land in a Legislature that has repeatedly pressed Patrick for a detailed transportation reform scheme but been resistant to his requests for targeted new revenues. The Legislature has no plans to meet again formally until January.

At a forum Wednesday night hosted by Our Transportation Future, a coalition of 22 non-profit groups supporting new investments in infrastructure, Sen. Steven Baddour (D-Methuen) threw cold water on the notion, backed by many in attendance, of raising the gas tax to help fill the state's transportation financing gap.

Baddour said none of his constituents had recommended raising the gas tax. "The problem is people don't have faith in government right now. They don't believe that we're spending their money wisely," Baddour said. "They say go further on police details. They say go further on the reforms. They don't talk about raising the gas tax."

The Turnpike Authority's board meets Friday, with a toll increase plan on the agenda.

Patrick did not directly address financing reforms at the Mass. Bay Transportation Authority, struggling with over \$8 billion in debt, but noted that the T and the Pike share nearly \$5 billion worth of Big Dig debt.

He noted the state's \$3 billion bridge repair program, a \$1.5 billion bond passed last year to take on immediate transportation needs, and \$5 billion in transportation capital funds intended to dent what an outside panel has pegged as a funding deficit of up to \$20 billion over the next 20 years. He blamed "[p]revious administrations" for "the sorry legacy we have inherited" for much of the state's problem.

Patrick promised to collapse the state's sprawling transportation bureaucracy, which he said "should be radically simplified" to eliminate duplication. He called for a more easily navigable multi-modal system.

"It will take several years to deliver on this vision," wrote Patrick, who is on vacation this week at his Berkshires vacation home. "We need to take the first steps now, by eliminating the Turnpike Authority, reassigning its responsibilities, and restructuring its debt.

"The Turnpike Authority once served a useful purpose, but Massachusetts no longer needs an independent authority running one toll highway. We will work with the Legislature to allow Massport to absorb the tunnels and roads that provide essential service to Logan Airport and the South Boston Seaport, including the Mass. Pike from Route 128 east to the tunnel."

Patrick said border tolls on I-84 and the New York border would help pay for I-90 maintenance. He said the administration hoped to eradicate all tolls except at those western sites and at the harbor tunnels.

"There is simply no way around an increase in tolls in the short run," he said. "That is an unfortunate fact. But the time has come to stop relying on tolls alone to pay Big Dig debt."

"Getting there will require a concerted effort from all stakeholders," Patrick wrote. "We will need the continued support of the Legislature, and the cooperation of the Turnpike and Massport boards."

Transportation funding has crept up the state's policy agenda in the last few years, occasionally topping the priority list before

sinking as state leaders have backed off rolling out big-ticket reforms.

At Wednesday night's forum, Transportation Secretary, pressed to specify when the administration would entertain new revenues for transportation, said he hadn't heard much about public sentiment concerning the condition of the state's infrastructure or its tolerance of new revenues.

"I haven't heard a lot about that other than the Boston Globe which has editorialized on a regular basis," Cohen said. "I know there are a lot of people out there who believe deeply that we need new resources beyond the prodigious amounts of funding that we have already raised through the bond bills. But I think it's going to be important for all of us to hear from people about what they are willing to tolerate in terms of new resources. That's a dialogue that I expect will probably happen over the next year."

After reviewing Patrick's op-ed Wednesday, Steve Poftak, research director of the right-leaning Pioneer Institute, said, "The devil is always in the details with these things as far as how implementation works, but for broad thematic strokes, I think it's pretty solid."

He said plans for the T remained the "least clear" of Patrick's intentions: "At least they acknowledge what needs to be done, but it's still open-ended what they're going to do. I think the T needs both some reform on the cost side of the equation and obviously they need some debt relief."

At the Wednesday night forum, Transportation Secretary Bernard Cohen emphasized the importance of blending transportation maintenance with new investments aimed at fostering economic growth, while also casting doubt on a gas tax hike, noting the state is seeing a rare decline in vehicle miles traveled and a shift towards fuel efficient and alternative power vehicles.

Cohen said the MBTA's problems would require "new resources" but said he didn't have solutions at the ready and that the administration was taking it "one problem child at a time" in the transportation arena, focusing for now on the turnpike and trying to prevent a potentially costly downgrade in the pike's bond rating.

U.S. Rep. Michael Capuano said issues like fixing the economy and improving health care access would crowd out transportation next year and predicted an extension to expiring transportation funding laws because it's unlikely that a reauthorization bill will be agreed upon in 2009.

Capuano said Democratic control of the White House and Congress does not guarantee swift progress on issues.

"As far as the new administration goes, obviously we don't know," Capuano said. "We are all on the high side of expectations next year. But let's be serious. President-elect Obama started out on election night rightfully so starting to tone everybody down, on back down to earth. We have a major economic problem and the Democratic Party, yes we theoretically control Washington, but for any of you that have ever paid any attention to politics whatsoever, you should know by now that the Democrats are the least cohesive group of people in the history of the universe. We go a thousand different directions with only a hundred people in the room. So for us to be able to all come together and move in one direction is a feat within itself."

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