

The Standard-Times

SUNDAY, FEBRUARY 22, 2015

Transportation funding woes, ideas abound in Massachusetts

By Mike Lawrence
mlawrence@s-t.com



New Bedford Mayor Jon Mitchell said Friday "that lack of commitment is evident here, in the deterioration of the New Bedford-Fairhaven Bridge, the rusting and potholes that we see on the (Interstate) 195 bridges, and the insufficient funding of port projects by the federal government." PETER PEREIRA/Standard-Times file

Transportation funding woes across the country also are creating roadblocks in Massachusetts, lawmakers and industry leaders said last week.

"Our expectation for planning purposes in Massachusetts, whether you're talking rail or roads or bridges, is that the federal government is going to be less and less of a partner," said state Rep. Bill Straus, a Mattapoissett Democrat who is House chairman of the state's joint Transportation Committee.

The problem has been growing like a rush-hour traffic jam.

Inflation-adjusted funding available to Massachusetts from the federal highway trust fund dropped by more than 10 percent between 2008-13, according to Federal Highway Administration data.

Straus said the decline is projected to continue, according to the Capital Investment Plan the administration of former Gov. Deval Patrick issued last year. That plan runs through June 2018 and projects federal funding for transit and rail in Massachusetts to hit more than \$200 million statewide next year, then gradually drop to just more than \$100 million by fiscal year 2018, Straus said.

He said the plan projects federal funding for highways in the state to drop from about \$650 million this year to \$344 million by fiscal year 2018.

Those projections come amid Bay State transportation problems past, such as

continuing debt payments for the Big Dig; present, such as the turmoil surrounding Boston's MBTA system in the aftermath of recent snowstorms; and future, such as how to find money for projects like South Coast Rail amid ever-increasing competition from the state's 351 communities.

Stephen Smith, executive director of the Southeastern Regional Planning and Economic Development District, said Friday that state funding only goes so far.

"Massachusetts has been very good at stepping up to the plate and trying to address the gap ... but it still can't keep up with the enormous needs we have," Smith said. "There are always more projects than there is money to do them."

A study released in October by TRIP, a nonprofit transportation research group based in Washington, D.C., showed a dire need for infrastructure upgrades across SouthCoast.

"We found that 86 percent of major roads in the area are in mediocre condition," Rocky Moretti, TRIP's director of research and policy, said Friday, adding that 11 percent of SouthCoast bridges are structurally deficient.

"What we've not seen over the last decade is any significant boost in federal funding — so we're actually losing ground," he said.

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Mitchell said he found reason for optimism during a visit to D.C. last month for a national mayors' conference.

"There's a great chance for a comprehensive infrastructure bill to come out of Congress in this session," he said.

"Republican members of Congress and President (Barack) Obama were both saying the same thing — it's about time the federal government got back into the business of investing in roads, bridges and port facilities."

U.S. Rep. Bill Keating, D-Mass., said work toward such legislation is progressing. "There will have to be a bill — and I think there's some areas where there will be common ground," Keating said.

U.S. Sen. Elizabeth Warren, who visited SouthCoast communities Friday, said the stakes couldn't be higher for long-term transportation funding.

"This is an issue for how we build a future in this country," Warren said during her visit. "I think that senators and representatives ... are starting to understand that this is part of what we do as a nation. We invest in infrastructure, in roads, in bridges, in water, in sewers — we make those investments so that we have a future."

State Sen. Mark Montigny, D-New Bedford, said the MBTA's recent turmoil could affect momentum for the \$2.2-billion South Coast Rail project that would link the region with Boston's transit system.

"Anybody who thinks the crisis at the T is not going to affect South Coast Rail, or any (transit) expansion ... I think is wrong-headed in this case," he said Friday. Massachusetts voters showed an aversion to more gas tax increases in November, when they rejected a part of a 2013 state transportation funding law that would have linked the law's gas tax increase to inflation.

"That, over the next 10 years, could present an open question of about \$2 billion in transportation spending," Straus said. "We're now working with the (Gov. Charlie) Baker administration — we're going to have to handle that with a mix of solutions." Straus said a portion of statewide sales tax from auto sales, allocated in the 2013 law, has been bringing more money into the transportation trust fund than projected two years ago — about \$100 million to \$150 million a year.

Montigny said he's trying to spur action on a bill he got adopted last year that requires an analysis of MBTA assets — such as naming rights to train stations — for potential sale to private companies, saying millions of dollars are sitting on the table. Straus expressed optimism about the future of South Coast Rail.

"We have more than sufficient state resources to cover South Coast Rail for the near term," he said, saying \$250 million of the project's cost is budgeted for the next four years.

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