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Transportation troubles

By Michael S. Dukakis | August 6, 2005

FOR THOSE of us who ride the T on a regular basis, the news that ridership has gone down for the first time in years is not a revelation.

Service is deteriorating. Stations look shabbier. Graffiti is everywhere. Escalators are invariably out of service. The public address systems in many stations are virtually unintelligible. And since the Romney administration took over, we have been treated to the wholesale spamming of the system. Buses and streetcars are covered with booze and bleach ads. Park Street has been turned into advertising heaven, and we are being submerged there in a welter of Dove Curves ads that cover virtually every square inch of wall space and feature a bevy of young women in their underwear.

In the meantime, you can hardly blame people for being concerned about security. And, in a move that began under the Weld administration and continues, starters and inspectors have been denied the opportunity to add their talent to the T's security forces.

One of the best things William Bratton did as the T's police chief in the 1980s was to provide these senior T workers with law enforcement training and turn them into special unarmed police officers that dramatically expanded security efforts and produced stunning reductions in crime on the T. As Scot Lehigh reported recently, subsequent administrations have stubbornly refused to use this resource to expand transit security and reassure the public. The current corps of starters and inspectors is ready to do the job at no additional cost to the MBTA. In light of our current concerns, T management ought to jump at the chance to enlist them in security efforts.

And one has to wonder about our current transportation priorities, particularly as they relate to the region's public transportation system. Millions of dollars that could extend commuter rail to Hyannis are being spent on a flyover at the Sagamore Bridge that, I predict, will do little or nothing for the summer backups that occur there and at the Bourne Bridge. Some \$230 million dollars are being spent to add a lane to Route 128 between Wellesley and Milton-- a project that seems to have little or no connection to the Commonwealth's professed commitment to "smart growth," and will inevitably make the backup at the Route 3 split even worse.

At least some of that money could provide important and needed improvements in commuter rail service to Worcester, Fitchburg and Lawrence or get us started on the extension of train service to Fall River and New Bedford. And the state's current transportation planners seem determined to push ahead with a half-mile bus tunnel under Boston that will cost nearly a billion dollars while ignoring the enormous benefits that would result from the building of the North-South rail link and ending the absurdity of bringing trains into downtown Boston, turning them around at North and South Stations, and sending them back out again. The rail link project not only would dramatically improve regional rail service. It would take 60,000 cars off the road every day.

Finally, it seems clear that tying the T to a single penny on the sales tax as its sole source of state funding was a serious mistake. Sales tax revenue rises and falls. It is subject to all the vagaries of the economy. It is a poor way to provide the kind of financial base that our public transportation system needs.

Nothing is more important to the Commonwealth's economic future than a first class transportation infrastructure. It is anything but that. Our highways are in the worst shape they have been in decades. Potholes and rusting bridges are the order of the day. The T itself which, until recently, had been the best public transportation system in the country is showing more and more signs of neglect. And if there is one lesson we should have learned a long time ago, the failure to maintain our transportation infrastructure will cost us millions down the road.

It may be too much to ask a governor who clearly has his eyes on other things to find his way to Ashmont Station with the right fare in his pocket. But I don't think we are asking for too much when we insist they get serious about the future of the Commonwealth's infrastructure and what could and should be the best public transportation system in the country.

That means getting our priorities straight; putting first class maintenance at the top of our to do list; using all of the resources we have to guarantee that it is safe and secure; and making it what it should be -- one of the jewels in the Commonwealth's crown.

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