

## TRANSPORTATION WOES COLLIDE AT HEARING ON ADMINISTRATION BOND BILL

By Kyle Cheney  
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STATE HOUSE, JAN. 22, 2008 □..Staring a purported \$19 billion transportation funding gap in the face, anticipating a \$75 million MBTA budget gap, and with the federal government threatening to withhold hundreds of millions in matching funds for new construction, the Patrick administration and lawmakers sparred gently today over the governor's three-year \$4.8 billion transportation spending proposal.

As Transportation Committee members wondered whether a moratorium on new construction, a gas tax hike or a foray into more public-private partnerships would be necessary to make major inroads, Secretary of Transportation Bernard Cohen admitted the governor's bill contained none of the reforms necessary to close the gap.

However, Cohen said the administration is preparing a string of transportation bureaucracy reforms that should be ready before the end of February. These reforms, Cohen added, along with proposals for new revenue - resort casinos included - will materialize later in the year and will help address some of the state's financing concerns.

He reiterated one of the governor's frequent talking points, promising he would "get our house in order" before asking taxpayers or tollpayers for additional revenue.

At a hearing, committee chairmen Rep. Joseph Wagner and Sen. Stephen Baddour promised to quickly shepherd Gov. Deval Patrick's transportation capital bill through committee and onto the House floor, although they said they were displeased that the administration failed to file the bill until November. Without an approved capital plan, federal officials have said they may withhold matching funds for new construction projects

"It has ruffled the feathers of some of us in the legislature that the governor, as the chief executive of the commonwealth, would point fingers about legislative inaction at a time when we are trying to be helpful to you," Wagner told Cohen, adding, "I don't want to beat this horse any deader." Cohen said the governor's remarks were never targeted at the Transportation Committee and that the administration appreciated their decision to fast-track the bond bill.

The potential effect of the federal government's stand has troubled some in the industry.

"It's extremely rare that a state [transportation improvement plan] is rejected," said John Pourbaix, executive director of the Construction Industries of Massachusetts, told to the committee. "In fact, I'm not aware of any."

Without federal funding, state-federal construction projects may not be advertised, which could hamper the industry as the warm-weather construction season approaches, Pourbaix said.

"We're in jeopardy of losing our entire season," he said. Patrick's bond bill proposes \$1.3 billion for state road and bridge repairs, which would leverage \$1.9 billion in federal funds, \$500 million for local road and bridge repairs, \$40 million for regional airport improvements, \$25 million for regional transit authority improvements and \$20 million for municipal "transit-oriented development." The bill would also fund \$700 million for rail projects, including a Green Line extension to Medford, \$100 million for mass transit projects, including the Urban Ring, a Blue Line extension and a South Coast Rail Line extension to Fall River and New Bedford, as well as \$75 million for a Fitchburg Commuter Rail improvement project.

Some lawmakers were incredulous that they found themselves debating new construction while many of the commonwealth's roads and bridges are in disrepair. "It's mind-boggling to the public that we own stuff that we can't fix and yet we're going to go build new stuff," said committee member Rep. John Fernandes. "I don't see an urgency in the administration."

Cohen told the committee, "Structural integrity should be a criteria for how we invest" state resources. Michael Widmer, president of the Massachusetts Taxpayers Foundation, said the governor's bond bill "doesn't really make much in the way of progress," and he pointed to the "desperate condition" of the MBTA.

"We're falling further and further behind," he said. "We're clearly going to need revenues sooner rather than later." One admittedly symbolic way that the state could tighten its belt, Widmer said, would be to reform police details, which currently eat up transportation funds when, some say, the work could be done more cheaply by flagmen.

Widmer also suggested pegging the state gas tax to inflation.

Although Baddour told attendees that he would push for "more controversial" proposals to finance road and bridge repairs, he said the notion of a gas tax was "off the table." He requested that the transportation secretariat analyze the effect of a temporary moratorium on major construction projects unrelated to road and bridge repairs.

"This [bond bill] gives us an opportunity to do things differently," he said.

The moratorium suggestion raised the eyebrows of some local officials who contended that it would hurt the state's ability to receive federal matching grants and put Massachusetts at a competitive disadvantage.

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