

PUSH MADE TO STEER REGISTRY FEES TIED TO BIG DIG TO REGIONAL TRANSPORTATION

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STATE HOUSE, BOSTON, MARCH 2, 2006..As the Massachusetts economy churns along, failing to gain traction, critics of the state of regional transit authorities today described a system in decline and entire regions of the state where residents are having more difficulty getting to and from jobs, classes and medical appointments.

Critics of the current system, testifying before the Legislature's Transportation Committee, described poor service, raised fares, late buses, and in some communities, either no service at all or limited service on nights and weekends. They described depressed elderly individuals isolated in their homes, job holders who can't get to work, and in Worcester, they described a bus system that serves students at 10 colleges and shuts down at 7 pm. Public transit woes are evident from Attleboro to New Bedford, Fall River, Worcester, Northampton and Fitchburg, officials said.

The culprit: years of flat funding from the state combined with soaring fuel, insurance, labor and security costs. And, according to some, a state focus on the MBTA's needs at the expense of other public transportation needs.

"There is life outside the Greater MBTA service area," said Charles MacNeil, president of the Berkshire Regional Transit Authority, which covers 360 square miles, and president of the Massachusetts Association of Regional Transit Authorities. "RTA's have been shortchanged for too long. The unmet need is growing every day."

The shortcomings of the regional bus lines are especially tough on low-income and working class residents.

"The people that ride our bus, not many of them are going to the racquetball club or the country club," said John George Jr., a former state representative who is now president of the Union Street Bus Company, which serves the Southeastern Regional Transit Authority. "This is an important, important issue."

Administrators of the regional authorities are urging the Legislature

to fix an arcane funding structure under which authorities borrow money for operating costs, incurring interest charges, and are then reimbursed by the state. To remedy the situation, they are asking that \$90 million in Registry of Motor Vehicles fees be earmarked for regional transit authorities over the next five years, as those fees, which now pay for the Big Dig, become newly available.

The switch to so-called forward funding for the authorities would roughly double the \$55 million that authorities now receive each year from the state without taking that money away from any other public purpose, said Sen. Stanley Rosenberg (D-Amherst), who said the investment would jumpstart state efforts to boost the economy.

The MBTA receives 20 percent of state sales tax revenues; RTA supporters say they need a funding source too.

Rosenberg said residents of 321 of the state's 351 cities and towns depend on regional transit authority services, usually buses and vans for the elderly and disabled. Authority vehicles provide 25 million person-trips per year, but Rosenberg said the demand, partly due to people moving away from Boston, calls for 50 million person-trips a year.

"The need here is pretty clear," said Rosenberg, who cited the closing of bus routes to industrial parks in Brockton, Cape Ann and Attleboro as running counter to the job-creation rhetoric that permeates Beacon Hill these days.

Surrounded by residents in wheelchairs who implored lawmakers to improve service, Lawrence M. Raymond, director of the City of Worcester's Office on Disabilities, said transportation continues to rank among the top issues of the disabled. "It would seem that all of the RTA's are in desperate need," he said. "We have literally thousands and thousands and thousands of people who rely on public transportation."

As the Baby Boom generation heads into the traditional retirement ages, the demands for better public transportation outside of the Greater Boston area will increase. Many of those Boomers lived and worked in areas close to Boston and have grown accustomed to public transportation options. Judith O'Connor, executive director of the Millbury Council on Aging, told lawmakers people are living longer and healthier and the state needs to recognize that in its transportation

budget.

Committee chairmen Sen. Steven Baddour (D-Methuen) and Joseph Wagner (D-Chicopee) said they understand the problem and are working on a solution. Baddour said he supports the bill, and suggested that if it advances, an amendment earmarking a percentage of the new funding to transportation for the disabled should be entertained. Baddour said the committee members may hold an oversight hearing on transportation issues facing the disabled.