

MARBLEHEAD REPORTER

McGee happy to be talking transportation on Beacon Hill

By William Dowd
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State Sen. Thomas McGee

Marblehead —

When state lawmakers were sworn in on Jan. 3 for the 188th legislative session of the Massachusetts General Court, Sen. Thomas McGee says he was happy to find Senate President Theresa Murray and House Speaker Robert DeLeo discussing on a legislative topic to which he has devoted much of his political career: transportation.

"Over the last year, if not longer, the focus has been on transportation and how it impacts today and our future," said McGee, who serves as the Senate chairman of the Joint Committee on Transportation.

In 2012, the Massachusetts Bay Transportation Authority asked for riders' feedback to help close its projected Fiscal Year 2013 \$185 million deficit, 6,000 riders attended 31 meetings, 5,180 of them sent email and 2,000 spoke at public hearings, according to the authority's website. McGee said the outpouring shows the MBTA's importance in the state's economy.

Based on that feedback, the authority reduced its deficit by \$33 million through efficiency measures, bringing the deficit down to \$159 million. Working under the newly consolidated the Massachusetts Department of Transportation and by looking at operation and administration spending, another \$75 million was cut.

The remaining \$84 million gap was borne by riders, who absorbed a 23-percent increase in fares and service cuts. McGee said the MBTA heeding rider input rather than enacting the "draconian" cuts that had been on the table prevented a huge impact on the state's economy.

"People wouldn't have been able to get to work," said McGee. "Just in the health care field – Longwood Medical area, which employs 50,000 people – 80 percent use public transit to get to work every day."

He added that that's just one piece of the larger role transportation plays in the state's economy.

"Think of how important that is to our economy," said McGee. "Similarly, think of the investments that have made an impact on our economy."

The MBTA provides 1.1 million people with transportation each day, and McGee noted that the current infrastructure needs improvement. Subway cars date to the 1960s, particularly on the Orange and Red lines. Locomotives used on commuter rails are from the 1970s and some bridges are over 100 years old.

"All the infrastructure is in desperate need of attention," said McGee. "That needs to be included in the discussion. What is the state of transportation? Do we realize how important it is to our economy today and tomorrow? We need to have an honest discussion on how do we get there. How are we going to pay for it?"

In the coming year, as he has in years past, McGee said he is looking forward to building continuing to discuss transportation capital investments and improvements.

Gov. Deval Patrick's unveiled a \$13 billion transportation finance plan on Jan. 14, which calls for transportation investments across the board over the next 10 years. But McGee said Patrick's ideas are part of an ongoing discussion.

"It's the governor's plan," said McGee. "The governor is correct in that there needs to be a comprehensive, statewide plan; it can't exclude different regions."

He added, "A substantial amount of that proposal included ongoing issues that are really impacting us statewide in a dire way, whether it be the Massachusetts Transportation Authority, Mass. Highway or regional transit."

Last week, in his annual "State of the State" address, Patrick asked legislators to decrease the sales tax from 6.25 to 4.5 percent and increase the payroll tax from 5.25 to 6.24 percent, a 19 percent increase, which – if accepted by lawmakers - would generate \$2.8 billion in annual revenue.

Of that revenue, Patrick calls for \$1.9 billion to be put into education and transportation, yet many on Beacon Hill are still digesting the governor's ambitious spending plan and tax proposals.

"We in the Legislature need to look at what his proposal is," said McGee, "and there has been a lot of discussion and debate on just how we can address transportation issues and what's best to tackle it."

While the Legislature may not endorse Patrick's plans wholly, McGee said the governor has

certainly sparked a conversation, a discussion he hopes continues and draws in all stakeholders, from members of the public to business leaders.

"We can build a bipartisan consensus to come up with something that's going to help move the Commonwealth forward," said McGee. "Transportation should always be one of the key pieces when we talk about priorities of the legislature – everything depends on it."

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