

Sentinel & Enterprise

Officials at Fitchburg State forum: More cash should be in transit

By Alana Melanson
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FITCHBURG -- Local and state officials agree that investing in public transportation will lead to economic growth in Gateway Cities. How to fund those improvements is something else altogether.

In a forum hosted by MassINC and Transportation for Massachusetts held at Fitchburg State University on Monday, elected officials and transportation, business and education leaders discussed the chronic underfunding of regional transit authorities, or RTAs, the effect on the region, and how revenue might be raised to increase services provided by the Montachusett Regional Transit Authority, or MART.

A report released by MassINC last week made the case for investing in public transportation, arguing that a strong transit system will allow Gateway City residents better access to jobs, thereby increasing labor-force participation. The report also stated that strong transit systems allow people to save money they would spend on gas and other car expenses, freeing that money up to be spent on local goods and services.

According to Ben Forman, MassINC research director and executive director of the Gateway Cities Innovation Institute, Fitchburg families are spending about the same amount of money on transportation as they are on housing -- 23 percent versus 22 percent, respectively. If they were to use public transportation, they would save themselves money, and the money they did spend on regional transportation would stay in the local economy, he said.

RTAs, however, have been receiving less funding in recent years, or at best, level funding, while gas prices rose, according to MART Administrator Mohammed Khan, leading to cuts in service.

State Rep. Stephen DiNatale said the MBTA, which encompasses Fitchburg through the reach of the commuter rail, has seen a 16 percent increase in state support since the fiscal crisis began in 2009, whereas RTAs have faced a 5 percent decrease in the same time frame. RTAs receive only 13 percent of the money sent to the MBTA through the state sales tax, the Fitchburg Democrat said.

With the erosion of support for additional investment and declining RTA service, many have overlooked the role of RTAs in their regional economies and their ability to contribute to future economic growth, DiNatale said.

"We as a Legislature need to hammer home the message that it's not going to improve our economic growth if the MBTA continues to take precedence over our RTAs," DiNatale said.

The state Department of Transportation has called for a 1 percent payroll tax to be instituted to pay for a proposal to invest \$1.5 billion in public transportation over the next 10 years. While it may not pass statewide, Forman suggested that regions may, by ballot initiative, be able to vote in their own levels of taxation suitable to regional needs and transportation aspirations, whether it be a payroll tax or a vehicle tax per miles traveled.

David McKeehan, president of the North Central Massachusetts Chamber of Commerce, agreed with allowing regions to set their own destinies and priorities, rather than a sweeping payroll tax that would leave room for regional inequity.

"Everyone in North Central Massachusetts is paying to retire \$17 billion in debt on the Big Dig, and that takes almost every bit of federal highway dollars that come to the state in order to do that," he said. "We need to be looking at financing mechanisms that are dedicated to solving transportation problems, unlike a general tax that might be dedicated this year or next year. But in three years will it be diverted to whatever the popular cause is of that administration?"

Kristina Egan, director of transportation for Massachusetts, said she supports a regional approach. She said her organization is dedicated to making sure that any new funding secured for transportation is spent wisely and transparently, fairly distributed and used to modernize the system for the benefit of all.

Leominster Mayor Dean Mazarella said funding public transportation is going to be "a hard sell," especially for people who don't use it and prefer cars.

Fitchburg Mayor Lisa Wong said it's important for regional voices to be heard to get funding they need, "not just to maintain operations from year to year, but really for us to get ahead and to continue to attract the type of business we want in this area, and by making sure the residents we serve are truly served, by having employment opportunities and a way to get to their jobs."

Forman, referencing a report from Northeastern University also released last week, said jobs for young people are at a 40-year low in Massachusetts. He added that one in four children in the state lives in a Gateway City. By improving public transportation, younger workers will have more options for early work experience, something that is more critical than ever, Forman said.

He said middle-class families today are less able to provide extra cars to teens, and that will likely be a trend in the future. At the same time, attitudes of public transportation are improving, and many young people don't want to own cars, Forman said.

FSU President Robert Antonucci said he hears from students that if the public transportation were better, they would be able to rely on cars less.

"Sometimes the bus stop is the first stop toward the American Dream," Egan said.