

Legislature revenue plan could derail South Coast Rail

By Ariel Wittenberg
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South Coast Rail proponents are worried the project could be in jeopardy following the announcement Tuesday of a new revenue plan by legislative leaders.

That plan, announced jointly by Senate President Therese Murray and House Speaker Robert DeLeo, would generate roughly \$500 million in annual new revenue to support transportation, providing just one quarter of new funding sought by Gov. Deval Patrick.

The leaders' plan does not include mention of multiple projects for which Patrick has requested funding, including South Coast Rail.

Kristina Egan, executive director of the Transportation 4 Massachusetts advocacy group, said she fears the new plan puts the commuter rail project at risk.

"No one has disputed that we need \$1 billion to be able to move transportation forward, and they gave us less than half a loaf," she said.

Egan said she believes there is some opportunity to "get the rail back" but only if there is a "concentrated advocacy and lobbying effort."

"Legislators need to know that we have a pent-up need and now is the time to take care of those needs," she said. "We won't get another opportunity like this for at least another decade or two."

Sen. Marc Pacheco said the leaders' announcement made him "concerned about the commuter rail project."

"Obviously, it has to be funded," he said. "The project does not happen without the revenue."

He added that the revenue plan falls under the House's purview, not the Senate's.

"If it doesn't specifically mention commuter rail in the regulation by the time it gets to us, then the funding is not guaranteed," he said.

Rep. William M. Straus, D-Mattapoisett, who chairs the House Transportation Committee, said the lower revenue in the leaders' plan does not necessarily rule out South Coast Rail.

He said the revenue plan includes less spending in the long run for funding the MBTA's operating deficit than the governor's proposal and that many other transportation expansions would not be funded in the 10-year bond bill.

"I am comfortable that this allows us to be spending on South Coast Rail as one of the major projects we will be authorizing," Straus said.

New Bedford Mayor Jon Mitchell said he was at first concerned the revenue plan would mean cutting the commuter rail project but that after conferring with Straus he believes "South Coast Rail is still in play."

Representatives from Patrick's office referred questions to the Department of Transportation.

South Coast Rail Project Manager Jean Fox called the project "a work in progress" and said the revenue plan was "the first shot across the bow."

"We understand the concern that this plan raises but the governor is committed to South Coast Rail," she said. "There will be more conversation about this and we will be listening to it."