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A Policy Prospective from the Worcester Regional Chamber of Commerce relating to the organization's involvement in the Massachusetts Business Coalition for Transportation

WORCESTER – In March 2007, the findings of the Massachusetts Transportation Finance Commission were released in their report, “Transportation Finance in Massachusetts: An Unsustainable System.” It stated a “conservatively-estimated funding gap of \$15 billion to \$19 billion over the next 20 years” which only includes maintaining the present system “without enhancements or expansions.”

Since that time, state government and various other organizations have issued myriad reports chronicling the need for investment in modern and efficient transportation infrastructure and operational capacity across the Commonwealth.

Three of the most recent related reports were issued by the Baker-Polito administration.

The first, established by Executive Order 579, created the Commission on the Future of Transportation in January 2018. The 19-member commission chaired by Gov. Charlie Baker’s former Chief of Staff, Steve Kadish, was charged to assess the Commonwealth’s “future transportation needs and challenges” and topics related to transportation such as climate and resiliency, transportation electrification, autonomous and connected vehicles, transit and mobility services, and land use demographics.

In addition, this report outlined the Massachusetts population is expected to grow by 600,000 by 2040 putting an even greater strain on existing transportation infrastructure.

The second report was issued in August by the Massachusetts Department of Transportation. A 157-page document titled “Congestion in the Commonwealth – 2019,” it mandates MassDOT “design and execute a study that provides detailed analysis of practical pathways by which the Commonwealth could reduce motor vehicle congestion and make appropriate recommendations for further study of pilot programs, if warranted”.

Drilling down to Central Mass, this congestion report stated: “On the segment of I-290 westbound through downtown Worcester from I-190 to Rt. 146, travel times increased by approximately 60 percent between 2013 and 2018 during the afternoon peak period, from taking 1.6 times longer than free flow to 2.2 times free flow.”

Further, the study stated: “The stretch of Rt. 9 through Worcester and Shrewsbury is one of the most consistently congested corridors in the state. Although never highly congested on an average day, the Worcester/Shrewsbury segment is congested in both directions for 12 hours per day under average

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conditions, between 7 a.m. and 7 p.m. Under free-flow conditions, this segment of Rt. 9 heading eastbound takes 20.1 minutes to travel, but at 3 p.m. it takes 37.3 minutes.”

Lastly, in 2018 the Massachusetts Bay Transportation Authority established the MBTA Rail Vision Advisory Commission to “identify cost-effective strategies to transform the existing commuter rail system into one that better supports improved mobility and economic competitiveness in Greater Boston.”

Last month, the Financial Management Control Board of the MBTA adopted the Transformation Alternative Six. Advocated for by many on the Rail Vision Advisory Committee, the objective of Alternative Six would convert the commuter rail to a rapid rail system with electrified trains running every 15 to 20 minutes along dense corridors and key stations inclusive of Worcester’s Union Station and the Worcester rail line passing through Framingham to South Station.

Beyond these reports, there have been a series of high-profile infrastructure, equipment, and human operational failures within both the MBTA and MassDOT – much of which is related to decades of chronic underinvestment in both infrastructure and equipment. Additionally, understaffed departments in key areas relating to project design and delivery have contributed to these problems. As a result of these challenges, there has been growing public awareness that the state’s transportation system is in crisis and that significant action must be taken to build a state-of-the-art transportation system which would allow Massachusetts to grow economically and meet the Commonwealth’s environmental goals of reducing greenhouse gas emissions – of which transportation is a major contributor.

To that end, the Massachusetts Business Coalition for Transportation was established to see if it is possible to build a consensus among the state’s business organizations and help guide the state’s elected and appointed leadership in moving Massachusetts closer to a first-class and responsive transportation system statewide.

Co-Chaired by James E. Rooney, president and CEO of the Greater Boston Chamber of Commerce; Wendy Northcross, CEO of the Cape Cod Chamber of Commerce; Timothy P. Murray, president and CEO of the Worcester Regional Chamber of Commerce; and Richard K. Sullivan, president and CEO of the Western Massachusetts Economic Development Corporation. At the conclusion of nearly six months of meetings and work by the more than two dozen business stakeholder organizations, there was near-unanimous consensus among the groups on the need for additional revenue for transportation based on conversations and a survey of participant business organizations.

Given that analysis, the Worcester Regional Chamber of Commerce is supportive of increasing revenue linked to necessary transportation investments in the central Massachusetts region. The following is a list of recommendations aimed at raising revenue dedicated to improving the Commonwealth’s transportation system.

Revenue Structure Recommendations

- **21st Century Roadway pricing taskforce:** This taskforce would study and create a plan for a statewide electronic gantry system that could be used for tolls, congestion, or demand pricing.
 - o Implementation must be done equitably recognizing that Central Mass and MetroWest drivers are currently paying tolls while other parts of the state are not. Therefore, the Worcester Regional Chamber of Commerce would not be supportive of toll increases or pricing increases of any kind on Central Mass or MetroWest drivers until such time as a uniform statewide system is in place.

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- **Gas Tax:** Increasing this fee by a range of 8 to 12¢ over three years with the possibility for a 2¢ diesel split. (Reduce any gas tax increase by the amount included with the Transportation & Climate Initiative implementation currently projected for 2022.)
- **Transportation & Climate Initiative:** This is a collaboration between 13 Northeast and Mid-Atlantic jurisdictions working to reduce carbon emissions in the transportation sector. The framework of the TCI currently being worked on by the governors of the included states would involve a tax on state fuel suppliers who transport fuel across state lines. In reality, these costs will likely be imposed on fuel consumers. Accordingly, whatever TCI tax amount is proposed, the Worcester Regional Chamber of Commerce's position is that any previous gas tax imposed should be reduced by the same amount of the regional TCI tax imposed on Massachusetts drivers.
- **Transportation Network Companies**
 - o Increase base fee to \$1
 - o Consider surcharges for luxury vehicles and/or discounts for shared rides
 - o Funding from TNC dedicated as follows: 10 percent to the municipality where the ride originated, 10 percent to the Commonwealth Transportation fund and 80 percent to MBTA and Regional Transit Authorities.
- **Gov. Baker's Transportation Bond Bill:** The Worcester Regional Chamber of Commerce supports the provisions in the governor's bill which would expand upon management and procurement tools needed for MassDOT and MBTA.

The Worcester Regional Chamber of Commerce strongly believes that any new revenue increases must be linked to regional transportation projects and priorities. These priorities include:

- Timely completion of center high platform of Worcester's Union Station.
- Timely completion of third track study currently underway to be followed by the immediate allocation of funds for engineering and construction.
- Funding to double the amount of MBTA parking at all MBTA stops from Worcester to Framingham.
- Funds to purchase the requisite number of locomotives and coach cars to increase the number of daily roundtrip trains between Worcester and Boston from 20 to 30 roundtrips over the next 10 years. This will also be critical to developing a mitigation plan for the I-90 Allston Viaduct construction impact which is scheduled to begin in 2022.
- Increasing investment to address the Central Massachusetts Planning Commissions Major Infrastructure Project priorities.
- Funding for a three-year pilot program that would allow Worcester Regional Transit Authority riders free access to bus services. Additionally, the Worcester Regional Chamber of Commerce supports implementation of many reforms outlined in the Taskforce on RTA Performance and Funding's "A Vision for the Future of Mass RTA." In addition, the Worcester Regional Research Bureau's report, "The Implications of a Fare-Free WRTA," merits the implementation of a pilot program for fare-free service.
- Expanded funding for the Commonwealth's Industrial Rail Access Program with accountability measures that guarantee bi-annual allocations by these matching grants.

The Worcester Regional Chamber of Commerce believes the time is now for public and private sector leaders to come together to collaborate on real solutions to address the Commonwealth's growing transportation challenges. As outlined in A Better City's report, "Funding Transportation Solutions," peer regions such as New York City, Seattle, Toronto and Los Angeles are investing in their transportation needs to maintain global competitiveness and achieve environmental goals. Massachusetts must do the same.

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On behalf of the Worcester Regional Chamber of Commerce, we would like to acknowledge the leadership of the Greater Boston Chamber of Commerce and, in particular, its president and CEO, Mr. Rooney, relating to the work of the MBCT. Moreover, his staff did an outstanding job in providing data and answering questions throughout this process.

Worcester Regional Chamber of Commerce is the largest Chamber in New England representing 2,200 members from all industries and of all sizes located in a service area of 35 cities and towns and other communities in Central Mass. and beyond. The organization serves the region's business community through public policy advocacy, educational and networking events, and economic development efforts. Worcester's affiliates are Auburn, Blackstone Valley, Central Mass. South, Wachusett Area, and Webster Dudley Oxford. For more information, visit www.worcesterchamber.org.

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