

BOSTON BUSINESS JOURNAL

VIEWPOINT:

Ideas for fixing the MBTA that don't include gas tax won't get off the platform

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The news is filled with descriptions of what the snow and cold have done to our Boston commutes and prescriptions for what to do about it. While a crisis may not be the best time to make major infrastructure decisions, it focuses our attention on our transportation weaknesses and creates hope for real action that can improve the city and region.

Gov. Baker has announced a special panel “to perform an in-depth diagnostic review of the MBTA’s core functions.” Sec. Pollack is right that this report can help by synthesizing previous work. As far as MBTA evaluations go, it is hard to do better than David D’Alessandro’s report, which details with clarity the T’s predicament. Optimally, we will have a vocal, credible T insider to advocate for making the hard choices necessary to improve the T. It is encouraging that the MassDOT Board moved quickly to name Frank DePaola to serve as interim general manager. The board should also move quickly to engage a new general manager so that we can have an agent of change to leverage this winter into a realistic agenda for the future. Bold leadership is in order.

People connect the desire to host the Olympics with the need for an efficient transit system, but the real



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question is, what will elevate us as the world-class city we profess to be through the remainder of this century? It will not be the infrastructure we have today. Fixing T motors and switches, while important, will not make a dent in achieving our long-term goals as a community. Band-Aids, even large ones, will not bring the future we should envision.

Attacking costs is necessary, but will prove difficult and cannot solve

the problem alone. Restructuring the T’s debt is similarly important, but will not adequately free up funds for necessary capital investment. Any tax is the third rail of politics, but we need an enhanced, dedicated infrastructure revenue source.

Voters in November repealed gas tax indexing. One could conclude that the populace has disapproved an increased gas tax. More likely, our citizens exercised a long-standing dissatisfaction with taxes that are not approved by the people or their representatives.

So perhaps there is an opportunity for an increase in the existing gas tax dedicated to transportation as long as our legislators approve it. The business community generally supported upholding indexing, and it seems appropriate to take another look at an increased dedicated gas tax to help move our transportation system forward. A modest increase in the Massachusetts gas tax with revenue going into the Commonwealth Transportation Fund could provide funding to slice away at the T’s capital projects backlog.

Massachusetts has a window of opportunity to create a better and deeper foundation for growth for Greater Boston. We should confidently approach this challenge keeping in mind how we and future generations will move about and settle our region through the remainder of the 21st century.