

Transportation Chief Takes Strategic Approach

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Transportation Secretary Stephanie Pollack thinks of the increasing frustration among Massachusetts commuters in terms of “good days” and “bad days.”

While average commute times have not increased substantially in recent years, Pollack said drivers are encountering more frequent bad days in which a 40-minute commute can turn into a 60-minute ordeal.



“If one day in five takes 60 minutes, you now have an hour commute every day. You plan your life as if it’s an hour and that’s why everybody feels worse,” Pollack told 300 business leaders at the AIM Executive Forum this morning.

The insight is one of many to come from a strategic effort by state officials to understand the underlying transportation challenges facing the commonwealth before identifying solutions. A comprehensive approach to transportation, according to Pollack, covers a daunting range of issues from improving capital planning at the MBTA to highway management to housing development to telecommuting.

“We have laid the foundation for hitting the accelerator and getting these things done,” Pollack told the audience.

She said the two largest challenges facing the transportation system are climate change and traffic congestion.

Massachusetts is seeking to meld the need to reduce greenhouse gas emissions with funding for new transportation initiatives through the regional Transportation and Climate Initiative. TCI is a regional collaboration of 13 Northeast/Mid-Atlantic states working to reduce carbon emissions through a “cap-and-invest” program or other mechanism that establishes a price for transportation emissions.

Pollack noted that transportation accounts for almost half of greenhouse gas emissions in Massachusetts.

“TCI was not proposed to be a revenue source. It was proposed because it is proven mechanism that has worked in electric sector. It is our best bet to make a dent in transportation greenhouse gas emission.”

Traffic congestion in Massachusetts has reached a “tipping point,” according to a report issued in August by the Baker Administration, which has signaled support for solutions ranging from allowing commuters to pay to bypass gridlock to reserving bus lanes on highways. The report offered 10 major conclusions:

1. Congestion is bad because the economy is good.
2. The worst congestion in the Commonwealth occurs in Greater Boston.
3. Congestion can and does occur at various times and locations throughout the Commonwealth.
4. Many roadways are now congested outside of peak periods.
5. Congestion worsened between 2013 and 2018.
6. Simple changes in travel time on an average day do not capture the severity of the problem.
7. Massachusetts has reached a tipping point with respect to congestion.
8. Many commuting corridors have become unreliable, with lengthy trips on bad days.
9. Congestion has worsened to the point where it reduces access to jobs.
10. We should be worried about congestion on local roads, too.

Modernizing the MBTA will play a big part in helping to reduce the number of cars on the roads, Pollack said. Total capital spending at the T will increase to \$9.3 billion between now and 2024, but capital delivery needs to increase to \$1.5 billion annually to fund reliability and modernization.

“When enough people use transit and they have a reliable way to get to work, you can take out some of the peaks and get to reasonable balance of good days and bad days,” Pollack said.

Governor Baker in July filed a transportation bond bill seeking \$18 billion in additional capital authorization to invest in building and modernizing a transportation system that meets the needs of residents, businesses and cities and towns statewide. The authorization would be used to fund existing programs as well as several new initiatives designed to lessen impacts from roadway congestion and ensure reliable travel throughout the Commonwealth.