

Andru Volinsky, Executive Councilor for District Two

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Interim Report on the Preparation of the Ten Year Transportation Plan

November 17, 2017

In December, the Executive Council, with the assistance of the Department of Transportation (“DOT”), will adopt a new Ten Year Transportation Plan (“Plan”) that will then be considered by the Governor and presented to the Legislature in January. The Plan determines our infrastructure improvements for the next ten years. The Council has conducted public hearings in all five districts. The Governor will not hold additional hearings, but the Legislature will and vigilance will be important.

This Interim Report summarizes what issues the Council must decide. Is the state’s progress in maintaining our roads and addressing our red listed bridges sufficient? Should commuter rail be a part of our Plan? Should the Council increase tolls to address funding shortfalls? Should the Council recommend an increase in the fuel tax to the Legislature?

What is the current state of New Hampshire’s infrastructure?

New Hampshire roads and bridges are degrading faster than the current Plan provides for their repair. The DOT tries to carefully plot the likely funding available for ten years and then only includes in the Plan those projects that can be funded within that budget. The goal of this practice is to transform the Plan from a political wish list to something more realistic. Realistically, the approach taken in the last few years has the state falling further and further behind.

While our major roads are generally in fair to good condition, the more secondary a road is, the more likely it is to be in poor or very poor shape. Municipal roads are not addressed in the Plan, but are likely in even worse shape.

New Hampshire has 140 red listed bridges that are in grave need of repair. We add 22 bridges to our red list each year. We are losing ground because the current Plan repairs only 21 of these bridges a year. There are an additional 254 red listed bridges in New Hampshire that are maintained by municipalities.

Commuter trains are not supported by the current Plan and New Hampshire has repeatedly refused to use available federal monies to study commuter rail in the Manchester/Nashua to Boston corridor. New Hampshire residents, however, do commute by rail. Seacoast residents make use of the Amtrak Downeaster that runs between Brunswick, Maine and Boston with stops in Dover, Exeter, and Durham. There were about 195,000

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boardings and alightings at the three New Hampshire stations in FY2016. This represents an 18% increase from the prior year. Residents of the Peterborough area commute to Boston via the Fitchburg line in Massachusetts, but there is not specific data on frequency of use.

The Questions to be Decided

A. Should we apply for rail planning funds?

Federal Transit Administration Boston Urbanized Area (UZA) Formula Funding is available to New Hampshire for the purpose of advancing the design, developing the environmental permits, and completing the financial planning for a potential commuter rail service in the corridor between Manchester/Nashua and Boston. Advancing the design and financial plan development was previously estimated to cost approximately \$4 million and would take almost two years to complete. The study would be paid for entirely with federal money that we likely cannot use for other purposes. Prior Executive Councils have declined to seek and use UZA funds to study commuter rail and prior Legislatures have upheld the refusals. The UZA program does not require a state cash match of these planning grants and accepting the grant does not commit the state to any particular course of action other than the duty to complete the design and assess the financial feasibility. Use of these federal funds for rail planning does not detract from the use of federal funds for bus transport for the elderly or those with disabilities.

I am inclined to vote to include these funds in the Plan and to work with advocates to ensure the money stays in the Plan during the legislative process.

B. Should we implement a modest toll increase to fund new projects and to complete existing projects more quickly?

The DOT, at the request of a few Councilors, has computed the cost and impact of a modest toll increase in New Hampshire's Turnpike System (I-95, Spaulding Turnpike, and the F.E. Everett Turnpike/I-293 and I-93). With the one exception of the Hampton toll, which was increased in 2009, our current toll rates were set by the Executive Council in 2007.

A toll increase will allow the state to complete important projects more quickly and allow the Council to add projects to the Plan. Some of these projects are safety oriented as for example re-working the Everett Turnpike in Manchester, including Exits 6 and 7. Other projects will more quickly contribute to our economy with additional funding. These include completing the I-93 widening between Bow and Concord and the F.E. Everett Turnpike between Nashua and Manchester. With additional funds, the DOT proposes completing the Bow/Concord widening of I-93 by 2028, instead of in 2033. Additional toll monies will permit the DOT to

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undertake the installation of sound walls to protect neighborhoods near our more active highways. All Electronic Tolling and Open Road Tolling could also be implemented sooner and more extensively if toll increases are allowed. A feasibility study for the construction of an Exit 10 on the Spaulding Turnpike in Somersworth could also be advanced with a toll increase.

Of course, the impact of toll increases must be considered. It is of little consolation to the average commuter that New Hampshire's tolls are modest when compared to tolls in other New England states (as is our fuel tax) or that the improvements funded by toll increases will improve our economy generally. I understand this individual concern. To offset the impact of toll increases, the state could increase the discount for commuters who buy their EZ Pass transponders in New Hampshire. Currently, passenger vehicles receive a 30% discount and commercial vehicles a 10% discount through EZ Pass for in-state tolls. The DOT, with Legislative authorization, also has the capacity to implement a commuter discount for those drivers who pay a toll at a minimum frequency each month. Although I am not a fan of having others pay for our responsibilities, it is worth noting that overall, 55% of our tolls are paid by travelers from out of state.

Please let me know your thoughts on possible toll increases in the range of 25 or 50 cents at locations chosen to optimize payment by out of state travelers and minimize the impact on local commuters, particularly those who pay multiple tolls during their daily commutes.

C. Should the state use turnpike funds to purchase a portion of I-93?

In 2009, the state "purchased" a section of I-95 above the Hampton tolls with the effect of making more money available to fund improvements to roads that were not part of the turnpike system. By expanding the turnpike system, turnpike tolls may be used to maintain and repair a broader array of roads. This frees up federal monies for other purposes. The DOT proposes something similar with respect to I-93 in Concord. Currently \$175 million in federal funds is targeted to complete the I-93 widening project in the Concord/Bow area. If we extend the turnpike to allow the state to use toll proceeds to pay for this project, the \$175 million may be committed to other projects in the state. The turnpike toll revenues mentioned above would be necessary to fund this 1.4-mile extension of I-93. The federal funds that would be freed up may be used on projects in the southwestern part of the state, in the north, and to address the repair of red listed bridges that are *not* a part of the turnpike system.

PLEASE LET ME HEAR FROM YOU.

The Executive Council will hold a meeting with the DOT on November 22nd. We'll ask questions and begin to provide direction to the DOT to further update the draft of the Ten Year

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Plan. The Council will vote on a final draft in December. That approved draft will then be reviewed by the Governor and presented to the Legislature. The Governor and the Legislature may each modify the draft the Council submits. If you advocate for positions with the Council, plan to remain watchful and involved through June 2018.