

Mass. wants to dip into funds, delay toll hikes

by GLEN JOHNSON
AP Political Writer

BOSTON - Gov. Deval Patrick reversed course Thursday and asked the board of the Massachusetts Turnpike Authority — which he controls — to delay a pair of toll increases slated to take effect this year.

Patrick, Senate President Therese Murray and House Speaker Robert DeLeo asked the authority in a rare joint statement to instead dip into a \$54 million reserve fund to tide it over until the Legislature can act on a sweeping transportation overhaul.

The delay risks a downgrade in a Pike's bond rating, potentially increasing its interest costs, but Murray pledged to debate her own overhaul legislation next week, and DeLeo said his chamber would debate the matter the following week.

The leaders have yet to agree on whether the state will increase its gasoline tax, though Patrick said there was consensus on the need for "new revenue." Patrick has proposed a 19-cent gas tax hike, generating legislative opposition.

"There are costs and risks associated with that postponement, but we believe that those costs and risks are worth it because of the genuine prospect of a long-term solution," Patrick told reporters.

They said their goal is to enact the resulting bill by July 1. Mary Connaughton, the only Turnpike board member to vote last month against the toll increase, said she was surprised by the change in approach. At the time, the board's chairman, Transportation Secretary James Aloisi, and fellow member Michael Angelini said the increase was needed to preserve the authority's bond rating.

The governor has appointed a majority of the five-member board, and it approved the increase by a 4-1 vote.

"It was the governor's team that supported this massive toll hike, and this is a step in the opposite direction," Connaughton said. "The governor realized that the politics of such an enormous toll hike would not play out well for him."

Under the plan, tolls would have been raised in two stages this month and in July at the Boston Harbor tunnels and the Weston and Allston-Brighton booths near and in Boston.

The board's initial approval of the plan in November prompted a wave of public opposition. It triggered discussion of a gasoline tax increase as an alternative way to raise money for the Turnpike and to spread other transportation costs more evenly among the motoring public.

Patrick ended up proposing a 19-cent increase, along with proposals aimed at streamlining the transportation bureaucracy and stabilizing debt payments at the Turnpike and the Massachusetts Bay Transportation Authority.

The Pike has about \$2.2 billion in debt, most of it after being saddled with repaying the state's share of the \$15 billion Big Dig project, while the T has about \$8 billion in debt from various subway, bus and commuter rail projects.

Lawmakers have balked at Patrick's proposal, which would give the state the nation's highest gasoline tax at 42.5 cents per gallon, and have suggested they will support nothing more than 9 cents per gallon.

Patrick and Boston business leaders in particular have argued that sum will not generate enough revenue to address myriad transportation issues and instead leave drivers with a higher gas tax and higher tolls and commuter fares in the near future.

Separately, the Turnpike announced Thursday that it was extending the bid process for a contract to lease the Pike's 11 service station plazas to April 24. ■

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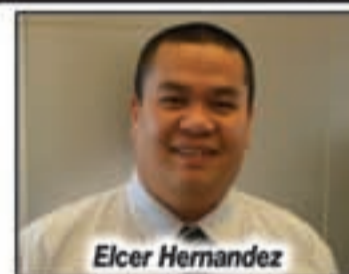
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