

Patrick signs \$3b bill to fix bridges

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By Matt Viser, Globe Staff | August 5, 2008

Governor Deval Patrick signed legislation yesterday to fix up to 300 of the most dilapidated bridges in Massachusetts, a plan he hopes will bring the state's infrastructure up to par after years of neglect.

Standing on the Esplanade with the ailing Longfellow Bridge in the background, Patrick and several of the state's top transportation officials put into law an eight-year, \$3 billion spending plan that was approved last week by the House and Senate.

As if on cue, a Red Line train passed over the bridge, traveling 10 miles per hour because of the bridge's structural problems.

"We have had a long period of neglect, where we have ignored the upkeep and maintenance and investment in our physical infrastructure," Patrick said. "Well that trend, starting today, is over."

Bridges targeted for repairs include the Longfellow Bridge over the Charles River in Boston, the Fore River Bridge in Quincy, the Whittier Bridge in Amesbury, and an Interstate 91 bridge in Holyoke.

Of the state's 5,500 bridges, 543 are considered structurally deficient, according to state officials, but that figure grows each year. If current funding levels were maintained, the state estimates that number would increase to nearly 700 structurally deficient bridges over the next eight years.

Under the current plan, the state will repair 250 to 300 bridges by the end of 2016.

The condition of roads and bridges has been a perennial problem in Massachusetts, which has one of the oldest transportation infrastructures in the nation, with 200 bridges that were built in the 19th century.

In addition, payments for the Big Dig have sucked maintenance and repair money away from repair programs.

Massachusetts' effort to rehabilitate its infrastructure comes at a time when states across the nation are making similar plans following a bridge collapse in Minneapolis last year that killed 13 people and injured more than 100.

Of the 590,000 public bridges nationwide, about 152,000 are classified as functionally obsolete or structurally deficient, according to a report released last week by the American Association of State Highway and Transportation Officials. More than \$140 billion would be needed to fix all of them, the report said.

"This is emblematic in some ways of a challenge we're facing all over the country," Patrick said. "We have been lulled into a false sense that all we have to do in this country is build highway systems and bridges, and then they'll take care of themselves ever after. They don't."

The state plans to pay to fix the bridges by issuing bonds, adding to a state debt burden that is already the highest per capita in the country.

Administration officials and fiscal watchdogs say bonding for the bridge projects is appropriate.

"This is a good first step," said Steve Poftak, research director at the Pioneer Institute, a fiscally conservative think tank that last year released a report, "Our Legacy of Neglect," documenting a lack of funding for transportation infrastructure in Massachusetts. The report used the Longfellow, which connects Boston and Cambridge, as a case study highlighting the danger of delaying repairs.

State Treasurer Timothy P. Cahill, who questioned Patrick's initial proposal for nearly \$4 billion in repairs, said the final version is financially responsible.

"It's still a lot of money, and we don't shy away from that, but we think this is a good piece of legislation," Cahill said.

But it was not lost on attendees at yesterday's press conference that a similar event was staged five years ago when then-governor Mitt Romney stood near the same spot that Patrick did yesterday and announced a \$70 million plan to improve the Longfellow Bridge as part of his "Fix it First" policy to repair infrastructure more quickly.

Now, that bridge is in such poor shape that the federal government ordered the state to ban all large trucks from it and prohibit all traffic from using the left lanes in both directions. Red Line trains traveling over it are limited to 10 miles per hour.

"Don't ask me to be catty," Patrick said, when asked to judge the success of previous bridge-repair plans. "The fact is we're here in the shadow of the Longfellow Bridge, as a symbol of the failed policies of neglect that go back many, many years, beyond Governor Romney."

Since the Legislature completed its formal session last week, it has given Patrick a chance to tout several legislative accomplishments. This week he's traveling across the state for bill-signing ceremonies in which he gives brief remarks before sitting down at a table, putting his autograph inside a binder holding the bill, and handing out pens to those who helped steer its passage.

He spent yesterday morning in Goshen, a small town in Western Massachusetts, signing a bill to expand broadband Internet coverage to 32 communities in the state that currently lack high-speed service.

The legislation provides \$40 million in state bonds to build the infrastructure required to expand Internet services within the next three years.

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