

TRANSPORTATION

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New coalition to push for transportation upgrades

By Chris Barrett, PBN Staff Writer

Rhode Islanders talk a lot about improving the state's transportation network, but reports often end up collecting dust on a shelf, says the recently formed Coalition for Transportation Choices (CTC). The group has launched a campaign to help steer suggestions to completion, saying Rhode Island needs to invest in transportation to stimulate economic development and raise the quality of life.

Co-Chairwoman Sheila Dormody, director of Clean Water Action Rhode Island, said policymakers are already armed with the results of a report commissioned by the city of Providence, the findings of a governor-appointed panel on transportation, a long-term vision produced by the R.I. Public Transit Authority and countless local and regional studies.

"But there's not a clear political will to implement all those plans," Dormody said during a recent interview.

The reports have suggested everything from widening heavily trafficked roads, to expanding bus service and installing a streetcar system in downtown Providence. On the financial side, a blue-ribbon panel established by the governor released a report in December 2008 that said decades of underinvestment in the state's roadways has left deteriorating highways. The panel also said the state's method for funding RIPTA with revenue from gasoline taxes leaves the agency with perennial budget problems.

To raise cash, the report outlined options, including increasing the state gasoline tax and motor vehicle registration fees and implementing a new gross-receipts tax on petroleum products, as well as putting toll booths along Interstate 95. Other ideas have included reducing the number of people that can ride for free on RIPTA buses and passing a new law to limit RIPTA's liability and lower its insurance costs. But the ideas have languished, said CTC Co-Chairman John Flaherty, director of research and communications at Grow Smart Rhode Island. (A 2 cent hike in the state gasoline tax did pass earlier this year, with the money flowing to RIPTA.)

The CTC, a partnership of more than 20 Rhode Island public-advocacy groups, is not yet ready to say which specific proposals, if any, deserve support; a subcommittee is studying the issue. But something, Flaherty said, needs to be done to improve transportation in the state.

"We see this as a competition issue," Flaherty said. "We talk about building a 21st-century economy, and I think more and more people are seeing transportation infrastructure as a critical part of that economy."

A report commissioned by the R.I. Economic Development Corporation and released in November found the state needed to improve transportation, particularly in the southern half of the state, to attract businesses. And a report released last

month by RIPTA says upgrades in its bus service, the installation of a streetcar system in Providence and additional park-and-ride lots could lead to \$9.5 million in economic development and \$36 million in total transportation-cost savings for commuters. It could also spur development along streetcar routes and help bring life to vacant buildings, the report says.

Flaherty points to Portland, Ore., as a city that leveraged its transportation infrastructure to grow its economy. The city government has taken great pains to make Portland pedestrian and bicycle friendly and expand public transportation options. The city launched a streetcar system in July 2001 that the Portland Office of Transportation said since 1997 has spurred \$3.5 billion in investments within two blocks of the streetcar alignment.

Flaherty, the CTC co-chair, said the economic benefits of transportation improvements also extend to the commuter's pocket. He said it costs about \$10,000 per year to own and operate a car. A year's worth of RIPTA bus service using unlimited monthly bus passes would cost \$660 under present rates. Public transportation is also often easier and particularly attractive to younger workers, Flaherty said.

"I think it's a real driver for businesses to know your employees are going to have an easy way to get to and from work," Flaherty said.

But implementing transportation improvements is costly. RIPTA said its suggestions alone would cost \$126.7 million and add \$18.9 million in annual operating costs. Flaherty said it would be "tricky" to persuade lawmakers and the public to pay for improvements, as the state faces ballooning deficits and a troubled economy marked by double-digit unemployment.

That's why Flaherty said the state needs to rethink how it funds transportation. Currently, RIPTA, the only statewide transportation agency, receives its money primarily from the state tax on gasoline, which leads to a paradoxical situation. As people drive less and ride buses more, revenue from the gasoline tax declines and so does RIPTA's revenue stream, just when it needs more money to accommodate additional passengers.

Also vexing, Flaherty said, is an unwillingness to subsidize public transportation. Flaherty said the federal and state governments already spend billions of dollars to help defray the costs of maintaining roadways but officials are reluctant to extend the same commitment to public transportation. The problem is compounded when governments trim money from public transportation due to general budget woes.

"I don't think cutting for cutting's sake is going to get us out of the economic situation," Flaherty said. •