

Massachusetts infrastructure in dangerous state of decay

John Marion
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Earlier this month, Barack Obama announced plans for \$50 billion in infrastructure spending he claimed would go toward construction of new high-speed rail lines, roads and airports across the US, and that would lead to the rehiring of large numbers of construction workers who have lost their jobs in the economic slump.

These proposals, however, bear no relation to a “public works” program but rather are based on tax breaks for big business, with the false claim that these windfalls for corporations will convince firms to hire more workers.

In reality, these meager proposals stand little chance of being passed by Congress. But even if implemented, \$50 billion would be a drop in the bucket compared to the amount needed to repair and maintain the crumbling US infrastructure over the next five years—a figure estimated at \$2.2 trillion by the American Society of Civil Engineers.

As highlighted by the recent gas explosion in San Bruno, California, the decay and neglect of vital infrastructure places the public at dangerous risk. In Massachusetts, as in other states, authorities point to a variety budgetary pressures. But the fundamental cause of the infrastructure crisis is the subordination of the needs and safety of the population to private profit.

While corporations are handed tax breaks, states are relying more and more on regressive taxes on working people to pay for infrastructure maintenance. For example, in Massachusetts a percentage of the state sales tax is now earmarked for the capital budget of the Massachusetts Bay Transportation Authority (MBTA), which runs subway and bus routes in the Greater Boston area.

Massachusetts is experiencing the consequences of decades of deferred maintenance of infrastructure—for roadways, bridges, dams and public transportation, as well as water and natural gas delivery.

About one-third of the state’s 21,000 miles of gas distribution lines are cast iron or bare steel, similar to the pipes at the center of the San Bruno explosion. The cast-iron pipes date from the late 1880s to the 1940s; the bare-steel pipes were laid from the 1930s to the 1960s. Massachusetts authorities claim to have reviewed the system for safety following several natural gas explosions during the winter of 2008-09.

The state’s railways are similarly antiquated. A September 2009 Evaluation Report by Amtrak’s Office of Inspector General found the following infrastructure problems in the railroad’s Northeast Corridor (between Boston and Washington, DC):

- An estimated 30 percent of the railroad’s infrastructure was older than its design service life.
- On average, Amtrak passenger trains are twice as heavy as European passenger trains, and “heavier trains cause more damage to the infrastructure.”
- “Significant portions” of Amtrak’s Northeast Corridor infrastructure date to the late 1800s and early 1900s.
- “Eleven of the thirteen moveable bridges that Amtrak owns were built between 1901 and 1919, and none of them are in a state of good repair.”

This report alone illustrates the lack of seriousness in Obama’s \$50 billion proposal: the Amtrak inspector general estimated that the railroad needs more than \$5 billion just to catch up on deferred maintenance costs. Moreover, the report did not include a study of conditions on the Downeaster line, which carries nearly half a million people between Boston and Portland, Maine, every year.

The MBTA, which runs the greater Boston subway system along with close to 200 bus routes, has chronic service and safety problems caused by decaying infrastructure. A 2009 report found that only \$47.2 million out of a total \$590 million for “critical safety projects” was funded in the MBTA’s fiscal year 2010 budget, and the report’s author went on TV to say that he wouldn’t be comfortable riding through some of the subway tunnels.

The MBTA’s response in the year since the report has been damage control: that is, attempts to shore up its damaged reputation, rather than its decayed infrastructure. It has hired a consultant to conduct a study—essentially nothing more than a delaying tactic—while attempting to quickly fix the subway tunnel problem.

An August 26 *Boston Herald* article reported the following problems on bridges used for MTBA subway and commuter rail trains:

- A 110-year-old drawbridge in the working class city of Gloucester is so decrepit that “a man can literally take his fist

and hit the steel and it will crumble.” Nearly 1,000 commuter rail passengers cross the bridge each workday.

- Earlier in the summer a “slab of concrete” fell from a Green Line MBTA structure in Boston and landed on a car.

- A bridge used by the D branch of the Green Line in Newton “has a deck with ‘advanced to poor concrete deterioration’ and steel columns with ‘heavy rust.’”

Bridge problems in Massachusetts affect not just rail transportation, but also highways and local roads. There are approximately 4,500 bridges under the state’s jurisdiction. The administration of Democratic Governor Deval Patrick, who faces a tough reelection campaign this fall, has committed extra resources to fixing structurally deficient bridges for roads and highways. Despite this push, nearly 500 of the state’s bridges—more than 10 percent—are still considered structurally deficient.

On August 3, a bridge supporting highway I-93 north of Boston was found to have serious enough structural problems that it was shut down during the evening rush hour. The *Boston Globe* reported the next day, “‘It created this nightmare commute,’ said Luisa Paiewonsky, highway administrator for the state Department of Transportation, speaking to reporters...while standing below the faulty I-93 bridge, as light streamed through a wide-open hole. The highway, the main north-south artery through Greater Boston, normally carries 100,000 northbound vehicles every weekday. The vast holes that opened 25 feet apart on consecutive days were not typical spring potholes...but were caused by something far more serious: the decay of concrete and steel attributed to years of postponed maintenance.”

Regarding the statewide infrastructure for delivering drinking water, a May 2007 report by the Massachusetts Infrastructure Investment Coalition listed the following problems:

- 660 miles of vinyl-lined asbestos-cement pipes needing replacement;
- lead pipes, still in use, that were installed as far back as 1850;
- cast iron pipes that were installed as far back as the late 1800s; buildup of rust and sediment inside of these can hamper the functioning of fire hydrants.

The age of pipes is not the only problem affecting the state’s drinking water. On May 1 of this year, a seven-year-old coupling on a 10-foot wide water main failed catastrophically, affecting the drinking water supply for nearly 2,000,000 people in 30 cities and towns in the Greater Boston area. A massive “boil-water order”—stating that tap water shouldn’t be drunk unless first boiled—was announced publicly, as though it were a standard procedure.

According to the Investment Coalition report, the EPA has estimated that \$8.5 billion would be needed over the next 20 years to modernize Massachusetts’s drinking water infrastructure.

The lack of seriousness in Obama’s proposal was also

demonstrated by his aides’ refusal to give any specifics beyond the \$50 billion promised for the first year. The number of jobs likely to be created is also woefully inadequate, demonstrating the fraudulent character of any “public works” effect to be anticipated.

A state government analysis of American Recovery and Reinvestment Act projects in Massachusetts showed that for the quarter ending June 30, 2010, approximately \$907.7 million in stimulus funds were spent to fund the equivalent of 10,415 full-time jobs. At this rate, assuming that the \$50 billion promised by Obama were split evenly across the 50 states, it would pay for less than 3,000 jobs in Massachusetts. There are currently more than 300,000 unemployed workers in the state.

The lack of adequate infrastructure funding in Massachusetts, which has been developing for decades, stems in large part from budgetary pressures placed on cities, towns, and the state by big business and its political representatives.

The sophisticated thievery of modern finance has also played a role. A Massachusetts Department of Transportation *Quarterly Integration Report* this February stated that the September 2009 legislation combining various transportation agencies into one Department of Transportation was passed in part to avoid \$261 million of termination payments on derivatives contracts the agencies had with global financial giant UBS.

For its part, the MBTA was so reliant on interest rate swaps in fiscal year 2009 that nearly eight pages of the notes to its audited financials are devoted to the topic.

During crises, the lack of town resources also means that for-profit companies are left in charge of the cleanup. For example, after a December 2008 ice storm that left hundreds of thousands of Massachusetts residents without power—some for a full two weeks—Unitil Corporation relied only on its own damage assessments in deciding where to send crews.

Similar problems exist at the state level, where the Pipeline Engineering and Safety Division has only six engineers to inspect the facilities and records of gas companies across Massachusetts. These inspectors are responsible for approximately 19,000 miles of water mains, 20 liquefied natural gas (LNG) plants, and 24 propane-air plants.



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