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Regional Effort Required

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The New England region is burdened with some of the oldest transportation infrastructure in the country. Age, accelerated wear and tear from acid rain and road salt, and our harsh climate have all contributed to deterioration throughout our transportation network. The result: an infrastructure that requires ever-increasing expenditures to barely maintain the status quo.

But New England is also fortunate to have an influential congressional delegation. And to have enough common cause among the states to plan intelligent solutions, together.

All six New England states are included among the top 15 having the most structurally deficient and obsolete bridges in the country. Our bridges, highways, rail and transit lines are crumbling under traffic levels far beyond those originally anticipated by their planners and designers. Since 1990, our road traffic increased two to three times faster than our population growth. New England relies heavily on trucks for freight delivery —

with the consequent highway wear and tear — and truck traffic is projected to increase 60 to 100 percent by 2020.

With our failing infrastructure comes continually worsening congestion, plaguing both residents and businesses. In May 2006, then Transportation Secretary Norman Mineta made the following remarks:

"If power blackouts drained billions of dollars from the economy each year, it would be considered a crisis of unacceptable proportion. Yet many accept the fact that Americans squander 3.7 billion hours and 2.3 billion gallons of fuel each year sitting in traffic jams ... even worse, congestion takes a major bite out of our day time that could be spent with families, friends and neighbors."

In New England, transportation-related delays cost some \$1.7 billion annually. With business leaders continually citing the quality of transportation infrastructure — and the ability to move both goods and people — as key factors in their location decisions, New England's commercial areas become less and less competitive every year.

Thus, few would argue that a safe, efficient and properly maintained transportation network is vital to New England's quality of life and economic health. Yet there are significant funding issues. The federal government provides most of the states' highway and transit-related expenditures, but its current funding source is inadequate.

According to the National Surface Transportation Policy and Revenue Study Commission, Congress must invest at least \$225 billion each year for the next 50 years to maintain, upgrade and expand the country's transportation network. Each year that our transportation system further deteriorates, the remedy becomes more costly, and our economic health and quality of life continue to decline.

Ideally, these problems should be addressed regionally, but New England's transportation network is not treated as an integrated system. Delays caused by commuter congestion slow freight deliveries, while increases in freight delivery by trucks slow commuters. It makes little sense to relieve congestion in one area if bottlenecks just appear elsewhere along the route.

The closeness of New England's states, along with shared characteristics, creates an opportunity for important collaboration.

The New England Council recently hosted a forum on regional cooperation, bringing together federal and state transportation officials, regional planning and transit organizations, academic experts and congressmen such as Connecticut's John Larson and Chris Murphy.

New England is fortunate to have House and Senate members on the committees that will draft both the transportation funding legislation and the annual appropriations to pay for it. These strategic roles, coupled with the seniority of many of our region's 34 members of Congress, can be leveraged to measurably improve our transportation infrastructure in coming years — but only if we work together.

By collaborating, the six states can fight for increased funding and integrate the delivery of transportation services throughout New England, resulting in better transportation choices and increased mobility for all stakeholders — businesses, commuters and residents.

The New England Council, the nation's oldest regional business organization.

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