

Opinion Piece – It's not just transit costs that are soaring Submitted to The Boston Globe – September 29, 2011

In his September 22 article, *Tab for transit fixes soaring*, Eric Moskowitz notes that more than \$15 billion is needed to keep the state's aging highway, bridge and transit network sound.

Lately, there has been a tremendous amount of attention paid to the condition of our failing transportation infrastructure. Less attention is paid to our failing drinking water and wastewater infrastructure. Out of sight should not be out of mind. Our nation's crumbling water resource infrastructure puts public and environmental health at risk.

Governor Patrick's Water Infrastructure Finance Commission (WIFC) recently released its Initial Report – *Toward Financial Sustainability*. In it the Commission reported that the US Environmental Protection Agency's most recent Needs Analysis for Massachusetts estimates a funding gap over the next 20 years of \$7.95 billion for wastewater and \$6.79 billion for drinking water infrastructure investments.

Public water resource managers are also faced with mounting costs to comply with environmental regulations that are often based on questionable and outdated science that imposes remedies that are not cost beneficial. We are being forced to chase ever decreasing environmental improvements at ever increasing cost to our ratepayers. Communities are being forced to choose between the need to clear up the backlog of maintenance and repairs and the increasingly stringent regulatory mandates of EPA at a time when we are reeling from the economic downturn that began in 2008. The downturn has required steep cuts in essential basic services and no end is in sight.

On top of the deferred maintenance and regulatory mandates, cities and towns across the country are now wrestling with EPA's latest Stormwater Permits, which focus on pollution from drainage system discharges. Urbanization produces more stormwater and thus impervious areas such as parking lots, buildings, streets and sidewalks all contribute significantly to stormwater runoff. In Massachusetts, it is estimated that the statewide aggregate cost for all communities subject to this permit to comply will exceed \$21 billion over the next 5 years. If we had a spare \$21 billion, should we be spending it on stormwater compliance?

Our Commonwealth and nation face a staggering infrastructure crisis. The WIFC's single recommendation – to identify funding to close the infrastructure gap – should be embraced by every responsible public servant and citizen. The benefits of water infrastructure funding include: (1) protecting the health and safety of our citizens and the environment, (2) improving system efficiency for a more sustainable operation, (3) maintaining assets for the next generation, and (4) supporting economic growth and putting people to work. There is an exorbitant amount of money that needs to be spent on water infrastructure, but with limited funding we need to be sure the money is being spent on the right projects. Let's prioritize what professionals working for our cities and towns know is needed to maintain our existing infrastructure rather than chasing unattainable, questionable and insignificant goals. It is also time that our environmental agencies, MassDEP and the EPA, take a breather and stop looking for new things to regulate. Municipalities already have more than enough to do just to keep basic water infrastructure

functioning. They do not need the mountain of costly burdens to grow ever higher based simply on an insatiable appetite to control and regulate. Addressing the real infrastructure problems will produce far more environmental benefit than will be had chasing the latest, trendiest green cause.

The Massachusetts Coalition for Water Resources Stewardship is an organization of cities and towns and professional groups in Massachusetts that advocate for reasonableness and cost control as we continue making environmental progress. In many cases, we are public officials who are environmental and fiscal stewards for our communities. We have been entrusted to protect the environmental resources of our communities in a fiscally responsible and sustainable manner.

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