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## A ticking clock for cities

By Paul McMorrow

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HEADING NORTH over the Zakim Bridge, the upper deck of Interstate 93 veers left and then disappears into nothingness, a ramp to nowhere hovering over a swath of post-industrial rot below. There's a reason this ghost ramp empties out onto a dirty corner of Charlestown and Somerville. It's the same reason that empty lots line a scar cutting through Roxbury, and the same reason that Jackson Square in Jamaica Plain feels empty and disjointed. Federal transportation policy made it this way.

Federal transportation policy is about to become this autumn's debt ceiling - an arbitrary flash point in a war over the federal government's continued existence. After nearly shutting down Washington, and then driving the country to the brink of defaulting on its financial obligations, and then briefly mothballing the Federal Aviation Administration, Congress's militant anti-tax faction now has transportation in its sights.

Hard-right lawmakers are threatening to let the federal gas tax expire on Sept. 30. In any normal year, Congress would schedule a perfunctory vote, extend the life of a tax that funds highway and mass transit projects across the country, and move on. Clearly, this isn't any normal year.

At worst, lawmakers aligned with the Tea Party could force Washington out of the transportation business entirely; more likely, they'll use the ticking gas tax clock as a tool for extracting deep spending cuts, as they did with the debt ceiling, and the federal budget before it.

In transportation funding, Congress's anti-tax crowd is targeting an especially sensitive section of the federal budget. It goes far deeper than a set of numbers on a spreadsheet, or an abstract debate over the relative merits of a strong federal government. Federal transportation policy shapes, in a profound way, the way Americans connect to their communities and to the economy. When the feds get it right, cities flourish. And when they get it wrong, the consequences can last for decades.

That ramp to nowhere in Charlestown, the mess in Jackson Square, and the gash running through lower Roxbury all speak to bad transportation decisions in Washington. The three are remnants of the Inner Belt and the Southwest Expressway - 1960s-era federal highway projects that were pitched as urban revitalization projects, but which were ultimately scrapped, in the face of a sustained public uprising, as wasteful and destructive.

The Southwest Expressway would have extended Interstate 95 north from Milton, through Hyde Park, Jamaica Plain, and Roxbury; there, it was supposed to connect to the Inner Belt, which was to have plowed through Roxbury to the Fenway, through the middle of Central Square in Cambridge, and over to the Somerville-Charlestown line.

Opponents eventually convinced state and federal leaders that the highways would have choked the life out of Boston, but not before the bulldozers began running through Roxbury and Somerville. To make way for the Inner Belt, Somerville cleared several acres along its eastern edge. The Boston Redevelopment Authority took and demolished scores of homes and businesses from lower Roxbury to Jackson Square. Five decades after they were first cleared, it's still a struggle to redevelop vacant patches that were supposed to have been paved over. The BRA is currently weighing redevelopment proposals for a pair of Inner Belt parcels along Melnea Cass Boulevard. Plans for the reconstruction of Jackson Square are still largely on the drawing board. Without Green Line access, Somerville's Inner Belt neighborhood remains virtually un-developable.

But if the destruction has outlasted the pro-highway policy by decades, so have the benefits that flowed from halting it. A 1973 deal swapped highway money for mass transit funds, and with federal support, a policy of destruction became a policy of construction. The state traded in money earmarked for the Inner Belt and Southwest Expressway, and used the funds on transit projects that helped reinvigorate the region. Neighborhoods receiving

transit improvements boomed. The two failed highways paid for the Red Line's extension from Harvard to Alewife and from Quincy to Braintree, for a fleet of new Orange Line and Blue Line cars, for new commuter rail tracks and cars, and for a new Orange Line through the Southwest Corridor, along the route of the defeated highway.

Now, of course, the transit system that the Inner Belt and Southwest Expressway helped buy is crumbling. It needs a hefty infusion of money just when there's a movement in Congress to pull a large stack of cash out of transportation.

The impact goes far beyond the dollars involved. In urban economies, the effects of federal transportation money are multiplied many times over. You see huge gains where it works, as with the post-1973 transit projects. And where it doesn't, as with areas cleared for the Inner Belt, you see gaping disparities. We're still cleaning up mistakes from 50 years ago. A bid to get the feds out of transportation now is tantamount to putting cities out of business, just to prove a political point.

Paul McMorrow is an associate editor at CommonWealth magazine. His column appears regularly in the Globe.

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