**Senate President Karen E. Spilka Remarks**

***A Better City Board Meeting***

*February 27, 2019*

Good morning. I usually start off talking about how, for the first 10 minutes of any meeting I go to these days, the conversation is all about how we all sat in traffic for two hours, but that might be a little too on the nose for this group.

Thank you for inviting me to speak to you today, and nd thank you for Rick for making that happen.

And thank you to all of you for all you do to make Boston “a better city” and, in the process, to make Massachusetts a better Commonwealth. I appreciate all that you do, especially this week’s report updating the work of the Transportation Finance Commission. Up to date numbers on our financial challenges and options will help us make better policy this session.

I’d like to start out with a story about my district, the MetroWest – and how the challenges and changes we are experiencing there are similar to the challenges and changes we face throughout Massachusetts.

Forty years ago, the communities around my home town of Ashland were not much more than cow pastures, apple orchards and quaint small towns, with some small cities -- that had grown up during the industrial revolution -- trying to cope with the loss of their factories. Back then, it made sense to think of MetroWest as a Boston bedroom community, and invest accordingly in a “hub and spoke” transportation system

Just a quick glance at some statistics, however, show how dramatically this region – and our Commonwealth – have changed. According to the 495/MetroWest Partnership, in 1980, the annual payroll in MetroWest was approximately $2.1 billion. As of a 2018 report, our payroll is at $24 billion – and 1 in every 11 jobs is located in the region.

In fact, many of the state’s most profitable and rapidly growing companies are either headquartered or located in MetroWest, including EMC/Dell, Staples, TJX, Boston Scientific, Fidelity, Bose, Genzyme and Raytheon. At the same time, our 2016 population is estimated to be over 600,000, and many of these residents commute within the MetroWest region, rather than in to Boston.

As a legislator, I had to fight to get this region the resources it needs to both adapt to and take advantage of these changes – including public transportation, infrastructure, and economic development help.

In 2006, I fought for the MetroWest to have the ability to create or join a Regional Transit Authority, resulting in the creation of the MetroWest RTA, which has been a vital resource for our working residents, our seniors, our youth and others. As you know, viable public transportation is so important to both economic activity and quality of life, but we continue to struggle with providing enough reliable public transportation – most notably in and out of Boston – so that commuters feel comfortable leaving their cars at home

As a result, we all spend too much of our time sitting in – and complaining about – traffic. And as a result of all that traffic, we spend a lot of time worrying about our collective impact on the environment.

Before we dive more in to transportation, I’d like to spend a few moments talking about some of the other Senate’s priorities.

I’m proud that the Senate successfully advocated for a record investment in education funding this past year, but we must do more, and so adequately funding our education system will be one of the top priorities of the Senate this session.

As the federal government remains paralyzed, we have both the opportunity and the obligation to lead on many issues.

Increasing health care costs are a stranglehold on budgets everywhere, but we can begin to address this by passing legislation that slows the rise of prescription drug prices and increases transparency for the consumer. When it comes to climate change resiliency, adaptation and mitigation, our potential for leadership is virtually limitless, especially as our proactive and evidenced-based approach stands in stark contrast to the inaction of Washington. Further, we can take on the challenge of creating livable neighborhoods where people can afford to live, work and raise a family by tackling the issue of housing in a thoughtful way. And we can, and should, continue our leadership in the areas of juvenile justice and criminal justice reform, so that we level the playing field and give all of our residents a fair shot.

I would also like us to focus on creating an economic development and tax framework for the 21st century where innovative technology-driven businesses can develop and thrive here, but where we also capture new revenue to continue providing essential services, and fund our vision for our future – including transportation. So far, we have been addressing these new industries on a piecemeal basis, which only serves to breed confusion for business, government, and consumers. We must work together to find a balance that benefits us all, especially as we will be relying on these industries to continue to fuel our economic success.

In the meantime, we can be proud that the Legislature has increased the balance of our Rainy Day Fund to more than $2 billion, which will provide for our resilience as a Commonwealth as we prepare for a future that is both exciting and uncertain.

Perhaps the policy area where the future is the most exciting and uncertain is that of transportation infrastructure and transportation financing, and, again, I want to thank you all for your most recent report on this topic, and all of your hard work in this area. As I have often said lately, I don’t have all the answers when it comes to the pressing issues of transportation, housing and climate change, but I am willing to listen, and I believe that we can commit ourselves to creating a transportation infrastructure that matches our innovation economy.

On that note, I’d like to take this opportunity to set the stage on where I believe we are on transportation right now, and where I’d like to see us go.

From the Transportation Finance Commission report of 2007 until now, we have over a decade of reports on the state of transportation in the Commonwealth. We know what the problems are. We know what the price tag is to fix them – and the fact that it keeps going up the longer we fail to act. We also have a good handle on what many of the proposed fixes are, thanks to this group and others, and it is clear that there are no shortage of technological or policy fixes to choose from

What is less clear to me is the path forward – which meaningful changes can we make in the next two years? The next five years? The next ten years?

As I listen to the discussion surrounding transportation in Massachusetts in 2019, I hear agreement that we must do something, but I don’t hear consensus on what that something should be – or how we get there.

Part of the issue, I believe, is the sheer enormity of the task before us. It’s not like we can stop the flow of people or goods across the state to tinker with our outdated subways, our failing bridges or our fractured regional transit authorities. Keeping the Massachusetts economy moving and fixing our transportation infrastructure at the same time requires us to perform surgery on the patient as its running a marathon – a challenge I’m not sure any doctor would accept

In addition, the amount of money we are talking about, just to maintain a state of good repair, is breathtaking. Add in the ramifications of our choices, not just for the daily lives of our residents, but for the planet, and it is easy to feel paralyzed by all that we need to do

But we need to act.

If our frustration over sitting in traffic for two hours to travel 25 miles doesn’t spur us to action, then the threat to our state’s economic vitality should. If our envy of other country’s rapid rail systems don’t spur us to action, then the idea of passing on a legacy of severe weather, rising seas and resource scarcity to our children and grandchildren should.

The good news about modernizing our statewide transportation infrastructure is that there are lots of natural constituencies to tap into to help move the needle forward…and the bad news is that there are lots of natural constituencies that will all want something a little different from the final product

In my new role as Senate President, I am looking forward to being able to take the 30,000 foot view on transportation. Right now, I plan to focus less on individual policy proposals and more on bringing the right people to the table to get things done. As I’ve said before –I don’t think we can afford to take any idea off the table right now when it comes to transportation – either in terms of fixes, or in terms of how we pay for it.

Chair Boncore and I have already touched base on this issue and he is anxious to get to work and start holding hearings. We will be working together to create an informal transportation working group, which will take an ‘interdisciplinary’ approach, and pull in members of my leadership team and chairs of other relevant committees.

As we get started on this session, there are some principles which I believe the Senate should be looking for in a proposal that we either put forward or ultimately agree to, and they are:

***Regional Equity.*** Each region of the Commonwealth has unique assets and unique needs, and no one knows how to meet those needs and capitalize on those assets better than the residents and local representatives of those regions. I believe in listening to the regions to understand what they need to succeed.

To that end, I believe that if tolls are so great for some areas of the state, they should also be great for many other of the areas of the Commonwealth. I joke about that, but as you are likely aw are, toll equity has been important to me for a very long time. Regional equity is also the reason the Senate has passed legislation allowing for communities to finance transportation through regional ballot initiatives, and why Regional Transit Authorities will always be a priority of mine.

***Access and Affordability.*** I’m referring to access in every sense – access for those communities that are underserved currently, including some of the economically disadvantaged neighborhoods in Boston and other cities, as well access to reliable public buses in our more rural areas. We also must ensure that our updated transportation options are fully accessible for those with disabilities, low incomes, and others. And – to ensure not just physical access but actual access – we must make sure that our public transportation options throughout the state are affordable for residents

***Sustainability.*** No one knows better than a legislator how hard it is to predict the future, but when we are designing our 21st century transportation system, we must be mindful of how we make it viable for many years to come, and that we design and build it in a way that can be paid for with the investments we make now, so that we are not adding an even further burden on future generations in the form of passed-down debt. We must also find ways to create it that allows it to be flexible over time, and adapt to the challenges of climate change that are certainly to come.

***Connectivity.*** The days of “hub and spoke” planning that I spoke of earlier are over, for better or worse. Instead, our transportation infrastructure has the potential to be the network that threads our communities together in an interconnected web. Right now, it is cars and roads that serve as that network - because disconnected and disjointed transit means Boston riders currently face challenges in getting from North Station to South Station, from the airport to Kendall square, or from South Station to the Seaport in their own city.

So if we want residents to get fully on board with more public transportation, whether it be trains or buses, we must assure them that they will not lose that connectivity, and our statewide goal should be a regional rail system that connects regions from east to west, from north to south and finally stretches to the south coast.

***Innovation.*** We are probably one of the best states in the country to capitalize on new technology and new policy approaches – since so much innovation originates right here. From electric vehicles to congestion tolling to mobile apps that make traveling by public transport easier, we should have everything we need right here to create the transportation system we need.

This innovation must address what we have ignored for too long – that almost 40 percent of all emissions in 2015 came from transportation infrastructure and vehicles in Massachusetts. Greening the grid and plugging both public transit and previously carbon emitting passenger vehicles into it seems like an obvious place to start.

We will also need to call on all of our ingenuity to tell the story of our transportation future, so that we bring residents along with us in the face of perceived increased costs or inconvenience.

***Responsiveness.*** One of the reasons that ride sharing services like Uber and Lyft have taken off while we still struggle with train and bus ridership is because consumers love the feeling of responsiveness they get from those services. Because of their focus on technology, Uber and Lyft have the ability to meet consumers where they are, while our current systems of public transportation require consumers to stand in the snow and rain for who knows how long to maybe get a seat. When the COST of public transportation is believed to be too high anyway, it’s easy to see how people make their choices.

And while modes of public transportation may never be able to fully compete with the flexibility of cars, taxis, and ride sharing services, we can certainly make public transportation more responsive to people’s needs, through increased reliability, areas served, and more competitive pricing. We also need to focus on the basics, like ensuring there is enough parking at commuter rail stations, so that we don’t experience the knock-on effects of increased traffic and increased emissions from a driver who really wanted to be a public transit rider in the first place

Achievability. Finally, It doesn’t matter how many reports or bills we all write, how many experts we consult, or how many great ideas come out of our universities if we can’t find a way to make a 21st century transportation infrastructure a reality – and find a way to pay for it.

We are in a unique political moment right now, in which everyone recognizes how important it is to make some real meaningful headway in solving our transportation issues, and I personally think it would be a mistake to waste that moment on incremental changes and small ideas. I know you’ve heard me say it before, but now is the time to be bold. That being said, we still need to find ways to reach political consensus on our bold ideas, and that consensus building must begin now.

And so I invite all of you to work with us in this coming session, and I look forward to working with you. I believe that the best ideas come from collaboration, and the future of our transportation system deserves nothing but our very best ideas. I know that many of you have been working very hard to figure out transportation solutions, and I would like to have your voices at the table as we work to find practical and implementable ideas – if you are willing.

I look forward to answering your questions, and thank you again for having me here today.