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## Lt. Gov. transportation talks focus on commuter rail, Rte. 9

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Lt. Gov. Timothy Murray addresses various regional transportation issues at the MetroWest Growth Management Committee's Fall Policy Conference at the Morse Institute Library in Natick on Nov. 5. (Matt Rocheleau for The Boston Globe)

By Matt Rocheleau, Globe Correspondent

As the state works to close a \$100-million agreement to purchase control of the Boston to Worcester commuter line – a process that will take several years to complete – state officials hope to take steps in the meantime to improve the railway's less-than-reliable service, Lt. Gov. Timothy Murray said yesterday following a conference in Natick on regional transportation issues.

At the MetroWest Growth Management Committee's Fall Policy Conference held at the Morse Institute Library in Natick Wednesday afternoon, Murray also addressed regional transportation issues including the recently announced \$12.5 million in stimulus funds set aside to upgrade a stretch of Route 9 that runs through Framingham and Natick.

When asked after the meeting, Murray declined to say exactly how many years it will be before the state will gain control of the commuter and freight line currently owned by CSX Transportation, Inc, which has been sharply criticized in recent years by state and local officials as well as commuters for poor service.

Terms of the agreement between the state and CSX were reached tentatively last fall and, once issues surrounding liability - the major sticking point in negotiations - were settled, the deal was finalized in September.

Murray said the timeline to close the deal will likely take several years, but "the sooner the better."

When the tentative deal was reached in fall 2008, it was reported that it could take until 2012 to close the deal. Once the state has control of the tracks, Murray said officials would look to increase the frequency and number of trains on the line, explore adding "express trains" and increase the speed of the

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on the trains, explore adding express trains and increase the speed of the trains.

In the meantime, he said state officials are talking with CSX and hoping to soon add a dedicated maintenance crew, among other infrastructural improvements to help the railway run more smoothly.

State transportation officials and CSX have agreed to complete work by summer 2012 to raise certain bridges and lower certain tracks along the line from Westborough to points west. Such improvements would allow trains entering the state that are double-stacked to no longer have to stop and rearrange their freight to fit under some bridges in Massachusetts which have a lower clearance than surrounding states.

In October 2008, five new trains were added to the Framingham/Worcester line, and in July, CSX also pledged to install new switches and take other steps to avoid lengthy delays like the one that stranded riders on the Framingham/Worcester and Needham lines for more than two hours in June.

The Worcester/Framingham Line is among the MBTA's busiest commuter services, carrying 4,000 to 5,000 passengers roundtrip every weekday and has also long been plagued by delays.

In February 2008, the MBTA created new timetables that added as much as 12 minutes to the scheduled time for trips between Worcester and Boston. Since the schedule change, on-time performance - which was as low as 50 percent in the fall of 2007 - has increased to around 90 percent.

Murray called Rte. 9 "the backbone" in terms of transportation for the MetroWest area. The proposed improvements to east-west roadway were announced last week along with 32 other highway projects statewide estimated together at around \$166 million. The projects would be funded through the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act and await final approval.

The Rte. 9 work would include milling and resurfacing, wheelchair ramp improvements, new sidewalks and sidewalk repairs, signal upgrades, new reflective lines and recessed roadway reflectors for safety, and the possibility of upgrades to drainage, said Murray as acting Governor while Gov. Patrick spent the day in the nation's capital lobbying for additional stimulus money.

Murray also stressed the importance of local communities working together, especially in a slumping economy. He said in Massachusetts especially, towns and cities are proud of their own identities, which can be beneficial, but can also pose challenges to regionalization efforts.

"That sense of character and community and city and town community can prevent us from working over city and town lines," he said.

Officials and residents from local towns including Framingham, Ashland and Natick expressed concerns - mostly regarding the commuter rail - to Murray during a question and answer session at the conference's conclusion.

Framingham Board of Selectmen Chair Ginger Esty asked that the state provide towns with more Chapter 90 local funding so they can afford to do routine maintenance on the tracks. She said she hopes the new CSX deal will also include moving rail yards out of Framingham and sinking the tracks below ground.

A Natick resident said he believed the deal could lessen the amount of freight transported on the railway and increase the number of freight trucks that will have to use local roadways, including the Mass. Pike, as an alternative. Murray said however that the plan would increase efficiency on the railway and likely decrease the amount of freight trucks on the roads.

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