



THIS STORY HAS BEEN FORMATTED FOR EASY PRINTING

Commuter crashes eyed as a cash cow Hub weighs fee for driver at fault

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By Matt Viser, Globe Staff | August 1, 2006

Looking for new ways to collect from some of the half-million suburbanites who drive into Boston each day, a city councilor is proposing a surcharge on those who cause accidents.

An automatic charge of several hundred dollars levied on out-of-town motorists who are deemed by police to be at fault in accidents would defray costs of emergency services, under a proposal by Councilor Robert Consalvo to be submitted to the council today.

With Boston property taxes up 58 percent since 2002 and the city's cost of doing business rising, the proposal is finding support from people who say money should be raised from those who use city services but don't pay for them. Consalvo said his plan could bring additional revenues of more than \$1 million annually.

"We've got to start thinking outside the box," he said. "Why should the city have to pay for someone from the suburbs who gets in an accident? Our police and fire are putting in hundreds of hours, and as a result taxes for residents in the city of Boston are going up."

Tapping the wallets of outsiders has recently been a desire in Boston, where officials see their options for raising revenue as severely restricted. Mayor Thomas M. Menino has looked for ways to draw funds from services, such as restaurant meals, that are heavily used by visitors. Last year, Councilor Paul J. Scapicchio proposed charging suburban motorists a commuting tax to enter the city. He is no longer on the council, and the measure was never enacted, but the plan won praise from Boston drivers who said they would be happy to share costs with those who share the city's traffic-clogged streets.

Likewise, Consalvo's proposal is being greeted with enthusiasm from city residents, fellow councilors, and Menino, who praised it as innovative.

Menino added that he is "always interested in any legislation that could bring additional revenue to the city."

But commuters among the downtown office-worker crowd had other things to say yesterday, calling it "odd," "inequitable," and "a scam." Some merely laughed.

"I think it's pretty ludicrous," said Joe Zabriskie, 43, who commutes to Boston each day from Ipswich.

"It strikes me as a little much," said David Zipps, 40, of Brookline, who commutes every day to Government Center. "The city should be making it easier for people to get downtown and work, not making it harder."

Under Consalvo's proposal, nonresident drivers would be fined only in accidents in which police reports are filed and the nonresident is determined to be at fault.

Last year, police reports were filed for 10,786 motor vehicle accidents. Consalvo estimates that at least half involved nonresidents, but statistics were not immediately available.

Fees charged to motorists who cause accidents have become increasingly common across the United States as communities look for ways to maintain services. About 30 communities have adopted such policies, and more are looking into it.

The fees communities charge vary, often depending on the severity of the accident or the kind of emergency services required, said Regina Moore, president of Cost Recovery Corp., an Ohio-based company that administers fee programs in some cities, taking a 10 percent cut.

Billing has been a problem in some places. Though some communities send bills directly to motorists, others have preferred to bill the responsible driver's insurance company. Some insurance companies have resisted or simply refused to pay the fees, arguing that their clients perceive the charge as an increase in rates.

Some critics, including the insurance industry, have also argued that charging for police, fire, and emergency medical services could undercut a system that has worked well for many years.

"It raises fundamental questions about what is the role of government," said David Snyder, vice president of the American Insurance Association. "In this country we have a pretty good collaboration with mutual aid. This could balkanize emergency services, putting one set of emergency services against another, one set of taxpayers against another."

It's unclear whether Boston would need state approval in order to implement the policy. In the past, the Legislature has denied requests from city officials to impose a so-called meals tax that would allow about 1 percent of the total spent at restaurants to go into city coffers.

Consalvo said that many details of his proposed fee system have not been worked out.

He said he hopes to hold a public hearing next month to get views from police, city lawyers, and the state's Division of Insurance.

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