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Letter: Good transportation benefits our health

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We know that transportation is about access to jobs and housing, about economic competitiveness, about convenience and quality of life, and about our environment.

Transportation is also about our health. Our transportation system – the roadways, bridges, regional transit systems, the MBTA, sidewalks, and bike lanes across the Commonwealth – can have a profound impact on the health of all citizens.

For instance, millions of Bay State residents are focusing on tried and true (and entirely free) workout plan: walking to the bus or train, walking to work or the store, or hopping on a bike to get to their destination.

Research shows again and again that people who take public transit walk many times further each day than those bound only to cars. On average, those who walk to and from the train or bus come close, just during their commute, to achieving the 22 minutes per day of moderate physical activity recommended by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

For people who live close to destinations, walking has shown to be both a great option and an economic boon – but only if the route is well maintained and safe for pedestrians. Research shows that nearly half of us will walk up to a mile to get to church or school and 35 percent of us will walk up to a mile to work. Biking as a mode of transportation has seen a steady increase across the commonwealth – but especially in places that support safe routes for cyclists through bike lanes and other means.

Increased walking and biking has a direct impact on health, including lower body mass index and decreased risk of obesity and hypertension. Each of these conditions can lead to a host of negative health outcomes — from Type 2 diabetes to heart disease. Additionally, for every new trip made by public transit, on foot, or by bike, that means less emissions, better air quality, and better health outcomes for people with respiratory conditions like asthma.

And perhaps most importantly, a system that provides accessible and affordable transportation options enables all of the Commonwealth's residents of Gloucester & Rockport to get to work on time and provide for their families, to get their children to doctor's appointments, and to make it to the grocery store to buy healthy food for dinner.

But realistically, most riders don't use public transit, break out their sneakers, or pump up those bike tires because they are concerned about their BMI or containing health care costs. They do it because it strikes

the right balance of convenience, timeliness, and affordability that squares with where they need to go and when.

We're making progress, with projects such as the ADA-compliant sidewalks, and improved crosswalks throughout the city.

But, on the whole, this balance is in danger of being upset, as our infrastructure deteriorates more and more with each passing year.

Many Cape Ann commuters have experienced delays due to train issues. Buses run infrequently, stop early, and often don't run at all in evenings or on weekends.

When public transit, walking, and biking options are unavailable, unsafe, or unaffordable, more of us will choose driving as the best way to get to work or to the store. Every time this happens, we lose minutes of physical activity, increase harmful emissions, and increase the risks from traffic accidents. For residents without access to a car, it might mean missing that medical appointment or doing the shopping at a corner store stocked with processed foods rather than making the trip to the produce section at the grocery store.

If we want to keep public transit, walking, and biking attractive to commuters, it is critical that we invest in a 21st-century transportation system today.

For the health of the commonwealth and of Gloucester, the time for action is now.

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Gloucester Open Space & Recreation Committee

TOBY FISHER

Massachusetts Public Health Association