

Civilian flaggers still stand chance

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Give that man a flag. And an orange safety vest, too.

A push to allow civilians to serve as flagmen at road construction sites in Massachusetts made a real splash back in April when it was included as part of a transportation bond bill. There seemed reason to believe - or at least to hope - that the long-standing practice of having police stand by each and every construction site, no matter how small, was about to finally fade into Bay State history. But there's been very little talk in the months since, and one had reason to wonder if the unreasonably expensive and unnecessary practice, so beloved by police unions across the commonwealth, might remain in place after all.

But Gov. Deval L. Patrick, in an interview with The Associated Press last week, said the move to allow civilians to hold the flags, at least at projects on secondary roads, is alive and well. He told the AP that his administration has been getting all of its ducks in a row before moving ahead with the change.

The police have long argued that only a trained professional can handle the job. If traffic needs to be redirected, if a lane needs to be closed, if there is a sudden and unanticipated problem at the construction site, only an actual officer of the law could take care of things. At least that's what the cops say.

But consider that little road project you drive pass day after day on the way to work. There's a hole way over on the side of the road. And a sign. And a few workers who seem sometimes to be doing a little something. Oh, and the police officer who is always standing around.

He could be making as much as \$40 an hour for his efforts.

In states where civilians do the same thing - after just eight hours of training - the pay is about half that amount.

We commend Patrick for trying to break the police stranglehold on road details. It has long been an unneeded expense, but in the current economy, it's become completely untenable.