

OUR VIEW: NEW REGULATIONS BRING REASON TO USE OF POLICE DETAILS

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Finally, Massachusetts is joining the 49 other states in allowing the use of civilian flagmen to direct traffic around some construction sites.

The new regulations announced by Transportation Secretary Bernard Cohen Wednesday only affect state Highway Department projects and would still employ police officers at sites that pose genuine public safety issues.

"This proposal strikes an appropriate balance between public safety and efficiency," Gov. Deval Patrick declared.

And that's all the public wants: Police on duty when and where they're needed, but not where there's clearly no safety threat whatsoever.

When a road is blocked off, for example, there's no need to have a police officer standing there to tell people that. Or when a utility crew is working at the side of a quiet street, the company should not be required to go to the extra expense of having an officer stand by on overtime for a minimum of four hours.

State and local police had milked the system for so long and taxpayer anger had grown to the point people like Patrick and state Sen. Steve Baddour, D-Methuen, who chairs the legislative Transportation Committee, were emboldened to take action. With billions of dollars worth of highway and bridge repairs in the offing, they agreed they would take whatever measures were necessary to keep the cost of those projects down — even if it meant angering the public-safety unions.

Estimates vary wildly as to how much will be saved by eliminating police details at some construction sites. But Cohen's agency currently spends some \$25 million a year — or 5 percent of its construction budget — on this one item; and it's fair to assume a less rigid approach will result in significant savings for the public which ultimately pays for those details either through their taxes or the bills they pay for electricity, gas, cable or telephone service.

The unions, police chiefs and some elected officials argue that police officers could not support themselves without the additional income these details provide, and that it's a good way to get more officers on the street on someone else's dime.

Those are reasonable arguments that, unfortunately, are undercut by the fact there are so many details some departments have had to enlist retirees to fill them; as well as the occasional sighting of an officer working a road detail with coffee in one hand, a cell phone in the other, and his back turned to the oncoming traffic.

Now that the state has taken this bold step, local officials should follow suit and demand changes, whether in practice or contract language, that will give chiefs more flexibility in assigning details. There are many circumstances when it's wise to have a police officer standing by, but there are others where a civilian flagman or even a simple sign or barrier, would serve just as well. Having a police officers on duty when one is not really needed, represents a waste of money voters are no longer willing to tolerate.