

Doubts over savings in Patrick's plan to curb police details

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Lowell Police Lt. William Busby directs traffic at a construction site on Chelmsford Street (Route 110) yesterday. Civilian flagmen may replace officers on the road under Gov. Deval Patrick's plan. SUN / JON HILL

BOSTON -- State transportation officials are guaranteeing Massachusetts drivers -- and taxpayers -- that they will see civilian flagmen replace police officers at traffic details by October.

The question is, how hard will you have to look?

Even some of the strongest proponents of replacing costly police details with flagmen are raising doubts about the savings taxpayers will see by cutting back on police overtime.

Only an estimated one-third of state-owned roads are expected to qualify for flagmen under Gov. Deval Patrick's newest proposal.

"I think it's an important symbolic issue and the governor does deserve credit for sticking with it," said Steve Poftak, director of research at the Pioneer Institute. "But it seems like there are enough trapdoors in the original legislation and parts of these regulations that I don't know how much we'll save."

Gov. Deval Patrick and Transportation Secretary Bernard Cohen unrolled a series of new regulations this week aimed at detailing when and how flagmen should be used. The proposal only governs roads owned and maintained by the state, or on MassHighway projects done on local roads where flagmen would not violate any local bargaining agreements with police unions.

Under the guidelines, flagmen are to replace police traffic details on all state roads where the speed limit is 45 mph or slower. Flagmen can also be used on roads with higher speed limits if there is low traffic volume -- under 4,000 trips per day.

Police officers will most likely continue to provide traffic assistance on projects near schools or other high-risk safety areas and major highways, unless the construction work is protected by a barrier.

Officials are taking a wait-and-see approach toward how these rules will play out, but they probably mean Greater Lowell drivers can expect to see civilians directing traffic on roads like

Route 110, Route 113 and Route 38, major thoroughfares through Dracut, Lowell, Chelmsford and Tewksbury where speed limits are under 45 mph.

The roughly one-third of all surveyed state-owned roads that qualify for flagmen amounts to about 418 miles. MassHighway controls 2,850 miles of road in Massachusetts, but has collected detailed speed and traffic information for just 1,376 miles.

"Just because the rest of the roads haven't been surveyed, any projects on these roads still qualify under the guidelines," said Clark Jessen, spokesman for the Executive Office of Transportation. "Without any doubt, there will be a substantial savings over time."

The other issue raising concerns is how much flagmen will be paid. Police unions, in addition to raising safety concerns, have said little money will actually be saved by the state once you factor in pension, liability insurance and wages for civilian traffic workers.

MassHighway spent about \$500 million on road-construction projects last year, with \$25 million going toward traffic details.

State police officers on detail earn \$40 an hour, and local cops sometimes more depending on their contracts.

Poftak and others acknowledged, however, that prevailing wage in Massachusetts for civilian flagmen is somewhere between \$31 and \$38 per hour, depending on the type of project.

"It's something that's been negotiated even though we didn't have flagmen," Poftak said. "I think it will come down over time."

Jessen said the prevailing wage is still being discussed, but is part of the reason officials have backed away from initial savings estimates of \$5 million a year.

He said the state will still be able to save money by paying only for work done instead of having to abide by local union rules that sometimes require police officers to get paid for four hours just for showing up when they might only work 45 minutes.

"There won't be any one consistent number and it's pretty certain that wherever that prevailing wage lands it will be lower than what state police make," Jessen said.