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Cameron on Transportation: Politicians and Promises

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By JIM CAMERON

I don't trust politicians. They tend to over-promise and sometimes just plain lie, telling you what you want to hear and then doing the opposite.

I'm not talking about Clinton and Trump. I mean right here in Connecticut where our state representatives and state senators were all recently up for election. They're all talking about "fixing transportation", but I don't trust them.

Case in point: the upcoming fare hike which, amazingly, will take effect after the election. Metro-North fares will jump 6 percent and CTtransit bus fares by 17 percent. Nice timing, eh? If they needed the money so bad, why not raise the fares before we go to the polls?

As I've been explaining for months, that fare hike was not created by the governor, the Connecticut Department of Transportation or Metro-North, but necessitated by the majority Democrats' budget passed last spring in the Legislature. They didn't fully fund mass transit and left the governor to raise the fares.

But what really galls me is to hear those same budget-writers come out in their campaigns and say they opposed the fare hike. They created it, and now oppose it? I think that's called hypocrisy.

Or do you remember when Dannel Malloy was running for governor in 2010 and he promised he would never, ever raid the Special Transportation Fund to balance the budget? I do, and I admired him for that pledge. So imagine how I felt when he did what every predecessor, Republican or Democrat, had done ... turn the Special Transportation Fund into a petty cash box, raidable at will to fix his budget. Was that a lie, a broken promise or a necessity?

Governor Malloy redeemed himself in his second term when he embraced transportation as his keynote agenda. He didn't just embrace it, he mated with it and produced an amorphous, amoeba-like off-spring: a 30-year, \$100 billion "plan" to rebuild transportation state-wide.

Well, it really wasn't a "plan" as much as a laundry list, maybe a wish-list, with something for everyone ... trains, planes, roads, rails, you name it. It wasn't just ambitious, it was unaffordable. So he did what any good politician would do who had an unfunded dream: he appointed a task force to figure out how to pay for it.

He wanted the credit for this amazing, Robert Moses-like plan. But he didn't want his fingerprints on the stone tablets detailing how to pay for it. I understand that. "Love my vision but don't blame me for the painful taxes required to build it."

His task force came up with a lot of great ideas, all of them practical, none of them popular. But what did legislators in both parties do? They rejected them all, out of hand.

Even the Governor's BFF Senator Bob Duff, the Senate Majority leader, said the Task Force's idea of a vehicle miles tax was dead on arrival and would never be considered. And you can imagine the glee of Republicans in attacking the idea, a concept which nobody ever had a chance to explain let alone study before it was snuffed out.

To a man (and woman) every candidate will say they support transportation, but they will reject all of the necessary means of paying for it. Victory has a thousand fathers, but defeat is an orphan.

P.S.: Lest you should think I have ambitions for election, I can reassure you I don't want any job in Hartford. The only thing I'm running for is the train.

Jim Cameron has been a Darien resident for 25 years. He is the founder of the Commuter Action Group and also serves on the Darien RTM. The opinions expressed in this column are only his own. You can reach him at CommuterActionGroup@gmail.com

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