

Cameron on Transportation: Why Widening Interstate 95 Won't Help

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By JIM CAMERON

Gov. Dannel P. Malloy wants to widen Interstate 95 to alleviate traffic congestion and commissioned a \$1.2 million study to support the idea. But I found a similar study from 2004 — State Project No. 56-245, I-95 Commuter Shoulders — that looked at the idea and rejected it for a number of reasons.

Trust me, it wasn't easy to get hold of the earlier study. I knew it existed, but somehow it had disappeared from the state Department of Transportation website. And despite numerous requests, nobody at the DOT could ever tell me what they paid for this study!

Why are the governor and DOT restudying the same issue and spending valuable tax dollars to do so? Because the first study rejected their widening idea completely, and they don't like that answer.

Here's the background:

When I-95 was built in the 1950s it was designed to handle up to 90,000 vehicles a day. Today the DOT says it handles 150,000 and congestion is almost constant from 6 a.m. to 7 p.m., especially in southwest Connecticut. In most sections the road is three lanes wide with a "breakdown lane" on both sides.

So, rather than widen the entire highway with a decade of massive and messy construction, why not use one of the lanes, probably the right shoulder, as a travel lane? Wouldn't that help reduce congestion?

No. And here's why ...

Narrow lanes

The right shoulder is only 10 feet wide so it could only be used by cars. But the other three lanes are now 12 feet wide and to make the shoulder driveable, those lanes would have to be narrowed to 11 feet wide.

I feel nervous enough driving next to big-rigs and tandem trailers. Do I want them a foot closer to me hurtling along at 70 mph? Narrower lanes are not safe.

Accidents

The 2004 study looked at other states that had tried using shoulders as travel lanes and found a 60 percent increase in traffic accidents, most of them rear-end collisions.

Emergency rescues

First responders hated the widening idea and said so at numerous public hearings (I was there and heard them). They didn't see the right shoulder as a "breakdown lane" but as an "emergency rescue lane" necessary to reach accident sites. If that lane is filled with bumper-to-bumper commuters, people will die.

More traffic, not less

The study said that allowing driving on the shoulder would actually attract 1,050 additional vehicles per hour. If you build it, they will come.

Environmental costs

More traffic means more noise and more air pollution.

Speed improvements

The biggest argument for driving on the shoulder is that it would speed up traffic, right? Wrong. The 2004 study said that with an additional lane the average speed on I-95 would go from 27 mph to 31 mph, just a 15 percent improvement. Is that tiny speed increase worth all the safety and environmental costs?

So clearly, the idea of widening I-95 doesn't make sense. And we've already paid the expert consultants to study the idea and tell us so.

So why is the Malloy administration and the DOT paying for yet another study on a topic already examined and rejected? Because they didn't remember the other study had been done? Or they couldn't find it?

Or is it because this consultant will give them the answer they want to hear?

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