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Don't Blame Gov for Transport Project Delays, Blame the Legislature: Cameron on Transportation

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Fare hikes, rail service cuts and a freeze on transportation projects. As he promised in December, Gov. Dannel Malloy announced them all last month.

Rail commuters and highway drivers are understandably outraged, but they should direct their anger not at the governor or the state Department of Transportation, but instead at the Legislature.

Why now?

This funding crisis has been years in the making, exacerbated 20 years ago when lawmakers' political

pandering saw them lower the gasoline tax. Coupled with better gas mileage and increased use of electric cars, the Special Transportation Fund (STF), which pays for our roads and rails, has been running out of money. By next year, it will be in a deficit.

Raids on the STF

Malloy's critics are quick to blame him, correctly noting he raided the STF for money to balance the state's budget. But so did former Govs. M. Jodi Rell and John Rowland. Blaming their past mistakes doesn't answer the question of what we do now.

Metro-North riders already pay the highest commuter rail fares in the U.S. The proposed 10 percent hike in July, while unpopular, will be absorbed by commuters who have no other choice to get to their jobs in New York City.

Public hearings

Required by law 90 days before they go into effect, the public hearings on fare hikes will be cathartic, but meaningless. Think of them as political theater. The state DOT will present the numbers, explain why the STF is running out of money and sit patiently as commuters yell and scream. Then they will do what they must: raise fares.

Rail service cuts

Why is Malloy cutting off-peak weekday and all weekend service on the New Canaan, Danbury, Waterbury and Shore Line East lines? Because, unlike the main line, these branches are subsidized 100 percent by Connecticut, have lower ridership and are much more expensive to operate.

Economic impact

While higher fares are never popular, cuts in train service can be economically devastating. Without daily trains, houses in communities like Wilton and Redding will be less desirable. Property values will decrease, affecting local taxes. Transit-oriented development dreams for communities in the Naugatuck Valley will be dashed.

Future projects

Not only is the governor threatening fare hikes and service cuts, he's freezing \$4.3 billion worth of transportation projects across the state. Forget about the new Stamford rail garage, the "mixmaster" in Waterbury, the Barnum rail station in Bridgeport, and hundreds of other projects.

There may even be a 15-percent staff cut at the state DOT. That means months or years of delays on these projects if and when money is ever found, making our state even less desirable for new business investment.

Road maintenance

These cuts may even affect the state DOT's ability to plow our roads in the next blizzard, let alone fix the potholes and our aging bridges.

What can be done?

It will be up to the Legislature to finally address STF funding. None of the alternatives will be popular, especially in an election year. But I'd expect tolls, taxes, and yes, fare hikes — all predicated on passage of a true STF "lock box" in November's referendum.

If you're as angry as I am, do something. Call your state representative and senator and demand they vote on new funding sources for the STF to stop these service cuts and project delays.

They created this problem. Now they'll have to solve it.

See also:

- [State Transportation Chief Describes Service Cuts, Rail Fare Hikes Coming Soon Unless Alternate Funding Found](#) (Jan. 26)
- [AAA Poll: Plurality of CT Drivers, But Not a Majority, Say Tolls Are Best Way to Finance Transportation](#) (Jan. 23)
- [CT's Prospects Get Ever Darker for Transport Funding, Even for Maintenance and Plowing: Cameron on Transportation](#) (Jan. 2)
- [Predictions for Roads, Rails and Air Transport in 2018: Cameron on Transportation](#) (Jan. 21)
- [How My Transportation Predictions for 2017 Worked Out: Cameron on Transportation](#) (Jan. 7)

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