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It's an Old Story: Owners of Transportation vs the Public Good: Cameron on Transportation

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What do Connecticut's P.T. Barnum and The Commuter Action Group have in common? Both have been rail activists, fighting for the interests of commuters.

This amazing piece of news about Barnum, a man better known for his circus and menageries, came to me while watching [a speech at the Old State House](#) in Hartford. The speaker was Kathy Maher, executive director and curator of the Barnum Museum.

She explained Barnum was more than a showman. He was also a businessman — once owning the local water company — and railroad advocate.

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In 1879, Barnum wrote [an impassioned letter to The New York Times](#), promoting a street railway be built in New York City along Broadway between Bleecker and 14th streets, enlisting the support of local merchants such as the Brooks Brothers and “the carpet men, W & J Sloan.”

Back in 1865, Barnum went to Hartford, representing the town of Fairfield as a Republican. He later became mayor of Bridgeport. As he wrote in [his autobiography](#), he arrived at the capitol and realized powerful railroad interests had conspired to elect a House speaker who’d protect their monopoly interests in the state.

He also discovered Connecticut’s “Railroad Commission” had been similarly ensnared by the industry it was supposed to regulate and one member was even a clerk in the office of the New York and New Haven Railroad. Barnum pushed through a bill, prohibiting these obvious conflicts of interest.

See also:

- [Public Private Partnerships: Care Needed, or the Public Gets Snookered: Cameron on Transportation](#)
(July 1)

He then focused on helping commuters. Barnum noted New York railroad magnate Commodore Vanderbilt’s new rail lines (now the Hudson and Harlem divisions of Metro-North) were popular with affluent commuters. Once Vanderbilt had them as passengers for daily rides to and from New York, he jacked up fares by 200 to 400 percent — there’s nothing like a monopoly.

Sensing Vanderbilt might try to do the same to Connecticut riders on the new New Haven line (in which Vanderbilt had a financial stake), Barnum worked in the Legislature to make sure the state had some control over “its” railroad.

Just as in Barnum’s day, our transportation future seems to be in the hands of powerful forces in New York. Our railroad is run by the Metropolitan Transportation Authority, a New York agency reporting to that state’s governor, not our own.

Though we are Metro-North’s biggest customer and Connecticut’s rail lines boast [almost as many passengers](#) than MTA has in its home state, we have no seat on either the MTA or Metro-North boards.

Gov. Dannel Malloy hasn’t been shy about holding the MTA and Metro-North accountable when their neglect caused derailments and service cuts. But hauling the New Yorkers to Hartford and publicly excoriating them in front of the media didn’t win Malloy any friends.

The one area where Connecticut does maintain control is setting its own fares. But in recent years, Metro-

North fare hikes have become more of a commuter tax used to plug state budget gaps than spent on improvements in service.

As Barnum once said: “There’s a sucker born every minute.”

Jim Cameron on Trains and Metro-North

- [Pay Your Fare Even When the Conductor Doesn’t Ask — or You’re Shoplifting](#) (Dec. 4, 2016)
- [Trains Slip Sliding on Wet Leaf Goo is a Bigger Mess Than You May Think](#) (Nov. 26, 2016)
- [Staying Safe on the Train](#) (Nov. 19, 2016)
- [The Billion Dollar Bridge](#) (Nov. 17, 2016)
- [Politicians and Promises](#) (Nov. 15, 2016)
- [Metro-North Hasn’t Enforced Quiet Car Rules, But They’re Expanding Quiet Cars](#) (Dec. 30)
- [How a 10% ConnDOT Cut Would Affect Connecticut: Cameron on Transportation](#) (Jan. 10)
- [Predictions for Planes, Trains & Automobile Traffic in 2017: Cameron on Transportation](#) (Jan. 14)
- [CT’s Problem with Turning Commuter Drivers into Train Riders Is Lack of Station Parking: Cameron on Transportation](#) (Feb. 10)
- [Metro-North Could Learn a Lot from Amtrak: Cameron on Transportation](#) (Feb. 24)
- [A Train Station in East Bridgeport Would Be a \\$300M Waste of Money: Cameron on Transportation](#) (March 3)
- [Where the Good News Is for New Haven Line Commuters: Cameron on Transportation](#) (March 9)
- [ConnDOT Commissioner on Changes to CT Rails: Cameron on Transportation](#) (April 28)

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