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ConnDOT Commissioner on Changes to CT Rails: Cameron on Transportation

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[Jim Redeker](#) has the best job in transportation.

And the toughest.

As commissioner of the state Department of Transportation for the past six years, he has guided the agency through hundreds of millions of dollars in spending while managing three competing taskmasters: his boss, Gov. Dannel P. Malloy; the budget-controlling Legislature; and commuters who depend on his product.

Redeker has successfully managed all three.

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I've known the commissioner for all his years in Connecticut and always considered him the smartest guy in the room.

But recently, I watched him in a venue he told me he actually enjoys: a commuter forum.

The forum was sponsored by politicians along Metro-North's Danbury Branch and organized by state Rep. Gail Lavielle, R-Wilton, the best commuter advocate in the statehouse.

On the dais, a long table filled with state politicians from the area appeared like the Last Supper with Redeker as the main course.

But the meeting — held on the first night of Passover during a week of school vacations — only drew about 30 people last Monday night at Wilton High School's Clune Auditorium.

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“Why was there no publicity for this event on the trains or at the stations,” one commuter asked.

The state politicians seated at a long table with Redeker couldn't answer the question.

“Why was I stuck three times this winter on diesel trains with no explanation from conductors?”

No answer.

“Why do we pay all the taxes, but get nothing back from Hartford?”

No answer.

Redeker gave each complainer a chance to vent and cherry-picked certain issues to address.

When he didn't have an answer, which was rare, he said so. But when he did have a response, he nailed it.

“Why does the New Canaan Branch have more trains at lower fares?”

Easy one: The New Canaan Branch is electrified and has twice the ridership.

“The Danbury Branch only has 1,400 daily passengers,” Redeker said. “That works out to a per-trip subsidy of \$17.

“Now if we had better service, we'd probably have more riders. I just don't have the money.”

Surprisingly, only a few of the 11 state lawmakers on the dais said anything all evening.

Given their budget-juggling skills, they offered no explanation or optimism to improve mass-transit funding.

But to the downtrodden Dashing Dans and Danielles, the commissioner offered some hope: new rail cars for the branch lines are coming — in about four years — and old diesel locomotives are being rebuilt.

Less satisfied were residents of semi-rural Georgetown and Redding who complained about train noise with constant horn-blowing and bell-ringing at crossing gates.

As three Metro-North officials sat mute in the auditorium, residents said they were afraid to complain and risk train engineers retaliating by leaning on the horn.

Several commuters called for more express trains, while others requested re-opening the Wall Street station in downtown Norwalk.

Redeker asked what they would prefer: More stations or fewer stops?

But those in the room seemed to want both.

One woman — turning the discussion to road transportation — even said she supported highway tolls.

The suggestion seemed to stun lawmakers, while Redeker suppressed a grin.

While Redeker and I have had our disagreements, I've never envied his job.

We should feel lucky to have him as the state's DOT commissioner.

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 and as program director for Darien TV79. The opinions expressed in this column are only his own. You can reach him at CommuterActionGroup@gmail.com

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