

Talking Transportation: Blame Legislature, Not Malloy, for Proposed Fare Hike

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Editor's note: Darienite.com is now carrying Jim Cameron's "Talking Transportation" column. Here's our first one:

By JIM CAMERON

Sure, it was sleazy of Governor Malloy and the CDOT to release news of a proposed 5 percent fare hike on Metro-North on a Friday afternoon in July, hoping nobody would notice. But the more I dig into the proposal, the more I realize the Governor and CDOT are not to blame.

It's the Connecticut legislature that's really responsible for this fare hike. Lawmakers this session left the Governor with a \$192 million budget shortfall and every other branch of government has taken budget cuts and layoffs as a result. Now it's transportation's turn to feel the pinch.

Pol's on both sides of the aisle tell me Malloy could have saved millions by facing down the state employees' unions and their rich benefits package. Could've, maybe should've... but didn't.

So now we're looking at a 5 percent hike in train fares on Metro-North and Shore Line East and a 16 percent boost in bus fares starting in December. Plus closing ticket windows, reduced maintenance and fuel savings. And that's just on the transit side. Highway work will also be cut, hiring postponed and less salt purchased for the winter. Service areas will be closed overnight and the volunteers who work in the Visitor Centers will be fired. Welcome to Connecticut! So when you calculate the impact of all these cuts on your commute, by road or rail, call your State Rep and Senator and ask "why"?

Why are they allowing the Special Transportation Fund to run dry due to the dwindling revenues from the gas tax?

Ask Senate Majority leader Bob Duff (D-Norwalk) and the usually pro-transportation Senator Toni Boucher (R-Wilton) why they have opposed alternative funding mechanisms like the VMT (Vehicle Miles Tax), calling it "dead on arrival" before it was even explained, let alone studied.

Ask your elected officials what their plan is to pay for our existing transportation network, let alone expand it by the \$100 billion Malloy has suggested. They won't have an answer.

Why? Because they are running for re-election this November. And none of them has the guts to tell you the truth: we will all have to pay more to drive or commute by rail... as you'll find out after the election when they approve new taxes.

What can we do in the meantime (aside from holding them accountable during the campaign)? There will be public hearings in September on the fare hikes and we should all turn out.

It will be political theater, but cathartic. Commuters will rant and the folks from CDOT will listen and then do what they proposed. Aside from cutting train service, a fare hike is about the only option.

And, of course as upstate lawmakers constantly remind us, those of us living on the "gold coast" are all millionaires, and we can afford it, right?

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