

A Train Station in East Bridgeport Would Be a \$300M Waste of Money: Cameron on Transportation

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Date : March 3, 2017

Parts of Bridgeport are quite beautiful, but others look like the bombed-out South Bronx, especially the lots along the Metro-North tracks. The most populous city in the state with residents paying some of the highest taxes really needs help.

But is a proposed \$300 million new Barnum train station in East Bridgeport the right answer, or just a political boondoggle?

Bridgeport already has a downtown train station right in the business center, next to the new bus station and ferry terminal. The new Barnum station would be a little over a mile away in the middle of nowhere. Sure,

some folks live nearby, but the proposed station only makes sense if huge new housing and office complexes are built.

The dream of transit-oriented development is the only possible argument for a new station. If the state Department of Transportation builds it, will developers come?

Others think the station idea is more political than practical. They point out Gov. Dannel P. Malloy announced plans for the station just weeks before his re-election. At a public hearing on the plan, one skeptic called it a political payoff to gain votes in a tight campaign.

Sources at the state Department of Transportation said they were given scant notice about the governor's announcement in July 2014. The plan had not been vetted in long-range plans. Even the state Bond Commission was surprised when the governor slipped a \$2.75 million appropriation for initial planning onto its agenda.

Malloy initially called for a \$75 million station with one platform on each side of the local tracks to be open by 2018. Now the plan has morphed into a \$300 million station with center-island platforms, serving local and express tracks.

Plans call for a 500-space parking lot, but there are no plans for a waiting room, bathroom or commuter amenities.

About 25 people attended the public hearing, including locals who said Bridgeport "deserved" this new station. They said the former glory of the Park City could be restored only with others' investments.

Some thought the new station would be served by Amtrak's Acela, which doesn't stop at the downtown station. I think the chances of that are slight. Acela only stops at thriving business centers like Stamford, not rubble-strewn neighborhoods like East Bridgeport.

The most chilling testimony came from Mathew Hallock of Fairfield. He reminded the audience about the strange timing of the governor's announcement and wondered aloud who owned the neighboring land that would suddenly appreciate in value. He even called for the state attorney general to investigate the matter, implying impropriety in the proposal.

Noticeably absent from the public hearing was Bridgeport Mayor Joseph Ganim. If the Barnum station was so important for his city, why wasn't he there?

Metro-North has so many needs: positive train control, more rail cars, better and more frequent service, improved safety and affordable fares. But do we really need to pour \$300 million into a Barnum train station built on the hope it might encourage development?

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This station is far from a done deal. More plans, more hearings and, of course, the search for funding are in the offing.

But as Bridgeport's own P.T. Barnum once said, "There's a sucker born every minute."

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