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'No Way That Toll Money Won't Be Misused' — Nobody Trusts Hartford: Cameron on Transportation

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Nobody trusts Hartford. If cynicism is a disease, we're in the midst of an epidemic.

Since last fall, I've been touring the state speaking to groups large and small about Connecticut's transportation crisis, about the \$5 billion we need to just get Metro-North back in a state of good repair, about the hundreds of deficient bridges and potholed highways, and and about the futility of depending mostly on the gasoline tax to fund long-needed repairs.

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And when I got to the part in my talk pitching what I see as the necessity of tolls, safeguarded in the recently approved Special Transportation Lockbox, most audiences turned on me. While there were a few true-amateurs' role in keeping our transportation in a state of good repair, the vast majority in my readers don't believe the State Transportation Fund (STF) is truly locked.

"There's no way that toll money won't be misused. It's just another taxing mechanism. You're nuts if you trust those idiots," was the gist of their comments. And maybe they're right.

Gov. Ned Lamont flip-flopped on his campaign promise to only toll trucks. Then he was brazen enough (in front of reporters) to tell the Democrats' caucus that he would help them raise campaign money if they'd support tolling.

He even tried to win over Greenwich Republican representatives by suggesting he wouldn't toll the Merritt Parkway if they'd give him their votes for tolls — without really considering what that would do to Parkway traffic diverting off of Interstate 95 to avoid tolls.

He also manufactured a funding crisis for the STF by halving earlier plans to place the car sales tax in that fund.

Meanwhile, the anti-toll forces filled the news vacuum winning wide popular support, gathering 100,000 petition signatures in opposition to tolling. For that grassroots effort, they deserve credit just as the policy amateurs in the governor's office deserve scorn.

Tolling will be debated in a special session of the legislature in the coming weeks but even the Democratic majority admits it only has a "50-50 chance" of passage. Still, in the race to adjourn the session, lawmakers did somehow find time to pass some crazy bills.

Like the one approving a study of burying I-95 in a tunnel from Greenwich to Bridgeport. Never mind that we don't have money to fix our bridges. Now lawmakers want to waste money on an impossible, multibillion dollar "big dig" along the Gold Coast?

They also had time to stuff the budget full of hard-to-find special-funding "rats," like \$60,000 for the New London Little League or \$37,000 for a New Haven Scout troop. They couldn't find time to vote on health care, online gaming or marijuana, but succeeded in stuffing pork in every crack and crevice of the sure-to-pass budget.

One issue that did survive was SB 876, which would invest \$10 million in bonding to improve the state's rail freight system — the eight small freight railroads left in our state operating on infrastructure up to 100 years old. That bill should be passed. But \$10 million? That's chump-change, a rounding error in most state Department of Transportation projects.

The post-election glow of optimism about a new governor with a vision for the future is gone, replaced by the reality of an inept, dysfunctional legislature that just doesn't care.

The skeptics are right and I too have succumbed to the epidemic of cynicism.

Jim Cameron has been a Darien resident for more than 25 years. He is the founder of the [Commuter Action Group](#), sits on the [Merritt Parkway Conservancy](#) board and also serves on the Darien RTM and as program director for Darien TV79. The opinions expressed in this column, republished with permission of Hearst CT Media, are only his own. You can reach him at CommuterActionGroup@gmail.com.