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CT's Great at Producing Transportation Master Plans, But Lawmakers Won't Fund Them: Cameron on Transportation

Author : David Gurliacci

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When are we finally going to do something about our transportation crisis?

That question has been asked for decades, but never answered, or more importantly, acted upon.

I remember in 2001 when Moira Lyons, who at the time was the Connecticut Speaker of the House, held a news conference about our state's transportation mess.

The six-term Stamford Democrat, who was long on power but short in stature, stood next to a stack of consultant studies and reports almost as tall as she was. Enough with the studies, she said. Let's fix it!

One of the best things to come out of that call to action was the creation of the Transportation Strategy Board. It had representatives from business, labor, commuters, academics and planners. They had a one-year deadline to [establish a 20-year plan](#) for Connecticut's transportation future and how to pay for it. And they did.

The chairman of the TSB was Oz Griebel. Yes, the same Oz Griebel who ran unsuccessfully for governor last fall.

One of the TSB's top recommendations was ordering new railcars for Metro-North, which finally happened under Gov. M. Jodi Rell. But they also recommended highly unpopular funding mechanisms: a gasoline tax increase, sales tax surcharge and, yes, tolls.

What have we done since? More studies making consultants rich but never persuading lawmakers to do something. When our elected officials have no political will, they just suggest another study, board or commission.

Former Gov. Dannel Malloy had ideas. His \$100 billion, 30-year "[Let's Go CT](#)" plan had something for everyone in every corner of the state. It was ambitious, but it wasn't really a plan, just a laundry list of projects without priorities or funding.

Politicians love to take credit for the ideas but never want their fingerprints on the nasty business of paying for them. That's why Malloy created — you guessed it — a blue-ribbon committee: [The Transportation Finance Panel](#). Among its members: Griebel.

"It was like that movie 'Groundhog Day,'" Griebel recently told me. "It was the same people we saw at the TSB debating the same issues" 10 years later.

And what did Malloy's Transportation Finance Panel [recommend to pay](#) for his \$100 billion "plan?" A gasoline tax increase, a sales tax surcharge, fare hikes and, you guessed it, highway tolls.

Of course, none of those moved forward. It was an election year and who wants to run for a job in Hartford explaining to constituents that they have to pay more, especially when the Republicans mischaracterized such funding as "taxes" instead of user fees.

Along the way, Malloy abolished the TSB, lest it should suggest one project had priority over another. He wanted it all, but got none, because he couldn't sell the plan to pay for it.

But now we have the Special Transportation Fund Lockbox, right? Any money that goes in can only be spent on transportation. Or so we were told. But as one sage observer of the transportation scene for decades recently told me, "The lockbox has more backdoors than a hot-sheets motel on the Berlin Turnpike." We'll see.

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Will the new Legislature have the guts to finally raise the funding we need to fix our roads and rails? Or will I be re-writing this column again in another decade, like déjà vu all over again?

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.