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Did the Governor Cut Back Rail Improvements to Get Back at a Rival? — Cameron on Transportation

Author : David Gurliacci

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Our “aw shucks, golly” Governor seems to have a mean streak. While he probably deserves all the credit he’s getting for his handling of the COVID-19 crisis, what he did recently at the Bond Commission seems uncharacteristically mean and vindictive.

Somehow a promised \$72 million investment in badly needed replacement rail cars for the Danbury and Waterbury branch lines of Metro-North got derailed as the item was deleted from the agenda. Those lines won’t be getting new cars anytime soon. What happened?

Flashback to July of 2018 when then candidate Lamont stood on camera in front of an empty railroad track

and made a campaign promise:

“The trains only come by here not often enough to make a difference. If we had more train service it would open up the entire (Naugatuck) Valley to economic development ... so we’ve got to make it a priority.”

After his election, Lamont’s unveiled his CT2030, \$10 billion transportation plan, only to see it detoured in the quagmire of the tolls debate. But our “transportation governor” isn’t giving up, at least in some areas.

This month the CDOT is accelerating \$90 million worth of work on the Waterbury branch line for signalization, Positive Train Control and passing sidings. With those improvements the long-promised 12 new rail cars for the line could have seen trains run every 30 minutes in rush hour, every hour off-peak. Imagine what that would have meant for local jobs.

Likewise on the Danbury branch where the old diesel push-pull trains are older than many riders. Clean, modern trains would have meant better service, adding to employment and boosting real estate values.

Instead, that last minute switch in the Bond Commission agenda on April 16 dropped those branch line cars, instead buying new equipment only for the Hartford Line and Shore Line East.

OPM budget director Melissa McCaw said the amended item reflected insufficient revenue in the Special Transportation Fund (STF). Governor Lamont agreed, saying “We had to set some priorities”.

Truth be told, it all comes back to tolls. Remember that debate? It seems like a century ago, right?

Is it just by chance that the Waterbury trains run through GOP Minority Leader Themis Klarides’ district? Was cutting that rail car order Lamont’s payback for her opposition to tolls?

Let’s also remember that last June Governor Lamont refused to fund Klarides’ request for a fire training facility in her district, almost taunting her by calling the spending cut an attempt to “prioritize progress,” playing off the GOP’s name for their much maligned alternative to tolling.

But it may be Klarides who gets the final revenge, announcing this week that she won’t seek re-election to the legislature this fall, joining a growing list of GOP long-timers bowing out of the race.

I mean, does anyone really want to run on a ticket topped by Trump? But the 54-year-old Klarides also says “my time in public service is not over” leading to speculation that she will run for governor, presumably against Lamont, in 2022, assuming she can best Bob Stefanowski to get the Republican nomination.

Meantime riders on the Waterbury and Danbury branches will be riding on old trains for a few more years.

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.