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Ferries on Long Island Sound Just Don't Work for Commuting : Cameron on Transportation

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Just when I thought Gov. Ned Lamont was getting it together to launch a thoughtful, considered “take two” on his transportation vision, bam — along comes another nonsensical idea.

It wasn't enough that he tried to sell us on the zany, physically/fiscally impossible [30-30-30](#) vision of faster train speeds, now he is (literally) refloating the idea of “high-speed” ferry service from Bridgeport and Stamford to New York City.

Such ferry service wouldn't take cars off of Interstate 95. Those drivers aren't going where the ferry does. And if they haven't already opted for the train, why would they ever take a ferry?

The [lure of federal funding is driving the Lamont team](#) to revisit the often studied, always rejected, idea of aquatic commutation. Since 2006, I have [written about why ferries will never work](#) here. But let me remind you of the high points:

“High-speed” ferries are not fast. They can only go 29 mph in open waters, half the speed of a Metro-North train. Speeds in excess of 30 mph mean higher operating costs for additional highly skilled crew.

They only carry 149 passengers — compared to 1,000 on a train — and are gas-guzzling polluters (vs. clean electric trains).

A fleet of two such ferries might make two round-trips a day (vs. every 20 minutes for rush-hour trains).

They can’t operate in all weather.

The fares would be at least double those of the train and they’d still need huge subsidies to attract operators.

New York state and federal subsidies of \$4.7 million were wasted on a ferry from [Yonkers to New York City](#), which ran for four years. At its peak, it carried just 90 passengers a day, paying \$8 each way — subsidized at \$50 per ride.

Or consider Glen Cove’s experience with failed ferries on Long Island.

In 2001, that bedroom community just 28 miles from New York City on the Long Island Railroad, began ferry service to the city at fares pretty close to those charged on the train. It failed after a year due to low ridership even though it received a \$1 million subsidy from the MTA.

In the “summer of hell” in 2017 when track work at Penn Station delayed trains, the service resumed with two boats each rush hour carrying a total of fewer than 80 passengers. The subsidies for the July-to-September runs totaled more than \$1.5 million. That’s a [\\$257 subsidy](#) per passenger per trip.

In 2016, Glen Cove used a federal grant to build a \$16.6 million stylish new ferry terminal and dock. But aside from the summer of 2017, the city has been unable to find a ferry operator to resume service.

So guess what: the feds asked for their money back.

Glen Cove had until last January to resume ferry service or refund Washington its money. After an extension, the city council voted 4-3 to hire a new, [heavily subsidized ferry operator](#) — not because they liked the proposal, but because the alternative of paying back \$16 million was even worse.

So if the Lamont transportation team is so excited about using federal money to study, build or even start a private-public partnership for ferry service from Connecticut, they should consider the consequences. Federal money may seem “free,” but if it locks you into a money-losing, heavily subsidized, under-utilized fast ferry

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for Fat Cats going to Wall Street, the long-term cost could be huge.