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In Praise of Oz Griebel, Who Successfully Pushed the State to Get M8 Rail Cars: Cameron on Transportation

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Every commuter on Metro-North owes a tremendous debt of gratitude to one man: Oz Griebel. He is the reason we can ride the new M8 rail cars.

Much has been written since Oz's passing (at age 71) recently from an auto accident while jogging, especially about his two unsuccessful runs for governor.

I remember distinctly in the debates with Bob Stefanowski and Ned Lamont how Griebel would take off his

suit jacket, roll up his sleeves and jump into the fray. His energy and passion were electrifying.

But what seems to have been just a small footnote in those tributes was his work at the first chairman of the Transportation Strategy Board, or TSB. This was a body created in 2001 and tasked with developing a 20-year vision for our state's transportation future.

I served alongside Griebel in a regional body and was impressed with his work, doing deep dives into the problems with our highways, commuter trains and airports.

Once I joined him and other TSB members on a road trip to Port Elizabeth, New Jersey to see the region's largest container port. Thousands of shipping containers were off-loaded there from mega-ships and onto trucks which then drove up I-95 to New England. This was not just a perfunctory windshield tour but an intense grilling of our Port Authority hosts with Griebel leading the discussion.

One solution to those trucks clogging our highways was the "feeder barge" concept, moving the containers off the ships and onto barges which would then be towed to Bridgeport, New Haven and points further away. Sadly, the idea never came to pass.

But when it came to prioritizing spending on Connecticut's transportation, the TSB's first report singled out one item: ordering new rail cars for Metro-North. That was the idea I pushed hard for many months and Oz got it done. Still, it was not until 2006 that the first M8 cars were ordered, and they didn't go into service until 2011.

Not only did the TSB come up with prioritized projects, they came up with a plan to pay for them: a combination of a state gasoline tax increase (which has been unchanged since 1997), a sales tax surcharge and, you guessed it, tolls.

Griebel was a businessman. He knew it wasn't enough to come up with a "wish list" like Gov. Dan Malloy's pie-in-the-sky \$100 billion, 30-year "Let's Go CT" scheme or Governor Lamont's sci-fi like dream of "30-30-30" commuter rail service screaming down the tracks from city to city. Griebel took the TSB's mandate and delivered a workable plan — which, of course, fell on deaf ears in the Legislature.

Governor Malloy's thank-you gift to Griebel was replacing him as chairman and eventually eliminating the TSB completely.

I spoke with Griebel for a column last year, revisiting his work as the tolls debate revved up. He told me, "It was like that movie, 'Groundhog Day' — it was the same people we saw at the TSB debating the same issues 10 years later."

But while "Groundhog Day" had a sweet ending, our state's debate over transportation drags on with little progress.

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Had the TSB's recommendations been adopted, their 20-year vision for the future would be close to completion.

Griebel is gone. But at least one of his ideas for rejuvenating Metro-North did come to pass. I shall think of Oz and say a small prayer of thanks to him each time I see an M8 car rolling down the track.

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.