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Jim Cameron Speaks to Greenwich Audience About CT's Transportation Funding Crisis

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The transportation in Connecticut is, to be blunt, in dire straits, commuter advocate Jim Cameron of Darien recently told a Greenwich audience. He also discussed possible solutions.

Transportation costs in Connecticut are funded by the state government's Special Transportation Fund, Cameron said in a talk given at Riverside Yacht Club on Wednesday in a presentation sponsored by the League of Women Voters in Greenwich. Like everything else in the Connecticut government, however, the STF is running out of money.

— *This article, in slightly different form, [originally was published](#) by Greenwich Free Press.*

It is estimated that the STF will be in deficit by 2019, and being in the red by as much as \$337.7 million by 2022.

There's a multitude of reasons why the STF is in dire straits financially, Cameron said.

One is that gas tax revenues are down due to a combination of more fuel-efficient cars and more electric cars on the roads. Combined with the gas tax remaining static after being cut by 14 cents in 1997, this has led to a lot of lost revenue.

Cameron also said the STF has been used as a “piggy bank” by the state government to plug holes in the state’s budget.

He said \$400 million has been taken from the STF funds over the past decade, in addition to \$3.4 billion in lost revenue from the cuts of '97. There will be a referendum on installing a “lock box” on STF voting in November (which would prevent its money from being used on anything besides what it’s supposed to).

- The event was attended by state Sen. Scott Frantz.
- Cameron served on the CT Metro-North Rail Commuter Council for 19 years, and founded the [Commuter Action Group](#) in 2013, an organization which advocates for Metro-North commuters.

If the Special Transportation Fund is in the red, this presents yet another headache for Hartford, since the state is unable to get more bonding from Wall Street, for transportation or otherwise.

Not only that, but \$4.3 billion worth of projects to improve and repair our infrastructure would be frozen.

However, the Department of Transportation can only raise money for the STF in two ways: increasing revenues (such as via hiking fares), or cutting spending and services. Anything else must come from the legislature.

If the DOT is forced to cut spending, it will adversely affect the state in a number of ways.

One of the cuts on the line is for the branch lines for Metro-North, such as to New Canaan and Danbury.

Were these services to be cut, and to only operate in the AM/PM rush hours, it would be detrimental for these communities, leading to more traffic on the Merritt Parkway and I-95, and less mobility for those without cars (which often includes some of the most essential workers, like shopworkers, house cleaners, and restaurant staff).

Not only that, but as land without access to consistent Metro-North service is less desirable for developers, this would cause property values to go down, which, in turn, would lead to taxes in these communities going up.

So, Cameron outlined many problems. Are there any solutions?

While none of the solutions to the state's transportation crisis will be popular, he said, it would be far preferable to increase revenues than to *solely* rely on cutting spending to the degree needed to avoid a deficit.

This includes solutions such as restoring the gas tax to pre-1997 levels (which could be phased in at 2 cents per year for seven years, rather than all at once), as well as a tax on vehicle miles traveled (an idea which state legislators said was dead on arrival).

Tolls on CT Highways

One solution that he voiced his support for has been a rather contentious issue as of late: the reintroduction of tolls on the highways.

Connecticut has been without highway tolls since 1983, and much debate has been made over the possibility of reintroducing them in order to help fix the state's transportation funding crisis.

Critics argue that tolls are another burden on Connecticut taxpayers, and worry that the revenue raised from the tolls will be miss-spent.

Cameron emphatically argued against a variety of tolling "myths." For example, the idea that the federal government would not allow us to implement them (false), or that we should only toll out of state vehicles (which is unconstitutional).

Perhaps the greatest myth about tolling would be the idea that tolls are yet another tax.

As Cameron emphatically argued, tolls are not taxes. They are user fees. People only pay the tolls if they drive on the highways, just like how people only pay rail fares if you ride the train.

Plus, as Cameron joked, aren't we kind of paying tolls already?

See also:

- [State Transportation Chief Describes Service Cuts, Rail Fare Hikes Coming Soon Unless Alternate Funding Found](#) (Jan. 26)
- [AAA Poll: Plurality of CT Drivers, But Not a Majority, Say Tolls Are Best Way to Finance Transportation](#) (Jan. 23)

Cameron's columns on state transportation problems and state lawmakers:

- [State Legislators Hold Ultimate Responsibility for Funding, Improving Roads and Rails: Cameron on Transportation](#) (March 21)
- [No Free Ride: Connecticut Needs Tolls and Gas Taxes: Cameron on Transportation](#) (Feb. 26)
- [Metro-North Commuting 'Like Getting Hit With a 2-by-4' — Cameron on Transportation](#) (Feb. 18)
- [Don't Blame Gov for Transport Project Delays, Blame the Legislature: Cameron on Transportation](#) (Feb. 7)
- [CT's Prospects Get Ever Darker for Transport Funding, Even for Maintenance and Plowing: Cameron on Transportation](#) (Jan. 2)