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There Is No Cheap, Quick Fix for Speeding Up Metro-North Trains Cameron on Transportation

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Would you like a faster ride on Metro-North?

Who wouldn't?

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How about a 30-minute ride from Hartford to New Haven, from New Haven to Stamford or from Stamford to Grand Central?

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That's the vision announced by Gov. Ned Lamont in his inaugural address. It's known as the 30-30-30 plan and sounds good compared to current running times (52 minutes, 55 minutes and 48 minutes, respectively). But how can such vast improvements be done? Ask Joe McGee, vice president of the Fairfield Business Council who's been pitching this idea for years.

McGee was so confident of this concept that his council recently paid \$400,000 to Ty Lin Consulting of San Francisco to study it. And which railroad expert did Ty Lin hire to spearhead the study? Joseph Giulietti, former president of Metro-North who was recently named Connecticut's new transportation commissioner.

Although Ty Lin's study has not been released, McGee admits the 30-30-30 idea is more of a goal than a possibility. Yet, for as little as \$75 million to \$95 million, Ty Lin thinks significant improvements can be made to speed up service by accelerating Metro-North's return to a "state of good repair."

While president of Metro-North, Giulietti said it would take five years to get the railroad back in shape after years of neglect. Metro-North now says a more realistic time frame is 10 years.

McGee claims service will improve quickly — shaving 24 minutes off the current 103-minute ride from New Haven to Grand Central — by fixing rail ties and overhead power lines to improve speeds on curves, restoring the fourth track east of Milford and adding express trains (at a premium fare). That would make it a 79-minute run, but not 60.

But wait. If this was Giulietti's idea as a consultant, why didn't he make it happen when he was running Metro-North? Or how will he now, as commissioner of the state DOT, get his old railroad to adopt Ty Lin's ideas? I asked, but he isn't saying.

Seasoned professionals at the DOT have told me the Ty Lin ideas will cost billions of dollars and take a decade. In other words, there's no quick, cheap fix.

Meantime, Metro-North is planning to add six to 10 minutes of running time to all New Haven line trains for the spring timetable to better reflect the reality of delays due to work.

For 2018, the railroad had an on-time performance of just 88 percent. By extending the train schedule on paper, OTP will go up and riders will have a more dependable, albeit slower, ride.

Lengthening running times, even on paper, "is not acceptable," said McGee, who hopes to release his Ty Lin study soon. He fully expects significant pushback from the railroad and East Coast consultants beholden to the MTA.

But it's really the Federal Railroad Administration that has been the biggest hurdle to speeding up the trains. The FRA has required slower speeds after the 2013 Bridgeport and Spuyten Duyvil derailments. Those limits will not be increased until the FRA is convinced the railroad is safe.

So let the debate begin: Is 30-30-30 possible or just a fantasy? Did Giulietti create his own nightmare by

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proposing as a consultant what he may not be able to deliver as DOT commissioner?

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