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Trouble for Tolls: Cameron in Transportation

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Gov. Ned Lamont's tolling plan is in trouble. I knew it when I recently got a call from Dan Malloy.

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The former governor and I know each other going back to his days as mayor of Stamford, but he's only called me once before (many years ago when he sought my endorsement in his run for a second term as
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This time he was calling about [my recent column on the Transportation Strategy Board](#), the panel tasked 18 years ago with prioritizing our state's transportation needs and how to pay for them.

It wasn't my fawning over then-TSB Chairman Oz Griebel that prompted Malloy's recent call. Instead it was my characterization of the "lock box" on the Special Transportation Fund as having, according to one longtime transportation observer, "more back doors than a hot-sheets motel on the Berlin Turnpike." Those were the source's words, not mine.

"That comment was not helpful, Jim," Malloy said, explaining how it could affect their effort to gain support for tolls.

That's when I knew the plan was in real trouble. Why is he calling me, of all people? Not that there weren't earlier warning signs that trouble was brewing.

The first was Lamont's somersaults on tolling [from being in favor](#), then promising [trucks-only tolling](#) and finally settling (again) on [tolling all vehicles](#). [Voters felt betrayed](#).

Then Lamont pulled millions in car sales taxes from the STF, potentially [bankrupting the transportation fund by 2022](#).

Those moves gave grassroots No-Tolls groups new-found fertile soil, picketing and tapping into the media's love of controversy by offering up great photo ops.

Sure, the Republicans helped fan the flames with their so-called "information sessions" in local communities, providing a forum to attack Lamont and tolls while resurrecting their "Prioritize Progress" bonding plan, [asking our grandkids to pay for the roads and rails we use today](#).

Then there were the "no tolls votes" in local communities, non-binding of course, but a clear indication of local sentiment. Even Stamford's Board of Reps [voted against tolls](#). Polling by Sacred Heart University, though perhaps poorly worded, [showed 59 percent of respondents were against tolling](#).

But wait. Where are the pro-toll voices?

Well, a coalition of Hartford lobbyists did try to organize an expensive campaign to support Lamont's tolling vision, seeking money from construction companies and consultants who'd make a lot of money if tolls were approved. But a reporter somehow [got hold of their pitch book](#), detailing the campaign, and it now seems dead in the water. Talk about "not helpful."

Now Lamont is on a Magical Misery Tour, holding press events at every crumbling bridge, viaduct and train platform in the state. Against those backdrops, he pitches the need for billions in funding only achievable, he says, through tolling.

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In the last few months, Metro-North has had two major power meltdowns as circuit breakers, transformers and sub-stations have failed, [slowing trains and disrupting service](#). Commuters take such crises in stride knowing full well they're riding in shiny new railcars on a century-old railroad crumbling beneath them.

But people upstate could care less. It's not their problem, so why should they pay tolls or support mass transit?

Cynicism abounds that toll revenues would really be spent on transportation and not get diverted. Nobody trusts Hartford.

Tolls, my friends, are in trouble.

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.