

# Decision on widening I-95 key step in transportation master plan

By: [Tom Condon](#)



CT DEPARTMENT OF TRANSPORTATION  
Traffic congestion on I-95

Lets say you are one of the thousands of unfortunates stuck in the fuming swath of bumper-to-bumper traffic on I-95 between Bridgeport and Stamford, where four-hour, 20-mile backups are routine, morning and evening, and “rush hour” is an oxymoron.

You might look to the side of the road and think: “If there were just another travel lane there, the traffic could flow freely and I’d make my meeting/get home for dinner.”

But would you? Or would the new lane just attract more cars and create more congestion and more pavement to maintain?

The question could wreak havoc with Gov. Dannel P. Malloy’s 30-year, \$100 billion plan to restore and expand the state’s aging transportation infrastructure.

While generally praising “Let’s Go CT,” as the plan is called, critics have assailed one major provision of it — the proposal to add a lane in each direction across the full length of I-95 at an estimated cost of \$11.2 billion.



I-95 route through Connecticut

Transportation advocates, several Fairfield County legislators and some business leaders have challenged the idea; one called it a 1950s solution to a 21st century problem.

In a report titled “Boondoggles 2,” issued in January, the U.S. Public Interest Research Group Education Fund and the Frontier Group put the widening of I-95 at the top of a list of a dozen highway projects it considers monumentally wasteful, saying it “would do little to solve congestion along one of the nation’s most high-intensity travel corridors.”

“There is ... tremendous opposition to widening I-95,” said Jim Cameron of Darien, a longtime commuter advocate and founder of [CommuterActionGroup.org](#).

“I will oppose it,” vowed State Rep. Jonathan Steinberg, a Democrat from Westport who co-chairs the legislature’s transportation bonding subcommittee.

State transportation officials want to widen the highway and introduce congestion or time-of-day tolling on it, to both raise transportation revenue and reduce congestion. If opposition to the widening can’t be resolved, the increasingly daunting challenge of funding the program could become that much more difficult.

“If we don’t pull together to get this going, no one is going to get anything,” said state Department of Transportation Commissioner James Redeker.

### Induced Traffic

A big reason critics don’t think widening the highway will reduce congestion is a concept known to transportation planners as “induced traffic.” Go back to the traffic jam between Bridgeport and Stamford. If a new travel lane were built — and no additional cars or trucks used the highway — then traffic would have more room and be able to move more freely.

But that is not what usually happens, according to several studies. The newly available travel lanes induce drivers who may have been taking transit, driving at odd hours or staying home to take the highway. More trucks and commercial vehicles use it as well. Over a few years, the road fills up again. To put it another way, if you build it, they will drive on it.

An extensive [study](#) by two University of Toronto professors, Gilles Duranton and Matthew Turner, of travel data from 300 U.S. metro areas over many years concluded that driving expanded on a one-to-one basis with increased capacity on interstate highways; in other words, a five percent increase in road space meant a five percent increase in road usage.

“These results suggest that increased provision of interstate highways and major urban roads is unlikely to relieve congestion of these roads,” the 2009 study concluded. Critics of the Malloy plan echo this thought, saying the state could spend billions of dollars and endure years of construction delays, only to see the highway fill up again.

### Yes, however...

State Department of Transportation officials acknowledge that new capacity can draw more traffic, but say congestion pricing can offset it. In essence, the state would create a system of electronic tolling and charge higher tolls during rush hour. The idea, similar to charging peak prices for electricity, train fares and some other services, is to spread out demand over the day, or nudge drivers to transit, to lessen rush-hour congestion.

The DOT held workshops in 2014 with transportation officials from Florida, California and Washington state, where various forms of congestion pricing are in place. Some toll “express

lanes,” where drivers can pay to be in a presumably less crowded lane; some toll all lanes of a highway.

The consensus was that congestion pricing can reduce congestion, as long as there is good mass transit available so drivers have an alternative (and there isn’t such massive traffic that it overwhelms the congestion pricing scheme). The DOT did its own pilot [study](#) of congestion pricing and concluded it would result in a substantial reduction in rush-hour congestion.

While the Let’s Go CT plan is still at the “conceptual” or “pre-beginning” stage,” — the legislature and federal highway officials must approve tolling before any final decisions are made — studies suggest the DOT would get the most revenue and congestion relief by adding the lanes to I-95 and tolling all lanes of I-95 and the Merritt Parkway — and possibly other major roads as well.

The department could toll the existing lanes on I-95, but officials say they wouldn’t get anywhere near the same level of congestion mitigation. And, officials say, the experience in other states indicates people who have to pay tolls on roads that used to be free want to see highway improvements that make their commute easier.

Critics of the plan are not against maintaining the highway, or making incremental design or engineering improvements to open bottlenecks. But they see Let’s Go CT as the rare chance to bring the state’s commuter rail system into the 21st century, which they believe would be a major boon to the state’s economy.

Business leaders have complained for years that congestion along I-95 forces workers to live closer to jobs, where, more often than not, housing is expensive. Those who cannot afford the housing don’t take the jobs. But faster and more frequent commuter rail would expand the labor market by putting more workers in commuting distance, said Joe McGee, vice president for public policy and programs of the Stamford-based Business Council of Fairfield County.

“It would be transformational for Connecticut,” he said. “High-speed commuter rail doesn’t have to be an oxymoron.”

### We get it

State officials don’t disagree; Let’s Go CT makes a substantial investment in rail, and makes it upfront in the 30-year program, before the major highway work.

While nearly two-thirds of the \$100 billion is earmarked for highways and bridges, project documents indicate \$21.8 billion is to be invested in passenger rail improvements, along with another \$2.8 billion to expand the state’s bus network and \$1.3 billion for rail freight improvements, along with investments in harbors and bike/ped trails. The goal of the New Haven line improvements is a “2 x 2” system, in which two of four tracks carry express trans and two carry local trains. The express trains would cut 15 minutes off the trip from New Haven to New York, officials estimate.

“I think we’re doing everything they (critics) want,” said Redeker.

Also, the bulk of the money is not going into new projects. It turns out that the state has not been investing enough money, going back many years, to keep the existing system in sound condition. As a result, 34 percent of bridges are rated as functionally obsolete or structurally deficient. This doesn't mean they are in danger of collapse, said Redeker, but they could be subject to weight restrictions or closure if not repaired.

Also, 41 percent of the state's roads are in poor condition, and four movable rail bridges on the New Haven line are well over 100 years old and, not surprisingly, prone to failure.

So two-thirds of the Let's Go CT money — \$66 billion — will be dedicated to bringing the existing system to a state of good repair. Much of this work is essential; about 70 percent of bridges were built before 1970 and are at or near the end of their useful lives. Two of the largest projects will involve elevated portions of I-84, the Waterbury "mixmaster" and the viaduct in Hartford. Both must be rebuilt or replaced, at a combined cost that could reach \$12 billion or more — another unfortunate effect of the mid-20th century decision to run the highways through the hearts of both cities.



JOHN HARTWELL PHOTO

Connecticut Transportation Commissioner James Redeker

There may also be challenges on the rail side. Riders have been flocking to Metro-North's New Haven Line in record numbers — the line recorded 40.3 million rides in 2015. Today, many rush hour trains are standing-room-only, said Jim Cameron.

With already increased service on the New Haven and other Metro-North lines leading into Grand Central Terminal, it is not clear how much capacity is left in the Beaux Arts monument to America's railroad age. The DOT plans to study speed and capacity on the line in the next year or so, said department spokesman Kevin Nursick. Also, Metro-North, is now in the environmental study phase of a project to bring some Metro-North trains to Penn Station via the Hell Gate Line to alleviate the crunch at Grand Central.

The debate over the widening of I-95 gets down to balance — how much money should go to transit versus highways. There is time to talk and for public education; nothing will happen this year except a push for a "lockbox."

#### 'Transportation governor'

No stranger to the ills of I-95 and Metro-North after 14 years as mayor of Stamford, Malloy has made transportation a priority of his second term. Let's Go Ct was rolled out last year, after an 18-month public planning period.

The first phase is a five-year, \$10 billion ramp-up. The legislature approved \$2.8 billion in bonding authorization in its late June special session to go with \$7.2 billion in existing state and federal funds, and set aside half of 1 percent of the 6.35 percent sales tax to help pay for the ramp-up investment.

Malloy appointed a panel headed by former New Haven legislator Cam Staples to determine how to

pay for the remainder. It — in a thoughtful, in-depth [report](#) — recommended congestion tolls, increases in the gas and sales taxes and transit fare increases, among other revenue sources, to pay for the work. None of these will go into effect — if ever — until at least 2018, though 2019 could be the year of reckoning.

One reason the state's transportation infrastructure is not in complete repair is the legislature's unfortunate habit of raiding the state's Special Transportation Fund to balance the general budget.

Malloy argues that legislators and taxpayers would be more likely to approve the \$100 billion transportation investment if they had some certainty that the money would be used for transportation. So this year Malloy said he will focus on the lockbox, a Constitutional amendment that would require that all transportation revenues be spent on transportation.

Lawmakers did pass a statutory lockbox last year, but the Constitutional measure, considered a stronger commitment, failed to garner the necessary 75 percent supermajority in both houses in December's special session, but supporters are trying again in this year's regular session. Some have observed that moving for the lockbox in 2016 has the added benefit of not making legislators vote for tolls or other tax increases in an election year.

But things don't get any easier next year.

#### Projected deficits

According to projections released in late February by the legislature's nonpartisan Office of Fiscal Analysis, the projected General Fund deficit for next year is \$900 million. It gets worse in the following two fiscal years, when analysts predict a shortfall of \$2 billion-plus each year.



To further complicate things, the Special Transportation Fund is now projected to go into the red in 2019 and 2020 because of falloffs in the petroleum gross receipts tax caused by lower gas prices.

If the estimates are correct, legislators are going to have to face the issue of transportation funding in 2019.

The transportation fund also has been a popular target of governors and legislatures trying to close General Fund deficits over the past decade.

And Sen. Beth Bye, D-West Hartford, co-chair of the Appropriations Committee, said she couldn't guarantee transportation funding wouldn't be reduced again to help close the \$900 million hole in next fiscal year's General Fund. "Nothing is immune" from cuts, she said.

There is good news and bad news about the \$100 billion figure. The good news is that it isn't all new money; DOT officials estimate that \$35 to \$40 billion will come from existing revenue streams. The bad news, according to the transportation finance panel, is that bonding and other existing sources by themselves cannot provide the new money. There must be new and

sustainable sources of revenue; some combination of taxes, fees and/or tolls.

It won't be easy. Malloy hopes to get through next year without a tax increase, but barring a sudden spike in income tax receipts, lawmakers soon may have to bite that leaden bullet. They could face the two-edged sword of having to pass general tax increases to balance the budget plus new taxes and tolls for transportation — a fiscal challenge that could approach the income tax battle a quarter century ago.

Connecticut could find itself in the Catch-22 of needing to invest in infrastructure to help its ailing economy, but being unable to do so because of its ailing economy.

The state estimates that electronic tolls on the state's major highway corridors, plus the four Connecticut River bridges in the Hartford area, could take up to seven years to implement, but would bring in \$18.3 billion over the following 20 years. About 30 percent of that would come from out-of-state drivers and nearly 25 percent from truckers. Connecticut the only state on the Atlantic seaboard without highway tolls.

Despite the objections to widening I-95, Let's Go CT has a certain momentum. There is widespread agreement that the state's infrastructure is hurting its economy and that the issue needs to be addressed. The Texas Transportation Institute estimated that Connecticut drivers spend an annual average of 42 hours stuck in traffic — 49 hours in lower Fairfield County. **TRIP, a national transportation research group, estimated in 2015 that congested roads and bridges are costing Connecticut's drivers \$5.1 billion annually: \$1.6 billion in additional vehicle operating costs, \$2.3 billion in congestion-related delays, and \$1.2 billion in insufficient safety features that lead to serious traffic accidents.**

The finance panel noted that the era when federal earmarks would cover big-ticket projects is over, and that federal transportation funding is expected to be flat for the foreseeable future. The state has to step up, the panel concluded.

Road and rails aren't the only ways to solve congestion. Building communities that don't require as much driving would help, said Lyle Wray, executive director of the Capital Region Council of Governments. The Malloy administration has taken steps in this direction, supporting such measures as affordable housing, brownfield remediation and transit-oriented development.

Also, more people could carpool, work at home or otherwise stop contributing to the congestion.

But if Let's Go CT is to have wheels, at least as envisioned, it seems as if the debate over widening the highway must be resolved. "The mark of a first-world country," said Wray, "is one that takes care of its infrastructure."