



Transportation: Indefensible raid on STF

June 9, 2019



Connecticut will have a budget when the 2019-21 biennium begins July 1. The legislature approved a \$43.4 billion package last week, and Gov. Ned Lamont almost certainly will sign the legislation. One can't help but marvel at the irony of what this budget will mean for transportation in Connecticut.

Legislation approved in recent years called for a share of sales-tax revenues to be deposited in Connecticut's Special Transportation Fund (STF). The STF was established in 1984 by the legislature and then-Gov. William A. O'Neill to ensure adequate funding for transportation-infrastructure projects. It long has been financed via fuel taxes and fees. The addition of sales taxes to the STF's revenue stream was intended to shore up the fund, which has fallen on hard times, at least in part because politicians of both parties have raided it to prop up the General Fund – the largest of the nine funds that comprise the state budget. Gov. Lamont has offered a proposal to reinstate tolls in Connecticut, to eventually provide the STF \$700 million to \$800 million annually.

Yet the new budget will deprive the STF of some of the "new" transportation money. The budget "captures most of the additional sales-tax receipts

earmarked for transportation, \$172 million over the next two years combined, and keeps them in the General Fund," the Connecticut Mirror reported June 3. This marks a continuation of the games Capitol politicians have played with the STF since the mid-1980s. And Gov. Lamont and some Democratic legislators can't understand why many Connecticut residents have been resistant to tolls?

Incredibly, many Capitol Democrats, most notably House Speaker Joe Aresimowicz, don't see anything wrong with the STF maneuver, the Republican-American reported June 6. "It wasn't a sweep. It wasn't a raid," said Speaker Aresimowicz, D-Berlin. House Minority Leader Themis Klarides, R-Derby, cut through the nonsense. "I don't care if you call it raiding, diverting, or just not keeping your word, the money that is supposed to go in there is not going in," she said.

Gov. Lamont's tolls plan was not voted on before the legislature's regular 2019 session adjourned late on June 5. For weeks, there was speculation that there would be a tolls-oriented special session following the regular session. During a speech to lawmakers in the early hours of June 6, the governor confirmed that one will take place. In light of the budget's STF provision, it will be interesting to see how many legislators will be willing to vote yes on tolls legislation.

Connecticut residents may see a call for a vote on a tolls bill, on the heels of this budget, as yet another example of politicians asking their constituents to clean up a mess that was made by the politicians themselves. Expect Nutmeggers to make this known to their legislators. Indeed, as the Republican-American reported June 7, Speaker Aresimowicz has acknowledged there is no guarantee that a tolls bill will make it through the Democratic-controlled legislature.