

# Toll booths could be answer

There is a suspicion that state lawmakers are purposing avoiding direct discussion on the topic of Connecticut returning to toll booths on Interstate 95. At a recent Chamber of Commerce breakfast, Lt. Governor Michael Fedele handled most questions except for one about tolls and why the state appears to be avoiding putting the subject on the front burner.

The word from Hartford is that toll booths are an enormous sensitive issue among cities like Stamford, Stratford, Fairfield, Greenwich and Darien.

Lawmakers obviously believe their political seats are on the line with the subject of toll booths. Why?

Fedele, a Stamford native, was careful in his reply, noting that the subject is "under review" and that opposition lies in the fact that residents where toll stations could be installed would be justifiably upset during short trips.

Proponents of toll booths believe it is justified to allow "reasonable exceptions" to residents jumping on and off the Interstate for work or shopping.

Furthermore, how could the state raise additional revenue without decreasing funding to municipalities during an economy that even has casinos losing revenue and colleges tuitions increasing by nearly 10 percent?

There might be a coming political storm on the need for toll booths on Connecticut highways, or more specifically I-95.

It is obvious that if the State of Connecticut wasn't trying to vacuum up every nickel it could find, the emergence of toll booth conversation would not be necessary.



## Art Secondo Second Look

But the reality is that Connecticut may have little or no choice but to get new revenues from unlikely and unpopular sources. Out-of-state motorists traveling through or part of the state each day cause maintenance problems and expenses.

All we see is the rear license plate when it's time to pay for repairs. The State Transportation Department estimates that close to 390,000 cars travel on I-95 a day. That's right - each day.

By charging a fee of \$2 per car that's a whopping \$800,000 for a day's work of a state employee sticking the arm out the window.

Toll pundits argue that the trucking industry would suffer enormous fiscal consequences. Some argue that tolls only hurt local residents who use the Interstate to go to work and return home.

Then there are those who cannot forget the tragic truck ramming accident that happened many years ago in Stamford.

Toll proponents rightfully claim the revenue

can bring in "millions" and certainly enough to squelch the thirsty budgets of the state. EZ Pass technology has made toll booths safer in other states and Connecticut doesn't need to construct more than two booths if the legislature decides to approve a return of toll booths.

The bottom line is straight and simple: If the Governor and "Gold Coast" lawmakers insist on ignoring debate on the subject, and that there will not be new taxes but state agencies will be in danger of being unable to serve the local population, where else can municipalities get additional funding at a time when cities and towns are getting less funding?

It is also ironic that the federal government would penalize our state for installing tolls, renegeing on several millions of dollars in state highway assistance.

While it may be worth debating why Washington would want to discourage Connecticut toll booths when bordering states have them, it is less confrontational to buffer the point by pointing out that within less than a year, the state could generate enough revenue to absorb the hit.

Does Hartford have any better suggestions to raise money without raising taxes?

*Art Secondo is president of the Southington Chamber of Commerce.*



TAMMI KNAPIK

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