

TRANSIT

Connecticut Governor to Pitch Plan to Speed Up Metro-North

Part of Mr. Lamont's \$18 billion transportation proposal hinges on bringing tolls back to the state



Passengers wait for a Metro-North train at a station in Connecticut. Gov. Ned Lamont says improving the commuter railroad's service will be an economic boost for the state. PHOTO: SANGSUK SYLVIA KANG FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

By Joseph De Avila

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Connecticut Gov. Ned Lamont will propose spending as much as \$5 billion to speed up service on the Metro-North Railroad as part of a larger, 10-year program to overhaul the state's aging transportation system.

The governor is expected in the coming days to roll out his \$18 billion transportation plan, which is expected to include a scaled-down proposal to introduce highway tolls on key crossings and bridges. Mr. Lamont pushed earlier this year for tolls, but failed to persuade lawmakers to bring them up for a vote.

The plan calls for rebuilding the stretch of tracks between Greenwich and New Haven, and eliminating curves that require trains to slow along that route. That could trim travel times by 15 minutes, according to the Lamont administration.

Mr. Lamont, a Democrat, also wants to buy more than 100 new train cars, replace three problematic rail bridges that frequently cause delays and add express service along the Waterbury-branch line as well as direct service to New York City.

Metro-North “hasn’t seen significant upgrades in a generation,” Mr. Lamont said in a statement. “Access to New York City is an incredible asset to the Connecticut economy, and targeted improvements up and down the line will only make the state’s economy stronger.”

The governor has made improving the state’s transportation system a pillar of his economic-development plan. He has said Connecticut’s lack of investment in transportation has stifled job growth there.

The biggest challenge for Mr. Lamont’s transportation plan is finding the money for it. Connecticut currently needs \$1.2 billion annually for upkeep alone of rails and highways, according to the state. And Connecticut’s special transportation fund, which is supported with gas taxes, is projected to begin running deficits starting in fiscal year 2022 if changes aren’t made.

The Lamont administration plans to pay for up to \$3 billion of its rail upgrades using a low-interest loan program from the federal government, officials said. While financing plans are still being completed, the administration is looking to incorporate a second federal-loan program for transportation projects into its larger plans, they said.

This second federal program requires a dedicated revenue stream to pay back the loan. The Lamont administration wants to use revenue from tolls to secure this line of funding, officials said.

Tolls are a tough sell in Connecticut.

A Sacred Heart University and Hartford Courant poll released earlier this month found that only 23% of respondents approved of how the governor is handling tolls.

Connecticut previously used tolls to raise revenue. The state eliminated them in the 1980s after a crash at a toll plaza left seven people dead.

Republican Senate Minority Leader Len Fasano, who has opposed tolls, said the lending terms of the federal-loan programs are so favorable they need to be given serious consideration. He said he hasn’t ruled out using tolls to secure the loan, but wants to see the Lamont administration’s full proposal first and said other revenue streams should be explored.

Mr. Fasano, however, said he is skeptical about adding even limited tolls because lawmakers will be tempted to further expand the levies to raise revenue. “The concern is that you can’t trust

government,” he said.

Patrick Sasser, founder of the group No Tolls CT, said his organization opposes a scaled-down toll plan.

“We are still firm against tolls,” Mr. Sasser said. “Even if one toll is put in the state of Connecticut, it will allow them to put in more.”

Improvements to Metro-North, which carries almost 300,000 passengers on an average weekday, has regional significance because the commuter line also covers areas in New York state. While Connecticut owns the rail lines within its borders, the Metropolitan Transportation Authority runs Metro-North service there under a contract with the state.

MTA board member Neal Zuckerman, who represents Putnam County, N.Y., said the entire rail and subway system needs to be well maintained, including parts not owned by New York.

“Anything that the governor of Connecticut does to improve his rail lines is a benefit to riders,” said Mr. Zuckerman, who has called on the MTA to fairly distribute funds to all parts of the transportation system. “Because the service expectations are not tied to a border.”

Connecticut officials have had preliminary discussions with New York Gov. Andrew Cuomo about making rail upgrades along the Westchester County portion of Metro-North’s New Haven line. Mr. Cuomo said at a news conference in September that Metro-North is vital to both states and he wants to work with Mr. Lamont to make improvements.

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