

Think Outside the 'Car-First' Box

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The following op-ed was published in the *Stamford (CT) Advocate* on September 29, 2005.

It's time for regional planning agencies, legislators and DOT planners to think, plan and invest outside the 'car first' box. With a 'car first' mandate, more parking spaces and wider roads are always good. 'Car first' transportation investments lead to more automobile dependency, sprawl and fuel consumption.

As future oil supplies becomes less available with devastating impacts such as the recent Gulf Coast hurricanes, the debilitating strife of oil wars and the coming age of worldwide post-peak oil production, it's time for the State of Connecticut, which produces no oil, to invest in alternatives to go-it-alone driving and goods shipments by truck.

The car-dependent mandatory evacuations of New Orleans and Houston due to Hurricanes Katrina and Rita produced calamitous results and provide a map to the road Connecticut should not take. In New Orleans, those without cars were left behind; in car-rich Houston, drivers went nowhere on empty as cars backed up for 120 miles on Interstate 45.

Commuter rail and rail freight, less fuel thirsty means of transport, are the most feasible alternatives.

In Connecticut, Robert Wilson, the South Western Regional Planning Agency representative, has correctly concluded that construction of a Super 7 motorway "really is a dead issue" (*Advocate* news story, Aug. 16 and *Greenwich Time*, Aug.16.) However, the incremental impact of Connecticut DOT projects such as the contentious Main Avenue-Merritt Parkway interchange reconstruction project in Norwalk and DOT's piecemeal approach to widening Route 7 are precisely the type of projects that lead to greater automobile dependency, sprawl and fuel consumption.

One alternative to Route 7 road widening projects is to build a series of high speed, high capacity modern roundabouts, based on study recommendations, along the Route 7 corridor. Connecticut DOT recently approved the construction of a pair of roundabouts on the south and north side of the Merritt Parkway at King Street, which will be paid by New York state. Paired roundabouts should also be constructed at Merritt Parkway interchanges affected by Route 7 congestion, such as Routes 106, 123 and 137.

With roundabouts, highway designers can "widen nodes (intersections), instead of widening roads" and still improve level of service (highway traffic flow). Additionally, roundabouts cost less and are home to fewer and less severe accidents than the type of intersections Connecticut DOT currently builds. Accident mitigation or prevention results in reduced health care and hospital costs.

Another alternative is to upgrade and extend Metro-North's Danbury Branch line service and commence commuter rail service on the Maybrook line from Danbury to Brewster.

State Representative Toni Boucher is right on track when she calls for an immediate infusion of funds to upgrade the Danbury Branch Line. These upgrades will include double-tracking sections on the single-track branch line. Double-track or long or short sidings relieve capacity constraints on the branch line by allowing trains to move north and south at the same time. Visually appealing at-grade separation projects will increase safety.

An electrified extension of the Harlem line from Brewster to Danbury should also be sought. Why terminate Harlem line service in Southeast, NY, a town with 17,000 people (Brewster is a village located within Southeast) when by extending service 12 miles you reach Danbury, a city with 75,000 people?

Legislators should reverse Governor Rell's proposed railroad ticket surcharges, as ticket surcharges are not an efficacious method to encourage intra-state rail commutation. Besides, rail commuters already suffer from a series of excessive fare increases. A statewide surcharge on parking spaces would be a much more effective way to fund commuter rail investments.

Public safety is a winner when commuters have the opportunity to travel by rail instead of road. Rail commuters are approximately 100 times safer boarding a train than driving a car.

The environment benefits, too. Air emissions and fuel consumed by a person boarding a crowded train car average out to be one-fifteenth that of a person traveling in a motor vehicle down congested highways. Since Fairfield County is an air quality non-attainment region, air quality should be a priority in transportation planning.

Highways are also less congested. The introduction of Metrolink commuter rail service in Southern California drew approximately 3 percent of drivers on adjacent freeways onto commuter trains.

And trains are far more efficient in carrying people than automobiles in a given amount of space.

Imagine how much easier it would be for evacuees to leave New Orleans or Houston if commuter rail service were a transportation alternative in Louisiana or Texas.

Finally with regard to future use of the Super 7 corridor, legislators, in the upcoming session, should direct Connecticut DOT to design and build America's first limited access veloway -- complete with median strips and designed for high-speed bicycling. The veloway should be designed to encourage active bicycle transportation.

Municipal planners could go one step further by establishing smart growth velo-village design districts close to Danbury branch line train stations. With its proximity to Grand Central Terminal, a veloway might provide an unintended economic benefit -- drawing bicycle tourists to the Super 7 corridor region!

[return to Op-Eds index](#)

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