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## No Raising CT Gas Tax Without A Lockbox

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There can be no new tolls on Connecticut's roads unless the money raised is used solely on the state's dire transportation needs. The only way to ensure it's not diverted to balance the budget is a lockbox.

Gov. Dannel P. Malloy's Transportation Finance Panel is recommending new tolls as well as higher gasoline taxes for his \$100 billion, 30-year initiative to fix the state's highway system and expand mass transit.

Senate President Pro Tem Martin M. Looney and House Speaker Brendan Sharkey are right to insist there will be no vote on such recommendations before a "lockbox" is created by the General Assembly and approved by voters to ensure that new revenues are used only for transportation.

### The Tax Dilemma

If ever there was a good time to raise state gas taxes, this might be it — if Connecticut's taxes weren't already the fifth highest in the nation at 37.51 cents per gallon, according to the American Petroleum Institute. That makes an even higher state tax on gas a hard sell.

The federal gas tax of 18.4 cents per gallon, however, hasn't been raised since 1993. That's the less painful option — gas prices are low enough that consumers wouldn't feel the pinch.

But any money that Connecticut would receive from a federal tax hike would need to be committed so that those revenues don't end up paying for something other than urgent transportation needs.

Nobody likes paying tolls, but somehow the state needs to pay for years of neglect of its transportation infrastructure. Some rail bridges are a century old; half the state's roads were built before 1962. And Connecticut is the outlier when it comes to tolls: "Every state with coastline on the Atlantic Ocean has toll facilities, except Connecticut," says the Transportation Finance Panel.

The state should use any new tolling to encourage mass transit by implementing so-called congestion pricing. That involves tolling all highway lanes and raising the price at rush hour to give people incentives to drive in off-peak hours or use mass transit.

Meanwhile, Connecticut needs to develop those mass transit options. GE's current home in Fairfield, for example, is seven miles from the closest rail station. Its future home in Boston will likely be a short walk from one.

### Who Should Hold The Key?

The definition of a lockbox and who has access to it are critical.

Last month, the legislature failed to pass a constitutional amendment by a majority large enough to place the lockbox question on this fall's election ballot. Supporters of the lockbox intend to try again.

They should. Ever since the Special Transportation Fund was created in 1983 following the Mianus River Bridge collapse, money from that fund has been used to help run the state Department of Motor Vehicles and balance the state budget.

A new law says resources in the fund — from fees, licenses, taxes on fuel and gasoline, and sometimes General Fund appropriations — shall be used only for "transportation purposes." But unless spelled out, could that mean candy in rest-stop vending machines or state police salaries? Then, too, who would have the key? (Answer: The state transportation commissioner.)

It's equally critical that tolls and taxes, if passed, be limited to only what's absolutely needed.

The commission recommended tolls so that out-of-state drivers and truckers will help finance the Connecticut highways they use, along with a half-penny increase in the sales tax to 6.85 percent and a 2-cent-per-gallon increase in the gas tax every year for seven years.

That's a lot to ask of state residents who already pay high gas taxes. Without an airtight lockbox in place first, it'd certainly be too much to ask.

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