

Gov. Ned Lamont crashes GOP anti-toll forum in Greenwich

[Neil Vigdor](#)



Gov. Ned Lamont made a cameo Monday night May 13, 2019, at a GOP anti-toll forum in his hometown of Greenwich, where he defended his proposed "user fee" for state highways. (Neil Vigdor)

Back in his hometown of Greenwich, Gov. Ned Lamont turned to his most strident messenger Monday night to deliver a closing argument on why Connecticut needs tolls -- himself.

The Democrat made a cameo at an anti-toll forum organized by Republicans, answering critics of his highly contentious plan to charge motorists a "user fee" on Interstates 95, 91, 84 and the Merritt and Wilbur

Cross parkways.

Lamont's appearance at the event -- where Republicans presented an alternative transportation funding plan known as Prioritize Progress that relies on bonding instead of tolls --- shows the urgency of the governor with less than a month remaining until the end of the legislative session.

"The biggest difference we have up in Hartford right now is that Prioritize Progress says, 'We're going to put it on the company credit card,' " Lamont said. "We're going to borrow that money -- \$700 million a year, 100 percent paid by Connecticut residents, plus interest. I know the alternative doesn't make any of you happy, which is why you're here. But the alternative is to have a user fee where the folks who use the roads, not the taxpayers, pay for it. Forty percent of it would be paid for by out-of-staters."

Greenwich was the final stop on a 21-municipality tour by state Rep. Laura Devlin, R-Fairfield, and Sen. Henri Martin, R-Bristol, the ranking members of the legislature's Transportation Committee, who said that tolls would have a crippling effect when compounded with the seventh-highest gasoline tax in the nation.

Both GOP members of Greenwich's now-split legislative delegation [Reps. Livvy Floren and Fred Camillo] were in attendance at the event, where a majority of the 65 people in the audience indicated that they opposed tolls. The delegation's two Democrats, Sen. Alex Bergstein, the Transportation Committee's vice chair, and Rep. Steve Meskers, were absent. Meskers serves locally on the Representative Town Meeting, which coincided with the forum.



State Sen. Henri Martin, R-Bristol, left, ranking member of the legislature's Transportation Committee, chats with Gov. Ned Lamont during an anti-toll forum organized by the GOP in Greenwich Monday, May 13, 2019.

The forum's organizers displayed an outdated state Department of Transportation map showing collection points on Routes 8, 9, 2, as well as 691 and 395 that are not part of Lamont's current proposal.

"The governor hates this map," Devlin said before Lamont's appearance. "He calls it the measles map."

Republicans contend that a newer version of the map with 50 collection points has not been presented to federal transportation officials, while the old one has. Devlin said legislators would have no input on the location of the gantries and characterized the toll fee estimates of the Lamont administration as arbitrary and understating the true costs of tolls.

"I want you to know, they're all fake," Devlin said.

At the 75-minute mark of the forum, Lamont, a former Greenwich selectman and one-time town finance board member, entered the Town Hall Meeting Room with a state trooper from his security detail.

"We were hoping you'd show up here tonight," Devlin said.

"I used to work here," Lamont responded.

Republicans defended their alternative transportation funding plan, saying it would not exceed the state's constitutional spending cap and would still use bonding for school construction, UCONN, clean water and other critical areas.

"We're not talking about new money, more money," Devlin said.

Lamont listened from the side of the room during a question-and-answer portion of the program, which some audience members used to voice concerns about the direction of the state.

"We're the only state that has not pulled out of this recession," said Barry Michelson, a Stamford Republican who ran unsuccessfully for mayor of his city in 2017.

Devlin asked if Lamont had a few minutes to take questions, which he did.

"I thank you very much for the opportunity. I didn't mean to interrupt your party," Lamont said.

Patrick Sasser, a small businessman from Stamford who is the co-founder of No Tolls CT, accused Lamont of trying to dodge him.

"Sorry you weren't in the office the other day when I presented 100,000 signatures," Sasser said of a petition drive by the group.

Sasser asked Lamont what he would say to small businesses that would be affected by the cost of tolls. For example, he said, a Greenwich heating oil company that he did not name has estimated its toll costs will be \$55,000 to \$72,000 annually.

"What do you say to these companies?" he said. "What do you say to these small businesses who are already struggling just to make it here in Connecticut and then putting this additional tax burden on them?"

Lamont challenged Sasser to find a better option.

"Patrick, I would say tell them the truth. Tell them the truth that if you borrow \$700 million a year and ask him to pay for that over the next 20 years with interest, you're not doing him or his kids any favors," Lamont said. "Tell him that this congestion gets worse and worse and it takes him 10, 15 minutes longer to deliver his oil. You're not doing him any favors at all. You can say, 'No tolls,' but you've got to say what you're for. Are you for bonding? Are you for doing nothing? You have to have an alternative."

Toll foes looked to engage the governor further, to which Lamont closed, "Hey everybody, I don't want to be a downer here, so thank you so much for the chance to be back here."

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Neil Vigdor covers politics for The Courant. He is an award-winning journalist who has interviewed Donald Trump, Michelle Obama, Mitt Romney, Jesse Jackson, Jeb Bush and Rudy Giuliani. A frequent guest

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