

Added traffic lanes for I-95, I-84? Only if federal infrastructure bill gets passed, CT lawmakers say

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U.S. Sen. Richard Blumenthal, D-Conn., far right, and Connecticut Gov. Ned Lamont, second from right, meet with crews to survey damage to an I-95 overpass and speak about infrastructure in Stamford,

Conn. Monday, Oct. 4, 2021. Connecticut Gov. Ned Lamont, U.S. Sen. Richard Blumenthal, U.S. Rep. Jim Himes, and Connecticut Transportation Commissioner Joe Giulietti joined with several local officials to stress the importance of passing the federal infrastructure bill that has reached a stalemate in Washington.

Tyler Sizemore / Hearst Connecticut Media



STAMFORD — Even for a gaggle of politicians, the hustle of Interstate 95 never stops.

Despite the cars rumbling above and trains whizzing by, federal and state officials gathered beneath a bustling highway overpass to stress the importance of a federal bill that deals with both the physical and human infrastructure, despite persistent roadblocks obstructing that goal in Washington.

“I think you’re going to find that after all these many years, now is the time to do more than a ‘state of good repair,’ which is what we do under our existing program,” Gov. Ned Lamont said over the din of traffic, surrounded by a swath of high-profile faces including U.S. Sen. Richard Blumenthal; U.S. Rep. Jim Himes, both D-Conn.; state Transportation Commissioner Joseph Giulietti; state Sen. Will Haskell, D-Westport; and state Reps. Ryan Fazio, R-Greenwich, Caroline Simmons, D-Stamford, Matt Blumenthal, D-Stamford, and David Michel, D-Stamford.

Connecticut is set to receive \$5.3 billion for highways, bridges and everything in between from the federal infrastructure package, but a topline number on the final federal package, which could push forward expansions to health care, child care, infrastructure and education, is still in flux.

Though the specific future of the federal funds remains uncertain, the state has a litany of site-specific projects shovel-ready for when funding comes in, according to Giulietti, especially along I-95. Improvements include adding an additional northbound lane to the highway from the state line to Exit 9.

The improvements aren’t limited to the interstate highway, either. Giulietti said adding an extra lane on Interstate 84 near Danbury could ease another vehicular chokepoint for local drivers.

“That will take care of that entire pinpoint that occurs and the fact that all those people in Danbury have to use the highway to get through the city,” he said.

Once federal funding comes through, Connecticut will need to match the money. The state may be asked to match “40 or 50 percent” — up to \$461 million — of what the federal government ultimately provides, according to Haskell, who is the state Senate Transportation Committee Chair.

Lamont put forth a litany of ways the state could pay for its match, including the recently-passed Highway User fee, which he said could generate between \$90 and \$100 million over time. There’s also bonding, he said, but that strategy means tighter purse strings in other parts of the budget.

“We can bond for that — that’s what people like to do,” he said, albeit he was quick to bring up the downsides of bonding. “That means a little bit less affordable housing. That means a little bit less (for) schools.”

After weeks of negotiations in the federal seat of power over which infrastructure plan becomes law, officials at the press conference reaffirmed their commitment to getting something done and underscored how important physical infrastructure is to Connecticut, which has 248 bridges and 2,100 miles of highway that the White House deemed to be in “poor condition” in April.

But getting past a “state of good repair” is more complicated than it sounds. Though \$1.1 trillion in infrastructure spending cleared hurdles in the U.S. Senate, its future relies on what 10-year spending plan — also known as a budget reconciliation plan — the U.S. House of Representatives agrees to pass.

A vote Friday fell through on the bipartisan infrastructure deal after the House failed to reach a consensus on reconciliation.

“The House of Representatives was under scrutiny last week because we’re doing what is known as the ‘sausage making process,’” Himes said Monday.

“I wouldn’t put too much consequence on the negotiations and the back and forth and all the media that occurred last week,” he said, before suggesting that the infrastructure saga could conclude by the end of October. Democratic Majority Leader Sen. Chuck Schumer also put forth that deadline in a letter to his caucus Monday.

“I am confident that sometime around the end of this month, we’re delivering the resources and we’ll make this, once again, an essential artery for the economy in this region,” Himes said.

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