



NEWS FROM: **SENATOR BOB DUFF**

Majority Whip

REPRESENTING THE 25TH SENATORIAL DISTRICT

Chair: Banks

Vice Chair: Energy & Technology; Transportation

Member: Appropriations; Commerce

Learning from Route 7

As you travel north on historic Route 7, passing through Norwalk on your way up toward Danbury, active construction is a common sight. On one stretch of Route 7, however, construction has stalled, as a portion of a new bypass in Brookfield awaits redesign.

This particular construction project isn't plagued by sinkholes or storm drains to nowhere, like the now-repaired construction debacle on Interstate 84. Nor is it years behind schedule and hundreds of millions of dollars over budget, like the critically important New Haven rail maintenance facility. And the hope is that a budget contingency built into the federally supported Route 7 project will be enough to cover any increase in cost, meaning that no additional taxpayer dollars will be spent.

However, the project does highlight a significant problem in our transportation system—one that we must solve if Connecticut is ever to move forward with a modern day transit infrastructure.

According to the Department of Transportation, work on the Brookfield bypass stopped because a slope of land was steeper than anticipated. While the department conducted aerial and field surveys of the entire construction site, this particular piece—deemed “hard to access and traverse,” according to the DOT commissioner—was never surveyed by a ground crew.

As a result, tunnels planned in the design of the roadway to maintain the migratory patterns of three species of wildlife—the Eastern box turtle, the hog-nosed snake and the slimy salamander—must be redesigned, a new treatment and soil stabilization must be used on the slope and the project must be re-permitted with the Department of Environmental Protection. While this no doubt sets the construction back, it doesn't doom the project.

It does, however, call to question the ability of our state departments to plan, design and execute major projects. The longer a major improvement project is delayed, the more it tends to appreciate significantly in cost. How much are scheduling issues affecting our state's bottom line?

Perhaps the only major benefit to our floundering national economy is that the cost of raw construction materials has dropped. Gasoline and steel prices are down from last year's high, which in theory brings down the total price of construction. With the prospect of a major infusion of federal dollars headed our way to rebuild our infrastructure and kick-start our economy, we have a prime opportunity to make serious improvements—if we can keep it all together.

Fast-tracking projects will take strong and effective leadership and competency from the Executive Branch and from those in power at the DOT. We must begin to build our efficiency and responsibility as we build our roads and railways. We cannot afford to continue to repeat the mistakes of our past, and we cannot continue to see projects like the Route 7 bypass suffer delays—budget contingency or no.