

Grist Mill fatality underscores need for state action

We hesitate to say “we told you so,” but we told you so.

Not you particularly, but the Department of Transportation and the General Assembly and all those forces united to oppose any extension of the Route 7 Connector.

Sunday we learned of the fifth person to die by crashing a car into the huge natural rock barrier at the Grist Mill end of the connector. Of the five deaths, two have been ruled suicides.

That does little to mitigate the hazard this rock pile poses. This despite the DOT’s efforts to make it “safer” by placing plastic sand barrels in front of it, adding signage with flashing lights and huge black and yellow chevrons designed to steer drivers away from the immovable obstacle.

After the previous fatal crash, there were promises from DOT the rock would be blasted away and an “escape lane” built to bring cars to a halt with a less horrendous result. Whatever happened to that promise?

Such ramps are used in other states, notably in Vermont along Route 9, designed to allowed trucks to exit the highway in the event of an emergency, coming safely to a halt in a pile of sand.

We had suggested rumble strips be installed across the lanes, similar to those ones designed to alert you if you stray from the lane onto the shoulder. DOT showed no interest.

Of course, these accidents could have been avoided if the DOT and the state administration didn’t collapse in the face of strident opposition from some Wilton residents. Even if the road had been extended northward to the intersection of the old Route 7 and lower Route 33, it would have provided a safer, more sensible merger for all traffic.

We don’t know what caused this latest fatal accident, but we can expect a loud but brief outcry for new safety measures — more barrels, more flashing lights, bigger signs. And we expect that will do little for this busiest of intersections, where multiple lanes of traffic are forced into a 90-degree turn to the left or right.

Former Norwalk state Sen. Robert Genuario, now Gov. M. Jodi Rell’s budget chief as director of the Office of Policy and Management, said he wouldn’t preclude the new Route 7 ever being extended. In published reports he held out the slim hope that it may some day be built.

As we have noted many times before, we fully support the drive to get greater reliance on mass transit rather than the automobile. As a part of this, we call for a major expansion of the Danbury branch of Metro-North to include newer cars, more frequent service and the re-electrification of the line. The best solution would be the addition of a second track and perhaps that should be the long-term goal.

We have also said that the DOT’s traditional solution of just pouring more concrete is not the answer — with one exception. If the state is to build one more road in Connecticut, it must be the new Route 7.