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Stamford commuters tell DOT head: Let us in on plans for new parking garage

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Stamford -- Dogged by criticism of the secrecy of his plans to spend \$35 million replacing a dilapidated parking garage at the Stamford train station, state Transportation Commissioner James Redeker told **the more than** 50 people attending a public hearing Thursday night, "We want to hear from you."

What he heard was an overwhelming message of concern over a process in which the state will decide who will add 300 parking spaces to its busiest train station and develop around it -- without telling anyone who's in the running to do the project or what their plans are.

"The reason why we're so frustrated and we really want more information is because we want to make sure you all understand how precious every minute is for our commute," testified William Tong, a state representative from Stamford.

"The commuters on those trains, they have to be a part of this process ... that has to happen."

It was unclear how much the public input from the hearing -- the only one scheduled for the project -- would actually influence the state's final decisions. While Redeker insisted comments would be heard, final proposals from developers in the running are due Oct. 9, four days after the public comment period on the project closes. After that, the state will enter into confidential negotiations to pick a winner.

"The bids are being worked on now [without any public input]," said Jim Cameron, chairman of the Connecticut Commuter Rail Council, to scattered applause from the audience. "The time for public input would have been a year ago ... not while [the project] is already in process. It's a done deal."

Redeker continued to defend the confidentiality of the process, explaining that the state Department of Transportation is asking the private sector for ideas rather than spending tens of millions in state money to design the garage itself. Those ideas need to remain confidential because they're proprietary, he said.

In fact, Redeker added, the state had tried a similar process years ago where it did "try to solicit proposals that were public proposals."

"How many did we get? Zero," he told the audience. When DOT asked developers why they wouldn't submit proposals, Redeker said, they responded, "Well, our proposals have value."

The DOT has said the public will be informed of all the specifics of the plans once the agency chooses a final one -- and that changes could be made after that.

Jack Condlin, president and CEO of the Stamford Chamber of Commerce, wasn't buying it. After the winner is chosen, he said, the public's chance to weigh in would be even more limited.

"No pun intended, the train has left the station at that point," he said, to more applause from the audience.

'Outrageous'

Thursday night's hearing was supposed to focus narrowly on the "potential environmental impact" of the final project. But since no specifics on the project have been released, commuters couldn't say much on the topic. Instead, they implored the state to take their thoughts into account.

Almost everyone who testified said that when the 727-space current garage in place now is torn down and replaced with a 1000-space garage, the new garage must not be farther away from the train station. The state's request for proposals included an option for developers to build the garage as far as a quarter-mile away.

"Occasionally, I have commuted with crutches, with a cast, and I see a lot of people struggling with double-strollers, children ... and everybody's always carrying something," said Stamford resident Esther Giordano. "So walking a quarter-mile, forget it. That's outrageous."

Giordano said she lives just a few miles away from the station, but has to leave 20 minutes early to catch a 7:50 a.m. train to Manhattan. She is currently on the waiting list -- along with 857 other people -- for a \$70 monthly parking permit at the station, and so she has to pay between \$8 and \$10 per day to park there, depending on how long her car is parked.

The DOT says it has given developers leeway with where to build the garage in part because it wants to encourage "transit-oriented development," which could include residential, office, or retail space near the station as well. But commuters said their interests should be paramount, before any other development ideas.

"You've got to get your priorities straight," said David Martin, a former president of Stamford's Board of Representatives who serves on the Board of Finance. "... What scares some of us is that [transit-oriented development] is an excuse to put more development and not solve the fundamental problems of our train station."

Many also criticized the lack of input from Stamford officials in the process. Because the state owns and operates the train station, the DOT will take the lead on the project. Top elected and unelected officials in Stamford, when asked earlier this week, didn't know who the potential developers were and did not expect to find out anytime soon.

Responding to that specific concern, Redeker said, "I just reject that." He said the DOT took all recommendations that were put into a study the city commissioned on the train station years ago. "We're not ignoring, we're partnering," he said.

Still, Redeker had acknowledged in an earlier interview with The Mirror that the city will not know the identities of developers, or their proposals, before the state picks a final one.

"The city is not part of the public-private partnership in a direct way," he said in the interview.

'We need to fix that'

Once testimony had finished, Redeker took the podium again to say that he understood that the state's new process was "totally disconcerting" -- especially "from a public involvement point of view." "We need to fix that," he said.

Martin said he found those words encouraging, and that the stakes for Stamford -- and the state -- were incredibly high. Metro-North has counted 27,000 daily boardings and disembarkations at Stamford Transportation Center. It is the busiest train station in the state and the second-busiest (after Grand Central Station) on Metro-North's New Haven Line.

"Is there a more important transportation facility in all of Connecticut than the Stamford rail station?" Martin asked DOT officials, adding, "Is there a transportation facility in all of Connecticut that has more problems than the Stamford train station?"

Still, many were not convinced anything would change.

"It seems that the taxpayers and citizens of the city are under assault by Hartford," said Barry Michelson, a member of Stamford's zoning board, in his testimony. Leaving the hearing, he expressed more discouragement.

"There's no proposal [to talk about,]" Michelson said. "They're doing an environmental impact statement and they don't have a proposal. So what are you evaluating?"

The Commuter Rail Council's Jim Cameron bluntly asked Redeker if he would let other stakeholders in the project besides DOT, such as commuters themselves, see and review proposals before making a decision. Others also asked if there would be additional public hearings.

Redeker did not respond directly to either of those questions, saying only that he would work to improve public involvement in the process.

"I can't be put on the spot tonight for an answer on exactly how to do that," he said.

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