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# No way to run a railroad

Leave it to the politicians to find after all these years that the space between a rock and a hard place offers ample room for a tax hike.

The rock is the reported \$1.2 billion revenue shortfall faced by the Metropolitan Transportation Authority. The hard place is comprised of residents and businesses already taxed to the cusp of insolvency.

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The alternative to a tax, we have been told, are schedule cutbacks and shutter ticket windows. Nonetheless, the reaction to the tax has been consistently negative.

Connecticut, to even the casual observer, has avoided the bloodstorm raging in its cross-border neighbor over funding for commuter rail. Westchester County Association President and CEO Bill Mooney said the reason is simple: New York's three biggest power brokers, Sheldon Silver in the Assembly, Malcolm Smith in the Senate and David Paterson in the governor's mansion, are all New York City men. "They don't want to absorb it, so they decided to pass these taxes around," he said. "It's New York City vs. the rest of the state. That's the reason we're stealing the headlines from Connecticut. I've gotten more calls on this than on any subject in a long time."

Come January, Terri Cronin, the co-vice chairwoman of the Connecticut Commuter Council, expects a 7 percent rate hike to accompany a new fleet of MTA rail cars.

"It's hard to say it's unjust when we're getting new cars," she said. "We

just hope that by keeping to what we know is going to happen, riders can budget for it."

Cronin's group negotiated with the MTA to scrap a plan for a dollar-per-trip surcharge to boost revenues. Her commuter council also won on service cutbacks, which Cronin said are now off the table.

Is there a fence at the New York border that prevents such reasonable, proactive thinking?

The solution as crafted in Albany is a 34-cent tax for every \$100 earned, possibly with the school districts surrounded by a magical rebate bubble so as not to double-charge taxpayers who already float their schools with hefty tax burdens. Hospitals and other health care providers, according to Mooney, will not be so lucky, paying additional millions with a payroll tax. "At least in Westchester, they get something for it," he said. "In Rockland, they get nothing."

The closer you get to New York City, the better is the train service, which would, at first glance, steal the thunder of those who would rail against a tax hike in Westchester and Putnam counties. But those commuters are already in line to get smacked by a 10 percent fare hike come June. For west-bank Hudson River communities, where a one-seat ride to New York City remains a dream, the logic of any tax increase completely fries on the third rail.

Let this called-for tax, if it is a done deal, at least awaken us to the need to work smarter and to do the same jobs better with less. That means consolidations. If done well, perhaps Connecticut will look west across to New York for guidance in how to get the job done right, instead of, as with the railroads, the other way around.