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A Conversation with Transportation Commissioner Joe Giulietti: Cameron on Transportation

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Joe Giulietti loves to talk, especially about trains. As Commissioner of the Connecticut Department of Transportation when he calls me and say “Jim... let’s have a chat”, I’m all ears. In a recent exclusive one-on-one, here’s what he said:

Will rail come back?

The commissioner says yes, but maybe not until the fall.

“Am I optimistic? I have to be. The disappointing fact right now is we (still) only have 10% of (pre-COVID)

ridership. The trains we have now can meet (that) demand. If ridership increases we can add more. ”

Are the trains safe?

“We have one of the safest (rail) systems out there. The air is exchanged in the cars almost every five minutes. There’s a constant flow of fresh air.” While Metro-North did experiment with virus-killing UV light treatments in the cars’ HVAC it turns out that an ionization process is more effective at scrubbing virus from the air.

On mask compliance:

Initially voluntary, then with a small fine for offenders, mask-wearing is now required by Federal rules. “Compliance is between 95 and 97%. Enforcement is done by the MTA Police, strategically placed to respond (to non-wearers).”

On increasing train speed:

Trains are still running slow under FRA rules following the Fairfield and Spuyten Duyvil derailments in 2013. But now that Positive Train control is installed, CDOT is working with the FRA to get their speed restrictions lifted.

“People are asking for higher speeds. We also have a Governor constantly reminding us he wants faster speeds,” says the Commissioner. But, he added “you know I never bought into 30-30-30. It’s just a vision and a goal.”

On modifying timetables:

Commuters complain that trains make too many stops, further slowing up the ride. So CDOT is studying ‘zoned service’. A train might run from Grand Central

to Stamford then skip-stop to Bridgeport. The train behind it could make the intermediate stops.

“With ridership down we can step back and look at our schedules. Modeling (by computer) has got a lot better. Of course every town wants express service from their station,” he said with a chuckle. Best bet is the fastest service will be to and from the busiest stations, perhaps as early as the fall.

Commuting hours have also changed, so also look for added service earlier in the AM.

What about fares?

“I don’t know that we’ll have a monthly ticket anymore... based on the utilization. Maybe we’ll come up with a 30-trip ticket.”

There's no plan to resume peak fares at rush hour but the railroad and CDOT have to find revenue to cover their huge operating deficits beyond Uncle Sam's one-time bailout. "A lot of people don't buy into the subsidization. We're trying to find a balance to keep trains running and meet the social justice (obligation of service)."

About more M8 cars:

As the final new M8 cars get delivered, the railroad has more than enough cars for needed service. CDOT may even have enough M8s to share a pair with MBTA in Boston for their testing, allowing for group orders of future cars. Testing of the M8s on Shore Line East is progressing (after six years).

On transit-oriented development (T.O.D.):

The Legislature is debating looser, state-wide zoning regulations, especially near train stations. But what happens to those developments ideas if ridership doesn't come back?

"I do believe (ridership) is coming back. If it doesn't we won't just be talking about T.O.D. but the future of business itself."

Jim Cameron has been a Darien resident for more than 25 years. He is the founder of the [Commuter Action Group](#), sits on the [Merritt Parkway Conservancy](#) board and also serves on the Darien RTM and as program director for Darien TV79. The opinions expressed in this column, republished with permission of Hearst CT Media, are only his own. You can reach him at CommuterActionGroup@gmail.com.