

CAMERON TALKING TRANSPORTATION

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Date : November 24, 2022

This week will be the busiest of the year for Amtrak as hundreds of thousands of Americans depend on the nation's passenger railroad to get them to and from their Thanksgiving plans.

If you don't have train reservations by now, good luck. Every seat on every train will probably be taken, especially in the heavily traveled Northeast corridor and the New Haven to Springfield (and points north) service. You should anticipate delays and maybe even standing-room-only conditions. (By the way... only folding bicycles are allowed on Amtrak this holiday week.)

The question is why. Why can't Amtrak add more cars to its trains to carry the extra loads, earn some badly needed revenue and help people make their holiday journey? The answer: bad management.

When COVID hit, Metro-North decided to not lay off engineers and conductors, a costly but prescient decision. But when ridership returned, they were ready, adding trains and serving passengers. Capacity wasn't a problem and won't be going forward.

Amtrak, on the other hand, contracted quickly despite receiving \$3.7 billion from Congress to minimize disruptions. Long distance trains, which once ran daily, were cut to three times a week. Trains between Washington and Boston, including the money-making Acela, saw revenue drop 98%.

The railroad's workforce was cut 20% with 500 veteran employees leaping at buyout offers, taking with them experience and institutional knowledge hard to replace. That made it even more difficult to maintain Amtrak's 40+ year-old railcars and 20-year-old locomotives, many of which are still "shopped". Meanwhile, Amtrak's management was pocketing \$2.3 million in bonuses in 2021 for cost reduction efforts. Critics are now implying the bosses were slow to restore service to protect their own bonus checks, the riders be damned.

By the time COVID vaccines arrived and ridership demand returned, the damage was done. Long distance Superliner cars, diners and sleeping cars, are still awaiting repairs because Amtrak can't find skilled workers or even would-be apprentices. The railroad is on a hiring blitz but they can't compete with private industry.

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One insider tells Trains Magazine Amtrak is seeing a 50% cancellation rate even for interviews. And hiring, then training, an electrician to work on railcars built in the 1980's is quite different than the skills those wiring-jockeys might use in building a new house.

Staff shortages for on-board personnel mean that Café Cars may not be in service or sleeping cars can't be used, despite demand. That means fares will remain high. Like Uber, Amtrak operates on a "surge pricing" model: the higher the demand, the higher the fares. At last check, one-way from NY to Boston on the days before and after Thanksgiving was \$309... in coach!

Train watchers in the Connecticut River Valley have seen ridership there soar in recent months. But while CTRail (run by the CDOT) will be adding more trains (no reservations necessary) next week, Amtrak (which runs half of all trains), will not. They just don't have the cars.

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. You can reach him at CommuterActionGroup@gmail.com.