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## **Commuters are NOT Coming Back. A New Train Riding Era Now Begins: Cameron on Transportation**

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I have one belated prediction for the new year and you're not going to like it: After we all get vaccinated and things "return to normal," regular weekday commuters on Metro-North will not be coming back as hoped.

Why should they? Who wants to spend \$400-plus a month and waste two-plus hours each day, five days a week riding a train into New York City if you don't have to? If this pandemic has shown us anything it's that going to an office isn't necessary to doing our jobs.

Sure, there are some people who have to show up in person to do their work (healthcare staffers, auto mechanics etc.), but that's never been the bulk of Metro-North's ridership. Most of those commuters can do

their jobs just as easily from home (or a satellite office in the ‘burbs) as in an office cubicle in midtown.

And their employers, having discovered this, are also finding they don’t need to waste millions on fancy real estate. They are downsizing too. So there may not be an office to go back to, even if you want to.

Oh, you may still need to show up “at work” one or two days a week for meetings in downsized, shared offices. And while you may think you are longing to get back on the train and return to your job, that’s probably as much your cabin fever from being quarantined for months as any real desire to get back to the old grind.

Even pre-pandemic the railroad found that monthly rail-pass holders weren’t commuting five days a week, maybe more like four days. They had already found they could work without being at work.

One group that never stopped working was Metro-North employees. In the darkest days last spring, parent MTA saw more COVID-19 deaths among bus and train drivers than the city had among its cops and firefighters. They all deserve our thanks. Yes, train ridership has slowly climbed back from a low of 5% to something like 20% on weekdays (closer to 50% on weekends), but even with federal aid, current service levels are not sustainable.

Pre-COVID when the trains were standing-room-only and with Metro-North riders paying the highest ticket prices in the US, the railroad was still losing money: about 20% of every ride was subsidized by taxpayers.

So if my predictions are correct and ridership doesn’t come soaring back, how is the railroad (or the state) going to handle deficits that quadruple or quintuple? Something’s gotta give.

Sadly, I think we will see further service reductions, especially in off-peak hours. That will mean layoffs of hundreds of dedicated (and yes, well paid) railroad conductors, engineers and maintenance staffers. And yes, we may also see fare increases. It will all add up to less (service) for more (cost).

It used to be that Connecticut’s tax base was tied to the availability of dependable train service: people lived in Fairfield county because they could commute. But if they don’t need to commute, how important is the train? And what will happen to TOD (transit oriented development) when ‘getting there’ isn’t necessary to ‘getting it done’?

I don’t think the train is going away completely, nor is New York City. We will still want to “go into town” for entertainment and to see the few friends we still have who’ll be living there.

But when COVID is gone, for commuters things will never just get back to the way they were. That train has left the station.

*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](mailto:CommuterActionGroup@gmail.com).*