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Connecticut Has Freight Railroads, and We Need to Invest in Them: Cameron on Transportation

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How would you like a plan to remove thousands of trucks from Connecticut highways, clean up the air and create new jobs?

Who wouldn't? It's a win-win-win plan that you'd expect Governor Lamont to embrace, especially in this time of TCI (the Transportation Climate Initiative). The solution? Invest in our state's freight railroads.

Yes, there are still freight trains in Connecticut, just not very many. But there could be more.

In its earlier days as a profitable, private railroad, the New Haven ran hundreds of freight trains each day. But today the railroad is too crowded with (relatively faster) passenger trains and the bridges and catenary lines are too low for modern double-stack container trains.

But in other parts of Connecticut, freight still travels by rail on more than 500 miles of track, most of it owned by the state Department of Transportation and leased to eight different private operators.

In western Connecticut we have the Housatonic, Pam Am Southern, Connecticut Southern, the Naugatuck and Providence and Worcester Railroads, to name but a few.

These short line railroads already carry 3.8 million tons of freight annually in our state, keeping 350,000 truck loads off our roads and reducing greenhouse emissions by 75%. Diesel trains can carry up to 500 ton-miles per gallon. Trucks manage about 130.

These freight railroads carry everything from chlorine-based disinfectants for water treatment, food for our tables, huge electrical transformers and bulk commodities. Their customers include such Connecticut businesses as Becton Dickinson, Kimberly Clark, Home Depot.

There are even plans to turn an abandoned factory site in Naugatuck into an inland port, receiving freight trains of goods to be offloaded onto trucks for local delivery.

Consider the mighty 19-mile-long Naugatuck Railroad. Founded in 1845, the line once ran from Winsted to Bridgeport, offering both passenger trains and freight service. These days the line is much shorter, but they still hand-off long loads of boxcars filled with construction debris bound for landfills in Ohio.

While marginally profitable, these freight railroads need help to continue, let alone expand, their service to the state's businesses if they are to meet federal expectations of a 30% increase in rail freight traffic by 2040.

As their "landlord," the state needs to invest in their infrastructure by rebuilding bridges to carry heavier loads, lay new track, replace worn ties and improve grade crossings.

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Eight years ago the state bonded \$10 million to fund such repairs and the railroads chipped in their own money, too. They had to, with \$80 million of needed work, most of which has gone unfinished.

Early in 2020, the Legislature approved an additional \$10 million in investments, but the Bond Commission has yet to approve the funding and issue the bonds. When the Bond Commission met mid-April they found \$467 million in total funding for dozens of projects but the \$10 million for freight rail wasn't even on the agenda.

The inestimable Ken Dixon asked the governor if his old "debt diet" was over and the governor said no, that the new bonding was an "investment" in everything from housing to economic development, thanks to interest rates being so low (1.8%).

Ten million dollars in state bonding is chump change. At their next meeting the Bond Commission and the governor should get on with the job of investing in Connecticut's rail freight.

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.