

Could Commuter Ferry Service Work from Here to NYC? Nope: Cameron on Transportation

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Why can't we run commuter ferries on Long Island Sound?

I can't tell you how often I've been asked that question. But as with so many "simple solutions" to our transportation woes, there are logical reasons why ferry boats won't work.

For starters, they are too slow. Even "fast ferries" can only make about 30 knots (35 mph) in open waters, half the (potential) speed of a train.

To dock at downtown areas in major cities like New Haven, Bridgeport, Norwalk and Stamford, they'd have to sail up rivers and inlets with 5-knot speed limits.

That really slows down the ride.

If we put ferry terminals closer to the Sound, we'd be eating into our most expensive waterfront real estate. And how would you get there? By car, parking where? By shuttle bus? And how long would that take?

We'd need dozens of ferries to compete with Metro-North's fleet. At rush hour on the railroad, there's a train every 20 minutes to Grand Central. There isn't a ferry service in the U.S. that can offer that frequency. Would you be willing to wait an hour if you miss the boat?

On a beautiful day, a ferry ride to work sounds like fun. But how about in a winter storm? You'd be back on the dependable old train in a heartbeat.

Even the few operators who've considered launching ferry service in Connecticut say it would come with fares at least twice those of Metro-North. Aren't people complaining already about the trains being too expensive?

Fast ferry boats are gas guzzlers, the aquatic equivalent to the Concorde. Even when the Pequots built high-speed catamarans to ferry gamblers to their casino to lose money, it cost them a fortune. Those ferries are still dry-docked, too expensive to operate.

When a private ferry operator offered service from Glen Cove on Long Island to midtown, it lasted only a few months. The same thing happened when ferry service was offered on the Hudson River from Yonkers. Why? Because both routes paralleled existing train service and the ferries couldn't compete. It also won't work here in Connecticut where Metro-North operates.

Mind you, there are places that ferries do work, especially where they go from point A to point B when you can't do that on land. Like the cross-Sound ferries that run from Bridgeport to Port Jefferson or New London to Orient Point on Long Island. Or consider Seattle, where ferries connect downtown with island suburbs.

A ferry from Connecticut to LaGuardia Airport might make sense. But in the late '80s when Pan Am tried to compete with Eastern Airlines in the lucrative air-shuttle market, it introduced the Pan Am Water Shuttle connecting LaGuardia to midtown.

I rode it once, on a bright summer's day, and it was sweet. But even funneling passengers to its own planes, Pan Am couldn't afford the aquatic connection. And since Amtrak's Acela came along, who flies the shuttles anyway?

One final reason why I don't think ferries would work: nobody else does so either.

I'm sure ferry operators in New York City have looked at Connecticut's Gold Coast, crunched the numbers and backed away. It's a free market, folks. If ferries made sense (and dollars), they'd be running here by now.

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