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Fewer Truckers Will Cost Consumers: Cameron on Transportation

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As if crumbling bridges and pot-holed highways weren't enough to worry about, America's transportation network now faces a new crisis: a shortage of truck drivers.

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According to the American Trucking Association, trucks carry more than 70 percent of all domestic freight, bringing in \$719 billion in revenue.

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It's trucks, not trains, that deliver our Amazon purchases and fill the shelves of our favorite big box stores for the holidays. So while we hate to drive behind them on our highways, we love what trucks deliver.

The half-million remaining truck drivers in the U.S. are continuing to dwindle as more people retire and their positions are unfilled. The ATA estimates the industry needs 51,000 new truck drivers, and new candidates are not stepping forward.

Roadblocks to Recruiting

Why? Well, the ATA says millennials don't like the lifestyle. They don't want to spend long, lonely days or weeks doing long-hauls, eating bad food and sleeping in their rigs. Even money, like \$50,000 signing bonuses, isn't attracting them.

The average trucker makes \$59,000 and drivers for private fleets can make \$86,000. But lengthy, expensive training courses present a roadblock to immediate recruitment. And newly mandated technology tracking drivers' time on the road is exacerbating the problem.

Drivers are only supposed to drive 11 hours of every 14 hours a day, but many had been fudging their paper log-book records because they got paid by the mile. Since last December, electronic logging has been the law, so the safety rules are impossible to circumvent. Of course, nobody wants tired drivers on the road, but in the interest of safety, truckers are losing efficiency.

Higher Costs

Where will the industry find new drivers? Well, women still only represent about 6 percent of all drivers. And minorities have seen their numbers increase 12 percent in the past year. The industry is also seeking a reduction in the minimum driving age from 21 to 18.

What's this all mean to us as consumers? Higher costs.

Amazon saw a 38 percent increase in shipping costs in the first quarter, forcing it to raise its (unlimited free-shipping) Prime membership fee from \$99 to \$119 a year. Across the industry spectrum, shipping rates are rising.

But the real solution will likely be self-driving trucks.

Driverless Trucks in Connecticut? Not Soon

That's why big companies like Waymo (owned by Google), Tesla and Uber, as well as truck-builders like Freightliner and Volvo are investing heavily in the autonomous technology.

However, we won't see driverless trucks on Connecticut interstates anytime soon. There's probably too much congestion to make them practical.

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But there are vast stretches of interstates out west where self-driving trucks make perfect sense, delivering loads of products to automated warehouses where robots will unload them.

Change the Way They're Paid?

Automating trucking may be good for the industry, but it certainly doesn't help with recruitment. Who wants to sign on for a career knowing they might be replaced by a robot?

Sociologist and 13-year trucker Steve Viscelli says the solution is to change the system: Pay truckers for actual hours on the road (not just mileage), including when drivers waste hours or days waiting for a new load.

Whatever the solution, it's clear who'll end up paying: consumers.

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.