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Finding Parking for Your Train Commute — Now There's an App for That: Cameron on Transportation

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Date : April 8, 2019

How can you get people to commute by train if they can't get to the train station?

Those two-wheeled, buff millennials would have us believe we should all bike our way from home to the train. But not all of us are that athletic or inclined to take our lives in our hands wheeling through traffic and bad weather.

No, the real solution (at least for now) is car-parking. But with a parking permit wait list of up to seven years

in many communities, shouldn't towns be thinking of building new expensive, decked parking lots? Maybe. But not until they've made sure they're maximizing the use of all existing parking opportunities.

That's where Boxcar comes in. Yes, when it comes to rail station parking, there's an app for that.

Boxcar bills itself as an "Airbnb for parking." It matches would-be parkers with private landowners who have available parking spaces near train stations.

Launched in 2017 in Cranford, New Jersey, Boxcar is the brainchild of 34-year-old Joe Colangelo, who grew up in that town

Cranford's a typical commuter town about an hour by train from New York City. Like most such towns, it's always had about a three-year waiting list for station parking permits. After graduating from the University of California-Berkeley and serving in the U.S. Navy in Afghanistan, Colangelo returned to Cranford and found, decades later, it still had a three-year waiting list.

But he also noticed a lot of empty parking spots at nearby churches and funeral homes. Why couldn't they be used by commuters, earning the landowners some money and the commuters new access to mass transit? Thus, his app was born.

Boxcar's app allows a user to find available parking, reserve it up to 14 days in advance and pay for it online. Spaces average about \$6 a day with 75 percent of that going to the landowner and 25 percent to Boxcar. Spaces closer to the station are more expensive.

Boxcar's first parking space was Colangelo's own driveway. The app is now used in 25 New Jersey towns and is making inroads in Connecticut. They've been operating in New Canaan since 2018 and have just launched a pilot program in Darien. After just two years in operation, Colangelo's four-employee company is already profitable.

Colangelo says "there's a high cost to free parking," especially when towns (or the Connecticut Department of Transportation) are considering major capital investments in new parking structures. Colangelo says in 10 or 20 years, parking lots will be empty and we'll all be shuttling around in autonomous vehicles.

"Boxcar is a bridge to the future," he says.

Boxcar is also finding applications in a different kind of time sharing — office space. With so many people working from home or on the road, there's no reason to go into NYC for work. But sometimes you do need a desk and a place to meet clients. So Boxcar can find you both.

"The average commuter only makes 3.5 trips into the city each week," Colangelo said. But working with nearby co-working spaces and law offices, that virtual worker can easily snare a desk or meeting room for a few hours.

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With big cities like Stamford enjoying a 28 percent office vacancy rate, imagine the possibilities.

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.