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'I'm Desperate for a Reason To Be Bullish on Mass Transit ... I Don't See Any': Cameron on Transportation

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When coronavirus hit us this spring, more than just our normal rail commuting patterns were disrupted. One young entrepreneur's business simply imploded, but now he's coming back, stronger than before.

Joe Colangelo is founder and CEO of [Boxcar](#), the New Jersey-based company that bills itself as the “Airbnb of parking,” matching commuters with empty parking spots near train stations in Stamford, Darien, New Canaan and Stratford.

Before COVID-19, his business was red hot. But by early March he knew it was doomed as people stopped commuting and demand for parking evaporated.

“We’re lucky our business fell 100 percent,” he told me. “It forced us to try new things. I’m not the smartest guy in the world but I can figure out what people need.”

And what they needed by mid-March was food. So Boxcar partnered with local produce distributors that were hurting because their restaurant clients were shut down, and developed a contact-less food box drive-thru service. For \$50, you could drive to a local parking lot, pop your trunk and have a big box of fruits, veggies, milk and eggs placed in your trunk.

- **SEE ALSO:** "[Metro-North Increases Train Service as More Passengers Return: Here's What's Changed](#)" (June 15)

Boxcar is now doing 1,000 food boxes a week in six New Jersey counties and gaining hundreds of new subscribers, building their database. They’ve recently added fresh oysters from the Hamptons, do-it-yourself pizza kits and even cupcakes made by a local baker who’d otherwise lost his business.

Now other service industries are asking Boxcar to market their work, like at-home car detailing and landscaping.

“They handle their expertise and we do what we do best, the tech and the customer service,” Colangelo said.

His latest family-friendly offering is drive-in movies. Even before New Jersey’s governor had allowed them, Colangelo used his municipal contacts to develop a plan — so when the state said “OK,” he sold out his bookings in one hour.

Boxcar hires the AV company to set up their gear. The \$25-per-car is split 50-50 with the movie studio, and up to 200 families get to enjoy a night out. His plan has been so successful that 70 towns in the tri-state area are asking him to bring the drive-in concept to their residents.

During this business transition, Boxcar hasn’t had a single layoff. In fact, they’ve added staff, given everyone a raise and are still profitable.

“Expanding beyond commuter parking was always part of my long-term plan,” said the former U.S. Navy officer turned Booz Allen Hamilton consultant. So in a way, he’s grateful the pandemic accelerated his plans.

“What I’m looking for is points of friction. People are leaving the city for the suburbs, but that comes with challenges,” he said. “That’s what we want to help them solve. We see Boxcar as a ‘passport to the suburbs.’”

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Colangelo still has hope for his commuting clientele. He's getting a lot of requests now from Fortune 500 companies seeking van pools for their city-bound employees, not just to avoid mass transit but for safety and contact tracing.

"Our software knows exactly who is on every van every day. So if anyone gets sick, we can immediately notify everyone they came in contact with. You can't do that on mass transit," Colangelo said.

"I'm desperate for a reason to be bullish on mass transit," he lamented. "But right now I just don't see any."

Nor do I, Joe.

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.