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In Three Months, This Commuter's Train Was On Time Just Once: Cameron on Transportation

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How bad has service been on Metro-North? Ask Chris Golier, a Fairfield family man in his 40s who rides the train daily from Southport to Grand Central.

“Commuting is a soul-sucking exercise,” he says.

What used to be a 60-minute ride to and from New York, now takes 75 minutes. His trains are rarely on time. Forget Metro-North’s claim of having an 88 percent on-time performance. It’s been more like 37 percent for Golier.

How does he know? He kept a log.

“People take it for granted that the train is going to be late. Most of us just deal with it or take an earlier train,” he said. “But after riding Metro-North for 10 years, I knew trains were running late, so I kept a record for three months. I used my iPhone to record the exact time my train’s doors opened at Southport and when I got off in GCT.”

Golier’s log covers three months from July through September. Though he usually takes the same morning train (scheduled for 7:12 a.m. from Southport), he takes a variety of evening trains home, so his data reflects systemic delays.

Even taking into account the railroad’s on-time grace period of 5 minutes and 59 seconds, only once in three months did the train meet the published timetable. Just once.

“These are new cars. They should be quicker,” he says. “I know the MTA needs to do maintenance, but I pay \$391 a month and fares are rising faster than the inflation rate while service keeps getting worse.”

Armed with real, tangible data — not just the usual commuter complaints of “my train is always late” — Golier sent his findings to area politicians. His local selectman responded immediately and asked to meet with him. But his town’s two state representatives and senators didn’t even reply, aside from automatic responses acknowledging receipt.

“I tried sending my spreadsheet to [U.S.] Sen. [Richard] Blumenthal, but his website wasn’t working. [U.S.] Sen. [Chris] Murphy gave me a boilerplate reply that wasn’t worth my time reading,” he lamented.

Yes, the elections are over and one wonders if the pols even care.

What he hoped would get the officials’ attention wasn’t just the train data, but its effect on the local tax base.

“Real estate values are going down as commuting time goes up, especially for bedroom communities farther east,” Golier said.

He also sent his data to Metro-North, which responded with an explanation about needed maintenance.

“It’s frustrating because neither MTA nor the politicians have a long-term plan they can articulate, which suggests the problem will not be solved in the coming years,” Golier said. “Commuters are stuck and have no recourse except to move.”

Who else should commuters turn to in frustration? Golier admits the conductors, being the face of the railroad, are caught in the middle.

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“We know they’re not driving the train, and many of them apologize and admit the railroad isn’t delivering the kind of service they should,” he said.

Golier doesn’t know what his next step will be or when he will get an answer from the folks he helped elect to Hartford and Washington to represent him.

But at least he did the right thing.

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.