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More M8 Train Cars on the Horizon, But It'll Take a While — Cameron on Transportation

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Categories : [Opinion](#), [Transportation](#)

Tagged as : [Cameron on Transportation](#), [Cameron on Transportation 2016](#), [Jim Cameron 2016](#), [Jim Cameron's Transportation Column](#)

Date : December 16, 2016

Riders on Metro-North just got an early holiday gift from the railroad and the state [Department of Transportation](#) — a bright, shiny new train set. It's not a toy, but real! We've been promised 94 more M8 rail cars! And just in time (though they won't start arriving until 2019).

We've been enjoying the new M8 cars since their introduction in 2011 and they have proved highly reliable. Unlike the old M2 cars, many of which were older than the passengers who rode in them and were prone to breakdowns each winter, the new M8 cars are champions.

They go over 460,000 miles between mechanical breakdowns, which is 53 percent better than the railroad's

own goals for the Kawasaki-designed and built cars.

Work on the M8's started in 2006 with an initial order of 300 cars. Another 80 cars were optioned in 2011 and 25 more single, unpowered cars were then added to the fleet, bringing the total to the 405 cars we have today. (When the newest cars start arriving in three years, the last of the old M2 cars will finally be scrapped).

Because of their unique design, operating on three different power systems, the M8 cars were not cheap. The first cars cost \$2.3 million but Kawasaki is now commanding \$3.8 million for the 60 now on order and \$3.7 million for another 34 cars on option.

Part of the price hike is attributed to improved design and addition of the long-awaited Positive Train Control system that could help avoid crashes and other safety equipment like closed circuit TV.

The state will cover 65 percent of the costs and the [Metropolitan Transportation Authority](#) will bear the other 35 percent. Our share will probably be paid for through bonding. Ten planned "Café Cars," to be fabricated from older, original M8 cars, will be completely paid for by Connecticut.

Rising Ridership

Why is the railroad going to all of this expense? Because it became victim of its own success: ridership has been soaring in recent years.

When the first M8 cars were ordered, Metro-North thought it would have enough cars to handle ridership until 2020. But we blew through those numbers years early. That meant more passengers than seats and crowded, oftentimes standing-room-only conditions at rush hour.

Jim Cameron's recent articles on Metro-North:

- [Pay Your Fare Even When the Conductor Doesn't Ask — or You're Shoplifting](#) (Dec. 4)
- [Trains Slip Sliding on Wet Leaf Goo is a Bigger Mess Than You May Think](#) (Nov. 26)
- [Staying Safe on the Train](#) (Nov. 19)
- [The Billion Dollar Bridge](#) (Nov. 17)
- [Politicians and Promises](#) (Nov. 15)

Why the surge in ridership? A stronger economy, which means more jobs in New York City. Worsening traffic on I-95, which makes the train an attractive alternative. The railroad's reliability, even in the winter. And yes, people really like the new cars with their power plugs at every row, working heating and air

conditioning systems and pleasing design.

All of those attractions have seemed stronger than the negatives to train-taking: lower gas prices, higher rail fares and insufficient station parking.

So the question now is, are we ordering enough new cars to keep up with demand? Given the three year lag-time between ordering and delivery, will a 499-car fleet be enough if ridership keeps growing as fast, if not faster?

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As new cars start arriving in 2019 they'll first be used to add capacity to existing trains to deal with rush-hour crowding. As more cars arrive, 24 of our M8's will be shifted over to Shore Line East service between New London and New Haven. And maybe, if we're lucky, by 2020 we'll have enough cars to actually increase service, adding more trains to the timetable.

If we don't want to waste billions of dollars on Governor Malloy's idea to "widen I-95," let's instead invest in our railroad and order more cars now.

Jim Cameron has been a Darien resident for 25 years. He is the founder of the Commuter Action Group and also serves on the Darien RTM. The opinions expressed in this column are only his own. You can reach him at CommuterActionGroup@gmail.com

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