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One of the Few Profitable Transit Companies in the U.S. — the Bridgeport Ferry: Cameron on Transportation

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Public transportation is a money-losing proposition. But Connecticut is home to one of the few profitable transit companies in the U.S. It's not CT Transit or Metro-North, both of which are heavily subsidized. No, the operation that's squarely in the black is the [Bridgeport–Port Jefferson Steamboat Company](#), a.k.a. “the ferry.”

“If you tried to start this ferry company today, you couldn't do it,” says the ferry company's chief operating officer, Fred Hall. Today's ferry is a legacy of the 1883 cross-Sound service run by PT Barnum.

Hall has been on the boats since 1976 when he worked weekends as a bartender as a “side-hustle” to his

advertising job in New York City.

In those days they used to run a Friday and Saturday night “Rock the Sound” cruise leaving Port Jefferson at 10 pm. Complete with a live rock band and a lot of drinking (the legal age then was 18), the three hour cruise drew 600 passengers a night.

From there Hall was promoted to general manager of the Bridgeport terminal, assistant general manager and finally to vice president in charge of the entire operation. And he thoroughly enjoys his work, commuting from his home on Long Island to inspect the three-vessel fleet several times a week.

He’s not alone: the ferry carries almost 100 daily walk-on commuters, crossing in both directions, who are an important indicator of the economy’s strength to Hall.

“When the numbers of monthly commuter (at \$240 per month) are high, that’s a sign of a weakening jobs market because people have to commute long distances to find work,” he observes.

But for cars carried on the ferry the opposite is true. “In 2005 we carried 460,000 cars. In 2018, only 450,000.” Why? Because Hall says so many of his repeat customers are using the ferry to get to second homes: beach homes on Long Island or winter ski cabins in New England.

“You can probably fly out West in the winter and get more reliable snow conditions and still save money compared to driving to Vermont,” Hall says of his northbound Long Island customers.

Big changes are coming for the Bridgeport ferry, starting with an annual May fare increase. Tickets which used to be sold onboard “using carnival tickets on a broom handle” are now e-tickets sold and scanned before boarding. If you’re bringing a car, reservations are a must, especially on weekends. If you show up without a ticket expect to pay a surcharge, just like on Metro-North.

The ferry company is still working on moving to a new, larger terminal farther east in the harbor, a 19-acre site that will also support a deep-water shipping pier — if the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers dredges the harbor. But that work is a Catch 22, he says. “They dredge where there’s shipping traffic. But that traffic depends on dredging.”

The new, \$35 million ferry terminal will save up to eight minutes unloading and loading the ship and allow foot passengers to board using Jetways. Depending on permits, this new terminal might open in 2020 or 2021. The ferry company also hopes to add a fourth ferry to its fleet, built in the U.S. and probably costing \$30 – 40 million.

But long rumored plans to run additional ferry service from New Haven to Port Jefferson, Long Island probably won’t happen, says Hall. “We just couldn’t find the land (for a terminal)” in New Haven.

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.