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Telecommuting Won't Replace Train Commuting, the 'Economic Backbone of Our State' — McGee: Cameron on Transportation

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When it comes to transportation, Joe McGee is often the smartest guy in the room. If I want a vision of our state's mobility future, he's the first man I turn to.

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McGee served as then Gov. Lowell Weicker's commissioner of economic development. For years I worked with him on the Connecticut Metro-North Rail Commuter Council. And until recently he was the Fairfield resident for public policy, specializing in the intertwined issues of transportation and economic development.

Sadly, that group recently announced its closure after 50 years of service. True, McGee and I have sparred in the past, especially over his uber-aspirational 30-30-30 plan for speeding up rail service. But nobody is a better advocate for our state's transportation future than McGee, so in this dismal period I turned to him for inspiration.

"We will get through this," he says. "There will be life after this and now's the time to start planning."

You'll remember that McGee and the Business Council led the charge for tolling on our highways, rejecting Republican proposals that we instead dip into the state's "rainy day" fund. Wasn't that prescient?

"Lamont is looking so good through all of this (crisis). He's handling it so much better than he dealt with the Legislature," McGee said with a smile.

Sure, transit ridership is down. But he's confident it will come back.

"I'm old enough to remember the days of polio when people evacuated cities. Same thing with HIV," he said.

Despite their new-found success with telecommuting, McGee is confident that once the virus is gone workers will return to their jobs in New York City.

"The city brings vitality, creativity and job opportunities. People feel isolated now. They need face to face physical contact to really be connected." McGee predicts that some companies may open new offices in the suburbs but will still maintain a presence in Manhattan.

And to get there they will need the trains.

"The trains are the economic backbone of our state," he says. And he means the branch lines as well as the main line. McGee says he's worried about CDOT's recent decision to replace Waterbury line trains (which have seen a 95% drop in ridership) with buses for four weeks — both to save money and to accelerate construction of sidings.

"The (Naugatuck) Valley's economic future depends on those trains," he says. With better train service will come jobs and economic growth, tying the Valley to both Stamford and New Haven. "It's a regional economy," he says.

Trains mean mobility and higher real estate values. In New Jersey when they opened the new Secaucus line, communities offering a one-seat ride to NYC saw a 14% jump in home prices.

Just look at the twin communities of New Canaan (served by a branch line) and Darien (on the main line of Metro-North). Housing prices in Darien have remained much stronger because of better access to the trains.

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In the short run the railroad's huge deficits will need federal assistance. MTA is already seeking federal money to cover the \$125 million they are losing in each week in lost fares. "No one state (or agency) can handle this," says McGee.

Now is the time for all the towns and states to work together, not throw up literal roadblocks to out-of-staters. We will get through this.

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.