

The World is Changing Pretty Abruptly, and Transportation Issues Along With It

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Don't look now, but we're making history. The changing forces now at work in our society, including our transportation network, will have a profound effect on our lives for decades to come.

THE BIG QUIT: According to federal statistics, 4 million people quit their jobs in July of this year, with almost 11 million jobs nationwide now unfilled. As a result, our ports are jammed, the supply chain broken and holiday purchases seem in peril. Don't expect any bargains for Christmas.

Why the huge turnover in jobs? I think a lot of it has been soul-searching amid the pandemic as people try to seek that illusory work-life balance. But it's clearly a seller's market for talent.

THE END OF COMMUTING ? Transportation used to equal communications. Now you don't need to go to work to do your job. As I predicted last December, I don't think passenger levels on Metro-North will return to pre-COVID levels for many years. Some think it may take a decade. To date, Metro-North ridership is only back to about 50% and not increasing.

CROWDING & COMPLAINTS: Even at these reduced ridership levels, many trains are jammed, especially at rush hour. (So much for social distancing.) That's because full service has not been restored and may not be until next year. Rush hour trains are not running express, lengthening commuting times and not attracting riders back to the rails. The once popular but seldom-enforced Quiet Cars are on hold. I doubt

they'll be coming back.

Many of those who are heading back to the office are driving instead of taking the train, exacerbating our traffic. When driving is faster and, in some cases, cheaper than taking the train, the perception of personal safety trumps slow traffic. (Mind you, I do think riding Metro-North is safe — as long as you remain fully masked.)

As Metro-North is slow to react to commuter demands for better service, savvy entrepreneurs are jumping in to offer commuting alternatives, skimming the creamy 1% off of the top of railroad's ridership with a one-seat ride to Wall Street.

FARES: Off-peak fares remain in effect, all day, for now. But even pre-COVID with standing-room-only conditions, the railroad was still losing money. In 2019 mainline trains subsidized every ticket by \$3. Branch line trains' subsidies were much higher... \$17 per ride on the Danbury branch, \$49 per ride on Shore Line East.

With ridership now only at 50%, just double those subsidy numbers and you can see how much the railroad is losing. Who will make up the difference?

UNCLE SAM: Yes, the federal government has kept mass transit rolling, but unless ridership returns those subsidies cannot last forever. Metro-North's parent, the MTA, has promised no service cuts, no layoffs and no fare increase... for now.

The historic federal infrastructure bill may pump more money into those subsidies. But that money was supposed to "build back better", repairing and renewing. If your house has a leaky roof, you don't take out a second mortgage to buy tarps and buckets when you should be repairing the roof.

THE BRAIN DRAIN: Before Connecticut DOT can start spending the billions of dollars coming our way in the infrastructure bill it has to deal with its own staffing problem.

CDOT Commissioner Joe Guilietti says his agency has 1,100 highly skilled, well-paying jobs to fill, many of them due to a long-anticipated 30-40% retirement rate of senior staffers cashing out for their fat state pensions.

So, this Thanksgiving we have much to be grateful for — but so much to still worry about.

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. You can reach him at CommuterActionGroup@gmail.com.