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Wi-Fi on Trains Should Wait — Coming 5G Will Make Current Wi-Fi Obsolete: Cameron on Transportation

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Will Haskell is 22 years old, and he's about two months into his first full-time paying job as a state senator representing the 26th District that covers most of interior Fairfield County.

His election victory was astonishing in November over Sen. Toni Boucher, who'd been in office since he was born.

He has certainly hit the ground running as the sponsor or co-sponsor of 68 proposed bills. Of course, submitting a bill is the easy part. A senator can submit a bill ordering anything, but it may never make it out of the committee stage for a vote.

Haskell's "progressive" proposals cover everything from voting rights to ghost guns, from a plastic bag ban to fracking.

But the proposed bill that first caught my eye concerned Metro-North whose Danbury and New Canaan branches run through his district. I'm thrilled the senator appreciates the value of the railroad to his constituents, but his bill (SB 163) says nothing about the speed or safety of the trains. It doesn't talk about fares, lack of seats, insufficient station parking or electrification of the diesel line to Danbury.

The senator's two-sentence bill addresses only one issue: requiring Metro-North to provide free Wi-Fi on all its trains. Wow. That is a hugely misplaced priority.

There are so many more pressing needs for rail commuters in Connecticut: the aging catenary, the signal system, grade-crossing safety, unreliable locomotives, and the list goes on. But Haskell wants us to have free Wi-Fi.

Why? Because the cell service along much of the line is so poor. But does the senator understand that free Wi-Fi on trains relies on local cell service? If there's no local cell signal, the Wi-Fi won't work. And anybody who's ridden Amtrak lately can testify about the slow speeds and unreliability of its technology. So imagine a packed Metro-North train with 50 percent more passengers than an Amtrak coach and you'll be lucky to get any bandwidth at all. Don't commuters have enough to complain about already?

There are [legitimate reasons](#) why Metro-North doesn't offer Wi-Fi. The railroad considered Wi-Fi and even issued an RFP for vendors, including Cablevision. But it balked at once again adopting a technology that would be leapfrogged.

Does anybody remember the 1990s when Metro-North offered pay phones on trains? They were made obsolete in months when cellphone prices dropped and everyone could afford one. Once burned, twice shy.

Today's state-of-the-art 4G cellphones will be toast in another year or two when 5G technology takes off. That 5G will make today's fast connection look like the early days of dial-up modems. And, of course, we will all need new phones.

So, isn't Metro-North busy enough getting Positive Train Control's sophisticated radio tech working correctly that we don't need to burden them with a millennial's dream of free Wi-Fi? If you really want to have high-speed internet on your daily commute, get a wireless card from your cell provider and an unlimited data plan.

But please, Sen. Haskell, let's get our priorities right when it comes to telling Metro-North how to run a railroad.

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