

NORTH AMERICA Freight

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Hiding in plain sight is one of America's most distinctive short lines. New York & Atlantic Railway runs over a 430 route-km network in New York City and Long Island, the majority of which is shared with Long Island Rail Road, one of the country's largest suburban passenger rail operations.

Until 1997, LIRR ran its own freight service, but traffic had gradually waned over the decades as the MTA subsidiary focused on its passenger operations. 'In the 1990s, LIRR realised they had to concentrate on moving passengers, not freight', says NY&A President James Bonner. 'Freight carloadings had gone down from about 100 000 in the 1930s to

about 10 000 when we took over in 1997. LIRR wasn't making money, so they put the freight business out for private bid.'

Based at a compact interchange terminal at Fresh Pond in the New York borough of Queens, NY&A has grown traffic volumes threefold since it launched. It now moves around 30 000 carloads per annum, carving itself a successful niche supporting the booming New York economy. As urbanisation and economic growth have driven an increase in passenger rail ridership in the region, so NY&A has played an increasingly important role handling consumer goods, construction material and waste. Indeed, such is the quantity of alcohol, flour and tomato paste carried by NY&A, Bonner

christened it 'the pizza and beer train', a sobriquet subsequently picked up by the *New York Times* when it profiled its local freight railway in late 2018.

NY&A's parent company is short line and regional railway group Anacostia Rail Holdings, which is headquartered in Chicago and operates several freight businesses across the USA — although none quite like the one in Queens. Anacostia has a permanent representative based in New York to oversee NY&A, such is the complex and sensitive dynamic of its relationship with LIRR and the local community.

NY&A's initial concession agreement with LIRR ran for 20 years to 2017. It included an option to renew, which was

Celebrating July 4 2017 at the Long Island Freight Terminal.

Freight and the city



New York & Atlantic Railway has carved out a successful niche as the 'pizza and beer railroad' to support the booming urban economy of New York City and Long Island. **Dave Lustig meets President James Bonner.**

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exercised after NY&A met its metrics for capital investment, safety and car-load growth. The current concession runs to 2027.

Putting passengers first

Having worked in various roles around the rail freight sector for 15 years, Bonner joined NY&A in 2013, becoming President three years later. He quickly learned the railway's golden rule: do not obstruct LIRR's passenger trains. Bearing this in mind, NY&A's growth profile since 1997 has come incrementally — 'we have not tried to go and hit home runs', Bonner explains. 'If there are any issues between us, LIRR will always win the argument. The commuter

23
%

INCREASE IN ACTIVE NY&A CUSTOMERS SINCE THE SHORT LINE LAUNCHED IN 1997

rail business has many masters, we just have two — LIRR and Anacostia. Fortunately, we have maintained an excellent relationship with them.'

In financial terms, NY&A pays access fees to LIRR which are broken down into an annual lump sum, the cost of turnout maintenance, and a charge levied according to the weight and wheel count of every wagon moved. On top, NY&A must also pay leasing charges for its loco fleet.

Solving the city's problems

A typical NY&A freight train would consist of inbound shipments of lumber, paper, building materials, plastic, aggregates, and food products, including flour, beer, tomato paste, pasta and rice. Outbound loads include solid waste, construction and demolition debris, and recyclables. 'We are all consumers and we have lots of trash and construction materials going out', Bonner explains, adding that the railway has 'about a 50:50 split' between inbound and outbound loads.

However, the physical geography of the New York region makes it tough for rail freight to compete for modal share. With many islands and few river crossings, rail freight struggles to penetrate the city's core, meaning it accounts for less than 2% of tonnage moved, compared to a share of around 20% for some cities in inland states of the USA.

Rail operators have also faced the challenge of adapting to a rapidly changing local economy; Bonner notes that while there was a large manufacturing industry around New York in the 20th century, little of that remains. Instead, smaller businesses have emerged to re-energise the region, and NY&A is determined to tap into the opportunity they present. The short line had 65 active customers when it launched in 1997, today that figure is 80 — a 23% increase.

Bonner sees even further scope for growth, driven by external factors including mounting concern about the sustainability of freight transport. He believes local policymakers are increasingly keen to use rail to get lorries off

the congested roads of New York and Long Island, and the continued expansion of NY&A is key to that objective.

Links further afield

Central to NY&A's daily activity is its interchange connections with various other railroads which move the wagons to and from destinations across the country. CSX Transportation is the only Class I with a physical connection to NY&A. It reaches Fresh Pond along the Hell Gate Bridge route into Queens from the north, and handles about 60% of NY&A's interchange traffic. This includes wagons which are received from Canadian Pacific customers via a haulage agreement.

Norfolk Southern is the other dominant east coast Class I. It has access to NY&A via interchange partner New York-New Jersey Rail, which operates a train ferry between Greenville Yard in Jersey City and 65th Street Yard in Brooklyn, where it meets the NY&A network. At Greenville, wagons can also be exchanged with Conrail, a regional terminal railroad jointly owned by NS and CSX. Finally, Providence & Worcester, a regional railroad owned by Genesee & Wyoming, operates block aggregates trains into Long Island from quarries in New England via CSX's Hell Gate Bridge connection. NY&A's largest terminal is at Fresh Pond, with smaller yards at Brentwood and Maspeth.

The compact nature of Fresh Pond yard directly influences the NY&A operating model; Bonner explains that it is easier to handle 100 freight cars a day every day, rather than marshalling longer 150 car trains five days a week.

Being a good neighbour

Operating in a dense urban environment like Queens means NY&A is subjected to intense scrutiny by neighbourhood committees and town councils. There has been a perception among these groups that rail freight operations are 'noisy and smelly', and the short line has to deal with a host of urban life issues which few of its peers in the rail freight sector would need to address. A particular challenge involves rubbish accruing along NY&A's various



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JAMES BONNER PRESIDENT, NY&A

'Everyday we're on stage, every day we're completely focused on our job'

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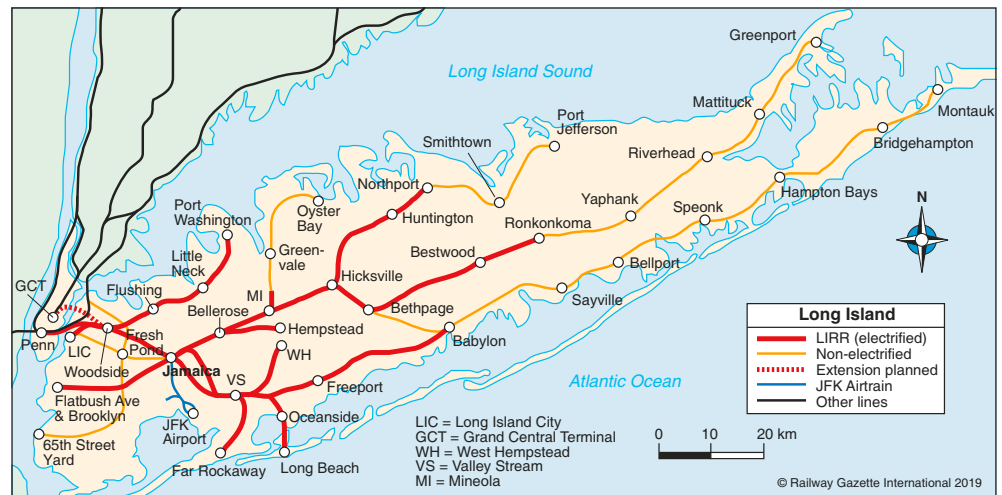
freight-only routes in Brooklyn and Queens; at times, there have also been problems with homeless people gravitating to the railway. Neither is a direct result of the railway's own activity.

NY&A has chosen to tackle these challenges head on, by inviting elected officials and other interested parties to Fresh Pond to explain how the railway works. On occasions, it has even used its own private saloon car to conduct tours to explain the operational issues in more detail from the railway's perspective.

Its outreach efforts have given rise to a number of specific initiatives, including the installation of rail greasers on tight curves to minimise wheel noise, and a revised approach to train marshalling at Fresh Pond to make sure most shunting moves are undertaken on the tracks furthest from homes.

On suburban Long Island, level crossings are a challenge. At OneWorld Recycling in Lindenhurst, for example, the loco typically triggered the circuit to activate the crossing alarm before reversing its train back into the terminal. As a result, the crossing was blocked to road vehicles for the duration of the loading and unloading process, which can last up to an hour, but no train actually passes over the crossing. Residents were quick to complain, and NY&A has responded by adding a crew member whose job is to override the crossing control unit.

Needless to say, the short line still faces some ongoing hurdles. Its regular carloads of Mexican beer, destined for the *bodegas* of New York City, make it a target for thieves; in January this year, a shipment of 3 500 cases worth \$60 000 was stolen. Another perennial problem



concerns household refuse traffic, where local residents are upset by the perceived odour emitted from passing trains and are petitioning for improved wagon covers to be fitted.

Bonner is philosophical. 'I believe this is the most difficult short line to operate, given we must weave our seven daily trains around LIRR's 700', he suggests. 'We're in a nice neighbourhood but it is very regulated and everyone is watching us.'

Looking ahead, NY&A's most significant major project is the installation of PTC, which must be interoperable with LIRR's own equipment and be ready for the commuter rail operator's December 2020 deadline.

Beyond that, Bonner's team is focused on driving up carloads further, while ensuring performance remains robust. That said, capacity constraints on LIRR are a looming concern, as is a regulatory environment where freight



NY&A train RS41 is heading home to Fresh Pond, passing the LIRR station at Hicksville, NY.

trains are not yet guaranteed 'white space' for paths in the working timetable. However, he is clear that he wants to ensure NY&A is in a strong position to renew its concession from 2027. 'It's New York City. I love it', he emphasises. 'Everyday we're on stage, every day we're completely focused on our job. I want to shepherd this railroad to its next phase.' ■

TRACK SHARING

An unexpected interloper

Despite running mostly at night on weekdays, NY&A still has a number of daytime trip workings which take its freight trains out onto the LIRR main line running east from the busy hub at Jamaica. Several commuter lines converge there, as does the freight-only branch from Fresh Pond, which follows an alignment through Richmond Hill that last saw LIRR passenger trains in 1992.

When *Railway Gazette* visited NY&A on June 24, we joined Locomotive Engineer Bob Savino and his crew — driver, conductor and two shunters — on turn RS40, a trip freight working between Fresh Pond and Babylon via Jamaica, Hicksville and the Central Branch. Consisting of between 12 and 15 cars, the train picked up three wagons at EWG Glass in Richmond Hill before collecting and depositing several more at OneWorld Recycling in Lindenhurst. After running round at Babylon, the train returned to Fresh Pond with wagons for interchange with CSX and Providence & Worcester.

Having waited for around 20 min for a path through the junctions at Jamaica after the morning rush, RS40 then headed out along the LIRR main line to Hicksville, where a major route modernisation programme is underway to add a third track. Savino says he 'still gets



Photo: Dave Lustig

a kick' from the look of surprise from waiting commuters unused to seeing freight trains rolling along their route to work.

The NY&A loco fleet is made up of four GP38-2s, two Progress Rail PR20Bs, plus five EMD switchers, of which four are the MP15AC design rated at 1 500 hp and the other is a 1 000 hp EMD SW1001. NY&A also uses a KLV 'switcher and slug' unit where the master loco is an SE23B-M rated at 2 300 hp. Turn RS40 is handled by a pair of GP38-2 locos rated at 2 000 hp each. There is no shortage of power for what is a very short consist by North American standards, but Savino explained that double-heading offers an important insurance policy to mitigate the risk of delaying LIRR trains.

Maximum speed for the train is 70 km/h, which is easily achieved between Jamaica and Hicksville; on this section, the train uses LIRR's Automatic Speed Control in-cab display to protect against overspeed incidents pending the completion of Positive Train Control installation on Long Island. 'It's a challenge to fit us in with all the commuter trains', Savino says. 'But it never gets old.' ■