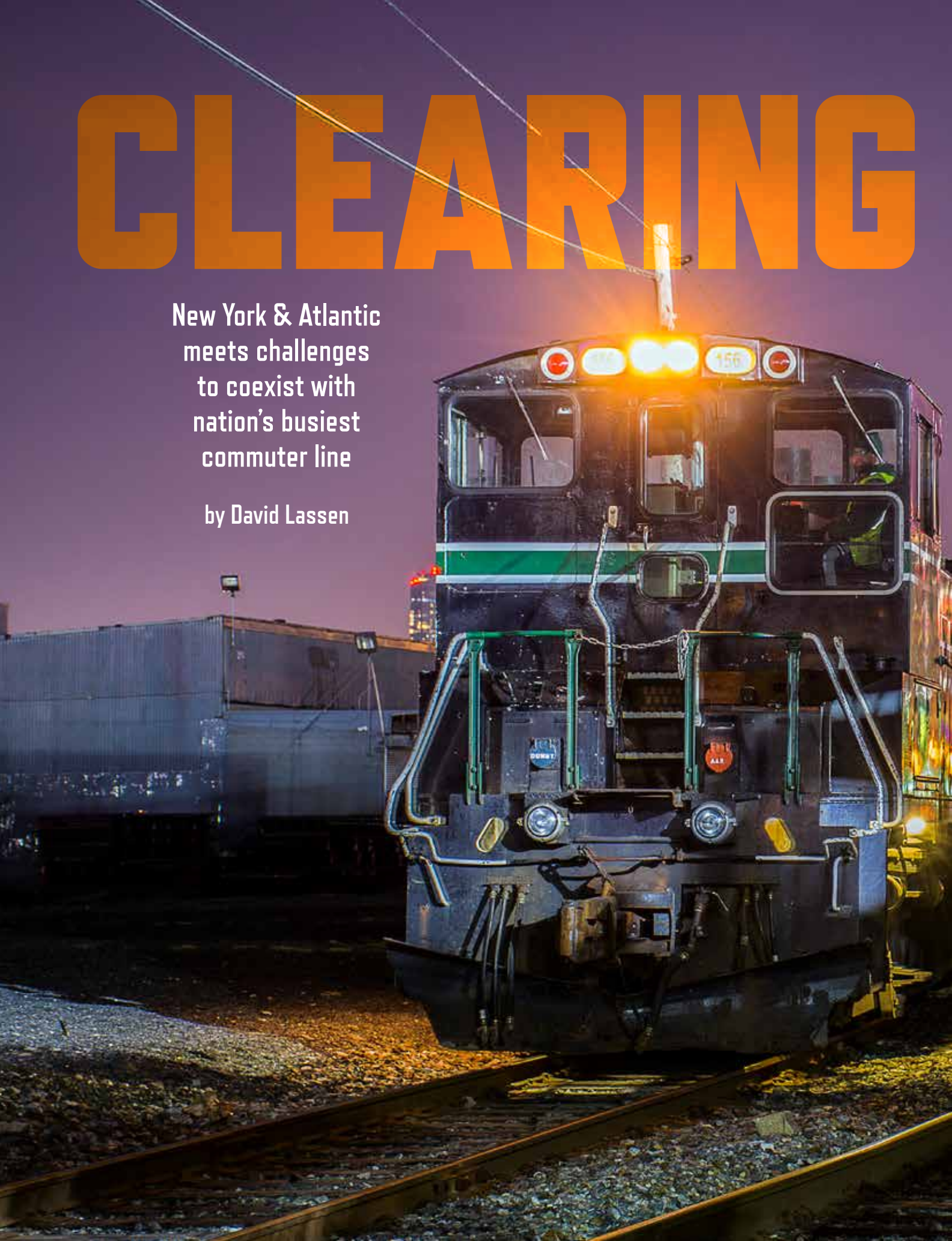


CLEARING

New York & Atlantic
meets challenges
to coexist with
nation's busiest
commuter line

by David Lassen



HURDLES

ON LONG ISLAND



The Empire State Building highlights the backdrop in Long Island City, N.Y., as a New York & Atlantic train moves retired Long Island Rail Road cars bound for scrapping in Ohio on Jan. 19, 2018. Gregory Grice



NY&A train RS-41 approaches Long Island Rail Road's Jamaica station on a gray August afternoon. Clearance issues for some locomotives and freight cars on platform tracks mean NY&A trains have just one track to pass through the busy station. TRAINS: David Lassen

DAYLIGHT IS FADING as New York & Atlantic Railway train RS-80 trundles out of the railroad's Fresh Pond Yard at 7:59 p.m. on a sticky August evening. Engineer Rich Buonomo is at the throttle of a pair of GP38-2s taking 27 cars to Pine Aire Yard, near Deer Park in central Long Island.

RS-80 heads east on the Lower Montauk Branch. Shortly after passing the abandoned, graffiti-tagged Long Island Rail Road station at Richmond Hill — passenger service ended on this line in 1998 — and not quite 5 miles into its journey, the train is halted at 8:30 p.m. by a red signal at Jay interlocking, just short of the LIRR's Jamaica station. As the NY&A train sits, commuter trains on the Long Island's Atlantic Branch pass to one side; ahead, on the LIRR Main Line, are a steady stream of trains to and from New York's Penn Station.

In the darkened cab of lead engine No. 270, RS-80's crew waits.

"You've got to have a lot of patience to work this job," Buonomo says.

In the big picture, the New York & Atlantic isn't a huge operation. An average day sees eight train starts, an average year about 30,000 carloads.

But the railroad faces operational

challenges far beyond its weight class for one reason: it must coexist with its landlord, the Long Island Rail Road, the nation's busiest commuter rail service. The LIRR operates more than 700 trains on weekdays and moves almost 90 million passengers annually.

The NY&A's entry point to most of the LIRR system is at Jamaica, not far from Kennedy Airport. About 400 commuter trains a day move between Jamaica and New York's Penn Station — roughly a train every 3½ minutes — as part of around-the-clock service.

So it's not as if those eight starts are working in some rural backwater. Now, three do operate on freight-only trackage radiating from the NY&A's yard in the Fresh Pond neighborhood of Queens,

which simplifies things considerably.

The others, however, compete for track time that is limited in the best of circumstances, a problem exacerbated the last couple of years because of an LIRR project to add a third track to its Main Line. That route, which extends 94 miles to Greenport, on the eastern tip of Long Island, sees more than 150 trains a day on the 15.5-mile segment from Jamaica to Hicksville, and more than 70 as far as Ronkonkoma, another 24 miles east. That's also a stretch liberally punctuated with NY&A customers.

"By their math," says NY&A President James Bonner, referring to Long Island dispatchers, "if they don't think we have time to get to where we're going and get back, we don't run. And Long Island Rail Road will always err on the side of caution and the commuter."

"No umbrage taken here, but that makes it incredibly tough."

Bonner, with the NY&A since 2013 and its president since 2016, says that on a given night, a crew might set out to serve six customers. "But you might only get four, because any one thing went wrong ... and that kills your whole night."

The ever-changing nature of each day's service plans keeps two staff members, senior trainmaster Blendi Agolli and day yardmaster John Whalen, busy coordinating with customers and the LIRR, and otherwise managing adjusting on the fly.

"It's just a lot of communication," says NY&A vice president Marlon Taylor. "It's eight crew starts a day and we've got two guys on it, and we need two guys on it." Reminded of a Dwight Eisenhower quote — "Plans are worthless, but planning is essential" — he laughs and agrees, and highlights the planning skills of NY&A veteran Agolli.

"I don't know how he holds all that stuff in his head," Taylor says. "He's a gem in his ability to map all of these things and weave them together and plan things. ... Blendi and John, day in and day out, they're



Power for NY&A trains RS-50 and RS-60 await duty at Pine Aire Yard as a westbound Long Island Rail Road train passes on Main Line 1. Work on the NY&A's west end is based out of Pine Aire. Two photos, Gregory Grice

managing that plan and making sure that the plan from 30 minutes ago is still the plan. Because that's how much it changes."

The crew of RS-80 left Fresh Pond knowing full well they were likely to face a wait to get onto the LIRR Main Line at Jamaica. On a perfect evening, they might be able to take advantage of a small window of track time before 9 p.m., but this is not a perfect night. About the time RS-80 pulled up to the signal at Jay, an LIRR train hit a car in a grade-crossing incident in Ronkonkoma, 10 miles east of RS-80's destination. The accident shuts down traffic through Ronkonkoma in both directions for about 3 hours.

Still, not long after Buonomo says his train usually gets its window at Jamaica about 9:47 p.m., RS-80 is cleared to advance through the station and east on the Main Line. The train is in motion at 9:53 p.m.

FROM 10,000 CARLOADS TO 30,000

The NY&A was born when the Long Island's parent, the Metropolitan Transportation Authority, contracted out freight operations after 25 years of declining business. Anacostia Rail Holdings won a 20-year operating contract in 1997, a deal renewed for 10 years in 2017. The company is famil-



The NY&A's lone SW1001 leads a light-engine move down a steep grade on the Lower Montauk branch, bound for Blissville Yard to pull loads from Waste Management, a major customer for the railroad, on July 5, 2018.

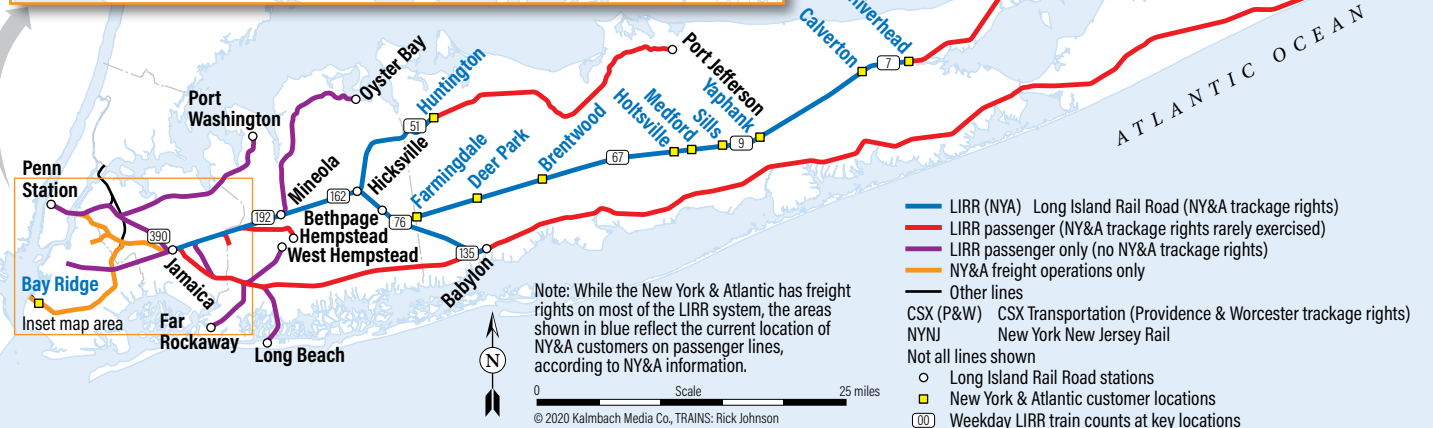
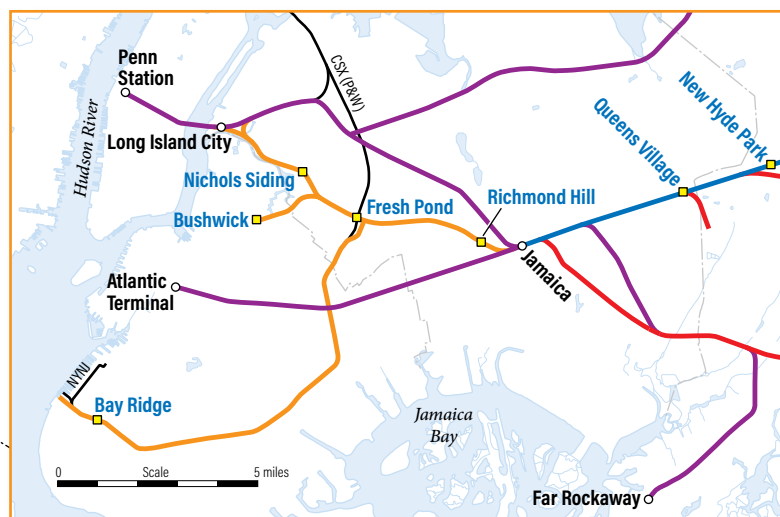
iar with operating freight trains on commuter lines; among its other railroads is a similar concession on the Northern Indiana Commuter Transportation District's South Shore Line [see "South Shore Freight's Fabulous Franchise," June 2017].

When the NY&A opened its doors, the 319-route-mile LIRR system was generating about 10,000 freight carloads a year.

"Only the customers that were hardened and needed to hold on were left when the NY&A took over," Bonner says. Everyone else had switched to trucks, he says, and if the customers had remained to that point, it was a sign they weren't going anywhere. "So we don't deserve any credit for those 10,000 [initial carloads]."

NY&A management in that era, Bonner says, pursued "the incremental carload mentality that makes shortline railroading what it is. They went about chasing every

WHERE THE NY&A AND LIRR COEXIST



They call it “the beer and pizza railroad” for a reason: NY&A’s RS-20, powered by its two Progress Rail PR20B locomotives, services the Manhattan Beer Distributors on the Bushwick Branch at sunset on March 19, 2017. Three photos, Gregory Grice



single opportunity, and most of them were fruitful.” Not all of them, though; in the fervor to add customers, some of the opportunities “didn’t necessarily make economic sense.”

The New York & Atlantic is sometimes labeled “the beer and pizza railroad” because it moves a lot of brews and flour, along with other foodstuffs and lumber. But three commodities form the foundation for the traffic increase. Foundations might literally be part of the first of those, construction and demolition debris, which the railroad began moving in the mid-2000s. Stone and waste business eventually followed.

The stone traffic began in 2012 and now accounts for about 8,000 carloads a year. It arrives from Connecticut via the Providence & Worcester, breaking an established pattern of movement by water and truck, thanks to one customer willing to try rail shipping. He provided “the proof of concept,” Bonner says. The first of two facilities serving Waste Management, the \$15 billion nationwide trash-handling firm, began shipping from Brooklyn about the same

time; a second facility in Queens provided more traffic two years later.

“It is good business, but it requires a great deal of focus,” Bonner says. “You have to move it out immediately, or it can get odoriferous.” (See “The Railroad Next Door,” page 27.)

Those new commodities were crucial to “creating a baseline book of business,” Bonner says. “Without that baseline, you would just be out there running trains. One day it

might be 13 cars and the next day it might be one. And that certainly isn’t efficient or effective as an efficient carload flow.”

NEW CUSTOMERS FACE HURDLES, TOO

The NY&A’s ongoing pursuit of new business faces its own unique hurdles.

In a perfect world, the growth would come on the freight-only segments that run west from Fresh Pond to Long Island City, and southwest to Bay Ridge, where the



NY&A’s RS-41 hold at Hicksville Northside while a westbound Long Island Rail Road train races by on Main Line track 1 on July 11, 2018. On weekdays, this section of track sees more than 160 LIRR trains.



After a long wait just west of the station, NY&A's train RS-80 rolls through the Hicksville station at 12:15 a.m. on Aug. 15, 2019. Many NY&A operations on LIRR's passenger lines are at night. TRAINS: David Lassen

NY&A connects with New York New Jersey Rail and its carfloat [see "Smooth Sailing Ahead," February 2018].

But — breaking news! — New York City is rather densely populated, and real estate can be pricey; there's not a lot of business-friendly property available.

"We can run all we want, but there's no land," Bonner says. "Or what has been there is being rapidly gentrified, especially down on the Brooklyn branches. A lot of the places that we used to serve have been turned into bars."

East of Jamaica, there are business sites — "It's not cheap land, not Indiana or Kansas, but it's available," Bonner says, "and a lot of it abuts the tracks" — but those customers face the service challenges that come with threading the eye of the LIRR scheduling needle. There's also a barrier in the high cost of adding a rail spur. Bonner estimates that on the passenger lines, that cost is probably 10 times what it would be on the freight-only segments.

Because of factors including signaling and positive train control, the cost of adding a switch for a new customer can reach \$1 million, he says: "As a business owner, you might save \$5,000 a load by moving to rail, but ... you've got to get 2,000 [carloads] just to get the cost of the first switch back."

He says "first switch" for a reason: the railroad really needs new customers to add switches at either end of their spur, to provide flexibility. The NY&A can then service the business when traveling in either direction, or has a place to get off the main line to wait out other traffic. Otherwise, an NY&A train might have to bypass a business it was scheduled to serve, to clear the way for commuter trains.

"We're explaining to people that holding the main line is what causes us problems," Taylor says. "If we've got to stop on the main line and leave cars there, [Long Island] trains can't run around us. So what we're telling people now is, when you're thinking about a service, think about us clearing the main line onto your property

THE RAILROAD NEXT DOOR



Working in tight confines, train RS-30, powered by two of the NY&A's MP15ACs, spots a boxcar at Wiener Crowley Wholesale Lumber in February 2017.

THE NEW YORK & ATLANTIC wants to be a good neighbor. But, with operations in New York's two most populous boroughs — Brooklyn and Queens — there are a lot of neighbors to try to please in a place and time where patience is not necessarily the default attitude.

NY&A President James Bonner says the railroad does its best, though, and is seeing positive results after a period when the railroad faced frequent criticism.

"We've all got this mindset that everybody dislikes us, because there is a vocal minority," he says. "It's refreshing to get out in the community ... talk to 150 people, and not one of them says anything other than, yeah, I hear the train sometimes when I'm walking my dog in the morning."

"To see us come out of what was a really tough period has just been incredibly encouraging to me."

Achieving that turnaround has taken operational changes and more than a few dollars. The railroad moved much of its switching in Fresh Pond from its East Yard to its West Yard, which is farther from residences. It added lubricators on a 21-degree curve in the yard to try to decrease flange squealing. On the line to Jamaica, it's replaced much of the jointed rail with welded rail to reduce noise. And it's done away with some operational choices that most railroads take for granted.

"We stopped kicking cars," says vice president Marlon Taylor, who came to the NY&A from Anacostia Rail Holdings' Pacific Harbor Line operation in Southern California. "Not because it probably wouldn't help you here or there, but because in the end, we're trying to be good neighbors by reducing additional noise."

Bonner says Anacostia owners Peter Gilbertson and Bruce Lieberman "have been incredibly supportive" of such efforts: "It's more about doing the right thing than it is just trying to get every single dollar you can out of the racket."

Perhaps the most cost and labor-intensive portion of the good-neighbor effort involves the trash the NY&A hauls out of sites operated by waste-disposal giant Waste Management. The railroad has hired an independent environmental firm that performs random spot checks to see if there are odor issues at its Fresh Pond yard. (NY&A incurs the entire monitoring expense.) It moved the handoff point for that traffic from Fresh Pond — where it was next to a large private high school — north to a CSX siding where there are no adjacent homes or businesses. And it starts a night-shift crew to move the trash, and outbound cars of construction waste, in the early morning hours.

"It's a significant additional expense just to have that train ready," Bonner says. "... But it's something we're willing to do, and that we know that we have to do because of where we are. We try to mitigate community impacts any time we can." — David Lassen



RS-41, the westbound leg of the New York & Atlantic's regular daytime train on the LIRR Main Line, passes through Mineola, N.Y., on July 23, 2019. End plates and steps must be modified to provide clearance for the third-rail electrification on the Main Line. Charles Freericks

.... Whatever needs to go by can go by, and then we get back to work.”

RS-80 threads its way through Jamaica station, and steadily advances east, passing through commuter stations at a brisk pace: Queens Village at 10:25 p.m.; Floral Park at 10:27; Merillon Avenue at 10:33.

The momentum doesn't last. With trains still stacked up on the Main Line because of the accident at Ronkonkoma, Buonomo's train is eventually shunted onto a siding at Hicksville Northside. On an adjacent track sits an LIRR work train powered by three SW1500s, waiting for its own track time. Punctuating the ensuing parade of traffic is NY&A's RS-61, bound for Fresh Pond.

Shortly after midnight, RS-80 is cleared to resume its trip. The train rolls through the brightly lit but deserted Hicksville station at 12:15 a.m.

CREW SKILLS ARE CRUCIAL

The NY&A's manpower demands are also influenced by its need to coexist with the Long Island. For one thing, it needs more crew members than the average short line. Because of those tight work windows, jobs that most railroads would perform with two-person crews need three or four here.

Bonner rattles off what a crew faces in a 14-minute window to serve a customer: stop the train, secure part of it, test the brakes, pick up cars, inspect them and brake test, then return to the train and brake test again. There are times, he says, when a two-person crew couldn't do this safely in the allotted time, and “for that reason, we often employ the use of a third or fourth crew member.

“I think people get caught up on the timing: ‘They only have 14 minutes’ ... but the reality of that is there are three or four people, and ... they're dancing out there.

“The first person knows that he's going to step off and he's going to walk back. The second one knows that he's going to walk up to that switch, and the third one knows that he's going to go back and he's going to climb on that car. So as soon as the cut is made, he can go ahead, right after the handbrake is untied, and can make that cut.

“It's a dance, and there's a lot of difficulty.” There's one other safety concern to note: along the Main Line, crews have to avoid the 750-volt, D.C.-power third rail for Long Island commuter trains.

At one time, the railroad had trouble

retaining employees. That's improved, which is vital, because crew training is a long and arduous process.

“You figure it's three years from hire date to someone being a fully qualified engineer,” Bonner says. “You could train someone for two or three years, and then they decided to do something different, and it's all lost. Because they never really provided 100% value to you until they were a fully qualified Long Island Rail Road engineer.”

LEARNING THE RULES

The lengthy gestation period in part reflects the need for NY&A crew members to be rules-qualified for the LIRR. This is no small feat, since the commuter line has a rule book reflecting its specialized needs.

Spend any time at all around someone from the NY&A, and they'll mention the extraordinary number of signal aspects on the LIRR rules test. “It was 92 signals when I took the test,” Bonner says, “and they've since added a couple of more. And there are also 60-some definitions that have to be memorized and written verbatim.”

The lengthy training process is one



At the NY&A's Fresh Pond Yard, the railroad's PR20Bs wait to take out one train while another crew shoves outbound cars for CSX overhead on Oct. 1, 2017. Tight curves on the wye at Fresh Pond limit the NY&A to four-axle power. Gregory Grice

reason the LIRR has an agreement not to poach crew members from the NY&A. But operating on the Long Island is about more than the rules.

"You have to have the memory, you have to have the intellect, and you have to get that all out of the way and then you have to be a railroader," Bonner says. "There is a complex algorithm in every railroader's head when it comes to switching cars, but that doesn't mean you can memorize things. And vice versa."

The freight-only portions of the NY&A allow new crew members to gain experience in a less pressurized setting. On the Main Line, the training process is another reason to send out three- and four-person crews; new hires have experienced operators guiding them. Ultimately, operating on the Main Line takes more than rule knowledge and hands-on experience. Taylor says it also requires a talent not usually associated with railroading: the sales skills of a car dealer.

"Our crews probably know the Long Island timetable better than some at the Long Island," he says. "When you get on that phone or on that radio [with an LIRR

dispatcher], you've got to know what you're talking about. The big part of this is the sell ... the ability to have a conversation and know your slots to the point where they cannot question you. [It's] knowing the rhythm, and getting on that phone to say, 'Hey, this is what I want to do today.'

"They sell the move, the dispatcher decides if it will work, and if so, we run." Less experienced conductors "fumble, and they don't run."

For all those challenges, far more often than not, the trains do run, and the work does get done. Every time that happens, the NY&A has scored a small victory over complexity, and another win for coexistence.

It is after 12:30 a.m. when RS-80 makes a brief stop as it passes through the Deer Park station, allowing the author to step off and catch a Long Island train to Manhattan. The LIRR's almost nonstop schedule, while a challenge for the freight railroad, is a boon to the visitor. Even at this hour, the wait for the next train is only 20 minutes.

RS-80's destination, Pine Aire, is just east of Deer Park station. The train is stationary just long enough to line a switch, and then is



Midnight has passed as NY&A train RS-80 pauses at the east end of the Deer Park station as a switch is lined for it to enter Pine Aire Yard and conclude its 4½-hour outbound trip from Fresh Pond. TRAINS: David Lassen

in motion again. The 34-mile trip from Fresh Pond has taken more than 4½ hours, and the crew of RS-80 will want to work quickly as well as carefully at Pine Aire. The Main Line's longest weekday window without an inbound revenue train — almost 2½ hours — opens up after a westbound LIRR train passes through Deer Park at 2:15 a.m.

It's a window that RS-81 — as the train will be redesignated to head west — will want to use to its full advantage. 1