

TOP STORIES

LI Freight Via Rail

Once-shrinking sector comes back in region

BY LORENA MONGELLI

lorena.mongelli@newsday.com

Freight locomotives chugging through Long Island are delivering more tons of cargo than in past decades and, as a result, are reducing emissions, the region's dependence on trucking, and wear and tear on roads, transportation leaders said.

The once-shrinking freight industry appears to have made a comeback on Long Island — and rail advocates foresee growth, yet acknowledge there are obstacles ahead.

When New York & Atlantic Railway took over freight operations for the Long Island Rail Road in 1997, it inherited 10,000 carloads of business — and now handles close to 32,000 carloads a year, surpassing its 2019 high of 31,000 carloads, said Chuck Samul, director of sales and marketing at New York & Atlantic.

New York & Atlantic is the main freight provider for Long Island, running an average of seven diesel and electric locomotives daily on the LIRR's commuter lines, mostly at night, going from Queens or Brooklyn to as far east as Riverhead. The company manages more than \$1 billion in commodity value each year, according to James Bonner, President of New York & Atlantic.

Rail freight advantages

Scrap iron, steel and construction debris are the major items hauled off the Island, while flour, tomato paste and rice,



James Bonner, president of New York & Atlantic Railway, said freight train traffic has a big future on Long Island.

ONLY IN NEWSDAY

along with crushed stone and construction material, are among the top commodities coming in by rail.

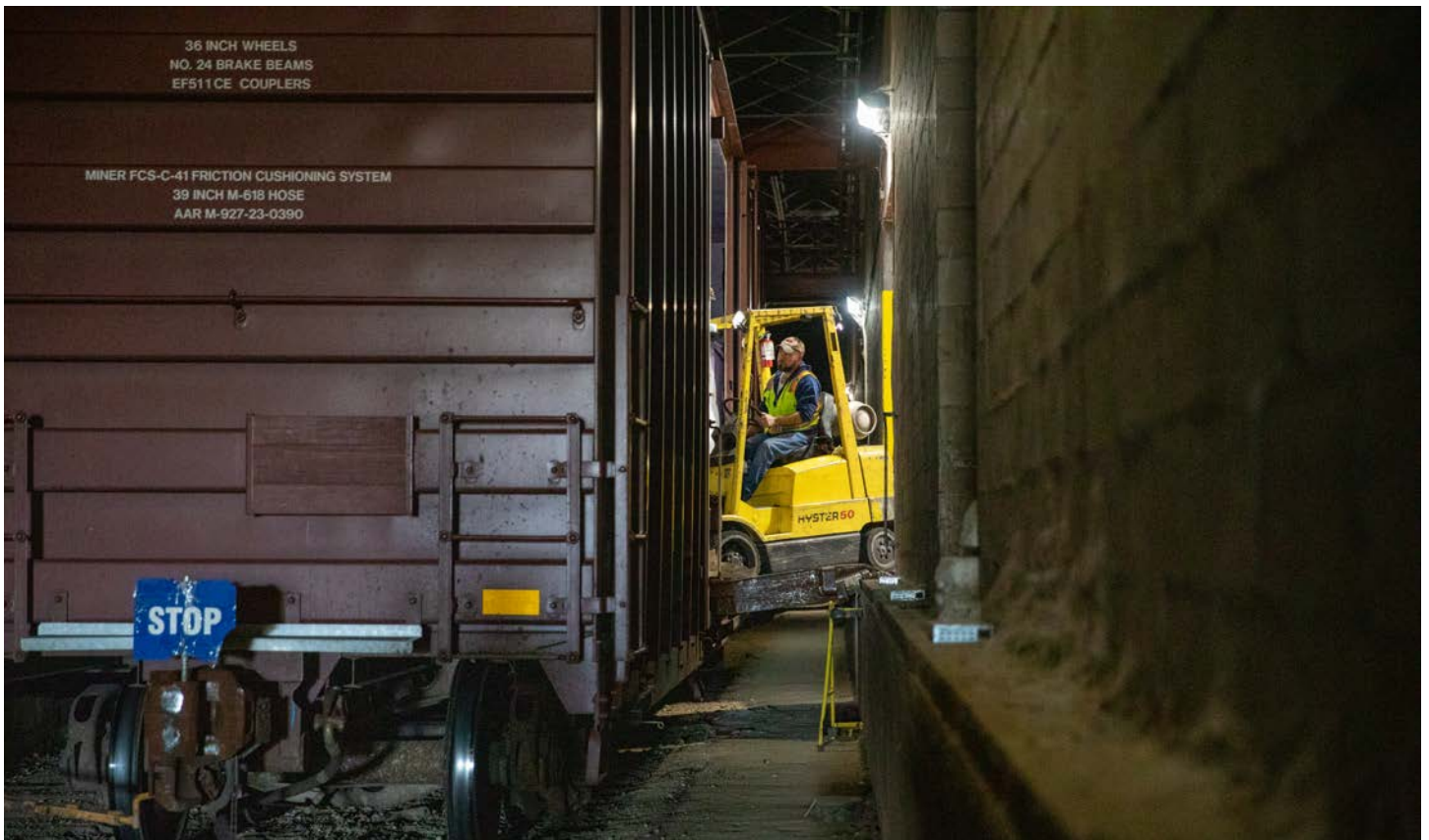
“In addition to the economic benefit, freight trains get trucks off the road, reducing emissions and the stress on our road network, and have the potential to alleviate supply chain challenges,” said Matt Cohen, president and CEO of the Long Island Association, a business group.

Trains are not only about three to four times more fuel-efficient than trucks, they're

also more cost-effective, according to the Washington, D.C.-based Association of American Railroads. Every carload hauled by New York & Atlantic holds about four trucks' worth of goods. That means New York & Atlantic has helped cut about 128,000 truck trips from major highways this year.

About 1,750,000 tons of freight has moved through Long Island by rail this year, Bonner said.

Rail advocates said projects such as the Oak Point Link, which added a nearly two-mile rail link in the Bronx, along with the Brookhaven Rail Terminal and the privatization of freight, have helped revive the rail industry through



A forklift operator moves sacks of pinto beans from a freight car at ELM Global Logistics' warehouse in Brentwood earlier this month.

MORGAN CAMPBELL

expanded service and rail capacity.

"Lower value, heavy commodities — that's your sweet spot for rail right now on Long Island," said Andrew Genn, who helped draft a 2018 freight report for the New York City Economic Development Corp., where he is the transportation department's senior vice president.

"The situation is actually pretty good compared to where we were at the end of the '90s when New York & Atlantic took over freight operations," Genn added. "The volume of rail customers, culminating with the BRT [Brookhaven Rail Terminal] facility, really have shown that rail is more normalized than it had been."

Business growing

Long Island-bound products already may have traveled thousands of miles before landing in Queens or Brooklyn for pickup by New York & Atlantic. Beer enters from Mexico, rice from California or Arkansas, and plywood from Canada or the Northwest.

ELM Global Logistics, a Brentwood-based warehouse and distributor, receives hundreds of train cars per year, but that wasn't always so. Bill Convoy, ELM's president, recalls that rail in the early 1980s was evaporating.

"Rail freight lost its panache. Truckers

were competing better than rail service, so there was less motivation to use rail," said Convoy, who lauds New York & Atlantic for making rail transport profitable again.

Since New York & Atlantic took over operations for the LIRR through an agreement in 1997, business has grown about 5% a year, Bonner said.

"We are inundated with truck traffic," said Robert Gottheim, district director for Rep. Jerrold Nadler (D-Manhattan), a rail advocate who helped secure federal funding for rail freight improvements.

"We have the highest rates of asthma in the country, almost the world, and we need to move more things by rail freight, which is much more environmentally friendly and energy efficient, but is underutilized. It's the reason that the Cross Bronx Expressway or the LIE is jam-packed 24 hours a day," Gottheim added.

Despite New York & Atlantic's success, most goods continue to be shipped via truck. Rail only handles 4% of all cargo in the state and less than 2% of all cargo in New York City.

Limited access hurts growth

Long Island's limited access to the rest of the world is a challenge for expanding rail freight.

But advocates believe there are solutions, such as the proposed Cross Harbor freight and rail tunnel project that is expected to link Brooklyn to New Jersey's national rail network, which is accessed by larger railroads.

Connections to the national rail network are more developed west of the Hudson River than east of the Hudson. Consequently, most cargo that needs to get to counties east of the Hudson winds up on trucks, burdening the region's heavily traveled highways.

The Port Authority of New York and New Jersey is expected to start a second in-depth environmental review for the Cross Harbor project next year, Gottheim said. The project also will address clearances on the Bay Ridge line to allow for intermodal rail transport.

"The biggest hurdle is we need to construct the tunnel and fix the entire Bay Ridge line. This line hasn't improved in 100 years," Gottheim said.

The Long Island Association agreed this project should be a top priority for boosting the passage of goods.

"It's a win-win. It's going to wind up spurring job creation, enhancing our region's economic competitiveness — in a more efficient, more environmentally friendly and a more cost-effective manner for Long Island," Cohen said. "There's only a handful of transpor-

tation options to cross New York Harbor and the lower Hudson River, and thus freight traffic currently shares severely congested crossing with cars and mass transit. Freight-related traffic inconveniences everyone involved.”

Rail cargo limitations

Rail cargo currently has a few ways of getting into the area. One way is over what's become known as the “Selkirk hurdle,” a rail bridge crossing that's located 150 miles north of New York City, near Albany. It's convenient for cargo coming from Canada or the upper Midwest, but is a 280-mile detour for trains coming from elsewhere that would need to loop around the Hudson River.

Rail cars also can float on barges from New Jersey into Brooklyn's 65th Street Rail Yards. The number of cars coming via this route has increased significantly since 2015, but the Cross Harbor freight project is expected to support additional expansion. The trains pick up cars from 65th Street and weave through Brooklyn on the LIRR's Bay Ridge line.

Whether coming from upstate or from Brooklyn, freight trains stop at Fresh Pond Junction in Queens, where cars get reassembled before heading to the eastern counties.

In addition to finding more efficient ways to get cargo across the river, developing infrastructure in the dense region is also a challenge. There is a need to build more transloading facilities, which helps get more goods on trains and costly switches off the LIRR's Main Line to facilitate deliveries.

“That's a challenge, as well as the price of property on Long Island and the diminishing amount of space,” Bonner said. In Brooklyn and Queens, Bonner added, many rail facilities have converted into commercial or residential properties, but the company still has potential to expand.

“We still intend to grow,” said Bonner, who noted he has 60 workers employed throughout the eastern counties, and Brooklyn and Queens. “We want to continue to improve our community, and that's a big part of why we enjoy doing this.”

WHAT TO KNOW

■ **New York & Atlantic Railway handles 32,000 carloads**, helping to cut roughly 128,000 truck trips from major highways per year.

■ **This year, New York & Atlantic Railway has moved about 1,750,000 tons of freight on and off Long Island.**

■ **The rail's biggest obstacle might be finding adequate infrastructure in the dense region to support continued growth.**