

OPINION

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Confronting Long Island's COVID shortages by rail



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Amidst a pandemic that shut down commuting, commerce, and even the use of cash, there was one segment of the economy that kept rolling: freight trains.

Despite the devastating impact of COVID-19, the Brookhaven Rail Terminal (BRT) continued to welcome the scheduled arrival of freight trains throughout the shut-down and many of those trains came with the supplies that were crucial to confronting despair this past winter.

For example, as supermarket shelves began to go bare, train loads of vegetable oil arrived along with tens of thousands of pounds of wheat flour and semolina that were quickly unloaded at BRT in order to restock, resupply, and confront the shortages at many area food suppliers and commercial bakeries. As homeowners realized their residences would

be the extent of their boundaries for what may be many months to come, construction lumber and other materials began to become a scarce commodity. Once again, it was rail that would address the shortage.

The pandemic is revealing a compelling truth: Not only is rail freight one of the most effective means of reducing our use of fossil fuels, it is nothing less than critical in times of crisis, requiring a minimum number of essential staff to move a maximum amount of supplies.

Transportation analysts report that, nationwide, rail moves 40 percent of freight (as measured in ton-miles) but is responsible for only 8 percent of freight transportation carbon emissions. Railways emit less CO₂ per ton-mile of freight movement simply because rail is far more energy-efficient than trucking. To put it another way, moving freight by rail versus trucks can save up to 1,000 gallons of fuel per carload.

The BRT is more than a railyard, however. It is an intermodal facility that includes the ability to store supplies in dry warehouses. This creates far more flexibility in transport-

ing goods “that last mile,” a delivery that can only be accomplished by truck.

The role of rail freight infrastructure comes at a time when the pandemic has greatly accelerated our use of internet-based retailers who depend on trucks to get their products to the consumer. If there are more delivery vehicles on the road than ever before, consider what goods and products can be sent the first 500 miles by rail in order to prevent an explosion in polluting truck emissions along with the wear and tear put on a road network. And recognize the roads will have far fewer funds available for repair and maintenance as state and local governments face massive deficits. (The Highway Trust Fund provides money for federal Interstate maintenance but annually teeters on bankruptcy because it is funded by a tax on gasoline and diesel that hasn't kept up with expenses. Don't expect any increase in that tariff for the foreseeable future.)

COVID and its induced recession have already created enormous changes in our society, our economy, and the trajectory of our shared future on Long Island. They

have revealed our strengths, our weaknesses, and a recognition that our generation will be defined by history through our ability to respond and recover from crisis. Quietly, without fanfare, the role of rail freight has revealed itself as a strategic transportation asset for a region of 2.85 million people.

To be clear, Long Island's major rail freight terminal is at the end of a very long steel rail logistics trail. It is dependent on a national system that requires more than a financial investment in bridges and rail beds. New technology, operational enhancements, and flexible pricing are all part of a formula that will ensure our post-COVID economy is far more resilient to conquering the unexpected through rail freight.

Some will find it ironic that a form of transportation first chartered in the United States nearly 195 years ago is not only capable of meeting the needs of our 21st Century society but has demonstrated a crucial role in protecting its economy and its environment.

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