



# LI starting to pick up pace on rail freight

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A 10-month-old private rail venture is taking thousands of trucks off the [Long Island Expressway](#) in a region that is among the nation's most reliant on road freight.

Reducing long-haul truck traffic on the Island's main artery has been a goal of regional planners and government officials for decades as they seek ways to reduce air pollution and traffic.

The September opening of the [Brookhaven](#) Rail Terminal ran against years of inaction and obstacles to delivering what policymakers agree is critical: bringing more goods to the Island by rail.

"Public officials have been calling for truck-rail facilities for more than 25 years to reduce truck traffic and make it easier moving goods on and off the Island," former [Suffolk](#) County Executive Patrick Halpin said.

The 3.4-mile rail spur and storage yard off the [Long Island Rail Road](#)'s main line in [Yaphank](#) was the brainchild of four construction-related company executives who for years trucked material from an upstate quarry to [Long Island](#), bedeviled by rising fuel prices and tolls.

In 2007, they teamed up with the quarry owner and bought 28 acres off Sills Road, just south of LIE Exit 66. The partners, working as [Brookhaven](#) Terminal Operations, said they have spent \$40 million getting the facility established.

In its first nine months of operation, the terminal received 735 railcars of stone, 22 of flour and 12 of biodiesel. With one railcar able to carry the amount of four truckloads for those commodities, the terminal operators said the loads replaced 3,076 long-haul trucks on the LIE.

[Brookhaven](#) Town Supervisor Mark Lesko called the venture an infrastructure "game-changer" that will help spark future economic growth and help improve quality of life for all Long [Islanders](#).

"[Long Island](#) is the most polluted area in [New York](#) State -- a key reason is truck congestion on the LIE," he said. "This project will result in cleaner air and better health by removing truck traffic."

### Region's negligible rail freight

The [New York](#) State Department of Transportation puts the number of trucks on the most heavily trafficked parts of the LIE at 20,000 a day. While only about 1 percent of [Long Island's](#) freight travels by rail, the rate is about 15 percent nationally, according to state and federal data.

[Long Island's](#) negligible rail freight use stems from the limited number of [Hudson River](#) rail crossings, said Robert Paaswell, professor of civil engineering at the [City College of New York](#). "Around the country, it's one of the least of all the regions to move goods by rail," he said.

Efforts have been made to change that. The state secured millions of dollars in federal and state funds in the mid-2000s to build a rail freight distribution facility off the [LIRR](#) line on part of the former Pilgrim State Hospital grounds south of the LIE in [Brentwood](#).

That project stalled about four years ago because of local opposition. But state officials said they continue to evaluate "the costs and benefits" of having a rail freight terminal at the Pilgrim site.

A second truck-rail yard is to start receiving goods for two companies operating out of the Town of Riverhead's [Calverton](#) Enterprise Park this fall, town officials said.

[Brookhaven](#) Rail Terminal's initial goal was to bring in around 500,000 tons of aggregate crushed stone annually, to be trucked short distances for use in local road and building projects. When the construction business dropped off during the recession, the partners identified other commodities that now make the trip to [Yaphank](#).

Ultra Green Energy Services, a biodiesel company, will open its terminal facility Thursday to bring in fuel made from vegetable oils and other fats for heating system and vehicle use.



The terminal's first food product arrived last month when Wenner Bread shipped 1 million pounds of flour, or about 2 1/2 days' supply, for its [Islip](#) bakery, [Long Island](#)'s largest.

"Right now we bring in about 40 percent of our flour by railcar," said Richard Wenner, whose family founded the company. "Once we analyze the situation some more . . . our goal is to move to 90 percent." That level of rail shipments would equate to removing 1,500 tractor trailers a year from the LIE for his business alone, he said.

### Plans for rail track expansion

The [Yaphank](#) site operators have their sights on further growth and recently bought another 92 acres east of the yard. They are seeking state and federal assistance to expand their rail track to serve about 400,000 square feet of refrigerated and dry storage warehousing to open next year.

Refrigerated warehouses, combined with the purchase of refrigerated railcars, would broaden the range of products the terminal can receive and open the way for the depot to start exporting local goods off the Island, the partners and officials said.

The concept has the backing of [LIRR](#) president Helena Williams, who said the main line has capacity for more off-peak freight movements. "To . . . take a diverse range of exports off the Island as well as bring products in as a safer, more efficient way to move freight, that's the key," she said.

Refrigerated storage is the crucial element, said Bill Mannix, economic development director for the Town of [Islip](#). "Then I think we have the tiger by the tail. I can't begin to guess how many other sectors could [benefit](#) -- pharmaceuticals, health and beauty products, East End produce and wine exported," he said. "I think it's a very important project for [Long Island](#), we just have to capitalize on it."

Ron Parr, a Ronkonkoma builder and developer, said: "It's an excellent concept -- it has a great potential if they have the staying power to see it all come together."

### [Yaphank](#) depot is 'good start'

The terminal faced early controversy when site-clearing in 2007 took local residents and town officials by surprise. Excavation as the operators dug down to grade to lay the track brought complaints of illegal sand mining from the state Department of Conservation.

Both issues were resolved and the terminal has the support of the South [Yaphank](#) Civic Association's immediate past president Johan McConnell, who said it is well-sited in an industrial area. Adrienne Esposito, head of Citizens Campaign for the Environment, which opposed the [Brentwood](#) site out of concern for groundwater, also backs the terminal.

"We support 100 percent the concept of lessening truck traffic in scaled-down facilities less disruptive to communities, but which still advance the [benefit](#) of reducing truck traffic," Esposito said. "BRT seems a reasonable location and we're not opposing it."

Paaswell, who at the request of then-Gov. David A. Paterson led a team that conducted a 2009 review of potential Long Island truck-rail yards, said research showed demand for increased freight delivery would increase and that Long Island needs more than one terminal.

"We felt it [the [Brookhaven](#) terminal] would be one of the first to fly," Paaswell said. "They are supplying a fast-growing part of Long Island and they had initiative."

Rep. Jerrold Nadler (D-Manhattan), who has long advocated for rail depots on Long Island as a way to reduce metro-area truck traffic, said [Brookhaven](#) Rail is "a good start," but the Island needs several facilities to keep final truck delivery distances as short as possible.

"There is no choice, you have to develop rail freight capacity or you put a lid on economic development, job growth and economic prosperity by reason of congestion," he said.

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