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Yaphank rail terminal called 'good start' as LI slowly starts to move away from its reliance on road freight

BY SARAH CRICHTON

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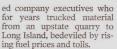
10-month-old private rail venture is taking thousands of trucks off the Long Island Ex-pressway in a region that is among the nation's most reliant on road freight.

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

The September opening of the Brookhaven Rail Termi-nal ran against years of inac-tion 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 Hal-

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-relat-



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 estab-lished.

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 replaced 3,076 long-haul trucks on the LIE.

Brookhaven Town Supervi-

sor 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 con-

VS. ROAD

- **4 times** more fuel-efficient Depending on commodity, can be about half the cost
- Less than half the number of fatalities

gestion 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 Depart-

ment 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 per-cent 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 se-cured 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 ter-

minal at the Pilgrim site.

A second truck-rail yard is to start receiving goods for

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 Termi-nal's initial goal was to bring in around 500,000 tons of ag-gregate crushed stone annual-ty to be trushed stone annually, to be trucked short distanc-es for use in local road and building projects. When the construction business dropped off during the rece sion, the partners identified other commodities that now

make the trip to Yaphank. Ultra Green Energy Servic es, 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 2½ 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 re-moving 1,500 tractor trailers a year from the LIE for his busi-ness 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



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LONG ISLAND





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.

Brookhaven Rail Terminal in Yaphank, above, has two diesel trains, and one railcar alone can carry four truckloads' worth of freight. At left, flour is transferred from a railcar to a tractor trailer for delivery to a local baking company.

"Then I think we have the tiger by the tail. I can't begin to guess how many other sectors could benefit — pharmaceuti-cals, 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 has a great potential if they have the staying power to see

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 sup-port 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 ground-water, also backs the terminal.

"We support 100 percent the concept of lessening truck traffic in scaled-down facilities less disruptive to communi-ties, 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 re-search showed demand for increased freight delivery would increase and that Long Island needs more than one terminal.

"We felt it [the Brookhaven we left it the Brooknaven 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 Is-

ed for rail depots on Long Island as a way to reduce metroarea truck traffic, said Brook-haven 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.

NOW ONLINE Watch video of how the Brookhaven Rail Terminal is reducing truck traffic on the LIE newsday.com/suffolk