**Commuter advocate slams Metro-North, says safety must be paramount**

**Ken Borsuk**

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Jim Cameron, founder of the Commuter Action Group, speaks to the Retired Men's Association at First Presbyterian Church in Greenwich, Conn., on Wednesday, February 18, 2015. Photo: Lindsay Perry

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Commuter advocate [Jim Cameron](http://www.greenwichtime.com/search/?action=search&channel=local&inlineLink=1&searchindex=gsa&query=%22Jim+Cameron%22) did not mince words when discussing the state of [Metro-North Railroad](http://www.greenwichtime.com/search/?action=search&channel=local&inlineLink=1&searchindex=gsa&query=%22Metro-North+Railroad%22) on Wednesday.

If you're hoping things are going to immediately get better, he advised, don't.

"What do we do? I guess we just go along and get along," Cameron said. "Greenwich's fate, my town of Darien's fate and Fairfield County's fate is in the hands of a railroad that we don't control, that we're not going to renegotiate with and we have no power over."

Cameron, founder of the [Commuter Action Group](http://www.greenwichtime.com/search/?action=search&channel=local&inlineLink=1&searchindex=gsa&query=%22Commuter+Action+Group%22), discussed the state of Metro-North at the Retired Men's [Association of Greenwich](http://www.greenwichtime.com/search/?action=search&channel=local&inlineLink=1&searchindex=gsa&query=%22Association+of+Greenwich%22)'s meeting on Wednesday. Calling his remarks, "Metro-North: From First to Worst," Cameron discussed the issues that have brought the train service, which logs 81.8 million rides a year, from the peak of receiving the triennial Brunel Award for Overall Excellence in 2011 to a service more in the news lately for accidents and deaths.

Among the recent incidents: the fatal accident in Valhalla, N.Y., earlier this month in which a train struck a vehicle stopped on the tracks, killing the driver and resulting in the death of several people on the train; the May 2013 collision between two trains on the New Haven Line that led to 60 injuries, and the December 2013 derailment near the Spuyten Duyvill station in New York City that resulted in four deaths and 59 injuries.

He also spoke of multiple incidents in which Metro-North workers were killed on the tracks, infrastructure issues that left passengers stranded for hours, problems with the Walk Bridge in Norwalk and the September 2013 feeder-cable issue in Mount Vernon that cut electrical service on the tracks for weeks.

"It turns out that Metro-North was not operating in a safe fashion and we didn't realize it," Cameron said. "... Unbelievably, there was no rule telling track workers that they couldn't be on their cellphones while they were on the tracks. There was no way of actually shutting off the power to the signal system to warn a train coming down the track that the track ahead of them was closed."

The frequency of incidents resulted in the [Federal Railroad Administration](http://www.greenwichtime.com/search/?action=search&channel=local&inlineLink=1&searchindex=gsa&query=%22Federal+Railroad+Administration%22) taking what Cameron called a "deep dive" look at Metro-North over the course of several months.

Their March 2014 report found that Metro-North had emphasized on-time performance over safety and maintenance, leading to a "deficient safety culture, increased risk and reduced safety."

"The DOT used to say to us, `Look at the on-time performance. It's at 95 percent,' " Cameron said. "Yeah, you can keep trains running on time if you're not doing track work, but that's going to catch up to you at some point."

The Railroad Administration ordered Metro-North to comply with speed restrictions approaching bridges and curves. After on-time performance dropped, the railroad issued new timetables in keeping with the new speeds.

Cameron said Metro-North's issues don't just affect people waiting for trains.

"Train service affects everyone," he said. "Unreliable train service discourages people from living in your town. ... If people don't move to these towns, property values go down and there's less demand for the house that you live in. Taxes have to go up because the fixed costs of the schools is not going to change. People move away. We have a drain on the population in Connecticut in the last few years."

Cameron praised Metro-North President [Joseph Giulietti](http://www.greenwichtime.com/search/?action=search&channel=local&inlineLink=1&searchindex=gsa&query=%22Joseph+Giulietti%22), saying he was doing "an admirable job in a very difficult job." He also said U.S. Sen. [Richard Blumenthal](http://www.greenwichtime.com/search/?action=search&channel=local&inlineLink=1&searchindex=gsa&query=%22Richard+Blumenthal%22), D-Conn., had shown "very strong advocacy on these issues" in pushing for improvements suggested by the [National Transportation Safety Board](http://www.greenwichtime.com/search/?action=search&channel=local&inlineLink=1&searchindex=gsa&query=%22National+Transportation+Safety+Board%22).

Cameron was not as complimentary of Gov. [Dannel P. Malloy](http://www.greenwichtime.com/search/?action=search&channel=local&inlineLink=1&searchindex=gsa&query=%22Dannel+P.+Malloy%22).

"I will give the governor credit for this," Cameron said. "He has been very hands-on micro-managing this issue, but I don't think the governor should have to micro-manage one contract through the [Department of Transportation](http://www.greenwichtime.com/search/?action=search&channel=local&inlineLink=1&searchindex=gsa&query=%22Department+of+Transportation%22)."

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