

Study Touts Growing Benefits from Long Island's Commuter Economy

[David Winzelberg](#) // November 9, 2023



A Long Island Rail Road train awaits passengers at Grand Central Madison station. Courtesy of MTA

The economic connectivity between Long Island and New York City is as significant as ever, despite an increase in remote work spawned by the COVID pandemic.

That's according to a new report from the Regional Plan Association, which shows a boom in local earnings and a huge spinoff of jobs and economic growth from commuters to and from the Big Apple and its suburbs.

The report, titled "Commuter Dividend," shows that while the number of people traveling to jobs in New York City five days a week has declined, the salaries of many of those employees have climbed in recent years, generating more revenue into communities on Long Island and other suburbs.

Specifically, the RPA study found that more than one-third (33.9%) of all wages earned by those living on Long Island are from jobs in New York City. According to the report, those 306,000 Long Islanders who commute to the city earned an average annual salary of nearly \$124,000 for a total of \$37.9 billion in wages from their jobs in 2022.

In addition, the spending of those commuters generated some 179,000 jobs and \$15 billion in earnings in various sectors here on Long Island, including hospitality, retail, real estate, healthcare and other service-related industries.

“Commuters are still incredibly important to Long Island’s economy,” said Chris Jones, a senior research fellow at the RPA, who worked on the report.



CHRIS JONES: ‘Commuters are still incredibly important to Long Island’s economy.’

One of the report’s more significant findings is the growing importance of reverse commuting. It estimated that 257,000 New York City residents held jobs located outside of the city, contributing to both city and suburban economies. Reverse commuters earned slightly higher salaries than other New York City residents, with an average wage of \$85,000 and total wages of \$21.8 billion, which represents 7% of all wages earned by city residents, according to the study.

And out of the 7% of all jobs held by New York City residents in the suburbs, Long Island had the highest proportion of reverse commuters, with more than 110,000 city dwellers commuting to jobs in Nassau and Suffolk counties.

“Queens and Nassau County share such a big border, and there are a lot of people in Queens who have a relatively easy commute into Nassau and Suffolk,” Jones said.

Of course, the biggest facilitator of commuting between New York City and Long Island is mass transit, specifically the Long Island Rail Road. The report notes that the recent completion of a third track on the LIRR’s mainline, as well as Grand Central Madison—providing greater access to Long Island from Manhattan’s East Side—provides more reverse commuting capacity to the east and strengthens the connection between New York City and Long Island.

In an exclusive interview with LIBN, Janno Lieber, CEO of the Metropolitan Transportation Authority, touted the \$15 billion of investment in recent projects that have improved service and increased capacity on the LIRR.

“We grew service dramatically. We grew the number of trains by 40 percent overall as a result of these big projects that grew our capacity because we had more tracks, more platforms and more areas for trains to pass each other and all that stuff,” Lieber said. “And even more significant, we grew the number of reverse commuter trains by 53 percent just on the Long Island Main Line, which is where a lot of that investment took place.”



JANNO LIEBER: 'Reverse commute service is now regular and predictable...' Courtesy of MTA

After taking a big hit from the pandemic, Lieber said ridership is recovering. He said last week was the best single week for the LIRR since the onset of COVID.

"I think it was 1.4 million riders last week, so they're moving in the right direction there," Lieber said. "Ridership is about 75 percent of pre-COVID numbers on a regular basis, which is pretty great, considering commuter railroads in the rest of the country are in the tank."

The MTA CEO pointed to the improvements in reverse commuting that allows Long Island businesses and organizations to better recruit talent from the city. Lieber said he heard from representatives of Winthrop Hospital in Mineola and Brookhaven National Laboratory who wanted to expand reverse commuting capacity so they could hire more professionals from New York City.

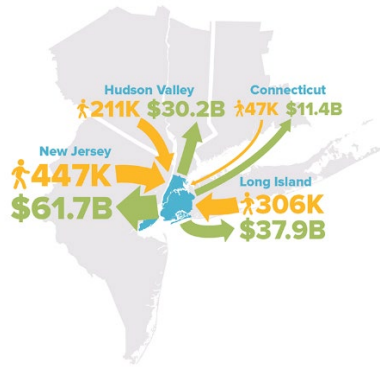
"Reverse commute service is now regular and predictable, and people can make decisions about where they work and live and know that there will be a way to get to a job on the Island, and that is a huge boost for Long Island's economy," he said.

John Cameron, chairman of the Long Island Regional Planning Council and managing partner of Woodbury-based Cameron Engineering said: "The MTA should really be commended for the \$15 billion of investment that they placed in East Side Access, Third Track and Double Track. That will present a number of different opportunities for Long Island on reverse commuting as well as being able to provide expedited access to the east side of Manhattan."

Besides highlighting the economic dividends from the commuter economy, the RPA report also made some recommendations, such as implementing congestion pricing in midtown Manhattan to reduce traffic and improve pedestrian safety in the city, while generating money to invest in mass transit. It also suggested building more affordable housing near suburban transit hubs.

"Housing is a big one for Long Island," Jones said. "You have these big investments in Long Island transit, and property values go up around transit stations when there are improvements in service. An easier commute is very valuable to prospective renters or homebuyers."

Long Island leaders praised the RPA report.



Where New York City workers are commuting from and their total earnings. Courtesy of Regional Planning Association

“This report demonstrates that the Long Island and New York City economies benefit each other, and investments in our infrastructure can amplify the economic impact of businesses and their workforce,” said Matt Cohen, president and CEO of the Long Island Association. “We should continue to develop solutions to address the lack of available and affordable housing options to support our region’s growth.”

Cameron said the report highlights “major benefits” that are being afforded here. “It’s up to Long Island whether we want to take advantage of those,” he said. “The report can provide a road map for us moving forward to capitalize on the changing economic picture with regard to real estate and transportation.”

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