

LIRR turns 185: 'A lot

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On April 24, 1834, 12 men signed their names on a state charter establishing a new rail line stretching from Greenport “through or near the middle of Long Island to a point on the water’s edge in the village of Brooklyn.” The new corporation would be known as The Long Island Railroad Company.

Now, rail historians from across Long Island are celebrating the birthday Wednesday of the nation’s oldest railroad by looking back on some of the important milestones in the Long Island Rail Road’s — the way it now spells its name — 185-year history, and looking ahead to one of its most ambitious expansions since its inception.

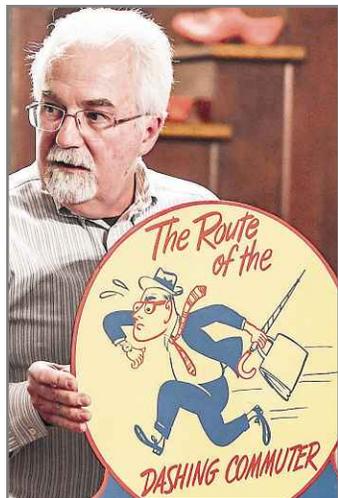
“One hundred eighty five years is a long time, when you think about it,” said David Morrison, a former LIRR branch line manager who has authored several books on the railroad’s history. “The Long Island Rail Road was around many decades before the airplane, before the automobile. It was around before telephones, photography. It even predated the telegraph.”

Morrison was among several self-professed “rail fans” who commemorated the anniversary of the LIRR at a West Babylon meeting Friday of the Long Island Sunrise Trail Chapter of the National Railway Historical Society. The event included a guest appearance by one of the LIRR’s original “Mini Maids” — a team of miniskirt-wearing spokesmodels who were charged with greeting commuters at Penn Station in the 1960s and 1970s.

“A lot has changed” over the years, Morrison said of the railroad, which was conceived as a “bridge line” to move people and goods between New York and Boston, with the help of a ferry across the Long Island Sound.

With advances in engineering and the creation of the direct rail link between New York and Connecticut, the LIRR’s original mission soon became obsolete, and its backers shifted its focus to transporting freight, including produce from North Fork farms to New York City, and manufactured goods from the city to Long Island. Along the way, the LIRR ac-

Line that predates cars, airplanes, telephones looks ahead to major expansion projects



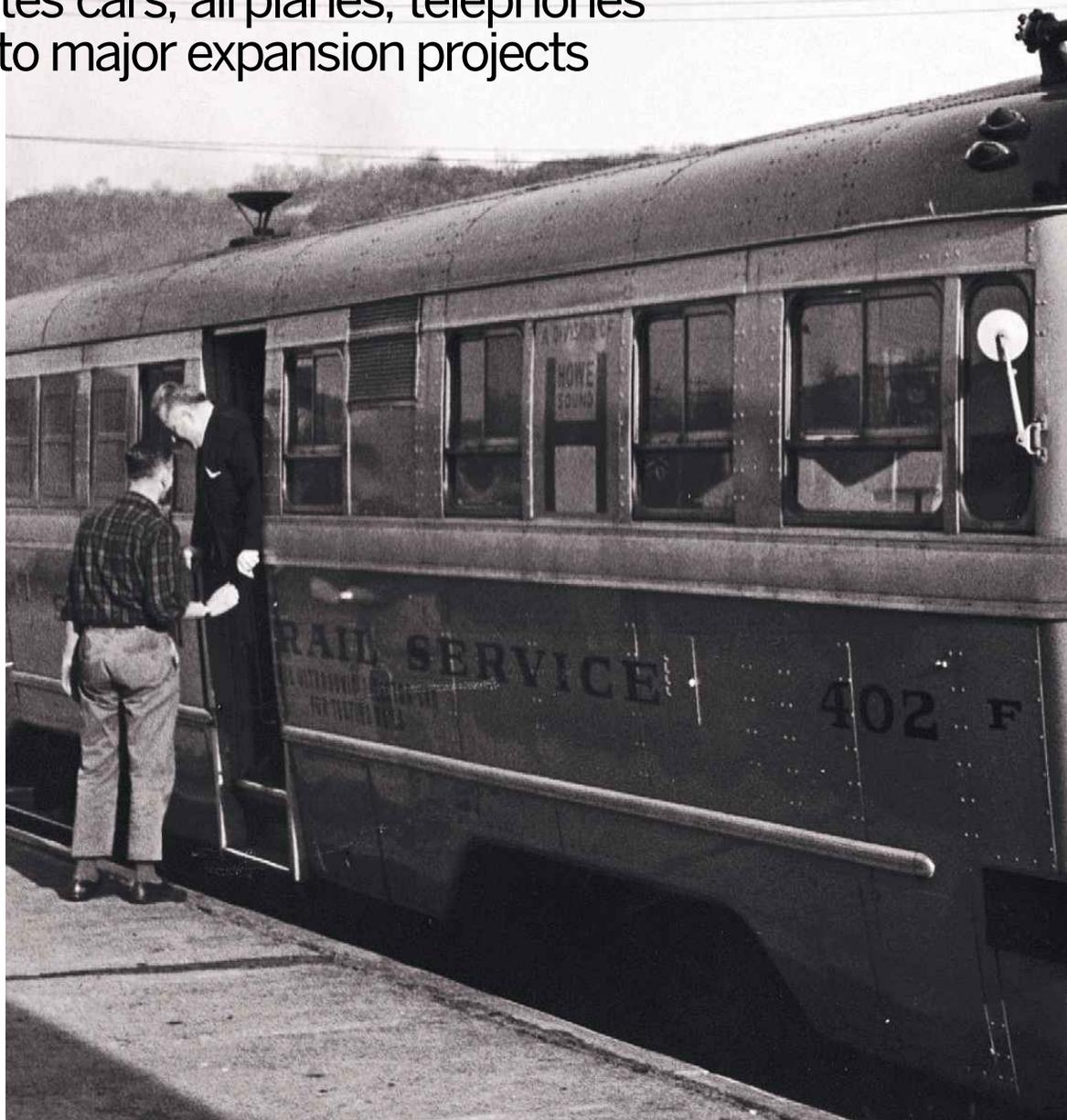
Stephen Quigley with “Dashin’ Dan,” the former icon of the Long Island Rail Road.

quired other failing railroads on Long Island and expanded its footprint. That included the South Side Railroad and the Flushing and North Side Railroad, which became, respectively, the LIRR’s Montauk and Port Washington branches.

“This is where people were putting their money,” said Don Fisher, president of the Riverhead Railroad Museum. “Everybody wanted to get into railroads. It was the new technology. It was the ‘dot com’ of the time.”

The Pennsylvania Railroad acquired the LIRR in the early 1900s, and, with the construction of Jamaica Station, Penn Station and the East River Tunnels, the railroad transitioned into the role it still has today — as a key mode of transportation for people commuting to and from jobs in Manhattan. Annual LIRR ridership reached nearly 130 million by the late 1920s.

But with cars and planes overtaking trains as a means of travel in the mid-1900s, the LIRR struggled to stay afloat, historians said. A lack of adequate investment contributed to serious reliability and safety problems, culminating with two separate train accidents in 1950 — in Rockville Centre and Kew Gardens — that, combined, killed more than 100 passengers.



On Dec. 5, 1963, the Sperry Ultrasonic Detector Car, designed to detect weak spots along the tracks,

“There were breakdowns every day,” said Stephen Quigley, president of the Long Island Sunrise Trail Chapter of the National Railway Historical Society, who said commuter complaints about LIRR service today could not compare with those when he used to ride the railroad in the 1960s. “The conductors were given bungee cords during the summertime to hold the doors open because the air conditioning used to break down all the time.”

With the Pennsylvania Railroad on the brink of bank-

ruptcy, New York Gov. Nelson Rockefeller in 1965 had the state take over the LIRR under a new agency that would go on to become the Metropolitan Transportation Authority.

Backed by state funds — including bridge and toll revenue — the LIRR would undergo a gradual comeback that culminated with it moving 89 million people in 2018 — the most since 1949. But the surge in ridership coincided with a surge in service problems last year, when the railroad recorded its lowest on-time performance in

nearly two decades.

“This has been a love-hate relationship between the people on Long Island and their railroad since the beginning. The complaints that we see today were happening 100 years ago,” said Fisher, who gets defensive when he hears commuters beat up on the LIRR. “I wish more people on the Island would celebrate the Long Island Rail Road for all its advancements over 185 years.”

Historians said some of the most important advancements are underway as part of a multi-

has changed'



Through the years

1834: The New York State Legislature approves the charter establishing the Long Island Rail Road.

1836: The first steam-powered LIRR train operates between Jamaica and Brooklyn.

1844: The LIRR completes construction of its Main Line through Greenport.

1905: Far Rockaway becomes the first LIRR branch to be electrified.

1910: Penn Station opens.

1950: Two train crashes, in Kew Gardens and in Rockville Centre, result in the death of more than 100 LIRR passengers.

1965: With the Pennsylvania Railroad on the brink of bankruptcy, New York State acquires the LIRR and forms what would go on to become the Metropolitan Transportation Authority.

1993: Colin Ferguson opens fire inside a rush-hour train as it pulls into Merillon Avenue station, killing six passengers and injuring 19 others.

2007: Heavy construction begins on East Side Access, which will create a second Manhattan terminal for the LIRR via newly bored tunnels.

2018: The LIRR carries 89.8 million riders, the most since 1949, but also has its lowest on-time performance since 1999 — 90.4 percent.

The future: The LIRR says several infrastructure projects, including East Side Access and a Third Track between Floral Park and Hicksville, will increase its capacity by 50 percent.

SOURCES: *Long Island historians/LIRR*

reaches the Montauk station after traveling from Patchogue.

billion-dollar expansion state officials said will increase the railroad's capacity by 50 percent. They include the recently completed Double Track between Farmingdale and Ronkonkoma, the planned Third Track between Floral Park and Hicksville, and the opening of a second Manhattan rail terminal for the LIRR as part of East Side Access by 2022.

LIRR president Phillip Eng said the railroad is focused on providing a "customer-centric experience" and "world-class railroad."

"From its inception, the original Main Line across Long Island kicked off the start of nearly two centuries connecting people and places across our region, a history of which we are immensely proud," Eng said in a statement Tuesday.

Mark Epstein, chairman of the LIRR Commuter Council, wished the railroad a "happy birthday" on behalf of its 280,000 daily riders who "use the system every day to get to work, school and play, whether staying on the Island or passing through."

Shelter Island may ease rules on short rentals

BY VERA CHINESE

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Shelter Island officials are considering changes to the town's strict short-term rental law, making it easier for some year-round residents to rent out their homes.

Proponents said the changes could help residents who rely on summer season rentals for income.

Under the current rental law adopted in 2017, Shelter Islanders are allowed to rent out their homes for short stays — which residents characterize as a Shelter Island summer tradition stretching back over a century — as long as they have a town license and maintain a two-week buffer period between guest check-ins, regardless of the length of the rental. The law led to complaints and a lawsuit from town residents who said it became more difficult to rent out their property in the summer.

Among the proposed changes is the addition of a "Homesteaders Hardship Exemption," to remove the 14-day buffer period for permanent residents who earn less than five times the federal poverty level. That threshold would equal \$128,750 for a family of four. The change would limit short-term rentals to six per year.

Shelter Island Town Supervisor Gary Gerth, a critic of the rental law adopted before he took office, said the proposed changes are intended to support residents who rely on the revenue to make ends meet.

"They're not renting because they love to rent," said Gerth, a Republican who pushed for the changes. "They're renting because it provides extra income."

The change is intended to allow residents to rent their homes during a single period over the summer, rather than undergo the inconvenience of moving in and out several times during the season, according to Town Attorney Bob DeStefano.

Other changes include decreased first-offense minimum fines from \$500 to a maximum of \$250, the creation of a registry for all rentals, including year-round, and a requirement to no-

tify the town of each new tenant.

Shelter Island in 2017 became the last of the five East End towns to adopt short-term rental restrictions following contentious public hearings where some claimed regulation would hurt the town economically. Others said short-term rentals turned private homes into commercial businesses.

Julia Weisenberg, a Republican town board candidate and the lead plaintiff in a lawsuit filed against the town over the law, said she thinks the regulations should be reworked, although she declined to give specifics as to how. Weisenberg said she relies on rental earnings as her main source of income and hasn't found tenants willing to rent for more than 14 days after the law went into effect, according to the suit.

"We have to go back to the drawing board," she said.

Judge LaShann DeArcy Hall in U.S. Eastern District Court in Brooklyn dismissed most of the major claims in the lawsuit in March. A joint status report is due May 13 and a trial is pending.

Town Councilman Jim Colligan said if Shelter Island hadn't imposed restrictions on short stays, the quiet town would have become an East End magnet for those booking through online sites. He said he thought the latest changes to the law, which he said is the least strict of the East End towns, are a fair compromise.

East Hampton Town limits short-term rentals to two stays of less than 15 days within a six-month period. Riverhead Town prohibits rentals of 29 days or less. Southold Town passed a law in 2015 that prohibits short-term rentals of less than 14 nights. Southampton Town prohibits short-term rentals of less than 14 days except for special events approved by the town board, such as the U.S. Open at Shinnecock Hills Golf Club in 2018. "I don't know if towns, state and counties were equipped to deal with how fast the [home sharing] industry grew," Colligan said.

A public hearing on the changes is set for May 3 at Shelter Island Town Hall.