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TRANSCRIPT: LIRR President Phil Eng Appears on Connoisseur Radio's Island Outlook

Long Island Rail Road President Phillip Eng appeared on Connoisseur Radio's Island Outlook with John Lynch.

A transcript of the interview appears below.

John Lynch: Good morning, I'm John Lynch and welcome to Island Outlook on this station of Connoisseur Media Long Island. And this morning, we are talking with the President of the Long Island Rail Road, Phil Eng. Good morning, sir.

Phil Eng: Good morning John, thank you for having me. I appreciate the opportunity to get on and chat with your listeners.

Lynch: Well, thank you for coming on. And I know it's been very challenging times for the Long Island Rail Road and the MTA, just like it's been challenging times for all of us through this pandemic and this crisis. I wanted to start this morning, it's got to be very interesting times for you right now, because you've gone through a period where the ridership on the Long Island Rail Road was down so much, and now we've got Long Island and New York entering these phases of reopening, so you're really in a position where you and the employees of the railroad are gearing back up and getting back into a somewhat normal routine of things. How has that been going so far?

Eng: Well, you're 100% right about these being challenging times. And not only was it challenging, the nature of that we've never been through a pandemic like this, at least not in my lifetime, facing so many uncertain things that were affecting not only what we did here at Long Island Rail Road, but affecting everybody in their daily lives at home. And it was one where, you know, we were balancing from the very beginning, how do we continue to be mobile, nimble and adjust in an environment that was changing every day. You know, from the ridership, basically, dropping to I think at its lowest, 3% of our normal ridership we were carrying during the peak of the pandemic. And at the same time, trying to make sure that your workforce can continue to deliver this service that was vital to New York and Long Island coming out of it, and how do you keep your workforce safe, informed and, you know, from everyone's perspective, the uncertainty caused a lot of mental stress, I believe for everybody. And that was paramount to being able to address those issues with the workforce, address those issues now, as we look to get out of it with our customers, and the businesses too. I think it's vital to Long Island's economy that they know the mass transportation system will be there when they need it, we're doing everything that we can to ensure safety and reliability, and that is a part of the solution to certainly beating the pandemic, but restoring the economy.

Lynch: Right, absolutely. And you say 3% ridership that's just crazy to think about, but I think we've all probably had friends on Facebook or something who were on the trains, post the picture of, you know, the 6:40 from Ronkonkoma at seven o'clock in the morning and they're the only one on a train. It's almost surreal to think of the Long Island Rail Road in that kind of context.

Eng: Yeah, absolutely right. I remember a few times going out of Smithtown and being the only one at the station, and other times where I trucked into Penn Station and just go into the streets and see Manhattan with nobody walking about. It was very eerie, you know, the kinds of things that you only imagined in the theaters, but it was happening in real life. But you know what, that is a testament to people actually adhering and following the advice you know, when the Governor issued the non-essential work orders, keeping people home. That really helps not only flow the curve, but as you see it today, we are now on the other end of the spectrum where we were leading the country in being a hotspot, we are now really at the unimaginable point where we were 108 days ago, we are now in really good shape. But we just have to remember to continue doing everything that we've done to get us to this point,

Lynch: Right, and even with the ridership down as low as it was, the Long Island Rail Road, the workers who were still working on the railroad were essential workers and helping essential workers get to places. So it was still performing a vital function through this, even though it was much less than what it normally did.

Eng: Absolutely. In fact, one of the reasons that we chose to continue to run 70% of our normal trains was that these essential workers that had to get to where they were going, whether they were doctors, nurses, first responders, grocery store workers, utility workers, even our own colleagues across the MTA family that use the railroad. Those were people that had to get to their places, they were helping us fight the virus, they were helping us get back to some sense of normalcy, and save lives. I said this before that, even though we're only carrying 3% of our ridership and we're only running 70% of our train service, it's probably some of the most important trips that we were making in our history. For 185 years of history, that's a pretty big statement.

Lynch: Yeah, that definitely says something. We're talking this morning with Long Island Rail Road President Phil Eng, and talking about the railroad getting back on track, no pun intended, but I guess it was a pun intended because I said it. But so what are just, I guess to make this kind of a two part question, what are the safety protocols that you have in place, first off for the employees of the railroad, and obviously for the passengers going forward?

Eng: Well, the employees were paramount to this, and making sure that they had the proper safety gear, but also have the proper information was huge. Because as I mentioned earlier, this is something that is not only just about going about doing your business, but it's also the state of mind that we needed to address. And what we wanted to do is make sure that work force who, quite frankly, went above and beyond as we battled this, make sure that

the workforce had all the right information and tools and from the very start, you know, one of the things that we were doing here, myself, some of the other key managers, we were going throughout the facilities and we were speaking with all the employees and answering questions, because they all had similar questions that I had too, right? My mother's elderly, how do I make sure that, you know, while I'm doing my job, I don't bring it back to her? And so those are the things that from a medical perspective, you really need to follow the advice of the health experts. But from an employer perspective, what we wanted to do was make sure we were doing everything we could, and that meant changing the way we did business here and obviously following the lead of the Governor and the state, as the non-essential workers were ordered to stay at home. We did similar things, wherever we could have people telecommuting, work from home, we did. And wherever we had certain services that we did not need to necessarily do during this period, we found ways to put that on hold and do all other things with our workforce. And the intent of that was to not only stop the spread across everywhere, but to protect our workforce, because there were periods of time where, particularly in the very beginning, when we had some positives in our maintenance of equipment teams. We were very concerned about the ability to not only inspect the cars, do the maintenance on the cars, but then, you know, if the workforce got to a level where we couldn't keep up, it would affect the level of service that we could run. And to their testament, those folks, the managers and the labor partners, we all banded together and we found a way to be more flexible in the work environment, and flexibility both on the labor side and actually on the management side, really pulled them through, and we were able to continue running service. And in that whole course of it from the very beginning, we also knew that we had to have measures to protect the employees, right? So from hand sanitizers throughout our facilities, we rapidly installed that everywhere. We provided masks early on, when it became apparent that that would be a key component to protecting their safety, and we made sure that as we distributed masks, you know, that we gave guidance on how to use it, when to use it and we were leveraging the MTA's buying power to ensure that supplies would be sufficient. And then obviously, we have to protect the equipment for the riders, the essential riders. And we started out cleaning our cars every 72 hours, disinfecting those cars I mean, which was unprecedented at the time, and then we quickly moved to disinfecting them every day. And that was something that I give a lot of credit to that workforce as well, because when we first started, we were disinfecting using wipes and sanitizers and spraying and rags, and we quickly moved right to foggers, and we went from a 30 minute effort per train car to five minutes. And we found that not only were we doing it more efficiently, more cost effectively, but that enabled us to increase the frequency of daily disinfecting of train cars. And then we did similar things in our stations. Every touchpoint in our stations, on our platforms, is now being sanitized twice a day. And again, that's a testament to our folks in stations and everything going on there, with regards to doing everything physically possible that we can to give the ridership that is currently using the railroad a better sense of comfort and for the ridership that we know will be coming back with each phase of reopening, that they can ride the train safely. And of course the mandate to wear face coverings. That has been proven effective everywhere, not just as you're traveling on transportation systems, but obviously when you're out and about buying groceries, out in the public, you know this is viral, it's spread through viral droplets, and face coverings are really there to protect the people around you and at the same time, it protects yourself.

Lynch: It's got to be even more pressure on running a mass transit system because as you said, this is a virus that can spread pretty easily if you don't take these precautions. So the fact that you got people coming in and out of the trains, you're going all over the place, all over Long Island, into the city, if you don't take these precautions, you can really very easily be a hub of spreading this.

Eng: Well, and you know, whether it's here on mass transportation or in other types of areas, if people are not following this advice, it can spread very rapidly. And obviously, that's why they have these contact tracers now, and it's important because of the ability for this virus to spread if people are not heeding the advice, we've seen it. The peak of our people out of work from our railroad was back in April. At one point we had 440 people that were in quarantine, and we are now down to 15 and the number of positives are in the single digits, and not one of those positives is in the hospital and that's really important. We did lose one employee and it's very tragic. But what we've shown is that if we're following all these protocols and riders are following all these protocols, mass transportation is safe, because we have gotten this to a point where, you know, there is so much positive progress since this and we've been running the railroad every day, it shows that these measures make a difference.

Lynch: Absolutely. Now if somebody is maybe on Monday going back to work and getting back into the idea of taking the train on Monday through Friday, nine to five, and this is somebody who's been a commuter on the Long Island Rail Road, for 10 years, 20 years, decades, years, whatever it's been, what would be the biggest difference if somebody who's going back, taking the train after three months of not going into work, what would be the biggest difference they would notice and the biggest adjustment they're going to have to make?

Eng: Well, right now, when the city went to Phase 1, we increased the Essential Service Plan from 70% of our trips to 90% of our trips. And we did that proactively because we want to make sure that when people return to work right now, because we want to have them riding, that their first experience is one where they still feel that they have sufficient space within the system. So because the ridership is low, right now it jumped during the Phase 1 of New York City, went from 10% the week before, to now we're at 14% of our ridership. And while that's low, that's a 40% increase from the week before. So we are seeing that this gradual increase is occurring and then come Monday, which my understanding is New York City Phase 2, you know, we will expect another jump. So when those workers who are part of Phase 2 New York City come to our system, I think they will see that obviously, in the pre-term pandemic timeframe, getting a seat was challenging. Now they'll see that they can find seats, and yesterday we launched, first in North America, the ability for our riders to see in real time how many seats are taken, how many seats are available, all by car.

Lynch: This is really cool. This is an update to the to the Long Island Rail Road Train Time app. This is very cool. The nerd in me loves this because it just sounds so high tech, and this is something that has been, I guess, in development even before the pandemic started, correct?

Eng: Absolutely, because one of the things when I started two years ago, and meeting and greeting customers and hearing what was important to them, safety, reliability and information. They wanted to make informed decisions. They even told me, we understand that there's going to be instances where there are going to be delays, but we need to know information, we need to know it in real time. So two years ago, we started building out, how do we improve communication. And obviously, the dialogue is important, but not just listening, but then acting on what we hear. And we installed GPS on our train cars. And that was first to enable us to know exactly where the train was between stations, and then using that GPS tracking we're able to inform passengers on platforms when the train was arriving at those platforms. And over the course of time, we knew other information was important, and we were carrying record ridership. So we were working on delivering something that enabled our customers to see just where trains were crowded, and just where trains were spaced out. And now during this pandemic, it's probably even more vital than it was before.

Lynch: It's perfect timing, it really works out well with that.

Eng: It did, and a testament to my team here. We were planning to roll this out a little later this year, but we really worked hard to move it forward. We wanted this tool to be available knowing we've put so much time into it. And I'm pleased to say that it's reliable. It covers 90% of our electric fleet, and we're working on the rest of the fleet. And what it does is it enables the people coming back to be able to look at the train, see as it's approaching and see where you're standing on a platform, and then see which train car you're probably going to be in front of. And it'll tell you if you need to walk up or down to find a car with more room. And it's that accurate. So yesterday, when we downloaded it, the cars pulled in and what was showing on your handheld device in your palm was the exact car that showed up in front of us. Just the other day as I was testing it myself, this is how real time it is, train

pulled in from Penn Station to Jamaica and the car was showing yellow. And as people boarded the car, it went to orange in that car, so it's literally within 10 seconds that it will update the loading on that car.

Lynch: Wow. And one of the things I saw described is when you look at it, it's almost like if you order an Uber ride and how they can show exactly where you are for the person to come pick you up. It's kind of that same kind of concept, right?

Eng: Yes, well, one of the things we rolled out last year was real time train locations using the GPS, but also for our customers so they could see exactly where the train is in the system. So when you're looking at it now, and the reason we rolled it into Train Time, we have over 70,000 daily uses for Train Time, and we figured why create a new app when we already have one that people love. So yes, they can see where the train is in real time, they could share that information with somebody, maybe meeting them at a station to pick them up from that station. And it is true, information is power, they can make decisions, if they're waiting for a train, or even planning to take a train, they'll be able to see in real time, you know, just how that train is loaded. Shortly we're going to be using this data to provide historical data, and customers will be able to see if this train was busy all week, and then maybe pick the next train. Those kinds of things are huge as people, not only coming back to work, but are coming back in an environment where they just want a little extra sense of comfort in their travels.

Lynch: And people can get it at the Google Play Store, in the Apple Store, anywhere they normally get their apps?

Eng: Absolutely, and if you have it already on your phone, the Train Time, and you have automatic updates, it probably is already updated on their phone. And that's the other thing that we're pushing, the fact that this is your mobile device, it means that you have it in your own hand, in the palm of your hand. And you can also buy your tickets right in the palm of your hand. So minimizing touchpoints, those are all things that are going to be part of how we look to make the riders feel safer. We want to minimize the interactions again with our own employees, keeping them safe, but that information is going to be huge for the riders because that can allow them to make decisions as they want it. Which train to take, where to stand, you know, even the app has push notifications, meaning if you're standing in Penn and you're waiting to see which track your train is leaving on, in the past, people would stand all together on the one board waiting for their track to be posted. Now you get that notification on your phone, you could be off having a drink somewhere on the side by yourself or in a smaller group, if you're with your family, and you'll get that notification on your phone. The second it goes on the board is the same time it goes to your phone.

Lynch: I think we've all been there where we gathered in Penn Station there by the big board there, and it's that rush, it's almost like a lottery number coming up when that track number comes up, you see the crowd surge to that track.

Eng: Yes, absolutely. But this will allow them to be in different corridors, they don't have to be near that big board. And this will allow them again, a little more sense of comfort if they would like that extra space somewhere else.

Lynch: Absolutely. And the other thing that's great about the app too, and communications as you say is key, this also translates into Chinese and Spanish, so it's accessible to a lot of people out there.

Eng: Yes, it is. That was one of the things that, you know, we also want to make sure a lot of our other users and those are two of our largest groups. We are looking at other languages and we'll continue to improve on this app for our riders because we're continually getting feedback, continually looking to enhance information and communication. I appreciate that our customers are open with us and it's how we respond to the information that I think makes a difference.

Lynch: Absolutely. We are talking with Long Island Rail Road President Phil Eng, talking about the railroad this morning on Island Outlook. As we've been talking about this morning with the shutdown, you went through this three month stretch where ridership was so low, and the other part of that just in terms financially is obviously, the railroad had a rough time in terms of ticket sales. So that's going to have some budget issues going forward. Where are we at with that, and what kind of plans you have going forward to cover for that?

Eng: Well we have been, obviously, monitoring the ridership. The revenue that comes from the fare box is important to operations. And with it dropping as you said, it has impacted the amount of revenue we had. I'm pleased that the first CARES Act did include MTA and \$3.9 billion of that was approved and that is helping right now. There's other requests being considered now by the feds, and I know a lot of folks are supportive of that need because they know that the MTA is vital to not only the New York metropolitan area, but to the whole country. But we are obviously looking forward to hopefully that being approved. But at the same time, we are finding ways to do things differently here. You know, we have continued to move critical infrastructure projects in a different way, and we've continued to do critical inspection and maintenance in a different way. And we did here, take advantage of the low ridership and in less trains in terms of doing some outages that we had planned for later in the year, and getting them done in a manner that allowed us to do it in longer stretches of time, more cost effectively and in shorter durations because of that. You know, so even our concrete tie replacement program, we just completed our 30,000th tie replacement this year and normally, we wouldn't have started till just about now. So it shows that we took full advantage of the time down and we did it in a manner that we were more efficient in doing it. But looking long term, you know, we're looking at the program. We're preparing and planning in all different scenarios. We want to be, just as we've been doing during these three months, we want to be ready to adjust, react, be nimble, you know, where we want to be prepared for any type of situation that comes up.

Lynch: A lot of people I've been talking to during this whole thing that have gone through all these different challenges of the shutdown, there is that phase that we got to kind of rethink with the way we do things, and maybe this wasn't the intention, but maybe we can rethink things and maybe do things in a smarter and better way.

Eng: Absolutely. One of the things we've learned that there can be something where field investigations can be done remotely. Positive train control is another critical project of ours that is mandated by FRA, but it's about safety. And in the past, when we have product testing, you know, we would have a number of people, to use an example, on the front end of the car, observing how the positive train control is being applied, and effectiveness, and all of those things that go along with inspections. And what we did is, because of the concern for the employees, the workforce and not wanting them all to be in a small contained area of the front of the train, is we use handheld cameras and allowed people to remotely monitor these tests. And we've done that with other things as well, where factory acceptance testing, we might have gone to another state or to another country to witness, we've done that remotely. So those are the types of practices that I think, and I know actually, what we will look to implement longer term. There will obviously be times where in the future, the aim is to still visit a site directly, but I think where we can be more efficient, more cost effective, particularly in this era where everyone is still climbing out of the economic impact that the virus has caused, this is important to learn best practices and, you know, all the businesses will be looking at how they do things differently, which we need to be ready for. A lot of businesses are talking about more telecommuting, shifting of their

hours, I know that they've talked about a lot of companies that have offices in the city, perhaps looking to get more offices in the suburbs. So these are all things that we're going to have to adjust to here at the railroad, and even projects like the mainline third track expansion, East Side Access and the double track that we completed last year, all those are giving us more flexibility and capacity to take people westbound, are going to be vitally important if we are looking at more reverse commutes, or more inter-island commutes. So these are all things that while they were vitally important for before the pandemic, so many things have become even more important now as we look to adjust.

Lynch: Absolutely. We've been talking this morning with Long Island Rail Road President Phil Eng, thank you so much for joining us this morning. We appreciate it, sir.

Eng: Well, I appreciate the time. I need to thank my workforce, they have been tremendously uplifting to me. We've said it before, they're heroes moving heroes. I thank all the essential workers across Long Island, New York and I thank all your listeners too, because they've helped us all get to where we are now, and we're on the other side of this.

Lynch: Right, and make sure you download the new Train Time app for the Long Island Rail Road too.

Eng: John, thank you.

Lynch: Take care, sir.

Eng: You too, be well.