

LIRR: Ridership grew in 2012, even as Sandy cut gains

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Photo credit: Getty Images | People wait to board a [Long Island Rail Road](#) train in Penn Station during the morning rush in New York City. (Nov. 2, 2012)

The [Long Island Rail Road](#) carried more riders in 2012 than it did in 2011, breaking a three-year ridership slide despite losing millions of customers because of superstorm Sandy.

Still, the LIRR's 81.7 million customers were not enough for the agency to reclaim the title of busiest commuter railroad in the United States from sister [MTA](#) railroad Metro-North.

LIRR ridership grew by 0.7 percent in 2012, thanks to 13 straight months of gains through September of last year. The growth followed nearly three straight years of falling ridership that began with the economic collapse in the fall of 2008.

"The impact of superstorm Sandy is, of course, what limited the growth," railroad president [Helena Williams](#) said Monday morning at a Manhattan meeting of the [Metropolitan Transportation Authority's](#) LIRR Committee. "Without Sandy, I think we were on a trend that really would have let us progress with an almost 4.2 percent increase from 2011."

Helping offset the 2.4 million customers lost to Sandy were big gains on the LIRR's Brooklyn line since the September opening of the Barclays Center across the street from the railroad's Atlantic Terminal. On nights that the arena hosted events, LIRR ridership soared by 334 percent, with the railroad carrying an average of 3,300 new customers, Williams said.

The surge in Brooklyn customers wasn't enough for the LIRR to topple Metro-North, which had its second best year for ridership. The railroad, which serves communities in Manhattan, the Bronx, upstate [New York](#) and parts of [Connecticut](#), carried 83 million people in 2012, even after losing 1.8 million to Sandy.

Williams said the railroad expects to resume its pre-Sandy growth pattern as it continues to repair storm damage and make new investments in the railroad starting in March.

Kevin Law, president of the [Long Island](#) Association, said the ongoing return of commuters to the LIRR after the economic collapse speaks to the link between [Long Island's](#) economy and that of [New York City](#).

"Anything we can do to make it easier for commuters to go into the city or come out to the Island will increase ridership even further, strengthen our region as a whole and allow for transit oriented economic development projects on Long Island to move forward," Law said.

Mark Epstein, chairman of the LIRR Commuter Council, said his group "welcomes the news that LIRR ridership has increased." For it to continue climbing, Epstein said, the LIRR needs to restore all the budget-driven cuts to service it made in 2010, create new discount fare programs to encourage more riders, and generally make tickets affordable.

"The recipe for increased ridership is frequency, convenience, and affordability," Epstein said