



# An interview with Peter Cannito

In each edition of The Review, we feature an interview with a key transport figure. For this issue, Marion Gourlay spent time with Peter Cannito, President of New York's MTA Metro-North Railroad.



## Watching the clock at Grand Central Station

**The clock on the concourse at New York's Grand Central Station – to movie buffs, it is sepia romance personified, to rail users, it's the centrepiece of 44 platforms of hustle and bustle.**

For Peter Cannito, President of Metro-North Railroad, it's a constant reminder to ensure his trains are running on time. As one of New York's two commuter rail operations, Metro-North serves around 80 million passengers every year, operating largely from Grand Central Station to destinations as far afield as New Haven in Connecticut, some 80 miles away. It is a subsidiary of New York's Metropolitan Transportation Authority (MTA), which is the public body responsible for running the railways, subway, buses, the tolled bridges and tunnels. What's more, MTA also manages a multi-billion dollar capital construction programme – some \$20 billion over the next 20 years.

Although Cannito has always worked in the US rail industry, (with Amtrak for 21 years, and a brief spell in private consultancy for five years) he has a business and financial background – Cannito graduated from the Canisius Business School in Buffalo in 1967 and took a further degree from Harvard Business School in 1990.

Perhaps it's this combination that has served him so well at Metro-North. The demand for public transport in New York is a sharp contrast to the rest of America. Two-thirds of rail users in the US live in New York and its suburbs while in the rest of the country, 90% of commuters drive cars to work.

Every weekday at 6.30am, Cannito boards one of his own trains and will be sitting at his desk by 7am. There's no question about his 270,000 daily rail commuters being late for work. Thanks to Cannito, Metro-North's award-winning services are so punctual that on-time performance hit an all time record of 98% in 2007. Not surprising then, that customer satisfaction is equally high with an average of 93% across all five lines operated by Cannito - three East of the Hudson River and two West. Patronage is growing too, at an average of 4 to 5% per annum. In fact patronage has doubled since 1999, when Peter Cannito started his tenure.

While it seems that Cannito has already accomplished his mission to supply New Yorkers with good quality, reliable transportation, there are two big challenges for Metro-North right now.

One is to find extra capacity in the network. By focusing on growing 'reverse peak' and 'off peak' travel, Cannito has improved service frequencies to other business centres, opened up the weekend market and targeted marketing accordingly. Furthermore he brought about a brand new station for the New York Yankees baseball stadium.

However, other new infrastructure projects will need to wait their turn as funding is not always available – Cannito speaks with a degree of frustration. In fact, Mayor of New York Michael Bloomberg has commissioned a report on congestion charging as a possible new source of revenue for infrastructure schemes.

The second biggest challenge is maintaining the high performance level. Cannito does not seem worried, he has shifted priority towards improving the trains themselves, and also the whole journey experience through a station renewal programme.

As Cannito reveals his plans to retire in July, he can be proud of the fact that he will have been the longest tenured President in Metro-North's 25-year history and that he will leave behind a lasting legacy. As the search begins for Cannito's replacement, it is clear that the next Metro-North President will have some very big shoes to fill.