

## Working on the railroad

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By John Anastasi - [Bucks County Courier Times](#)

PHILADELPHIA — At a time when ethanol-fueled hybrid vehicles are all the rage, a more traditional mode of transportation is experiencing a quiet resurgence.

Railroad operators say increased business and a graying workforce are about to create a shortage of locomotive engineers and conductors in the United States. Seeing a field that needs workers, Bucks County Community College is trying to launch a basic training program in locomotive engineering and conducting.

"The railroads are still a part of how we move people and materials," said Barbara Miller, BCCC's vice president for continuing education, workforce development and public safety.

The course covers operating rules, train air-brake theory, railroad infrastructure, diesel and electric locomotive operation and other topics. It's designed to prepare students for a railroad training academy.

The course was offered for the spring semester, but it failed to generate the necessary enrollment. The school will try again in the fall, said Miller.

The need for engineers, who drive locomotives, and conductors, who are in charge of the trains, is very real, according to regional and national railroad officials.

"We need to do more recruiting than we have in many years," said Tom White, spokesman for the Washington D.C.-based Association of American Railroads.

Over the last few decades, railroads slowed their hiring as the industry declined and technological advances automated many jobs.

"The railroad industry went through a period of time in the 1980s and 1990s where they weren't hiring," White said. "The technology made [operations] more efficient and they didn't need as many people. So the railroad industry is an aging industry. A lot of people are reaching retirement at the same time."

Those retirements have escalated in the last few years because the federal government lowered the age at which railroad workers could retire with full benefits from 62 to 60, said Andy Burton, director of the National Academy of Railroad Sciences in Kansas.

"For 15 years, the railroads weren't hiring anyone and it's starting to catch up with them," said Burton.

And it's happening at a time when railroad use has increased more dramatically than even industry experts had predicted.

"I don't think anyone anticipated the particularly dramatic growth in the industry," White said.

The high cost of fuel has prompted some companies to use rail service rather than trucking to transport their products, said White. That, coupled with growth in national and global trade, has helped drive the increase.

"Moving a lot of goods over long distances is something rail does extremely efficiently," White said. "At the same time, we're seeing a huge run-up in the price of fuel. Fuel prices are a much higher percentage of truckers' costs than ours, so we've got more of a competitive edge over trucks there."

According to the Union Pacific Corp., one of the nation's largest railroad companies, a gallon of diesel fuel moved one ton of freight about 400 miles in 2001, making it between two and four times more fuel efficient than trucks.

The association predicts rail freight demand will jump 67 percent by 2020. Burton estimated the industry will need to hire 85,000 workers, including 18,000 conductors, in the next five years. Every year, his academy trains about 1,100 conductors from all over the country.

SMS Rail Lines is a New Jersey-based short-line rail service that operates in area industrial complexes, including the Penn Warner Industrial Park in Falls. Owner Jeff Sutch said he has noticed the increase in rail freight business.

"A lot of things that had been moved by truck are coming back to the rails," said Sutch.

The New Hope resident said he was surprised and pleased to hear about BCCC's attempt to start a locomotive engineering/conducting course.

Salaries for conductors and engineers average about \$67,000 and \$75,000, respectively, according to the railroad association. On the downside are odd shifts, including nights, weekends and holidays, and plenty of time away from home.

"It's a certain type of lifestyle," said Rudy Husband, director of public relations for the Norfolk Southern Corp. "It's definitely a commitment."

Virginia-based Norfolk Southern is a rail service that employs 30,000 workers and operates in 22 states, including Pennsylvania.

"We've been in hiring mode for the last couple of years and we expect it to continue," said Husband. "Half of our company will be eligible to retire in the next five years."