

The Lehigh Valley's Essential Freight Industry

We've all been stuck on Route 22 and wondered "maybe if all these trucks weren't out here, this wouldn't be gridlock."

Trucks, warehouses and freight have become a familiar target in a Lehigh Valley that's become a national epicenter of distribution and logistics growth.

But these days, those trucks are among the few vehicles on the road, and rather than being the answer to why you're annoyed, they've become part of the solution to how to deal with the Covid-19 Pandemic.

As the Pandemic spreads, the supply chain keeps on trucking – often with the essential goods needed to sustain a sheltered-in-place population. That includes everything from food to consumer goods to masks to respirators.

It's particularly evident in the Lehigh Valley, which has become an e-commerce supplier for the entire Northeast.

"In a lot of ways, they're as much on the front lines as medical personnel, police officers and postal workers," said Lora Cecere, Founder of Hanover, Pa.-based Supply Chain Insights and author of Supply Chain Shaman. "Not only are they exposed, but they're providing the goods that we need to keep things going through this crisis."

There's little question that warehouses, and the trucks that come with them, have come under fire in a region that's seen more than 40 million square feet of new distribution space proposed since 2013 – much of it built in former farm fields and open space.

It's brought more trucks to the region's increasingly congested highways and that is expected to increase. A 2015 LVPC report estimated that freight through the region will double to more than 80 million tons a year by 2040. And while freight comes on planes and trains, as well, roughly 90% coming through the Lehigh Valley is coming by truck.

But these days those trucks have taken on far more importance, so much so that they're among the few vehicles deemed essential enough to move between states. So essential that the Department of Transportation in March suspended strict guidelines on how long truckers can driver each day, as long as they're transporting emergency supplies like medical equipment, masks, gloves, groceries and fuel. And soon after closing all its rest stops to promote social distancing, Pennsylvania began reopening the rest areas for truckers.

All those Lehigh Valley warehouses and trucks are more important than ever, said Fred Koeck, President of The Lehigh Valley Roundtable Council of Supply Chain Management Professionals.

“If the Lehigh Valley wasn’t able to function the way it has, it would create a big ripple effect,” Koeck said. “This region supplies the Northeast states.”

The region’s profile in the freight industry has risen across the state and nationwide. For more than two years, Lehigh Valley Planning Commission Executive Director Becky Bradley has sat on the Multi-State Freight Working Group that shares best practices and suggests policies for a four-state region that includes Pennsylvania, New Jersey, New York and Connecticut. Most recently, the LVPC played a role in getting the rest areas reopened, and helped connect retailers with their shipments coming from the Port of New York and New Jersey.

Koeck explained that as the economy slowed, many warehouses, including some as close as Berks County, have reduced to skeleton crews. Those tend to be suppliers of service providers and retail shops that have closed during the stay-at-home orders.

But many of the warehouses in this region’s transportation and logistics industry – which adds 2.1 billion to the Gross Domestic Product and employs nearly 32,000 workers – remained at or near full staff because they specialize in e-commerce. With so many people sheltering at home rather than going out to the store, more have been ordering online, forcing the supply chain to keep humming through the region.

But that too will begin slowing, Koeck said, as suddenly high unemployment cuts into e-commerce buying. Suppliers of food and other essentials will weather the storm better, he said.

“Relatively soon, once this purchasing bubble passes, even the e-commerce suppliers will slow in this area. It’s already happening in some cases,” Koeck said. “But places like Wegmans, U.S. Cold Storage and B.Braun will remain strong because those are essential goods that we’re going to need to get through this.”

It’s certainly changed the way truckers operate, said Bob Dolan, President of the Lehigh Chapter of the Pennsylvania Motor Truck Association. Drivers often don’t even enter the buildings they deliver to, sometimes leaving the load and paperwork to be picked up by the employees receiving the shipment. Some warehouses or retailers have erected tents and handwashing stations outside to allow truckers to sign paperwork and leave it behind so they don’t have to come in contact with those receiving the load. But with multiple drivers sometimes using the same trucks, risk is inevitable.

“I’ve never wiped down the dash board knobs so much in my life,” said Dolan, who has been driving for 41 years.

For now, all those trucks can’t be blamed for gridlock because they’re among the few vehicles still on the roads. This new shelter-in-place era is enough to make us all long

for rush-hour traffic again. Until then, the supply chain through the Lehigh Valley will remain unbroken.

“We’re keeping the economy moving and the shelves stocked,” Dolan said. “We all have a role to play to get through this. This is our role.”