

Across the Hudson, Reluctance to Return to New York City

Anne Kadet

7-8 minutes

Until the coronavirus hit, Taras Hicks made frequent trips across the Hudson River to explore Brooklyn and the Bronx with his three children. “I teach my kids, don’t be fearful of anything but the creator,” said the Jersey City utility worker.

But even Mr. Hicks is in no hurry to return to New York City now that its three-month lockdown is lifting. “It’s like when a new cellphone comes out,” he said. “People buy it the first day. Then you return it because it has glitches.”

Residents of the New Jersey towns across from Manhattan have long commuted to New York City for work. “And while local options have steadily improved in recent years, many...still looked to the city for dining, shopping and entertainment,” said Maria Nieves, president and CEO of the Hudson County Chamber of Commerce, which includes municipalities such as Jersey City, upper-middle-class Hoboken and blue-collar Bayonne.

But now, even as the lockdowns ease on both sides of the Hudson River, fears of a New York City that is still grappling with

pandemic issues have people staying away.

At the pandemic's peak, daily PATH train ridership dropped 95%, to 14,000 from 281,000, before creeping up to 24,000 in early June. While these numbers surely will climb further, they may be indicative of a fundamental shift in the relationship between New York City and its nearby suburbs.

Many say coronavirus concerns will continue to keep them away. While New Jersey had a high number of cases, everyone knows New York City was the pandemic's epicenter. It's hard to shake that association.

"Unfortunately there is going to be a lot of hesitation, if not fear, about going back to New York any time soon," Ms. Nieves said.

Global coronavirus cases cross 8 million; The Federal Reserve deploys a \$250 billion lending program to buy individual corporate bonds; The U.S. opens the door to more passenger flights by Chinese airlines. WSJ's Jason Bellini has the latest on the pandemic. Photo: Johannes Eisele/AFP

Christian Bermudez, a Bayonne student and retail worker, says that for a long spell this spring, even locals who went into New York City were regarded with trepidation. "You'd try to distance yourself from them," he said.

The city doesn't seem as scary now, he says, but he's waiting for more people to go in and report back that it feels safe.

Natalie Luciano, who just reopened her all-day breakfast and sandwich restaurant, "Bayonne Eats," is wondering about her establishment's tagline, "With a Taste of New York."

“It will help if they taste the food,” she said, of potential customers. “But if they’re just looking at that, it could be a problem.”

Even those eager to return to the city are concerned about transportation. Some say they will go in only if they can drive or take an Uber. Others say they’re comfortable taking the train, but the journey stops there.





Hoboken resident Ashley Ward says she prefers to ride the PATH instead of the New York City subway because it is generally cleaner.

Photo: Anne Kadet for The Wall Street Journal

“I’ll try to avoid the subway at all costs,” said Ashley Ward, a Hoboken executive in her 20s who works at a Manhattan fashion company. “The PATH is public transportation too, but it’s always been a little cleaner than the subway.”

Another factor discouraging returns—Gotham’s slower reopening pace. In New Jersey, indoor shopping and outdoor dining launched Monday. But there’s still no date set for these milestones in New York City.

Hoboken resident Katherine Perry, a retired government worker, says she’s made frequent trips to Manhattan all her life to shop department stores such as Saks, or just explore. But she won’t be heading in if there’s no place to land. “I need to be able to sit down somewhere and have a meal,” she said.

Many commuters, meanwhile, have realized they can do their jobs just fine from home.

Gregory Elliott, a consultant who lives in Hoboken and works in

lower Manhattan, says his employer probably won't reopen the office until September, and then it will give employees the option of working from home. Mr. Elliott expects to head in just a few days a week. "On the ferry," he said. "It's the less risky way. Open air, less people."

Jon Litt, founder and chief investment officer of Land & Buildings, a real-estate hedge fund based in Stamford, Conn., says towns that derive a good deal of their value from their proximity to New York City might see a decline in home prices as suburbs farther out are seen as safer—and just as convenient.

"If they are not going into the city as much, people might say, 'Why do I need to be in Hoboken?' " he said.

On the other hand, he says, restaurants and stores in Hoboken, Jersey City and Bayonne will get more business as residents opt to shop and dine local.

Gabi Lombardi, owner of Sorellina, an Italian restaurant and wine bar in Hoboken, says that in launching outdoor dining this week, she is offering lunch service for the first time since opening in 2016.

"Usually lunch is not a big market for us. Most people work in Manhattan. But right now, everyone is working from home, and we're going to give it a try," she said.

So far, so good—reservations are booked solid.

"I wouldn't be surprised if we saw a shift. Usually we're the ones going to Manhattan to dine, but now they might be coming here,"

Ms. Lombardi said. “Just like everything else, it’s crazy times!”



A pedestrian walks past a reopened flower store in Hoboken.

Photo: Michael Nagle/Bloomberg News

Write to Anne Kadet at Anne.Kadet@wsj.com

Copyright ©2020 Dow Jones & Company, Inc. All Rights Reserved. 87990cbe856818d5eddac44c7b1cdeb8