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Testimony to the Joint Hearing To Examine The Effectiveness Of New York's Transit Networks / Buffalo

By Douglas Funke, president, Citizens for Regional Transit

The world is changing in ways that demand a bold new vision for mobility based on clean, reliable public transportation. The 20th century dream of a car in every driveway has become unsustainable. Our cities have been turned into parking lots, our “freeways” are clogged with stop-and-go traffic, our air is polluted with gases and particulates that cause cancer and asthma, and our climate – planet-wide – is changing in ways that increase the frequency of dangerous weather events and threaten our coastlines and economies. The largest source of greenhouse gas emissions in Erie County is not electrical energy generation or industry, but rather transportation (at 40%, primarily from cars). If we expect people to drive less, alternatives must be provided.

This is also a matter of equal access to jobs, food, healthcare, education, recreation, and cultural amenities. Thirty percent of Buffalo households do not own cars. This includes seniors, the disabled, and those who cannot afford cars. The annual cost of car ownership (\$10,000) and road maintenance (\$25,000 per lane mile) puts a strain on family and municipal budgets alike. Millennials with the option to drive are increasingly choosing not to – and are attracted to cities that provide other mobility options. For all of the above reasons, a solid commitment to expanded, efficient public transportation must undergird our plans for a just, successful, and sustainable future.

A growing number of cities and regions across the US have recognized this imperative by investing in better public transit, including light rail, which can move more people more efficiently, quickly, and sustainably than any non-rail mode. Buffalo-Niagara needs to keep pace, to remain competitive and serve our community's needs. Recognizing this imperative, a growing list of Buffalo-Niagara municipal leaders (including city mayors and town councils, and Erie County Executive Mark Poloncarz) and over 68 community organizations and business have endorsed the Citizens for Regional Transit petition calling for: extending Buffalo's light rail along highest demand corridors, providing inter-modal connectivity and, most importantly, establishing long-term sustainable transit funding. Our petition and a list of signers are attached.



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The most immediate priority is to maintain and strengthen what we have. Funding for transit in Buffalo-Niagara, and New York State more generally, has not kept up with the need for many years. This has led to deferred maintenance and degraded service. We call for increased state transit operating assistance (STOA) and adequate capital investment funding for Buffalo-Niagara's transit system. Failure to make these ongoing expenditures degrades our transit service further *and* jeopardizes our ability to qualify for the federal funds needed for critical projects like the Buffalo-Amherst light rail extension. We also need to recognize and address the unique operating and maintenance costs associated with Buffalo's light rail system, the only subway outside of the MTA, as we address this funding crisis.

In order to meet the climate, economic, and equitable access goals put forth in Buffalo-Niagara's One Region Forward Plan, we need to work towards incremental completion of Western New York's 46-mile light rail rapid transit system (LRRT), originally designed to connect many more of our communities and transportation hubs, both city and suburban. As a first priority, we call for support for the NFTA's in-process extension of the Metro Rail to Amherst. This expansion promises an immediate doubling of daily ridership with an increase of over 25,000 riders each day and elimination of the need for the UB Stampedo intercampus bus service. The NFTA is \$6M short for completing the necessary engineering studies to plan this extension. We call on NYS to fill this critically needed shortfall and pledge that future state funding to meet the federal match requirement will be a priority following the completion of the engineering design work. The Governor has pledged to support the Amherst extension. He needs to be held to that promise.

In addition to the Amherst extension, we are requesting state and local funding for studying a Metro Rail extension from the opposite end of the existing line: from its downtown terminus at the waterfront, through the Eastside, to the Buffalo-Niagara International Airport (BNIA). This extension would connect Buffalo's highest-demand destinations (including Larkinville, Central Terminal, the Walden Galleria, and the airport) while simultaneously serving Buffalo's neediest populations with rapid mobility and opportunities for community redevelopment. This Eastside-Airport extension was part of the original LRRT plan and was recommended for study by the NFTA as recently as 2010. The NFTA 2010 study rated the Eastside-Airport extension as highest in the category of potential development (now known as Transit Oriented Development or TOD) and high in categories of market intensity and ridership



per line mile. Funds should be found for studying the Eastside-Airport extension while the Amherst extension is designed and completed, so that it can progress towards shovel-ready status as funds become available. As this extension would run above ground, mostly on disused rail rights-of-way (ROWs), trains could transport passengers at high speed without the high costs associated with tunneling. Public ownership of these ROWs also makes this investment especially cost-effective, while the fact that this alignment is separate and away from streets, also minimizes disruption to traffic and businesses during construction.

It is also time to support commuter (heavy) rail between Niagara Falls and Buffalo using the existing Amtrak rail and ROW. There are many reasons that the time is right for this relatively inexpensive, tourism enhancing investment:

- The new Niagara Falls multimodal train station with its co-located Underground Railroad Museum is operational and located on the Niagara River for easy access by Niagara Falls tourists.
- The new downtown multimodal train station in Buffalo, to which the service would connect, is scheduled for opening in 2020.
- The Buffalo waterfront is emerging as a tourist attraction, but because of the poor connectivity with Niagara Falls, only a small fraction of the 10+ million tourists that visit Niagara also visit Buffalo. A commuter rail connection between Niagara Falls and Buffalo can change this equation.
- When connected by transit, the Buffalo – Niagara Falls – Lewiston – Youngstown corridor will become the world’s greatest waterfront, with historic Old Fort Niagara to the north, Niagara Falls in the center, and Buffalo’s waterfront, Erie Canal terminus, museums, historic architecture, theater and arts (and much more) to the south. What’s missing is a public transportation connection.
- Toronto / Southern Ontario, Canada’s economic powerhouse, is poised to double its population by mid-century, offering long- and short-term opportunities for upstate New York to cater to and effectively become part of the “Golden Horseshoe” by strengthening economic ties. Toronto’s commuter GO Train, now reaches to Niagara Falls, Ontario – just over the Whirlpool Bridge from the train station in Niagara Falls, NY. Completing the commuter rail between Niagara Falls, NY and Buffalo will facilitate bringing Canadian shoppers, sports fans, tourists, and airport patrons from Toronto to Buffalo-Niagara.



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- Since the rail connection between Buffalo and Niagara Falls already exists and is used by Amtrak, completing the necessary track improvements is an inexpensive and high return on investment. This should be a no-brainer.

Finally, we are calling for investments that make Buffalo-Niagara transit cleaner and less polluting. Buffalo Metro Rail already runs on 80% clean hydroelectric power from the NY Power Authority (NYPA). Expansions of Buffalo's electrically powered LRRT will provide the least polluting form of transit achievable. We are also calling for beginning a transition from diesel and natural gas buses to electric buses. While a shift from cars to diesel and natural gas buses will significantly reduce pollution, transition to electric buses will make that improvement much more dramatic and help Erie County and NYS meet their pledge to achieve the goals of the Paris Climate Accord. Hence, we are calling for legislation that amends the economic development law to make the NFTA an eligible applicant for more NYPA hydropower and for accessing the WNY Economic Development Fund. This will support expansion to broader use of clean electrically powered transit.

The shift from cars to transit will be a cultural change among some demographics, especially for suburban communities. It will be important to initiate programs that encourage and reward the transition to public transit. For example, programs that provide incentives to employers who reward their employees for using transit should be implemented and supported. System enhancements that make taking transit easier and more comfortable, such as park-and-ride lots, increased bus frequency, and improved bus shelters, will be needed.

We want to thank Senator Kennedy and Assemblyman Magnarelli for holding this public meeting and their continued leadership and support for upstate transit, especially Buffalo Niagara's transit system. Thank you for considering our comments.

Respectfully,

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Citizens for Regional Transit is a grassroots non-profit organization seeking to educate the public, public officials, their authorities and agencies in the Buffalo-Niagara Region about the benefits of a comprehensive multimodal transportation system, including an expanded Metro Rail.