



CITIZENS for REGIONAL TRANSIT

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2 December 2021

Niagara Frontier Transit Authority
181 Ellicott Street
Buffalo, NY 14203

Attention John Cox, Chief Financial Officer:

This letter contains our comments on the NFTA FYE 2022-2023 draft budget. We are appreciative that the draft budget document was made available electronically this year per our request last year. It makes our review a lot easier than having to go to the library. We also thank the NFTA for providing on-line virtual access to the hearing.

Again this year, we strongly commend and support the NFTA's mission of "... providing the highest level of safe, clean, affordable, responsive and reliable transportation through a coordinated and convenient bus and rail system" and goal of "achieving a reputation as the best transit system in the United States" (page 2-3). We support Tom George's benchmarking work vis-à-vis other transit agencies as one tool for identifying areas for improvement and look forward to helping identify and prioritize needed improvements. But more is needed beyond just comparing to other transit agencies. We believe the NFTA mission and goal needs to be specified in detail to support these efforts. We suggest that the recently updated *NFTA-Metro. Service Design Guidelines & Delivery Standards – 2021 Revision* be modified to include the needed specificity. We are making our recommendations for these additions in a separate correspondence to the NFTA Board of Commissioners and executive managers.

We are pleased to see the combined FYE 2022-2023 State Transit Operating Assistance (STOA) and federal transit budget support is anticipated to increase by 9.5%. This is not enough to fully meet the NFTA-Metro mission and goal but probably all we can hope to receive during this budget cycle and will allow the NFTA to continue improving and satisfying the region's basic transit need. And we realize that this increase is uncertain and subject to the state and federal budgeting processes and uncertain developments with the COVID-19 pandemic. We plan to meet with our state and federal legislators to encourage their support for at least this amount of increase to support transit. The pandemic has taught us that public transit is an essential service and needs to be supported regardless of external public health or government budgetary difficulties.

In 2019 your answers to our budget questions indicated that NFTA-Metro received 60% of Metro Rail traction power from NYPA. Is this still true? Are you able to get additional NYPA electricity as you transition to electric buses? Do you anticipate getting additional NYPA power at the same rate when the light rail is extended? Please see our detailed questions about electricity rates and sources in the attachment that we aren't taking the time to read here.



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Maintaining and increasing transit budgets is especially critical today as we deal with climate change and social justice / access issues called for in the new FTA Justice40 Initiative. The goal should be making transit as attractive and effective as driving. This is critical if we are to reduce vehicle miles traveled along with the associated congestion and pollution, and for providing access to jobs and educational opportunities for everyone including the 30% of Buffalo households that do not have access to cars. This highlights the importance of extending Metro Rail that can carry up to 700 people at 50MPH every 10 minutes, compared to 50 people per bus moving in traffic. No wonder 20% of NFTA riders are served on just the 6 miles of light rail rapid transit in comparison to the over 1,000 miles of bus service. We are pleased to see that there is \$4.1 million in the draft budget for continued progress on the Amherst extension and \$8.2 million for DL&W completion. These are both important steps for achieving Metro Rail extension, which is critical for meeting the NFTA-Metro mission and goal, and for addressing the social justice/access objectives of the FTA Justice40 Initiative.

While we are concerned about the FTA's insistence that we reevaluate bus rapid transit (BRT) for the Amherst extension, we believe that it will quickly become obvious that BRT cannot meet the capacity requirements for connecting the UB campuses and that BRT would create a barrier to disadvantaged city residents seeking access to employment and education opportunities available in Amherst.

Switching to electric cars won't solve the climate problem – we need high-capacity transit. In addition to the fact that many Buffalo households cannot afford a car, cars are 50% plastic (oil-based) and rubber tire wear produces micro-plastic particles that pollute our waterways and are carried by wind all over the globe, including to arctic and Antarctic regions where they can darken snow cover, which may lead to increasing light absorption further exacerbating global warming. Also every ton of concrete produced to carry and park all the cars produces a ton of CO₂. Steel-on-steel wheels of light rail is not only more energy efficient; it has less negative impact on the environment.

As Always, we thank you for your diligent work in answering our questions. They are always helpful to us in advocating for better public transit.

Sincerely,

Douglas Funke
President, Citizens for Regional Transit



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**Attachment
Detailed questions**

As in previous years, we have some questions that relate to details of the budget. Rather than burden the budget public hearing with these questions, we have included them below.

Here are our questions:

Page i-2. We assume the Mortgage Recording Tax revenue is from Erie only (not Niagara County.) Is this correct?

Page i-3. The draft budget document says that vehicle maintenance and facility costs are \$1.036 million (9.7%) below FYE2022 “reflective of recent trends.” Most costs are going up. What recent trends are being referred to here?

Page i-3. You estimate that the FYE2023 market diesel fuel rate will be \$2.30 per gallon, up from FYE 2022 of \$2.16 per gallon. In FYE2020 budget it was \$2.70 per gallon. Do these price estimates include some locked-in prices? This would be good since gas prices today are generally going up.

Page i-3. The FYE2023 rail traction costs are \$450K, up \$104K from FYE2022. We calculate this as a 30% increase from FYE2022, which seems high. Why so high?

Page i-3. In your answers to our questions in 2019 you said that you received 60% rail traction power from NYPA with NYPA electricity costs at \$0.05/KWH and National Grid rates ranging from \$0.03/KWH to \$0.07/KWH. What electricity rates are assumed in these projections? Are you still purchasing 60% of the traction power from NYPA? Will NFTA-Metro’s NYPA allocation increase to cover electric buses and the extended light rail? We hope so.

Page i-8. In previous years we were pleased to see the NFIA deficits decreasing. However, they more than doubled in FYE2023. We assume this is due to getting hit especially hard by the COVID-19 pandemic. These deficits are being covered by projected BNIA surpluses. Does this mean that the BNIA will not be able to provide financial support for NFTA-Metro?