



Citizens *for* Regional Transit

CRT News

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Citizens for Regional Transit Next Public Meeting

15 October 2020

5:30 – 7:00pm

Zoom link: To Be Provided

The Post COVID-19 Future for Transit

Speakers:

Nick Sifuentes, Executive Director, Tri-State Transportation Campaign

**Thomas George, PE, Director of Public Transit,
Niagara Frontier Transportation Authority (NFTA)**

Summary:

Our speakers will discuss the impact of COVID-19 on public transit from scientific and operational perspectives. Mr. Sifuentes will summarize the latest research on how the virus spreads and whether transit has been found to be a significant vector for its spread, and will discuss approaches for mitigating potential spread from the perspective of riders, transit agencies and governments. Mr. George will discuss the impact of the virus on NFTA transit operations. He will describe steps taken and experience responding to the virus and the associated economic fallout; and he will discuss plans for moving forward and obstacles to be overcome.

The Future of Transit in the Age of COVID-19 (Part 2)
Building Back Stronger
By CRT President Doug Funke

It is well known that the Chinese symbol for crisis combines symbols for dangerous/precarious with change-point/opportunity. Our current COVID-19 situation represents such a crisis for public transit with both immediate danger and long-term opportunities.

The immediate priority is to address transit's precarious financial situation. Transit ridership and therefore fares are down, along with other NFTA funding sources (e.g., Erie County sales and mortgage recording taxes, which are also down). Cuts at the State level are also possible. There is a danger that the NFTA will have to cut service further.

The CARES Act (Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security Act) passed by Congress in March allowed the NFTA and other transit agencies to maintain near-existing service levels. But this money is running out. If Congress fails to agree on adequate follow-on CARES legislation, transit service will be cut. In fact, the NFTA is beginning to cut service gradually, pre-emptively, to avoid hitting a cliff later. The bottleneck is the US Senate and President Trump. We urge our US Senators and the President to continue working toward a compromise bill that will avoid cutting transit service. It is also imperative that State Transit Operating Assistance (STOA) be continued. We therefore also ask our state legislators to make sure that STOA is maintained.

85% of Buffalo-Niagara transit riders rely on transit for satisfying all their transportation needs. This means that cuts in transit service impact those who have no transportation alternative and the businesses they work for and patronize. These are people who can't afford the higher costs of alternative transportation, which includes a large portion of people of color. The pandemic has also taught us that transit is a critical public service serving essential workers that we all depend on. Transit is not optional. It is an essential public service that must be maintained and prioritized as we come out of this crisis. Transit is the circulatory system for the people, businesses and government of our region and needs to be kept viable. It is also a key component to addressing climate change, the larger existential crisis facing all of us long term.

We call on the NFTA and our political leaders to find ways to continue transit service at current, or near-current levels, as we get through the pandemic. This means we need to maintain adequate levels of transit service through at least the first half of 2021, when return to normal is possible.

Finally, let me address the opportunity part. We shouldn't be satisfied with just a return to "normal" as we come out of the pandemic. Like many regions, Buffalo-Niagara had been planning improvements to public transportation as a way to attract businesses and population. These plans need to be kept alive and implemented when we are through the crisis. We can also learn from the COVID-19 experience to build back better.

At a minimum, many of the changes made to combat the virus can be maintained and enhanced to keep us safe, and even to improve service in important ways. For example, rear door exiting can be made permanent to speed service, and enhanced cleaning protocols can be continued to help protect from all diseases. And as we restore pre-pandemic schedules we can better align them with demand. For example, more frequent buses in high demand areas can be implemented with only small reductions to service in lower-demand areas, as recommended in the NFTA's 2016 Erie and Niagara County Service Plan. This approach has worked in other cities that have reworked their transit systems (e.g., Houston) with the effect of significantly increasing ridership. The NFTA study included cost-neutral changes that provided more frequent service in high-demand areas and along high priority corridors. Further planning for extending Buffalo's light rail should also continue. As we deal with the pandemic, let's also keep an eye to a future that makes transit and Buffalo better.

At our October public meeting (October 15, 2020 at 5:30, location TBD) we plan to discuss the future of transit following COVID-19. Plan to attend.

CRT at Work for WNY: July – October 2020

Meetings. Continued to attend meetings of local public organizations including the NFTA and GBNRTC. Also attended CEJ's Buffalo Transit Riders Union meetings and served on the Erie County Climate Change Committee representing transit issues and NFTA's Community Advisory Committee. These meetings were conducted virtually via zoom or teleconference.

Community Discussions. Attended WNY Town Hall meeting on BLM, COVID-19, and Climate priorities for CLCPA hosted by Senator Tim Kennedy and Assemblywoman Crystal Peoples-Stokes. Participated in NY for TCI planning meetings. Participated in WNY Youth Climate Council workshop.

Webinars. Attended Women's Safety on Transit: Alternative Models to Policing, 12-state Transportation Climate Initiative (TCI) Webinar, and Effectiveness of Air Treatment in Transit Applications.

Meetings with Legislators. Met (via zoom) with Chris Fahey of Congressman Brian Higgins Office. Discussed transit needs to support the skyway removal, continued federal support needed during the pandemic, ideas for commuter rail between Buffalo and Niagara Falls and improved border crossing.

Correspondence. Sent letter to Buffalo Common Council in support of WNY Youth Climate Council' call for declaring a climate emergency.

Upcoming Events: Several CRT board members plan to attend the annual Rail~Volution "Building Livable Communities through Transit" conference this year online. The 2020 conference is 100% virtual, including networking events, and will take place Oct 28-29.

This is the nation's and perhaps the world's largest conference dedicated to multimodal mobility solutions with an emphasis on public transportation; CRT attends most years and has never been disappointed with the wealth of information and helpful contacts. Although there are many transit professionals, advocates, and elected officials participating, anyone from the community concerned with equitable access and environmental justice is welcome. Go to www.railvolution.org for more information about the organization's goals, the schedule of offerings at this year's virtual program, and how to register. We would like to hear from you if you would like us to try bringing a future Rail~Volution conference to Buffalo.

Thoughts on the Skyway Removal



Picture source: NYSDOT/FHWA. NYS Route 5 (Buffalo Skyway) Project: Public Scoping Meeting. January 28-29, 2020.

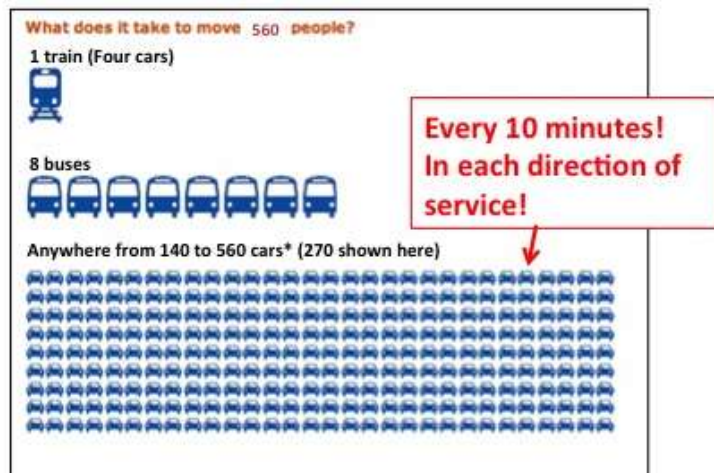
http://www.buffaloskyway.dot.ny.gov/Content/files/MeetingMaterials/NYS%20Route%2005%20Project_Scoping%20Meeting%20Presentation.pdf

We reviewed NYSDOT's project scoping report on the removal of the Buffalo skyway (<http://www.buffaloskyway.dot.ny.gov/Documents>). The report evaluated traffic impacts of skyway removal and described the replacement concepts received as part of the "aim for the sky" competition.

We are very disappointed that little consideration of public transit was considered as part of the analyses described in the report. In Appendix B, the plan thoroughly reviews the impact of skyway removal to traffic patterns on existing roads and evaluates possible highway improvements, which it says will be needed to handle the added traffic. It provides a level of service (LOS) traffic analysis for each alternative. The report says that it looked at future transit improvement plans but does not reference them. We see no evidence that

future transit improvements were considered in any of the analyses. All alternatives considered were highway-focused and car-centered. This does nothing to improve mobility or reduce greenhouse gas emissions and it doesn't help Buffalo's transit-reliant communities (30% of Buffalo households do not own cars.).

As we said in our letter to NYSDOT, we believe public transit improvements are needed as part of any skyway replacement. Buffalo's current light rail line can carry up to 560 people every 10 minutes in each direction of service, and moves at 50 mph unimpeded between stops. It can offer a viable alternative for a large portion of commuters currently using the skyway and other south-heading expressways everyday. Together with NFTA buses that can move up to 420 people per hour along each of Buffalo's many arterials, multi-modal public transit can significantly, and immediately, contribute to serving the commuter demand from the eliminated skyway. Instead of evaluating the impact of the added traffic on the transit-dependent population, which the report promises to do, real improvements to transit should be part of the plan and the public investment. The figure below graphically shows the number of cars that can be removed with transit alternatives along with Buffalo's original light rail network that would still be able to use existing, available rights-of-way.



Adapted from: Transport Sydney Trains
<http://www.sydneytrains.info/about/environment/>

- From "RAILFAN GUIDES of the U.S." > Todd's Railfan Guide to the Buffalo, NY NFTA Light Rail System
 (<http://www.railfanguides.us/ny/buffalo/lightrail/index.htm>)

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Thank you.



Calendar

October 15, 5:30 - CRT Quarterly Public Meeting (via zoom)