



Citizens *for* Regional Transit

CRT News

A Quarterly Publication of Citizens for Regional Transit

Vol 23, Issue 3, July 2020

Citizens for Regional Transit Next Public Meeting

22 October 2020

The Post COVID-19 Future of Transit

(Date and topic tentative)



Picture credit: New York Public Transit Association. COVID-19 Recovery & Restoration Task Force Initial Report, June 2020.

The Future of Transit in the Age of COVID-19

By CRT President Doug Funke

The world is in crisis right now with the COVID-19 pandemic and the associated economic turmoil. Despite severe drops in ridership, transit continues to provide its essential service, as it must, with emergency financial support from the government.

But what is the future for public transit? Will transit be able to maintain its essential public service role in urban transportation? Will it be able to build back in a sustainable way? Do we have any choice? Is urban life even achievable and desirable without public transit? No, no, no!

And its not just public transit we need. We need baseball games, festivals, concerts, weddings, graduations, family gatherings, conventions, and street rallies. Questions of how to keep transit safe and productive must be addressed successfully along with safely enabling the other essential human activities.

Transit is perhaps the most important of these activities because it provides the means of getting places, and getting there in large numbers without further destroying the environment. As the recent article in “Advancing Public Transport” (https://www.uitp.org/news/cities-people-means-prioritising-public-transport?fbclid=IwAR0gOM602a330WSjblzKWbo19NIQ_NW_iZ6WzCgBAeD-1H3LVb1e2okP28w) points out “over 90% of the world’s population live in areas where air pollution exceeds safe levels resulting in eight million premature deaths per year” ... and “50 million people are injured on the world’s highways each year, costing governments 3% of GDP.” (3% of the US \$20 trillion GDP is \$600 million!)

The good news is that the COVID-19 pandemic is a short-term problem. We will eventually have sufficient population immunity to restore normal societal life, even though this may take more than a year or two to achieve. As our April 28, 2020 CRT “Another Voice” article in the Buffalo News (<https://buffalonews.com/2020/04/29/increased-rail-transport-needed-to-mitigate-climate-change/>) noted, the larger looming catastrophe that we must avoid is climate change and public transit is key to achieving this. Transportation is the largest greenhouse gas (GHG) contributing sector with cars the largest GHG source, by far. Public transportation will be critical for achieving the necessary GHG reductions.

There will be a new normal emerging after the COVID-19 pandemic, including changes to public transit. The NY Public Transit Association’s (NYPTA) COVID-19 Recovery & Restoration Task Force June 2020 Initial Report (https://nytransit.org/images/19853_NYPTA_COVID19_Recovery_and_Resoration_Report_R6_1.pdf) lays out ways transit and society may change following the COVID-19 pandemic. It describes how transit can be operated to maximize public safety (e.g., routine disinfecting, safe payment approaches, rear door exiting, service adjusted for ridership and social distancing). It also describes likely societal changes that will impact transit and transportation, more generally. For example, telecommuting and virtual gatherings may become common features of the workday along with work schedule shifting. Similar

changes to personal lifestyles may also be in the offing. Together these changes may reduce demands and congestion on our highways and open opportunities for transit improvements such as dedicated bus lanes.

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: May - July 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. These meetings were conducted virtually via zoom or teleconference.

Grant Proposal. CRT submitted a grant proposal to Transportation for Massachusetts (T4MA). The grant would have provided funding to cover travel to attend Transportation Climate Initiative (TCI) events and fall Rail-Volution convention in Florida. Unfortunately, we were unsuccessful in this proposal. We want to thank those who supported our proposal with letters of recommendation including Hal Morse (GBNRTC), Tom George (NFTA) and Andrea O'Suillaebhan (PPG).

Community Discussions. Attended the Southern bike trail public meeting (virtually) led by GObike Buffalo and held follow-up conference call the GObike to discuss the need to preserve rights-of-way for future light rail and commuter rail. We agreed to stay involved with this planning effort.

Outreach. Doug was interviewed on PPG radio (WUFO) to discuss CRT work and progress on our PPG plank to promote improved transit funding as part of NYS 12-state Transportation Climate Initiative (TCI) plans. The interview will be aired at a later date. We will notify membership when broadcast and available online.

Staying Informed. Participated in NYPTA webinars discussing current and planned transit adaptations due to COVID-19. Monitored NFTA Commissioner's meetings on COVID-19 response.

Communications. Sent letter to ECHDC on transit needs for the outer harbor. The letter addressed current needs as well as CRT recommendations if the skyway is taken down. (See summary below.) Sent letter to Amalgamated Transit Union thanking them for sacrifices and front line work during the pandemic. We also had a second Another Voice editorial in the Buffalo News on July 15th promoting the East Side Metro Rail extension (http://buffalonews.ny.newsmemory.com/?token=539bdaa63d0376923b47bc5e69447b15_5f156feb_bae19f8&selDate=20200720&utm_source=emailMarketing&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=email+stats).

Amherst Rail Extension update: We have been informed that upon review of the NFTA's draft Environmental Impact Statement (DEIS) the federal Department of Transportation is requesting a more thorough evaluation of Bus Rapid Transit before selecting the preferred local alternative.

Outer Harbor Needs Transit

By Doug Funke



Picture credit: Jay Burney, Member, Our Outer Harbor Coalition.

Don't let our outer harbor turn into a parking lot!

A key to the success of the Outer Harbor is keeping it car-free. This means it must be accessible by all modes other than cars, especially public transit. The use of cars to access the outer harbor should be minimized by outer harbor design. CRT joined the Our Outer Harbor (OOH) coalition in calling for the Erie Canal Harbor Canal Development Corporation (ECHDC) to restore the bike ferry operations. The bike ferry takes people from Canalside to the northern end of the Outer Harbor. Together with the existing NFTA bus service that drops people at the southern end of the Outer Harbor near Ohio Street provides transit access to both ends of the outer harbor. But the Outer Harbor is 3 miles long, so there needs to be a transit shuttle available for moving people without cars between these sites. Otherwise only those with cars will have preferential access to this public space.

Since all NFTA buses have bike racks, working together with the bike ferry, they provide multimodal access to the Outer Harbor. Further, since all NFTA buses, the bike ferry and the recommended trolley shuttle are (or will be) accessible by people with disabilities, these simple changes will make the Outer Harbor fully accessible for everyone, including access by Paratransit for those who are qualified.

If the skyway is taken down and replaced with a bridge as planned, the Outer Harbor is in danger of becoming a thoroughfare for cars. This is a nightmare scenario. Therefore, if the skyway is taken down, we are calling for a transit alternative for commuters. Light rail or bus rapid transit (BRT) to the Southtowns is recommended to help fill this need. Also evaluation of a low-cost (compared to a bridge) gondola should be undertaken as part of planning. Not only would an aerial gondola cost 1/5th the cost of the proposed lift bridge, gondolas provide spectacular views of city like those now provided by the skyway.

Will Congress INVEST in America?

By Gladys Gifford

The proverb, "Where there is no vision the people perish," applies to transportation policy in America. Congress has had no vision regarding transportation policy, and the American people are suffering as a result. The current financial stress on national priorities due to the pandemic offers a chance for change.

Congress began crafting legislation to fund transportation needs in 1916 and 1921 in order to build highways. Their work expanded to include every aspect of transportation through multi-year transportation acts which authorized spending on infrastructure for all forms of transportation, not just highways.

Congress faces a deadline at the end of September, 2020, when the current transportation act expires. This current legislation, the Fixing America's Surface Transportation (FAST) Act, was enacted December 4, 2015, as a five-year authorization to provide funding to repair the nation's surface transportation infrastructure and to improve transportation performance. Through the FAST Act, local highway and transit improvements are funded for Western New York, passing through our regional transportation council (Greater Buffalo Niagara Regional Transportation Council).

Thankfully, the House of Representatives has passed a bill on July 1, 2020, that reauthorizes the transportation act. Called "'Investing in a New Vision for the Environment and Surface Transportation in America Act' (INVEST in America Act), H.R. 2, this bill offers a path forward to help build and repair transportation infrastructure which supports equitable and sustainable communities. According to the American Public Transportation Association (APTA), "H.R. 2 makes critical investments to surface transportation infrastructure, including \$105 billion for public transportation and \$60 billion for commuter rail, Amtrak, and other high-performance rail. The bill also provides historic investments for Projects of National and Regional Significance and addressing climate change."

The bill now faces the greatest hurdle: passage by the Senate. Included in the bill are opportunities for the current Act to be extended for a year or two, as has happened with previous transportation acts. Will the Senate rise above partisanship and enact this bill?

We know that our Congressional delegation— Senators Schumer and Gillibrand, Reps Higgins and Jacobs — support equitable transportation across our region. But we also know that their attention focuses on the issues brought to them by their constituents. Therefore, CRT urges all supporters of public transit to contact our Congressional delegation to ensure that they are vocal in support of this

legislation.

Remembering David Sweet

By Gladys Gifford

Citizens for Regional Transit remembers David Sweet with respect and gratitude. As President of the organization, I attended Buffalo Place meetings in order to promote expansion of Metro Rail and he attended as owner of properties on lower Main Street. Buffalo Place tolerated my presence, but David Sweet actively promoted Metro Rail throughout his time as owner of 237 Main Street and encouraged our efforts. We were in need of a meeting place during the winter of 2012, and he graciously offered a conference room in 237 Main Street. We met there from February, 2012 to April, 2014, enjoying its historic ambiance.

David Sweet was an asset to the Buffalo community. He died on May 10, 2020, aged 90. We celebrate his memory.



Keep CRT On Track

Insert inputs from Jim:

<If you have not renewed your membership, please do so....>

<Also, if you are (or represent) a corporation please consider becoming a corporate member...>

Calendar

October 22 - CRT Quarterly Public Meeting (tentative date)