



Public Hearing

Aug 23, 2021, 5:30 pm

1:34:59

[silence]

[00:04:08] Helen Tederous: Good evening. We will be starting in a few minutes.

[pause 00:04:11]

Hello, everyone. Good evening. On behalf of everyone at the NFTA and NFTA-Metro, welcome to our virtual public hearing. We are seeking your comments on a proposed service plan and fair structure modification. The hearing will include public comment as well as a presentation. I'm Helen Tederous, director of public affairs at the NFTA. And with me now, here at Buffalo Headquarters is NFTA Executive Director Kim Minkel, Deputy Director of Public Transit James Morrell. And on the phone joining us, NFTA Chair Sister Denise Roche, Commissioners, Joan Aul, Reverend Mark Blue, Margo Downey, NFTA General Counsel David State, and NFTA-Metro Director of Public Transit Tom George.

This virtual hearing is being taped and transcribed. The transcription will be available on our website. This hearing is part of our ongoing public outreach aimed at listening and reacting to our riders and community. This outreach included a survey to better understand rider needs and priorities. We worked with 20 community and municipal partners on the survey and conducted 2 virtual meetings. If you signed up to speak, you will have your mics turned on when you're time-- when your name is called. This will take place in order received. Attendees will not be on video.

I will ask you to say and spell your name and if you are affiliated with an organization. You will have three minutes to speak. There is a virtual clock that will count you down, and we will let you know when you've reached the three-minute mark. Now, we're going to start with a presentation from Rob Jones, Manager of Service Planning.

[00:07:41] Robert Jones: Thank you for joining us to learn more about the 2021 Bus Network Improvement Plan. My name is Rob Jones, and I'm the manager of the Service Planning Department. I'll be walking you through the high-level changes to our bus network tonight. The goal of this plan is to adjust our bus network to meet changing ridership and demand patterns, align with community priorities, and

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address funding and operational challenges. To get to this point, we've conducted a robust community engagement effort. The first phase of community engagement was targeted at soliciting feedback from our residents on priorities for transit service.

This effort, which took place in May and early June, resulted in almost 600 respondents. Individuals noted a desire for increased access to suburban jobs and shopping, recreational-recreational destinations, and off-peak service to express locations. The second round of community engagement was conducted in late June and July. Staff were able to take the feedback from phase one and begin developing a service plan. We developed a dedicated website to solicit feedback and public comment and also created interactive maps for individuals to comment on where numerous alternatives were listed. Additionally, Metro staff conducted in-reach to bus operators and other employees to gather ideas and information.

The majority of these comments were related to frequency, coverage, access to suburban job shopping centers, and employment generators that are not currently served by transit service. Feedback from both rounds of community engagement applied to the plan that is available on our website, and I will be walking through during this presentation. In summary, we sought to create a more streamlined routing, provide access to new locations, create modifications to the express network so that it is more reliable, introduce new limited stop services to create competitive travel times, and modify different variants to create more logical endpoints while still creating common layover locations for smoother transfer activity.

Additionally, we examined broader frequency changes to better match current travel demand and plan to introduce new scheduling techniques like time transfers in Niagara Falls to limit overall wait times. Lastly, all fixed-route changes have implications on our paratransit network, which were also considered as part of this effort. The Niagara Falls bus network has been considerably modified. The primary goal of the Niagara Falls Service Plan is to provide better transfers, more legible routes, faster service between Niagara Falls and Buffalo, and also access to new job opportunities. Two new routes help us achieve these goals. The 77 will provide faster service between downtown Niagara Falls and points in Buffalo. The 59 will continue to provide access to Niagara Falls International Airport, NCCC and BOCES while adding additional service to Vantage International Point office park where numerous jobs are located.

Additionally, the 52 has been redesigned as a loop route serving the entire north end of Niagara Falls. Service will alternate directions allowing for maintained coverage in short travel times. The 54-Military route has been eliminated as part of this proposal. The express network has also been substantially altered. Our goal with the express plan was to create more permanency of routing and greater liability with the schedule to meet various job start and end times. For services that had multiple variants, these have been consolidated into one variant for all trips. Additionally, all routes will have at least three morning and three evening trips, which allows for greater passenger flexibility.

Numerous services that were not productive are slated for elimination, including the 67-Cleveland Hill, 68-George Urban, 75-West Seneca, and 79-Tonawanda routes. Downtown Buffalo routings have been modified to use common routing and stops.

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The current network through the downtown core can be somewhat confusing and difficult to understand for passengers. Creating common routings allows for greater visibility of transit, and also a more legible system for our passengers. It allows Metro to target specific stops for greater amenity investments. The addition of two new limited-stop services will create a faster trip for riders and allow for easier transfers on connecting routes.

Limited stop services will not replace local trips fully provided as an option creating greater choices for our riders. The addition of limited-stop service is planned for the 19-Bailey and 25-Delaware routes. Another goal of the bus network improvement plan is to modify the endpoint of specific routes to align with destinations and provide greater access. Examples shown on the slide shows a modification to the endpoint of the 11 A, which currently ends within a residential neighborhood. We are proposing a modification that would access the Boulevard Mall. This allows for an activity center to be served while also providing new coverage along Brighton Road, which is not currently served by transit.

Numerous riders and community members have provided feedback to examine serving new job locations. The example shown shows the new 59 route as well as the current 55 F variant. We're able to create a new route of the 55 which does not attract- which does not attract much ridership on portions of Niagara Falls Boulevard **[unintelligible 00:13:02]** roads. The resulting route allows us to serve a new business owner while still maintaining access to the generators that already exist in that area. Transit service works best when used as direct as possible. In the example on the slide, we're showing a modification to the 32-Amherst route, which currently deviates down to Buffalo State College.

While this deviation does clucks from ridership, it also forces the majority of our passengers who are trying to travel east-west to have a longer trip. Eliminating this spur creates better travel times and reliability for the majority of our passengers. Individuals from Buffalo State still have the opportunity to utilize high-frequency services like the 3-Grant and 20-Elmwood to access the 32 if needed. Frequency changes which are more operational in nature are examined on an ongoing basis. However, we do anticipate returning to a 15-minute frequency in the near future on our busiest routes, like the 3-Grant, 20-Elmwood, and 23-Fillmore-Hertel.

Creating common layover locations is important for better transfers and greater efficiency. And the example shown on this slide. The 47 modification accomplishes this goal by modifying the endpoint of the route to connect with 48 and 49. Additionally, the modifications to the 47 reduce overlap on Main Street, serve new job locations in the Snyder Community Center and create greater access to transit route locations for shopping. In order to accomplish some of these ambitious goals laid out in the Bus Network Improvement Plan, some low-performing routes are slated to be eliminated. The local routes slated for elimination are the 7-Baynes-Richmond, 29-Wohlers, and 54-Military.

These three routes have the lowest ridership within our system, and largely have alternative services available to serve riders in these areas. In addition to improvements to the bus network, we are also proposing some modifications to the fare structure. We're undergoing a major change to the way we collect and process

our fares over time and have decided that a couple of modifications to our fare policy are warranted. NFTA-Metro went to public hearing in September of 2016 regarding our proposed fare policy. The fare policy allows us to establish guidelines for setting and restructuring our overall fares.

The fare policy includes both fare payment and fare media as well as fare structure and costs. The previous fare policy effort cover numerous elements of our proposed fare structure, including daily capping, 31-day rolling passes, and a change to how we handle youth fares. As part of this effort, a fair equity analysis was completed and found no significant impacts. Over time, the priorities of the authority and the community at large have changed. We think that is pertinent to look at three additional fare structure changes. The first of these is the institution of 31-day capping. This will ensure that all riders are able to receive the best value over the course of any 31-day period regardless of being able to afford a \$75 upfront cost.

This will effectively bring the overall cost down for our passengers. The second modification to the fare structure is to eliminate the enhanced express surcharge. The 50¢ surcharge currently only applies to two routes, and does not align with our new service guidelines. Elimination of this surcharge will create greater equity by standardizing the fare. Lastly, we are introducing a premium fare of \$5 one-way for premium services. While we do not currently have any premium services, we are examining the potential to provide these in the future. This may include a sporting event or a special activity outside of our normal service parameters.

The introduction of these three items is a way for our community in providing equitable services to our region. The third and final phase of community engagement commenced on July 22nd with our presentation to our Board of Commissioners. We have conducted numerous in-person tabling events with the public and our bus operators since that time. We have received comments via mail, email, and through our dynamic mapping software. The public hearings are just one way to comment, and the official comment period will be open until September of 8th.

After all comments are received, Steph will modify the plan as necessary and present to our board for adoption in September. We are planning a phase implementation beginning with the Niagara Falls service changes moving to the county local service changes and finally the implementation of express plan changes in the summer of 2022. That concludes my presentation providing an overview of the bus network improvement plan and fair policy modifications. At this time, I will turn it over to Helen Tederous to be in the comment portion of the public hearing.

[00:17:50] Helen: Thank you, Rob. A reminder, this virtual hearing is for the public to provide input. We will not respond to specific questions. All comments will become part of the public record. Please direct your statements to the subject at hand, and we ask that you use respectful language. If you would like to speak but have not yet signed up, please go to the Q&A section. And here's a graphic that shows you how the mute function works. When your name is called, we will unmute your mic. At that time, please say and spell your name for us and if you are affiliated with an organization. Again, we will not respond to direct questions. We will be getting to our first speaker in just a moment.

[pause 00:18:36]

And thank you for your patience. Our first speaker, Melissa Leonard. Please say and spell your name. Thank you.

[00:19:30] Melissa Leonard: Hi, um, Melissa. M-E-L-I-S-S-A, Leonard, L-E-O-N-A-R-D. Um, I live near the corner of Manchester place in Baynes, and I use the Baynes bus frequently with my four small children. I previously had used it to regularly uh, match up with bus routes very early in the morning when it was still dark. Um, I know that it was temporarily-temporarily suspended when the pandemic began. And I found out it was permanently eliminated, um, when I was on a walk and I noticed that all of the bus stop signs on Baynes had been permanently removed. And it was frustrating because these public hearings are taking place this week.

And the decision clearly was already made to eliminate the route. Um, one of the things that the NFTA has on their website was community engagement indicated that r-riders wanted more service on the west side of Buffalo. Um, and with this route eliminated, that clearly does not match that community need. Um, one of the things that, um, was frustrating is there's been relatively little coverage that it was permanently eliminated, um, and the sign say it was canceled. And a lot of people that I've spoken to in my neighborhood were completely unaware that it was permanently eliminated. Um, the NFTA's tried to do this for years.

In 1988, they tried to eliminate the route. And in 2012, it was, um, on budget cuts. And I had personally attended a meeting at ECC, um, advocating for the Baynes to remain in service because it's an important route for commuters in the morning and in the afternoon. Um, using the Grant Street bus and the Elmwood bus during times, um, in the morning, and especially when school lets out is-is quite impossible, especially the Elmwood. Um, a lot of the kids in the Buffalo public school system use it around that time. And for me to try to get on the bus with four small children by myself, um, it's-it's really difficult. So, that doesn't, um, cut it as far as, "Oh, it's okay, you can just use those two routes."

Um, it's a piece of infrastructure that influence our decision to buy this house because I don't drive. So, I utilize it to get to my children's school **[unintelligible 00:21:56]**, um, to a-access the medical campus, um. And the Grant street does not-- is not, um, easily accessible for those uses. Um, there's-- it's a rather large gap in coverage, um, for just saying that those two routes are sufficient for getting to Downtown Buffalo and also-- especially for the medical campus.

Because it was a route that ran Monday through Friday, um, with sparse times, but I think it-it was easy access for idle people in my neighborhood to get to those places. And I just- I just want to indicate my frustration with the process for public input because it wasn't-- The meetings were not-- they were not advertised, um, widely on Facebook. And-and my neighbors didn't know about it. And because the Baynes wasn't running, a lot of people just assumed it was still part of the pandemic, and that they-they weren't aware that it was permanently eliminated, which with the bus signs gone, um, I guess that decision has already been made.

[pause 00:23:01]

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[00:23:17] Helen: Thank you very much for your comment. We will be on hold until we receive our next speaker.

[pause 00:23:25]

And a reminder, if you would like to speak but have not yet signed up, please go to the Q&A section. And here we have a graphic that shows you how to mute your phone and your mic on your computer. Uh, again, when your name is called, we will unmute your mic. At that time, please say and spell your name for us and if you are affiliated with an organization. Again, we will not be responding to direct questions.

[pause 00:24:30]

At this time, we do not have any speakers. I just want to remind you if you do want to speak but have not yet signed up, please go to the Q&A section. And here is a graphic that shows you how the mute function works. Again, when your name is called, we will unmute your mic. At the time, please say and spell your name for us and if you are affiliated with an organization. We will remain here live as we wait for other public speakers until 7:00. Yeah.

[pause 00:26:17]

We have our next speaker, Jason Buck. [silence]

[00:28:26] Jason: I-I take the 50, the St. Mary's for my work, and I depend on it, uh, daily.

[00:28:32] Helen: **[inaudible 00:28:32]** Ja-Jason, I'm sorry to interrupt you. Um, please say and spell your name, your first and last name.

[00:28:39] Jason: Oh, yeah, no problem. Uh, Jason Buck, J-A-S-O-N B-U-C-K. And, yeah, uh, like I said, take the 50 to St. Mary's Hospital for my work. So, I very much depend on that route. And, uh, I hope it does not change. Thank you for your time.

[00:29:04] Helen: Thank you.

[00:29:06] Jason: Thank you very much.

[pause 00:29:07]

[00:29:43] Helen: Our next speaker, Elizabeth Giles. Please say and spell your first and last name.

[00:29:50] Elizabeth: Uh, yes, it's Elizabeth, E-L-I-Z-A-B-E-T-H. Last Name Giles G as in George I-L-E-S. Um, I'm sorry. I missed the introduction but, um, is-- are we only commenting now about the bus route, uh, alignments or-or can we comment about the fare system and other things?

[00:30:14] Helen: You-you can comment, uh, Elizabeth. Uh, it's a public hearing, feel free to.

[00:30:18] Elizabeth: O-okay, okay. I just wanted to, um, comment in general about the elimination of bus stops. In my experience, and I-I do depend on the system, I'm on it at all hours of the day and, uh, evening, um, I have noticed that the buses tend not to need to stop at every stop or even most of them. Um, and then from day-to-day, the stops that the bus is, um, you know, requested to stop at tend to be different and don't really affect-- you know don't really bog down the-the bus in terms of, um, how long it takes, uh, to get to the end of the-the run.

So, I guess I just wanted to express some concern about, um, whether it's a good idea to be eliminating bus stops. Obviously, some of them, if there was one, say, a factory and then there's nothing on that block anymore, you know, maybe. But just to look at, um, um, a particular stretch of the route where there happen to be a lot of stops, um, you know, it doesn't mean that those stops aren't useful to someone at some point in the day. Um, I could have misinterpreted the, uh, remix that I was looking at for the bus stop diet. But it looked to me like the bus stop in front of the Broadway Market was being eliminated and a stop in front of the Forge, uh, which is a big new mixed-use development on Broadway in Mortimer.

Interestingly on the, um- on the satellite picture, there's nothing on the site. But now, there's a brand new housing complex there and yet, the bus stop seems to be slated for elimination. So, um- so, I wanted to make that specific comment. And like I said, in general, um, I'm a little concerned about the elimination of bus stops. Um, it's not always a question of the space, you know, between like the walk, between one bus stop and the next along a particular thoroughfare. Um, it's really a question of how far that individual has already come, possibly already six blocks just to get, you know, to the cl-closest bus stop to their home. Thank you very much for your time.

[00:32:45] Helen: Thank you, Elizabeth.

[pause 00:32:47]

We do not have any speakers at this time. Again, we will remain live until 7:00 PM. A reminder, if you would like to speak but have not yet signed up, please go to the Q&A section. And here's a graphic that shows you just how to mute your mic. When your name is called, we will unmute your mic. At that time, please say and spell your name for us and if you are affiliated with an organization. Again, we will not respond to direct questions. Even though we do not have any speakers at this time, we will stay live until 7:00 PM.

[pause 00:35:15]

We have our next speaker, Marcia Kuma. [silence]

[00:39:11] Marcia Kuma: Good evening. My name is Marcia, M-A-R-C-I-A Kuma, K-U-M-A. I would just like to add an additional comment on-- uh, regarding potential removal of bus stops. I live inside the city of Buffalo City limits, uh, during the winter months, many residential and business areas do not clear their bus stops near their areas of snow and ice. I frequently find it-- really, during the winter months pretty much every day, find it difficult to stand at a bus stop with my footing free of snow and ice. So, if-- My-my concern is if a number of bus stops are eliminated, it may be

even more difficult for riders to reach stops without having to cross potentially dangerous snow and ice.

And I'm thinking particularly of people who are mobility-impaired, people who have very young children, who may not even be very good at walking during the best of times, let alone on snow and ice. And I imagine if someone's using a walker or a wheelchair trying to get between bus stops that are covered with snow and ice, um, sidewalks must be a nightmare. So, I would just like to raise that concern and ask the NFTA to consider the fact that, uh, for part of the year, it look-- it may look like some people are not using bus stops. But during our winter months, which are several weeks long, those ex-- what-what could be thought of as extra bus stops are in fact very useful to a lot of people. Thank you very much.

[00:41:00] Helen: Thank you for your comment.

[pause 00:41:02]

And a reminder, this virtual hearing is for the public to provide input. We will not respond to specific questions. All comments will become part of the public record. Please direct your statements to the subject at hand, and we ask that you use respectful language. If you would like to speak but have not yet signed up, please go to the Q&A section. And here is a graphic that shows you how the mute function works. When your name is called, we will unmute your mic. At the time, please say and spell your name for us and if you are affiliated with an organization. Again, we will not respond to direct questions. We do not have any speakers at this time. We will stay online live until 7:00 PM.

[pause 00:42:13]

[00:50:09] Helen: Good evening. We do not have any speakers at this time. We will be staying live till 7:00 PM.

[pause 00:50:16]

[01:11:43] Helen: And we have a speaker, Michael Rogers. Please say and spell your name.

[01:11:51] Michael Rogers: M-I-C-H-A-E-L and R-O-G-E-R-S.

[01:12:03] Helen: Go ahead.

[01:12:04] Michael: I just wanted to-to say I didn't have a lot of time to formulate, uh, a response, but from what I have looked at, the continued reduction of routes and stops and services in the, um, in the suburbs, particularly, uh, Niagara Country and the Tonawanda areas, kind of alarms me because, you know, the more- as a person with a disability, the more and more we change and reduce stops and routes in the suburban areas, the less movement people with disabilities have. And you know, it-it almost feels like we're being forced to move into the urban areas like into the city to be able to really go anywhere of significance.

And I don't think that that is- that that is right. I mean, public transportation is supposed to be for the public. I understand about funding and, you know, the number of riders and-and ridership and things of that nature, but I just don't see this as good for the community in general. When you get rid of stops and change routes to the point that people can't get around to the general area, except if they lived in-in the city, that's not right. I just wanted to say that.

[01:13:58] Helen: Thank you very much for your comment.

[pause 01:14:00]

[01:16:11] Helen: We have a speaker, Carol Machowski. Carol, please say and spell your first and last name.

[pause 01:16:24]

[01:16:46] Helen: Carol, um, if you can unmute your mic.

[01:16:49] Carol: There-there we go, I've got it. Thank you. I'm Carol, C-A-R-O-L, Machowski, M-A-C-H-O-W-S-K-I. I'm from OLV Human Services, and I represent the DDAWNY Transportation Committee. Um, I'd like to thank Michael, uh, for-for speaking up. I've been on the call this whole time and listening to all the comments and I wanted to echo Michael's sentiment, um, about the exclusion of folks, uh, with and without disability in the, uh, first-ring suburbs and in our rural communities.

I know that the ridership doesn't always reflect the need, um, but I think that it's because of the continual and gradual reduction of the availability of transportation that folks in those areas continue to have to find other resources or just simply are not participating in their community. And that means accessing their jobs, um, and then the other things that are out in the community, um, for them. And like Mike said, um, kind of forcing people into the- into the urban areas where the transportation is.

Um, and so I wanted to really make that a point that-that Mike was kind enough to bring up and I wanted to echo that, that there's-there's a growing amount of people who feel the same way, um, but maybe aren't using their voices to say that this is something that affects them. But we have a lot of folks who live in the suburbs and in, uh, um, those rural communities who want to access their community, but really can't. Thank you for the opportunity to speak.

[01:18:28] Helen: Thank you, Carol.

[pause 01:18:29]

[01:23:51] Helen: We have another speaker, Karen Peissing. Karen, please say and spell your first and last name.

[01:23:58] Karen Peissing: My name is Karen Peissing. First name is spelled K-A-R-E-N. Last name is spelled P as in Peter E-I-S-S-I-N-G-E-R.

[01:24:15] Helen: Go ahead, Karen.

[01:24:17] Karen: Um, I am a friend of Buffalo Transit Riders United, also known as BTRU, B-T-R-U. The comments that I make are my own and are not endorsed by BTRU. I believe the NFTA should prioritize providing dependable and timely service to those people who are transit-dependent over the maintenance and expansion of express routes. For example, the proposed Route 60 to provide express service between Buffalo and Niagara Falls is slated during the commute times for a 15-minute headway.

However, that route terminates at a car-oriented location, the Fashion Outlets. [clears throat] Excuse me. It seems that this route is primarily aimed towards vehicle owners who commute during the week but have a car that they can park at the Fashion Outlets and may not wish to pay for parking near their workplaces in Buffalo. Route 40 serves Buffalo Niagara Falls. It has headways of 35 minutes during the commute time. It has stops along Grand Island, as does Route 60. This route, Route 40, passes through Downtown Niagara Falls and terminates at the Portage Road Transit Center.

I've ridden this bus route both ways during the weekday. Many of the people seemed as though they were traveling to or from work. I feel that these working people should have more frequent service than those who use park and rides and have the car as an option to get to their work, whereas people who are transit-dependent do not have that option.

I want to finish by saying, I understand the value of express routes and taking vehicles off the road. This is good, environmental, and sustainable practice. However, with limited funding available to NFTA and transit authorities across the country, as well as limited labor and limited bus assets, I believe it is imperative to support transit-dependent working people. Thank you for the opportunity to make my comments.

[01:26:29] Helen: Thank you, Karen.

[01:26:34] ?Speaker: [inaudible 01:26:34]

[pause 01:26:35]

[01:34:01] Helen: And that concludes our virtual hearing. Thank you so much to all of our speakers. A reminder that if you would like to provide further comment, you can go to our website, send an email, call us, or send your comments to us via mail. Thank you to our signers, Joan [unintelligible 01:34:16] and Kate Shaver. We'll be collecting all comments until September 8th, and all feedback will be weighed equally. Once again, thank you for taking the time to participate, and have a great evening.

[pause 01:34:29]

[01:34:59] [END OF AUDIO]