



In 2024, NFTA-Metro provided free express bus service from downtown Buffalo to parks that are not usually accessible by public transit. This program was originally developed in response to rider requests for improved access to recreational destinations and was loosely modeled on CDTA's Nature Bus (Albany, NY). After running a highly successful Parks Adventure Bus for the past two years, Metro maintained the program to include eight summer dates and three fall-winter dates. New York State Parks, New York State Department of Environmental Conservation, and the Erie County Parks Department were key partners in this initiative.

The Parks Adventure Bus continued to foster strong ridership every week and receive significant positive publicity. A total of 725 riders used this service in 2024, a 2% increase since last year, despite some rainy days. The provision of high quality, free transportation to parks and recreational opportunities for people who would otherwise not be able to access these locations is a major accomplishment for the Buffalo-Niagara area.

This report briefly describes the planning, execution, and evaluation of this program.

Background & Rationale

In 2021, NFTA-Metro engaged in a planning process, entitled the Bus Network Improvements Plan, to adjust the bus network in response to changes in ridership patterns. Many routes had not been updated or modified in years despite land use changes, demographic changes, and the pandemic. NFTA-Metro undertook an extensive community engagement process that involved three rounds of public engagement, beginning with a survey that asked about needs and priorities. One of the questions asked on this survey was: “Are there places that you’d like to go on the bus, but you can’t? If so, please share them below.” In response, many riders expressed a desire to access recreational destinations such as area beaches and county parks. Around this time, NFTA-Metro became aware of the Nature Bus, a service that had been offered by the Capital District Transportation Authority (CDTA) in Albany, NY in 2021. The Nature Bus was a free bus service that connected communities in the City of Albany to natural areas in Albany County. The Nature Bus operated on Saturdays from June through September, making four stops within the City of Albany and nine stops at parks and preserves. The 2024 Parks Adventure Bus encouraged connectivity to various parks in the area, as established in the previous two years. This continues to be a strong program, as shown by the support from our partners and riders.

Partners

In late 2023, NFTA-Metro reached out to existing partners at New York State Parks, the Erie County Parks Department, and New York State Department of Conservation (DEC) to continue a partnership on parks access for the summer, fall, and winter. All were pleased to join the effort, as they also identified a need and desire for additional connections between the City of Buffalo and area parks and recreation.



New York State
Parks, Recreation and
Historic Preservation



Department of
Environmental
Conservation

Planning & Scheduling

NFTA-Metro determined that we would develop an eight-week summer program, along with two dates in the fall, and one in the winter, starting at the Metropolitan Transportation Center (downtown bus station) and serving a different park each week. We decided to have five trips to the park and five trips home during the summer schedule, then reduced it to three trips during the fall/winter schedule. The additional trips in the summer offered more capacity and flexibility for riders in terms of when they could come and go from the parks.

Within those parameters, our parks partners selected dates and locations based on their availability and on previously planned initiatives and events. Through early discussions, we determined that selected parks required restroom access and park rangers or parks staff on site. Additionally, parks with concessions were preferred, and parks served by NFTA-Metro regular fixed route service were excluded.

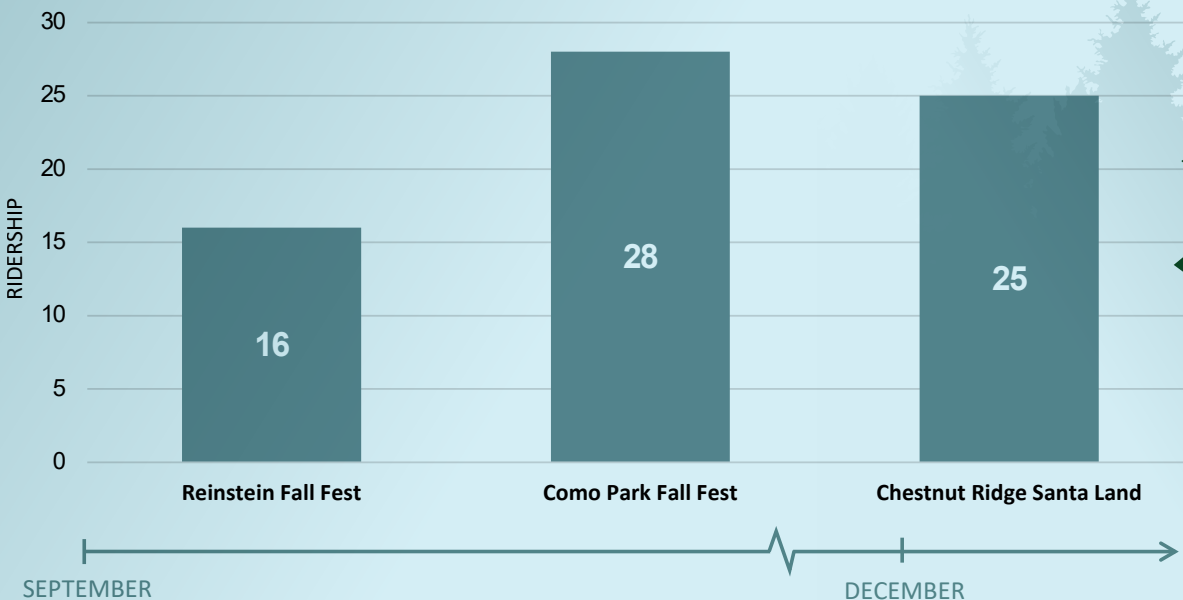
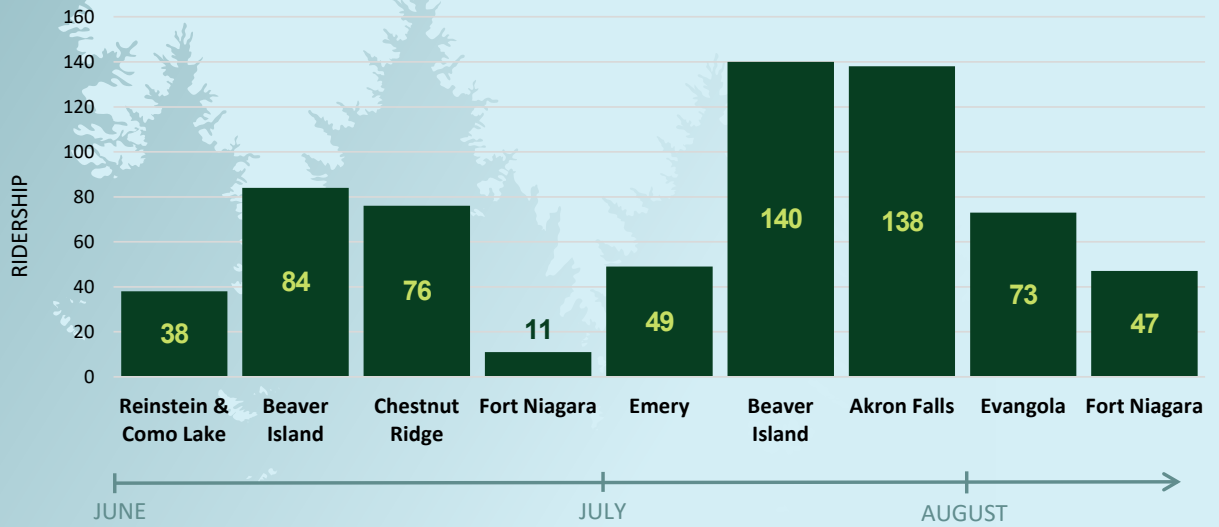
JUNE 8 Reinstein + Como	JUNE 15 Beaver Island	JUNE 22 Chestnut Ridge	JUNE 29 Fort Niagara	JULY 13 Emery County	JULY 20 Beaver Island	JULY 27 Akron Falls	AUG 3 Evangola	SEPT 21 Reinstein	SEPT 28 Como Park	DEC 14 Chestnut Ridge
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Fixed Route Data

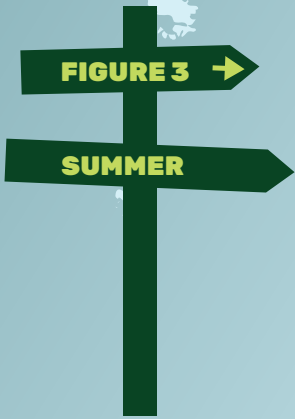
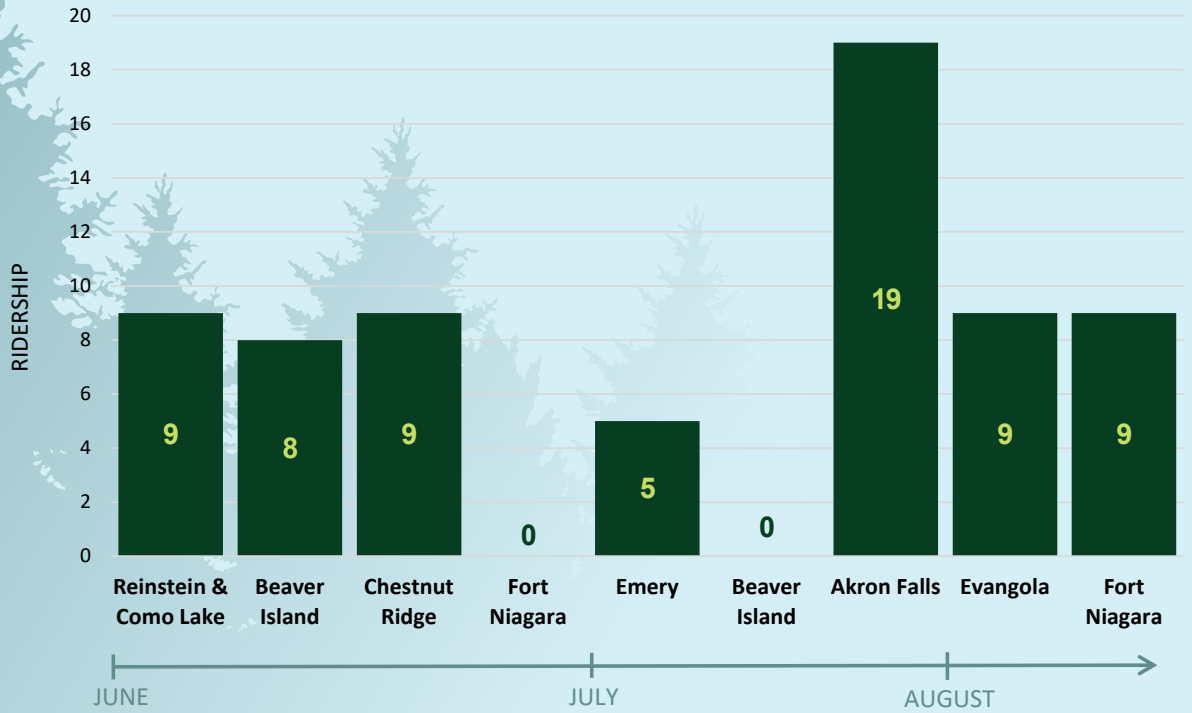
Bus operators and supervisors tracked ridership data every trip. This reduced the likelihood that someone would be left behind at the park by comparing how many people arrived at the park to how many had already departed. Parks with swimming and fishing opportunities, such as Fort Niagara, Beaver Island, and Evangola, attracted considerable transit ridership.

Figure 1 and **Figure 2** show the ridership data for the fixed bus route throughout the season. The rain date on August 17, 2024, shown in **Figure 1**, was used to revisit Fort Niagara as there was extreme rainfall on June 29, 2024.



Paratransit Data

Figure 3 shows the ridership data for paratransit service throughout the summer season. **Table 1** summarizes the paratransit ridership during the fall and winter dates.

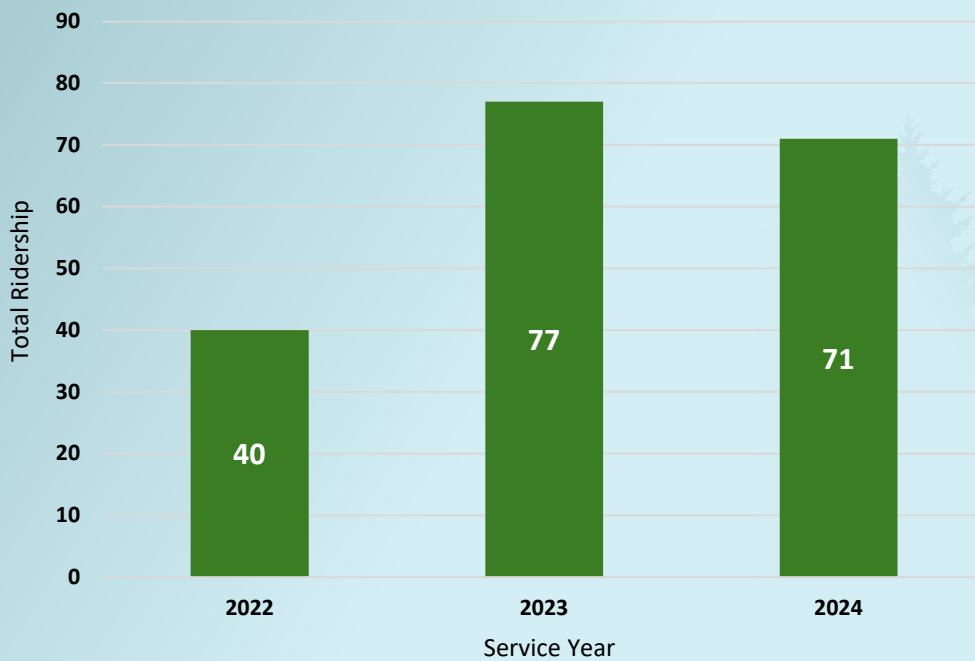
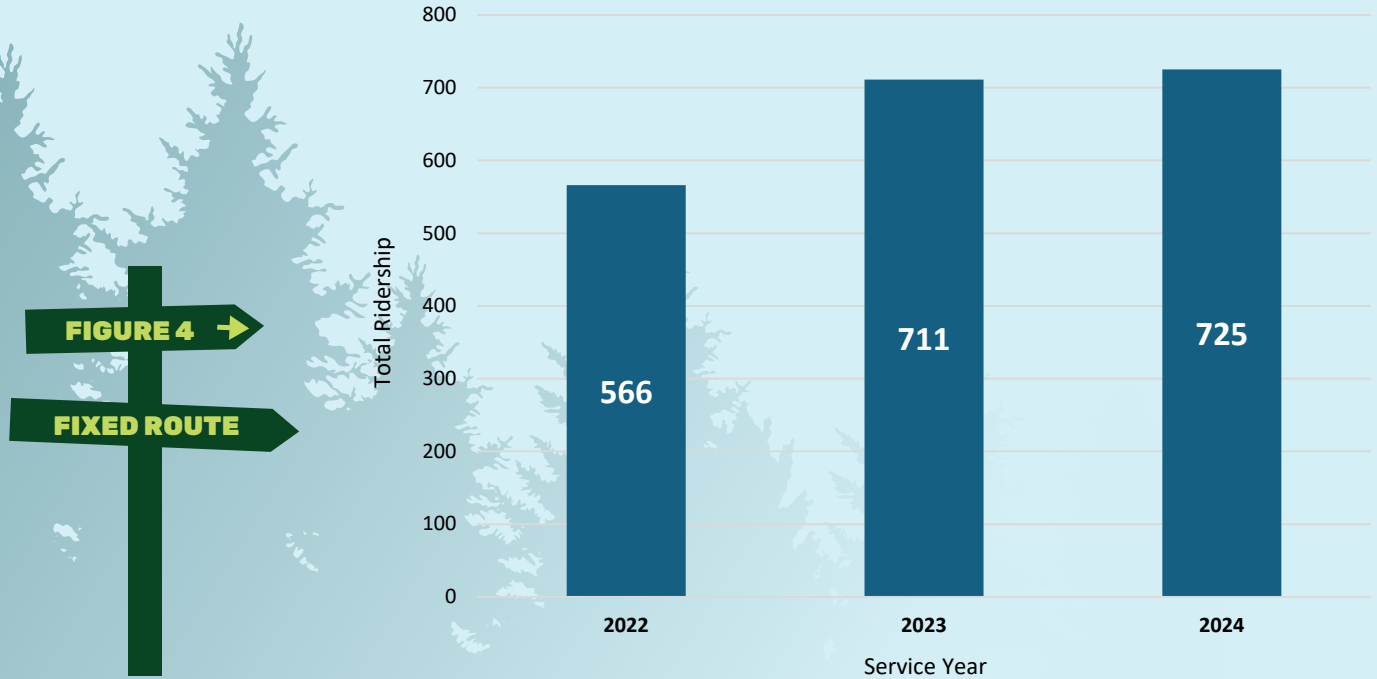


Date	Location	Ridership
September 21	Reinstein Fall Fest	0
September 28	Como Park Fall Fest	0
December 14	Chestnut Ridge Santa Land	6



Data - Ridership Summary

Figure 4 shows this year's ridership compared to previous years of operation, while **Figure 5** shows this year's paratransit ridership compared to previous years of operation.



Accomplishments

During the summer season, five trips were scheduled to and from the selected parks. This provided more opportunities for riders to participate and stay as long as they prefer. In addition to the summer season trips, the Parks Adventure Bus arranged trips during the fall and winter seasons which allowed riders to explore the parks during different times of the year.

The Parks Bus punch card incentive was a success this year once again. Riders earned punches on their punch cards for each trip taken, with a chance to win the prize of a tote bag. They had to enter the giveaway either by sending a full card in or through an entry in a raffle per each punch given. Those who participated enjoyed the fun that this brought to the experience for those of all ages.

Since Beaver Island State Park was a popular destination in 2023, NFTA-Metro and New York State Parks arranged two dates for the bus to visit. Both dates to Beaver Island were well supported as summarized in the ridership data shown in the figure above.

The trip dates coordinated with park activities to provide riders with more ways to spend their time. As a result, the additional staff and events at the parks enhanced the overall experience for riders, which fostered public appreciation for this program.

Arrangement of a standby bus on limited weekends for popular parks like Fort Niagara, Beaver Island, and Evangola provided additional capacity to accommodate the increased demand on busy weekends.

Effective communication and collaboration among our park partners and NFTA-Metro was integral to achieving a successful season of Parks Adventure Bus.

Lessons Learned

Paratransit:

- The provision of paratransit service to the parks continues to be a positive arrangement as NFTA-Metro is not required by law to provide paratransit service along with the Parks Adventure Bus, but PAL riders have repeatedly indicated how much they value the access afforded by this program.
- Since PAL is extremely resource constrained with drivers and vehicles, PAL established one drop off window. This allows both service to the Parks Adventure Bus locations and to all regular trips on those Saturdays.

Planning:

- A proactive relationship with our park partners was established early in the planning process. NFTA effectively communicated with our park partners the best solutions to make this another successful year.
- Implementation of certain provisions such as activities, signage, presence of staff, tents for waiting, and water improved the rider's experience. Bus riders could reference the A-frame signs at the park waiting areas, with the bus arrival and departure times, which alleviated any confusion or concerns.



Lessons Learned

Operations:

- Pick-up and drop-off locations were well-managed by both Metro and partner staff.
 - New drop-off and pick-up locations were established at Chestnut Ridge for the Santa Land event to mitigate the congestion issues experienced last year near the Casino. This year, the stop was on Sheriff Drive, near the southern end of the event space.
- Operators enjoyed their navy-blue colored Parks Adventure hats this year. This token of appreciation boosted morale and contributed to the fun.
- Rotating the Parks bus among three different stations was beneficial.

Future Recommendations

1. Continue with the two-stop trip to Reinstein Woods & Como Lake, as it was deemed successful in the previous season.
2. Be more proactive with the publicity of Parks Adventure Bus in between the summer and fall/winter scheduled dates. Increased publicity during this time encourages more people to participate in the bus service for the fall/winter events.
3. Maintain the one drop-off window for PAL riders to continue to support the sustainability and predictability (for riders) of PAL Parks Adventure Bus service.
4. Update the educational materials to include information about bikes. This could include guidelines on how to transport bikes on the bus or any specific rules or regulations related to biking in the parks.
5. Ensure most riders participate in the giveaway by thorough distribution of the punch cards and improved communications to the stations and riders about this opportunity.
6. Find more ways to promote the online survey to obtain a comprehensive representation of the riders' experience and to determine additional areas of improvement, and/or consider offering the survey onboard or in paper to increase response rates.
7. Develop a concrete internal and external process for canceling the Parks Adventure Bus in case of any extreme weather or emergency. This would include a communication plan for rescheduling a visit to a selected park.

