



CITIZENS REGIONAL TRANSIT NEWS

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Behind Budget Battles

Spring is here, bringing blooms, budgets and battles.

The battle in Iraq will come to an end, but its impacts on local budget battles will persist for generations to come. Those billions for the military will be paid, with taxpayer dollars.

Currently, the tax cuts already enacted at the Federal level translate into reduced income at the State level. Therefore, NYS scrambles for income and tinkers with the budget, making a mockery of its own April deadline.

Local government entities that are dependent on NYS have no such luxury: schools are required to meet real budget deadlines; likewise, the NFTA must adopt its budget by April 1. In an effort to ensure that its budget will balance, the NFTA proposes a fare increase.

Why?

Since the NFTA is an Authority chartered by New York State and directly answerable to the Governor, it may not criticize Albany. Instead, we hear a litany of complaints about rising costs such as insurance and pensions and fees from contractors.

Such rhetoric coming from the NFTA to justify the fare increase deliberately clouds the issue. The question is: Will the final NYS budget match up with the Governor's proposed budget?

NYS elected officials must provide a clear answer, sooner rather than later.

Meanwhile, Metro riders can blame NYS budget battles for the proposed fare increase.

Tracking Transit Dollars (Part II): Proposed NFTA 2004 Budget Seeks Metro Fare Increase

by Gladys Gifford, CRTC Chair

The NFTA's proposed 2004 budget was available for examination on March 17th. The NFTA held its budget hearing on the morning of March 24th and its Board of Commissioners voted to approve the budget later that same day.

A comparison of the 2004 proposal with the 2003 version reveals incremental changes in the budget figures, but a significant difference in the interpretation of those figures.

* The 2004 budget begins with a proposed fare increase for its core business, transit, without a reduction in service. The 2003 budget begins with a boast that the NFTA's business would be healthy without a fare increase.

* Consolidated 2003 income totaled \$121 million: \$59.8 million in revenues and \$61.5 million in government assistance. Consolidated 2004 income anticipated at \$126.8 million: \$60.9 million in revenues and \$65.9 million in government assistance.

* In 2003, Metro Bus and Rail operations totaled \$82.6 million of the budget. In 2004, Metro Bus and Rail operations are expected to take up \$87.9 million of the budget. Both the 2003 and 2004 budgets project a surplus from Metro Bus and Rail operations. The projected 2004 surplus is \$2.8 million.

* The transportation centers, i.e., bus stations, which the NFTA operates in Buffalo and Niagara Falls continued to show significant losses.

* The airport business of the NFTA had a budget of \$32.7 million in 2003, and showed a small surplus. In 2004, the NFTA's airport business was estimated at \$32.2 million. The strong surplus of

\$7.5 million at the Buffalo airport was offset by losses of \$1.5 million expected at the Niagara Falls airport.

* Revenues from fares collected by Metro Bus and Rail in 2003 were budgeted at \$21.2 million. The 2004 budget projects \$22.5 million from fares, based on the proposed fare increases. Nowhere does the 2004 budget project anticipated changes in ridership. The 2003 budget anticipated a decrease in ridership as a reason for its drop in revenues from 2002.

Simple arithmetic shows the proposed fare increase to net NFTA \$1.3 million each year. Such revenue could make up for other debits. The anticipated loss from decreased ridership in the 2003 budget was \$1.4 million per year. The anticipated loss from two bus station operations for 2004 is \$1.4 million.

The NFTA's public hearing on its proposed 2004 budget attracted an audience of three (a 50% increase from 2003): two women from the LWVBN, plus CRTC Chair Gladys Gifford. NFTA was represented by five senior staff plus the court recorder.

Ms. Gifford recited a list of 13 particulars regarding the budget, most of which were editorial changes. The intent of several comments was to separate out rail from bus ridership figures, and to compare cost of diesel power for buses with cost of electric power for trains.

She identified an apparent surplus in the projected operations of Metro, which calls into question the NFTA's proposed fare increase. She reminded the NFTA that it serves the public for New York State, and can expect to meet its expenses mainly through government assistance, not fares.

National Poll Results: Americans Support Public Funds for Public Transit

apta.com/news/releases/wirthlin

Four in five (81 percent) Americans believe that increased investment in public transportation strengthens the economy, creates jobs, reduces traffic congestion and air pollution, and saves energy, according to a new national poll conducted by Wirthlin Worldwide [released 3-12-03].

The survey found that almost three-quarters (72 percent) support the use of public funds for the expansion and improvement of public transportation. Also, 64 percent said that they would be more likely to support a candidate for Congress who is favorable to improving public transportation options.

Wirthlin Worldwide conducted the telephone survey February 12-16. It polled a random sample of 1,003 adults, 18 years of age and older, living in the continental United States. The American Public Transportation Association commissioned the survey.

"These results show that Americans clearly are looking to public transit as a solution to the growing congestion crisis and are willing to pay for it. Most interesting is that these findings cut across all geographic locations: urban suburban, rural and small town areas," said Dee Allsop, PhD., Wirthlin chief executive officer.

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aims to improve and expand bus and rail transit for all of WNY through citizen involvement and education.

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On Capitol Hill--

Clinton and Schumer Sign Letter to request Increased Transit Funding

The following letter was sent to the leadership of the Senate committee on the Budget, March 7, 2003. Signers included Senators Clinton and Schumer.

Dear Chairman Nickles and Ranking Member Conrad:

As we begin the 108th Congress, we also begin the process of rewriting the transit title of the Transportation Equity Act for the 21st Century (TEA-21). We write to seek your support for continued growth of the federal investment in mass transit. We believe that mass transit is an essential part of the nation's surface transportation system that makes the entire system work better....

As reflected in TEA-21, maintaining a modal balance between highways and mass transit will ensure that the maximum benefits of reduced congestion and improved air quality can be achieved. According to the Texas Transportation Institute, the annual economic loss to U.S. business caused by traffic congestion is \$67.5 billion. An additional \$20 billion would be lost if all U.S. transit commuters drove instead. Our investment in transit benefits both highway and transit users. As our population and our economy continue to grow, our nation's transportation network is becoming ever more strained. Preservation of the existing federal investment is critical, as is addressing the growing demand for new and better transit service in communities of all sizes. A report by the nation's state transportation officials found that transit investment by federal, state, and local government needs to be increased to maintain and improve public transportation in every community. According to the study, at least \$19 billion in capital investment is needed annually just to maintain current conditions and service levels.

As you craft the FY2004 Budget Resolution, we urge you to work with us to grow federal transit funding in order to maintain the intermodal balance and to continue to improve the efficiency of our nation's surface transportation system.

Sincerely,

find full text at www.senate.gov/%7Ebanking/letters/2003/0311trns.htm

Bipartisan House & Senate Transportation Committee Leaders Send Letter to Congressional Leadership

Washington, D.C. - The bipartisan leaders of the U.S. House and U.S. Senate transportation committees today [4-1-03] indicated their strong support for retaining the Senate-approved \$311.5 billion highway and transit funding level and the House-approved provision allowing for potential increased funding levels in the upcoming FY 2004 Budget Resolution conference.

The House and Senate transportation leaders made their request in a letter to House Speaker Dennis Hastert (R-IL); Senate Majority Leader Bill Frist (R-TN); House Minority Leader Nancy Pelosi (D-CA); and Senate Minority Leader Tom Daschle (D-SD).

Members stated: "There is widespread agreement that investment in our nation's highways, bridges, and transit systems must be increased significantly.

"Improving the nation's transportation infrastructure will reduce fatalities with safer highways, transit systems, and bridges, create hundreds of thousands of good jobs (for every \$1 billion of federal funds invested, and matched by the state, in transportation infrastructure we create 47,500 jobs), and save billions of dollars lost through congestion and delays."

find full text at www.house.gov/transportation/

NO FREE RIDE: The State of Comprehensive Transit Initiatives in WNY Public and Private Higher Education Institutions

by John P. Weiksnar, CRTC Executive Board

As an undergraduate in the 1980s at University of California, Santa Cruz, I could travel from the mountains to the prairies to the ocean, white with foam . . . all in one bus ride. Students at this expansive campus were blessed with a county-wide transit pass that practically eliminated the need for an automobile to get downtown, to shopping, or to any other destination via their transit center. Someone had the right idea. My number of car trips in one year sank to the single digits.

Contrast this California nirvana experience with later days at the University at Buffalo, where I like to say I received a graduate degree in parking (The key was to stay crafty and plan the lot first, classes last.) To be serious, what does it mean when each day begins with single occupant vehicles vying for precious spaces, all but immune to any convenient alternative? The same effort spanned my years teaching at Buffalo State College. I noticed that the entire Niagara Frontier, despite a proliferation of college and university campuses, seemed to have neglected the chance to assist its leagues of daily academic commuters, either with ridership perks or simple demand for a more comprehensive (meaning desirable) bus and rail system.

Was I on to something? CRTC asked me to test my hunch by contacting each of our Erie and Niagara County higher education institutions. First, I used the WNY Regional Information Network (wnyrin.com) to list all fourteen of them, then channeled the following pair of questions to the most appropriate source at each site:

1. Some area educational institutions have sought transit passes for their population, worked to sway bus routes closer to campus, etc. Can you name any particular public transit opportunities that exist for your college/university but go unused by your students, staff, or faculty?
2. Our light rail line is one of the most successful anywhere for its length, but has never been extended past its 6.2 mile core route. How do you foresee your daily commuters or campus residents benefiting from an expanded Metro Rail system?

My research was completed by the end of March, 2003. Only nine of the fourteen contacts replied to initial or follow-up requests.

Following is a summary of the responses to the first question. Responses to the second question and a summary will be published next month.

Answers to the first question took several forms but only one college admitted to having discount transit passes available for its employees. E. Joyce Eulner, director of human resources, Canisius College, noted that “Canisius is beautifully situated on the rapid transit line and on and near bus lines. Unfortunately, the discount transit passes and bus tokens that they sell on a pre-tax basis to employees are enjoyed by a core group of no more than a dozen.”

Just a handful of students were using passes at Buffalo State College. According to Nanette Tramont, director of news services, “The cost of transit passes for our students was found to be prohibitive in that the college would have to have purchased a \$25 pass for every student registered to avail ourselves of the system.” She claims that the students themselves voted the measure down several years ago, even though their urban campus is situated on bus routes.

The same sentiment was expressed by James Sturm, vice president of student life, Hilbert College, who claimed that they offer no passes to students because “The actual number using the system does not warrant such an investment.” This decision stands even with Hilbert as a suburban commuter college, with a bus route conveniently close to campus. Echo that for Villa Maria College which, according to Sister Mary Louis Rustowicz, vice president for student affairs, has not sought any transit passes, likely because “All our faculty members drive cars.”

D’Youville College has a large number of Canadian commuters, claims D. John Bray, director of public relations, stating that all of those are automobile drivers out of necessity. Bray adds, however, that “bus routes on Porter Avenue and Niagara Street are a convenience for our staff and students.” Two buses venture onto campus at Niagara University but Mati Ortiz, director of student activities, admits that “they are not used extensively.”

The suburban Main Street campus of Daemen College does not keep records on student transit use. The downtown Niagara Frontier Center of SUNY Empire State College on Main Street did consider “access to public transportation (was) an important issue to us when we relocated our center in 1995,” according to Dean Anne Bertholf. Empire State College is not even a conventional college campus, but does make an effort to promote public transit for staff and visitors to their location.

The final response to Question 1 provided the most intrigue of any. The University at Buffalo, dealing with intercampus transportation as well as ordinary commuting, has a plan in the works to benefit potentially thousands of students. In the words of Ellen Goldbaum, senior science editor in the Office of News Services, “Right now, they are working on an agreement with NFTA on their University Transit Pass program where universities pay NFTA so students can have unlimited transit passes.” Goldbaum adds that “there really isn’t a public transit option here that is going unused by the UB community,” citing the sole 44 Lockport bus to the South campus in addition to the preferred Coach USA (formerly Blue Bird) free shuttles.

As an historical aside, Goldbaum reminded me of the service called Metro Link, run by NFTA in years past. These shuttles stopped at UB and then journeyed out to corporate parks in the area, fostering the equivalent of a Park and Ride with UB as the lot. According to Chris Austin, UB’s transportation coordinator, the service was grossly underused, likely due to unawareness. It may also have been that case that people in general do not get out of cars to ride a bus, only light rail. *(to be continued)*

CRTC Monthly Meeting, April 15, at 7:30 PM:

“Transportation Futures in WNY”

a conversation with special guest,

Hal Morse, Executive Director, GBNRTC

The Greater Buffalo-Niagara Regional Transportation Council (GBNRTC) is the Federally-designated Metropolitan Planning Organization for Erie and Niagara counties.

Join in conversation with Hal Morse, Executive Director of the GBNRTC, to explore many aspects of transportation planning in our region.

Please note the change in time. The April 15th meeting begins at 7:30 PM.

The CRTC meets monthly in the education wing of University Presbyterian Church, corner of Main Street and Niagara Falls Blvd., Buffalo. Enter via parking lot door, and take the elevator to “ML.” Meetings are free and open to the public. Brown bag lunches are welcome.

CALENDAR

Apr. 5- June

“Smart Growth and Choices for Change” exhibit
Burchfield-Penney Art Center, Buffalo

Apr. 9 9:30 AM

GBNRTC-PCC meeting
NYSDOT, 50 Lakefront Blvd., Bflo.

Apr. 15 7:30 PM

CRTC monthly meeting

Apr. 22 4:00 PM

LWVBN Coalition on Sprawl
Burchfield-Penney Art Center, Buffalo

May 5&6 7:00 PM

NFTA Metro fare increase hearings

May 5 ECC City campus

May 6 Niagara Falls City Hall

May 17 9 AM-2 PM

“The State of the Waterfront”
the Pier, at Buffalo waterfront

June 1 2:00 PM

“Art Via Rail” tour of subway
South Campus Station, Buffalo

Quotable Quotes:

“Transportation is the fundamental building block of the U.S. economy. Investments in transportation infrastructure directly aid the productivity of our economy and will help us meet the economic challenges that we are facing now, and will face in the months and years to come.”

...from bipartisan Congressional letter to leaders of Congress 4-1-03

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return service requested