



NFTA-Metro Paratransit Study

# Communications & Participation Plan

August 2023 (DRAFT)



# 1 INTRODUCTION

This Communications and Participation Plan for the NFTA-Metro Paratransit Study is designed as a living document with purposeful flexibility. The plan will likely evolve over the course of the study as input is received. This chapter summarizes study goals and timeline, introduces the study team, and describes the overall approach to stakeholder engagement. The next chapters describe the engagement elements.

## STUDY GOALS

The NFTA-Metro Paratransit Study has the following goals:

- Improve efficiency and effectiveness of Paratransit Access Line (PAL) service
- Enhance the overall customer experience
- Identify new and improved service delivery opportunities
- Evaluate the feasibility of service area expansion
- Ensure compliance with the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA)

## STUDY PHASES

The NFTA-Metro Paratransit Study is organized into three phases:

- Phase 1 –Evaluation, research, and engagement to recommend improvements
- Phase 2 –Estimation of future demand, costs, and options for delivering paratransit, including expanded service area
- Phase 3 –Implementation plan design

## STUDY TEAM

A consultant team led by Nelson\Nygaard Consulting Associates is conducting the study for NFTA. The following individuals from NFTA-Metro and the consultant team are involved with engagement activities for the study.

<b>Name</b>	<b>Organization</b>	<b>Role</b>
Samuel Gallivan	NFTA	PAL Study Project Manager
Patricia Wiseman	NFTA	Paratransit Customer Service
Nadine Chalmers	NFTA	Manager, Service Planning
Rob Jones	NFTA	Deputy Director, Public Transportation
Rachel Maloney	NFTA	Manager, Bus & Special Service Operations
James Morrell	NFTA	Director, Public Transit
Bill Schwartz	Nelson\Nygaard	Consultant Project Manger
Emily Oaksford	Nelson\Nygaard	Consultant Deputy Project Manager
Megan Morsch	Highland Planning	Public Engagement Consultant
Nancy Raca	Highland Planning	Public Engagement Consultant

## **APPROACH TO STAKEHOLDER ENGAGEMENT**

NFTA-Metro is seeking input from current PAL riders, NFTA employees, caregivers, advocates, public agency and nonprofit staff, and the broader community. Avenues for obtaining input include:

- Pre-engagement interviews
- External Stakeholder Committee meetings
- Project website
- Other meetings including small group discussions and public meetings

In addition, the project team is obtaining input by meeting with NFTA-Metro staff (leaders, managers, supervisors, operations staff, drivers, mechanics, etc.).

Throughout the public engagement process, the team will document and analyze participant feedback, and, in later stages of the project, share how community feedback informed study recommendations.

## 2 PRE-ENGAGEMENT INTERVIEWS

Team member Highland Planning is supporting study engagement activities. Staff conducted pre-engagement interviews with the following stakeholders to inform this plan:

- Andrew Pieczynski, a frequent PAL rider
- Bradford Watts and Jill Turchiarelli of People, Inc.; Ms. Turchiarelli is a PAL rider.
- Frank Cammarata of the Erie County Office for People with Disabilities
- Melissa Resnick, a visually impaired rider of Metro fixed-route and PAL services
- Holly Nidell, an NFTA-Metro employee who chairs the Accessibility Advisory Committee
- Ray Zylinski, of Visually Impaired Advancement (VIA)
- Stephanie Speaker, a PAL rider and advocate (with Mike Billoni)

## INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

Interviewers asked the following questions.

1. What do you believe are the strongest assets of the paratransit service?
2. What do you believe are current challenges and opportunities of NFTA?
3. What would be the best possible outcome of this evaluation process, in your opinion?
4. How do paratransit users get information about existing transportation services?
5. Who should we be sure to include in our public engagement efforts and in our stakeholder database? Do you maintain any email distribution lists we could distribute information through?
6. What's the best way to engage people about issues and opportunities in the paratransit system?
7. Are there any "hot button" issues the consultant team should be aware of before conducting outreach?

## KEY THEMES

The following key themes emerged from the pre-engagement interviews:

- Assets of Current PAL Service
  - Provides a vital service to people with disabilities and other mobility challenges
  - Helps people to participate in the community and live independently
  - Is a valuable resource for people who cannot use traditional fixed-route public transportation
- Current Challenges
  - Limited-service area
  - Inadequate funding
  - Unreliable telephone system
  - Late pickups and drop-offs
- Opportunities to Consider
  - Expansion of service area
  - Increased funding
  - Improved telephone system
  - Improved on-time performance
- Best Possible Study Outcome
  - A more comprehensive and efficient paratransit service that meets the needs of both current and potential riders
- Learning about PAL
  - Primarily through the NFTA website and by calling the NFTA customer service line
  - Some riders also receive information through social media, email, or word-of-mouth
- Stakeholders to Include
  - Paratransit riders
  - Social workers
  - Disability advocates
  - Representatives from other transportation agencies
- Best Ways to Engage
  - In-person meetings
  - Telephone surveys

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- Online surveys
- Social media
- “Hot Button Issues”
  - Late pickups and drop-offs
  - Unreliable telephone system
  - Limited-service area
  - Inadequate funding

## 3 EXTERNAL STAKEHOLDER COMMITTEE

NFTA-Metro appointed an external stakeholder committee to offer input and provide feedback to the study. Committee members will serve as liaisons to their organizations and colleagues throughout the Buffalo Niagara region.

### COMMITTEE MEMBERS

Invited committee members include:

<b>Name</b>	<b>Affiliation</b>
Joe DiStasio	Best Self
Mindy Cervoni	Community Services for Every1
Jodie Chibi	Deaf Access Services
Jeannette Grimaldi	Deaf Access Services
Frank Cammarata	Erie County
Jordan Bellassai	Health Foundation of Central/Western NY
Ken Genewick	Health Foundation of Central/Western NY
Aaron Carlson	Hearts and Hands
Nick Hester	Niagara County Department of Mental Health
Darlene DiCarlo	Niagara County Office of Aging
Stephanie Speaker	PAL rider and paratransit advocate
Mike Billoni	Advocate for Stephanie Speaker
Bradford Watts	People, Inc.
Jill Turchiarelli	People, Inc.
Ray Zylinski	Visually Impaired Advancement (VIA)
Todd Vaarwerk	WNY Independent Living

## COMMITTEE MEETINGS

NFTA-Metro will meet with the External Stakeholder Committee throughout the course of the approximately 18-month study. It is anticipated that at least six meetings will take place, though some meetings could be combined with public meetings.

The meetings will primarily be in-person events held at NFTA-Metro’s offices on Ellicott Street. The consultant team will coordinate with NFTA staff to prepare an agenda and meeting materials and share them with committee members in advance. All materials will be created as PDFs and tested for use with screen readers. Large-print documents will be made available at a minimum of 14-pont type. The team will prepare meeting summaries for distribution to committee members and posting on the project website. See Chapter 4.

The following is a list of meetings, general timing, and anticipated topics for discussion.

<b>Meeting</b>	<b>Timeframe</b>	<b>Topic(s)</b>
1	May 2023	Project overview, introductions
2	August 2023	Stakeholder engagement plan, project website
3	Fall 2023	Review of existing PAL service
4	Fall/Winter 2023	PAL service improvement needs
5	Winter/Spring 2024	Considerations for future demand and service area expansion
6	Late Spring 2024	Cost estimates and recommendations for future growth and expansion

Virtual public input sessions – discussed in Chapter 5 – are anticipated to take place in the winter of 23/24 and in late spring 24.



## 4 PROJECT WEBSITE

The project website is live and can be reached at <https://nftametroparatransitstudy.com/>. Links to this website will also be provided on NFTA-Metro's website. The project website includes information about the study, project documents, ways to participate (including announcement of any events), and ways to contact NFTA-metro staff.

The consultant team will maintain the project website for a two-year period and transmit the site to NFTA-Metro for archiving.

## 5 INPUT FROM OTHER MEETINGS

In addition to working with the External Stakeholder Committee, NFTA-Metro and the project team will hold small group discussions and virtual public meetings. Further, NFTA-Metro staff may be asked to participate in other area meetings to inform people about the study and its progress.

### SMALL GROUP DISCUSSIONS

The project team will arrange meetings and group discussions with individual members of the paratransit community and stakeholder committee as identified by the NFTA. Meetings are expected to be virtual but may also be held in person if needed. The project team anticipates holding four such meetings and will coordinate logistics with NFTA staff. Virtual meetings will likely be recorded. The team will summarize meeting discussions as meeting notes.

### VIRTUAL PUBLIC INPUT AND FEEDBACK SESSIONS

Two rounds of virtual public meetings are anticipated to take place in December 2023 and May 2024.

#### **Existing Conditions & Operations Virtual Public Meetings (December 2023)**

Purpose: To present the results of the existing conditions review and seek input on service expansion needs and opportunities.

Medium: Zoom/Microsoft Teams with telephone call-in option

Interpretation: ASL interpreters will be provided

Format: Presentation with Q&A followed by use of breakout rooms for focused conversation

Registration: Participants will be asked to register to enable meeting organizers to staff breakout rooms

Timing: One daytime meeting and one evening meeting

Publicity: see below

## **Service Expansion Analysis Virtual Public Meetings (May 2024)**

Purpose: To present the results of the service expansion analysis and answer questions from meeting participants

Medium: Zoom/Microsoft Teams with telephone call-in option

Interpretation: ASL interpreters will be provided

Format: Presentation with Q&A

Registration: Participants will be asked to register

Timing: One daytime meeting and one evening meeting

Publicity: see below

## **ADDITIONAL NFTA ENGAGEMENT**

Go-to-them strategies are useful in reaching out to community members and organizations in spaces and through familiar platforms. NFTA-Metro staff are available to attend meetings hosted by others to describe the study, obtain input, and encourage participation. The consultant team will prepare materials to support such efforts.

## **PUBLICITY**

The project team will work with NFTA-Metro staff and the External Stakeholder Committee to identify potential meeting participants. Outreach methods will include email, direct contact, use of the project website, recordings on the PAL telephone line, IVR messaging, posters on PAL vehicles, press releases, updates given to the Accessibility Advisory Committee (AAC), and social media. The project team will provide technical information and graphic design support to create materials. The team will work closely with the communications department at NFTA.