Meeting Summary

Public Workshop #1 (Virtual)

Wednesday December 13, 2023, 1–2:30 p.m.

An in-person public meeting was also held on December 14, 2023.

Welcome & Introductions

NFTA Director of Public Transit James Morrell welcomed the group and encouraged everyone to provide their feedback at the meeting.

Bill Schwartz of Nelson\Nygaard Consulting Associates, Project Manager of the study, reviewed the meeting agenda, which included a short presentation and breakout group discussions. A list of meeting participants is included as Appendix A.

Project Overview

Bill explained that the American Disabilities Act (ADA) requires NFTA-Metro to provide paratransit access line (PAL) service to eligible individuals whose disabilities prevent them from traveling by fixed route bus or rail. The ADA requires that paratransit service be provided within 3/4 mile of fixed-route bus routes and metro stations when fixed-route service is operating.

In 2022, NFTA received funding from the State of New York to study the feasibility and potential of providing paratransit service beyond the ¾-mile minimum required under the ADA.

Study Objectives

The goals of the Paratransit Expansion Study are to ensure that NFTA’s complementary paratransit service (PAL) meets the DOT ADA requirements, is efficient and equitable, makes the best use of public funds, can meet customer needs today and in the future, can offer innovative services, and delivers excellent customer service.

Project Schedule

The Paratransit Expansion study has three phases:

* Phase 1 (current phase): Evaluation, research, and engagement to recommend improvements
* Phase 2: Estimation of future demand, costs, and potential options, including expanded service area
* Phase 3: Implementation plan design

By late 2024, NFTA will complete a comprehensive study of PAL service to identify opportunities to improve quality, increase efficiency, and enhance the customer experience.

Stakeholder Committee and Public Engagement

NFTA-Metro has appointed a stakeholder committee to provide feedback and insight throughout the course of the study. Committee members include riders and representatives of local foundations, public agencies, and advocacy groups.

The project website is <https://nftametroparatransitstudy.com/>. Input from the virtual public meeting and tonight’s public meeting will be used to influence the development of potential options. Proposed recommendations will be shared at a second round of public meetings in summer 2024.

Key Study Elements

Bill shared the key elements of the study which will be evaluated.

* Process and policy topics: How is the certification and application process?
* NFTA Staff training: What is training like? What additional training might be needed?
* Adequacy of resources: Number of vehicles, operators, and overall funding.
* Service delivery: What is the process to reserve a trip? When you contact the control center, what is that experience like? Are you getting to appointments on time? If they are not on time, what happens?
* Issues: How are issues addressed?

Bill acknowledged known service-delivery issues including on-time performance, shortage of operators and vehicles, and increased wait time on the phone for reservation and/or customer service requests, and training issues. Nelson/Nygaard is in the process of developing an existing conditions report and preparing specific recommendations.

Breakout Groups

The meeting attendees were assigned to breakout groups to discuss the following:

* Tell us what you are looking forward to about this study
* Tell us about any challenges you have using the PAL service today
* Share your ideas or suggestions for improving the current PAL service
* Where else should service be provided?
* When should service be provided?

A summary of responses, some of which are repeated under different topics, follow:

Desired Study Outcomes

* Expanding the service area beyond the current 3⁄4-mile ADA requirement, especially to suburbs and rural areas.
* Improving reservation system and ability to make same-day reservations/changes.
* Enhancing on-time performance and reducing long rides.
* Offering online scheduling options and mobile apps with real-time tracking - many riders prefer scheduling rides online versus over the phone (even those less tech-savvy).
* Having clearer information on service areas.
* Expanding weekend and evening availability - A rider shared an experience of having to stay overnight at a bus station because the last route ended before their appointment and they had no transportation options to get home.
* Simplifying booking, eligibility verification, fare payment processes.
* Implementing supplemental services like microtransit, or services operated by transportation network companies.

Current PAL Service Challenges

* Limited-service area that cuts off access to suburbs.
* Difficulty contacting dispatchers to make reservations, especially after hours.
* Unreliable on-time performance and excessively long rides.
* Confusing eligibility and fare payment processes.
* Safety issues like slippery ramps and/or unsafe drivers.
* Limited weekend and evening availability - A rider discussed her husband's inability to attend veteran events and social gatherings because PAL does not operate during those times and another rider cites issues accessing her friend’s home in Hamburg during the weekends due to service area restrictions.
* Lack of accountability for late/missed trips - Riders get penalties like suspension for no-shows but there are no repercussions when PAL trips are late or missed. A rider described being left behind by late PAL vehicles and having to spend $50 on private transport to avoid being late to work.
* Issues using online booking system to add new addresses or confirm PCAs.
* Challenges getting home from medical appointments that run late.
* Lack of accessible map/info on where PAL serves.
* Frustrations around ride times, drivers unfamiliar with locations.

Service-Improvement Suggestions

* Expand service area to suburbs and rural locales.
* Provide same-day booking and more flexibility to change reservations.
* Improve on-time performance and limit maximum ride times.
* Offer online scheduling, mobile apps with real-time tracking - Riders asked for an app like Uber/Lyft to see real-time status of vehicles.
* Simplify booking, eligibility verification, fare payment processes - Riders with permanent disabilities should not have to re-certify every 3 years.
* Enhance customer service training for reservation staff and drivers.
* Implement supplemental services like microtransit, or service operated by transportation network companies.

Additional Service Locations

* 321 Columbia Ave, Depew, NY 14043
* Angola
* Barker
* Cattaraugus County
* Clarence
* Depew
* Derby
* East Amherst
* Genesee County
* Grand Island
* Hamburg
* Lancaster
* Lockport, housing projects
* Niagara County
* Niagara Falls Blvd., retirement communities, Walmart
* North Tonawanda
* Orchard Park
* Orleans County
* Sheridan and Elmwood Ave
* Wheatfield Area
* Williamsville
* Chautauqua County
* Natural areas: State parks, nature preserves such as Knox Farm State Park, Lockport Nature Trail, Reinstein Woods Nature Preserve
* Large employers in suburbs: Moog
* Medical centers: Amherst

Additional Service Locations & Times

* Evenings:
  + Until 12:30 am
* Weekends:
  + Riders want expanded weekend hours to be able to use service for grocery shopping and social/religious activities.
  + Fridays & Saturdays.
  + Sundays, to accommodate church services.
* Specific service hours extensions to locations:
  + North Tonawanda, evenings and weekends.
  + Hamburg - McKinley Mall to Village of Hamburg on weekends.
  + Southtowns and West Seneca - Southwestern Blvd.
  + Lockport and Wheatfield - senior living properties.
  + Niagara Falls.

Other Comments

* Multiple attendees expressed appreciation and positive feedback for the new low-floor PAL vehicles with improved ride quality, spaciousness and easy access via the ramps.
* An attendee suggested exploring coordination with other disability/medical transportation providers to improve access to destinations like clinics beyond the current zones.
* A couple attendees noted challenges with the ramps on the new PAL vehicles being slippery when wet and posing fall risks.
* An attendee suggested some drivers need additional training/sensitivity around properly securing wheelchair passengers and interacting with disabled riders.
* An attendee suggested providing more detailed information about schedules, policies, and procedures in multiple accessible formats like print, online and accessible PDF.
* A couple attendees expressed confusion and anxiety around the switch to the new MetGo fare payment system and the need for clearer information.
* An attendee suggested service to large employers in suburbs could expand job access and opportunities for disabled residents.

Registration Feedback

Those who registered for the webinar had an opportunity to identify any affiliation, whether they ride PAL, locations they would like to see PAL serve, and offer any comments. Responses are summarized below.

Affiliation/Organization?

* ACCESS-VR
* ADA compliant TNC
* Citizens for Regional Transit
* Coalition for Economic Justice
* Deaf Access Services
* Erie County Office for People with Disabilities
* Home of My Own of WNY Inc.
* National Federation of the Blind (NFB)
* OLV Human Services
* Parent of rider
* People, Inc.
* Self-Advocacy Association of New York State (SANYS)
* Spectrum News
* Spina Bifida of Western NY
* The Arc of Erie County New York
* Visually Impaired Advancement (VIA)
* West Side Community Services
* Western New York Independent Living (WNY-IL)

Additional Service Locations

* East Amherst - Actually ALL of Amherst and the surrounding suburbs
* Weekend service in Cheektowaga/ French Rd Union and Old Union Rd
* All Lockport
* Batavia downs and Darien lake
* Clarence, NY
* Suburbs
* Expand services in the Southtowns
* Southtowns (Lackawanna, Hamburg, Orchard Park, East Aurora, Derby)
* Southtowns region
* Tift, other nature parks. Wider coverage on Grand Island
* Marilla
* All
* More Southtowns routes, restore Route 75
* Area near Williamsville North High School
* Clarence; Williamsville Pediatric Center on Wehrle Dr
* Williamsville, Amherst, Clarence, and other suburban towns
* West Seneca Depew
* Hamburg area weekdays/weekends, specifically McKinley & Bayview intersection
* Erie County has limits to the area of PAL utilization
* Suburbs
* 525 Oliver Street and other places in Tonawanda
* County Parks - not just once a year, Bills game- love to see the drop off in a different location, Maple Road on the weekends

Other Comments

* PAL service shouldn't be tied to fixed route schedules (ex. Hamburg on the weekends) and expand to 1.5 miles from a stop.
* Keep people with disabilities in mind and make sure that paratransit riders stay updated.
* Give some PAL/bus service to us on weekends in Cheektowaga Old Union and Union Rd area.
* Pickups should be late as 12am since some night events end at 10-11 pm.
* Thank you for finally getting the MetGo system working.
* It could be helpful to have a pilot of the study.
* The fareboxes and how to use them and make it easy to understand.
* No/limited bus routes in the suburbs limits housing and employment options. It also limits access to services for the disabled.
* Increase communication, and accuracies with schedule changes.
* Logistics when it comes to the amount of time someone is on the PAL vehicle; some drive passed destinations to return later.
* Wait times, accountability to where rides are and how late they are running.
* Greater candor about the metrics used to determine which routes are limited would be helpful.
* Expanding the regular Route 49 bus to go inbound on Maple and adding weekend service would allow my son more independence as he ages.
* Unreliability (PAL user cannot use it as a reliable means of transportation to work).
* When service territories change, riders who are affected should continue to have service (a 'grand-father clause').
* Need the area expanded.
* Low prices.
* Use the opportunity to really study for change and be objective about expansion.
* More people might be able to attend these meetings if NFTA offered to waive the fee for the paratransit ride.
* Extend Buffalo Metro.
* PAL drivers should not have to move or find new employment because a bus line is changed/terminated.
* Expand weekend availability during the morning hours.

Appendix A: Meeting Participants

Attendees

* Mike Billoni
* Hannah Brecher
* Elizabeth Brinkworth
* Christa Brown
* Jill Bryant
* Giuseppina Bugenhagen
* Frank Cammarata
* Linda Caminsky
* Mindy Cervoni
* Linda Christopher
* Israel Cruz
* Shanell Davis
* Margo Downey
* Wafa Dubashi
* Andrew Dugan
* Ian Foley
* Richard Fritz
* Douglas Funke
* Robert Giannetti
* Jeanette Grimaldi
* Linda Groat
* Krisan Hahn
* Janet Harrison
* Hilary Helfinstine
* Chari Himmelsbach
* Chaunci Hinton
* Erin Kavanagh
* Erica Miller
* Julie Nelson
* Spectrum News
* Kevin O'Connor
* Ellen Pachioli
* Julie Phillipson
* Robert Pryor
* Sophia Roberts
* Mike Rogers
* Nickeisha Rogers
* Melissa Sibley
* Kate Simonds
* Stephanie Speaker
* Ann Steimer
* Connie Stives
* Emyle Watkins
* Taryn Wilde
* Justin Wright

ASL Interpreters

* Miriam Lerner
* Ruann Larson

NFTA

* Dejuan Hardy, NFTA
* Holly Nidell, NFTA
* James Morrell, NFTA
* Nadine Chalmers, NFTA
* Omar Campuzano, NFTA
* Patricia Wiseman, NFTA
* Rachel Maloney, NFTA
* Rob Jones, NFTA
* Sadie Kratt, NFTA
* Sam Gallivan, NFTA
* Kara Stromberg, NFTA

Consultant Team

* Bill Schwartz, Nelson\Nygaard
* Emily Oaksford, Nelson\Nygaard
* Evan Mancini, Nelson\Nygaard
* Russell Thatcher, Thatcher Consulting
* Stephanie Hyde, Highland Planning
* Tanya Zwahlen, Highland Planning
* Tom Procopio, Consultant