



Meeting Summary

Public Workshop # 2 (In Person)

Schiller Park Senior Citizen Center
2057 Genesee Street, Buffalo, NY 14211
September 25, 2024, 6–7:30 p.m.

An in-person public meeting was held following a virtual meeting on September 24, 2024.

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 a group discussion with Q&A. A list of meeting participants is included in Appendix A.

PRESENTATION SUMMARY

Julie Boasi of Highland Planning outlined the meeting logistics, including how participants could engage during the presentation and the question-and-answer session.

Bill provided an overview of the study, highlighting the importance of public input and discussing the evaluation of existing health services. He presented findings on service expansion, cost estimates, and a proposal to expand the core service area.

Key takeaways from the presentation are:

- In the short term, NFTA is proposing to invest in and expand the existing PAL service – geographically and by span of service – by offering customers a simplified core service area.
- Challenges remain with existing PAL service delivery: improvements are underway, but staffing, fleet, and maintenance challenges will take much longer to resolve.
- **Service expansion is not possible today.** If by 2030, NFTA can address its ongoing driver shortage, acquire more vehicles, and expand maintenance capacity, future expansion will require at least \$10 million in the first year, not including funding for subsequent years, inflation escalation, or current costs to operate PAL service.

- An alternate service delivery model—using private contractors for supplemental PAL service—could enable service expansion to occur sooner, but customer service and quality control concerns and current labor agreements present challenges for this option.

Participants asked questions about trip reservations, service challenges, and the timeline for implementing recommendations. These questions and comments can be found below. The NFTA team emphasized their commitment to addressing community concerns and planned to hold further stakeholder meetings to discuss specific issues in detail.

The session concluded with gratitude expressed to attendees for their participation and input, and a reminder to contact NFTA with any additional feedback.

DISCUSSION

Bill facilitated a discussion. A summary of questions/comments and responses are below.

Question: Why not have big buses split the service area?

- To reduce travel times
- In their response, it was understood that the person asking the question was suggesting ways to optimize fleet allocation for NFTA's potential movement of big buses to reduce travel times. While they did not provide an analysis, they encouraged the individual to share their suggestions with NFTA if the agency decides to move forward with their study.

Question: On holidays, paratransit buses run until 7pm. Will hours be expanded?

- Yes, if they are in the core service area. Express corridors will not have service.

Question: Regarding service area, can you further elaborate on what is being expanded for the blind?

- The proposal states that the core service area remains consistent throughout the day, from 5:30 AM to 1:30 AM, regardless of whether it's a weekday or weekend. This ensures simplification and consistency in the core service area. When discussing service expansion, it refers to a single service provider.

Comment: Fleet size isn't increasing with ongoing increases (from 12,000 rides a month up to 20,000) and it needs to.

- This has been an ongoing issue for the past 10 years per NFTA
- Getting vehicles is often a challenge, and it's important to make sure that there's more vehicles in the fleet to meet the current demand

Question: Will Lockport have service on weekends?

- Yes, where it has non-express service Monday-Friday

Question: Florida buses aren't fixed bus route, why don't we?

- Elderly transportation service and ADA services in FL and PA
 - Both Florida and Pennsylvania have elderly transportation programs funded by the state, which allow older individuals to travel within the state and access local services. In many areas, elderly transportation services are combined with ADA services, and various agencies utilize these funding resources. They emphasize that substantial funding is necessary for these programs, mentioning that Monroe County has previously offered such services.

Comment about the need for expansion because people can become stranded in their homes without necessary transportation and then end up losing their jobs

Comment regarding the need to lower the prices of transit, Current rate of \$10 for 10 trips is a lot

Comment that NFTA Metro should divert funding to paratransit

Comment regarding calling customer service and a lack of communication about 7-day service

Comment that that Clinton, William, and Lovejoy ends @ 6pm and impacts many seniors who live

- Will have a map with hours Monday-Friday/ Saturday and Sunday

Comment that suburbs aren't serviced by NFTA

- Proposed system will expand the service area

Question: Will PAL service be provided for church trips both ways?

- Service will be provided if the church is in the service area - it was confirmed that if the church and the destination are served by PAL, the proposed service would indeed be operational

Question: How will long wait times be improved?

- We are working to address that with vehicles and drivers.

Rideshare Partnerships

- Bill discussed the possibility of partnering with a rideshare company for supplemental sedan services but acknowledged that it may not meet all users' needs. Two solutions include hiring a contractor for on-demand wheelchair-accessible services or using PAL's vehicles. Bill stressed the need for equitable service and respond to a question about expanding transportation to Baseline Road, sharing personal difficulties with

unreliable transport to church events when support staff is unavailable, often resulting in costly taxi or Uber rides.

- Sedan service for those that use it

Question: Will you expand to Baseline Rd? The cost of taxis and Uber is high.

- Yes, if service is there now. The goal is to provide consistent service over longer time period

Comment about new paratransit vehicles, which don't have stops, just jet rails

Comment about wait times being too long and not predictable

Question: Why did they eliminate bus stops after Hertel to Sheridan Drive?

- It was advised that they couldn't give specifics as to why, but they took it down as a comment/concern.

Question: Why can't NFTA shovel bus stops at business?

- It was noted that more maintenance should be done so bus stops are cleared off.

Question: \$145,000 to improve fleet and staffing vs new locations. NFTA purchases have made purchases that were economy vs. quality. Where is this number from?

- Lift, accommodate multiple wheelchairs
- Large PAL last longer
- If, not available, buy other vehicles

Multiple Comments

- Cost of this shouldn't scare us
- The cost of paratransit shouldn't be a barrier, as there are ways to reduce expenses, such as using existing buildings
- Importance of paratransit for the disabled community and called for immediate action, urging the NFTA to commit by forming a committee and prioritizing implementation
- Suggest privatizing paratransit services under NFTA management to expedite progress and stressed the need for accountability to ensure the project moves forward
- One-quarter of the population is disabled and had access to transportation. Further analyze this budget.
- Seek hybrid results for implementation faster. Make a commitment and form a committee to get this done.

Multiple Comments

- This population needs to be a priority. Start sooner. Find the money.
- This began with a bill 10 years ago. \$750,000 study. Let's make sure we see action. Five-year wait isn't a good approval. Need a committee to keep NFTA accountable.
- Privatize PAL service
- Bus cancellation caused late work arrival and impacted physically. Mention of NFTA not caring about people. 2030 is too long to wait.
- Why this study is taking so long and why is the NFTA "jerking people around"

Comment: Paratransit map has no buses to Lewiston (town not city)

- Service operates $\frac{3}{4}$ mile today.
- Service should go to ART Park

Question: What is the rationale for $\frac{3}{4}$ mile expansion?

- Community feedback was much broader. We evaluated what we heard and the costs. For simplicity, you expanded slightly DTS don't necessarily represent needs. We had to draw a line somewhere.

Comment: Committee should include paratransit drivers. Expansion is needed. Drivers need a seat at the table. Paratransit makes less than big bus. The need for paratransit is expanding. 2030 is too long to wait. I appreciate the study, but this has to be done.

Comment about bus to Hamburg. Had to see people get on bus who need support or assistance

Comment: Paratransit no showed for doctor's appointment. This was important and wrong.

Expression of gratitude for the PAL bus drivers

Question: Is NFTA unionized?

- Yes

Question: Do paratransit make the same amount as the NFTA?

- Bill explained that under the current agreement, compensation for the first three years of service is the same for those working with Pal and driving a big bus. However, after the three years, bus drivers' compensation increases at a different rate compared to PAL workers.

Question: What does a strike of paratransit mean for riders who utilize the service?

- Bill acknowledged that they couldn't provide an answer to the question, noting it would be a challenge if people left, and it would be up to leadership to prevent that from happening.

Question: Riders get penalized with no show, why don't drivers get penalized?

- Bill acknowledged that passengers are penalized for no-shows, but drivers are not penalized when they miss trips. He agreed that this seemed unfair and explained that while there are rules to prevent missed trips or denials, unforeseen issues sometimes occur. The goal is for both drivers and passengers to follow the rules, but it doesn't always work as intended.

Comment: The paratransit renewal deadline is August. NFTA didn't honor application, needed to resubmit. Paid for 7-day pass. Need leeway for application and need assistance to be certified. It takes a month. Don't think NFTA cares.

Comment about the lack of flexibility of bus stop impacted asthma attack and rider died

Comment regarding partnerships with business to business to subsidize costs of services. MPO has service transportation and that is where this is considered

Question: Does NFTA have partnerships with health systems or private businesses to subsidize transportation costs, similar to other transportation models?

- The response was that such partnerships were not part of their study, but transportation coordination efforts do exist in the region through a public transit service coordination plan. Bill highlighted the importance of ensuring that patients can get to and from medical appointments, noting that coordination between healthcare facilities and transportation providers helps prevent confusion and missed rides. While Bill acknowledged that such partnerships could help reduce costs for healthcare providers, he was unsure about any specific financial arrangements in the region.

Comment about Madison County is paying for rides and paying 50% riders

Question: What is the timeline for consolidating times and routes?

- Bill explained that the simplified service area, which will expand coverage in more places and times, is a short-term implementation coming soon. While some work remains, it does not depend on vehicles or drivers and is already being coordinated with PAL and the NFTA. The timeline for implementation is expected to be months, not years.

Bill thanked participants for their feedback and mentioned that the report and recommendations are being finalized, with another meeting planned for external stakeholders. The study is expected to wrap up in about a month to a month and a half.

Appendix A: Meeting Participants

Attendees

- Michaela
- Michael
- Rosa
- Sue Adams
- Jordan Bellasai, Health Foundation
- Mike Billoni, Stephanie Speaker's Representative
- Barbara Binkowski
- Eric Biscantz
- John Blume
- Robert Brunch, WNYIL
- Natalie Burgos
- Barbara C.
- Kathleen C.
- Jim C.
- Linda Kaminski
- Gracie Chamber, ILNC
- Melinda Collier
- Naba Eloud
- John Fitzgerald
- Ron Giza, ATV
- Cynthia Hall
- Mickey Kearns
- Mavra Keller, WNY IL
- Walt Koch, Rep Tim Kennedy (NY-26)
- Ann Marie Kollmar
- Mac McClean, Center for Advocacy
- Mike Metz
- Martha Perez
- Andrew Pieczynski
- Jordan, SANYS

- Danielle Shaw
- Don Solberg
- Stephanie Speaker
- Ron Speaker
- Justine Yates
- Anthony Young

ASL Interpreters

- 2 present, did not record names

NFTA

- Nadine Chalmers
- Sam Gallivan
- Rob Jones
- Rachel Maloney
- James Morrell
- Helen Tederous
- Patricia Wiseman
- Holly Nidell

Consultant Team

- Bill Schwartz, Nelson\Nygaard
- Julie Boasi, Highland Planning
- Stephanie Hyde, Highland Planning
- Tanya Zwahlen, Highland Planning

Appendix B: Meeting Photos

