



Meeting Summary

Public Workshop #2 (Virtual)

Tuesday September 24, 2024, 1–2:30 p.m.

An in-person public meeting was also held on September 25, 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. The meeting presentation is included in Appendix B.

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 about trip reservations, service challenges, and the timeline for implementing recommendations. These questions and comments can be found in the section “Q&A Discussion” 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: What is PAL doing about people who live in rural areas? I have been hearing from a lot of advocates from rural Niagara County that PAL does not travel there.

- This proposal suggests a slight expansion of the PAL service area in Niagara County, but are you aware that Niagara County recently re-organized and expanded their rural transit service under the new name Connect Niagara? The new Connect Niagara may be better able to cover rural Niagara County.

Question: When will we hear recommendations from NFTA of what they want to pursue and what are the next steps?

- We are wrapping up the project report in the fall and putting a draft into review next month. One recommendation we have for the core service area is simplified hours and the extension of the hours on the express corridors. We are working on specific recommendations for service efficiencies.

Comment on the negative repercussions of changing PAL schedule on riders missing appointments because they are not picked up on time.

- We know there are ongoing challenges with being able to accommodate trip requests and to deliver on-time service. We are working with NFTA on what can be done to smooth out these issues by having larger timeframes in which we place the trips, so they're not as concentrated around the peak periods. There are only so many vehicles and operators.

Question: Is there a reason why there's so much turnover with staff? Have you ever asked them why they do not stick around?

- We do not have a reason. When we interviewed vehicle operators, we interviewed people who are currently working and did not inquire as to specific reasons. Transit agencies generally face this problem as people move on to different jobs for better opportunities for multiple reasons. Before we began this study, we learned for the first 3 years a PAL operator works for NFTA, they have the same pay scale as the big bus drivers do. A lot of transit agencies have different pay scales.

Question: For the suburban aspect of bus transportation with the 47 bus, you mentioned paratransit buses wouldn't follow big express buses. Are you going to expand paratransit service for the buses that only come once or twice a day in the suburbs?

- The proposal is to operate PAL service anywhere and anytime. Even if the 47 or 49 stops don't operate on Saturday or Sunday, PAL services are available as if it were a weekday. When those buses are operating, it's no longer tied to the local bus that serves that area. PAL services are available wherever local bus services operate. Whenever a local bus service is operating in the core service area, you can travel anywhere in the core service area.

Comment on expecting another stakeholder meeting to discuss other distance models of the Paratransit service. Mention of considering the six-mile distance that is a contingent requirement of funding

- Acknowledged that the alternative service delivery model will help to address this concern because it is a way to provide more capacity. We will communicate about scheduling another meeting with the stakeholder committee.

Comment regarding the seat belts not fitting in a comfortable way on the newer NFTA paratransit vehicles.

MEETING REGISTRATION

Those who registered for the webinar had an opportunity to identify their affiliation and whether they ride PAL.

Affiliation/Organization

- Community Services for Every1
- VIA
- WGRZ-TV
- Hearts and Hands
- Health Foundation for Western and Central New York
- Deaf Access Services
- OPWDD
- EC
- Home of My Own of WNY
- Beyond Support Network
- National Federation of Blind
- GBNRTC
- Self-Advocacy Association of New York State
- DAS Interpreter
- WNY Independent Living
- ACB WNY
- Heritage Christian Services
- Western New York Independent Living- Mental Health Peer Connection
- People Inc.
- Mayor, Village of Depew
- NYS Assembly
- Spectrum News 1
- Center for Self-Advocacy
- Billoni Associates
- WKBW 7 News
- WBFO- Buffalo Toronto Public Media

Do you currently ride PAL?

- 15 said "Yes"
- 51 said "No"

Appendix A: Meeting Participants

Attendees

- WGRZ-TV
- Mason Ald
- Riley Anderson
- Maki Becker
- Jordan Bellasai
- Mike Billoni
- Robert Brandon
- Hannah Brecher
- Elizabeth Brinkworth
- Frank Cammarata
- David Carr
- Mindy Cervoni
- Gracie Chambers
- David Coleman
- Maddie Czworka
- Dawn Daigler
- Kelly Dixon
- Michelle Fagyas/ Mickey
- Karlene Fiorello
- Adam Francis
- Eric Frank
- Jeanette Grimaldi
- Sarah Kinseher
- Samuel Mattle
- Chris Minkler

- Spectrum News
- Julie Phillipson
- Frank Saia
- Michell Scheib
- David State
- Todd Vaarwerk
- Mara Wright
- Rachel Young

ASL Interpreter

- Anne Stone

NFTA

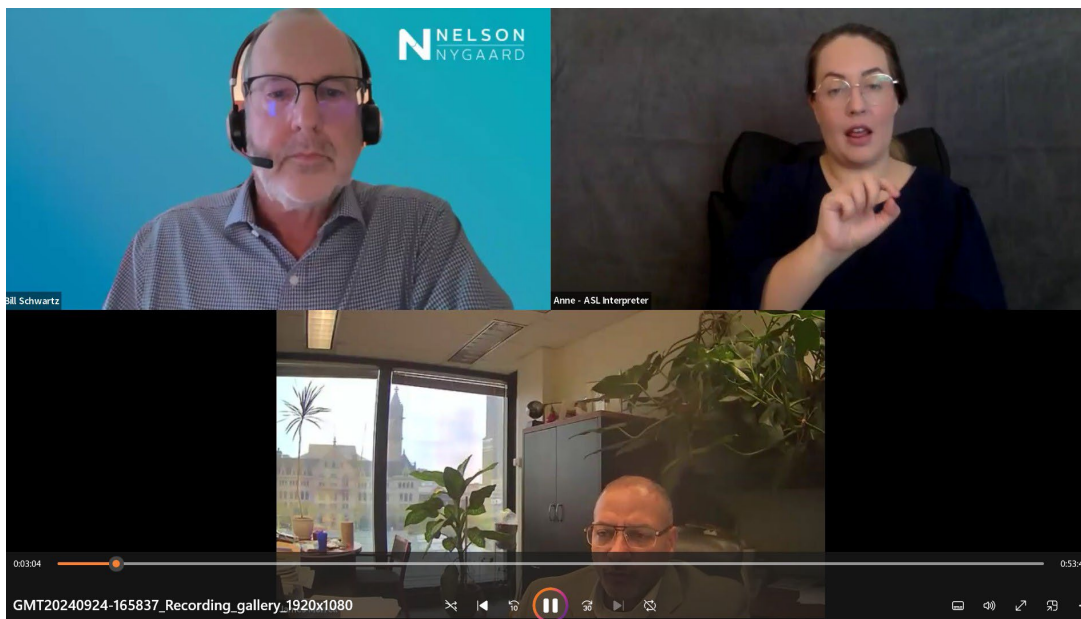
- Jeffery Amplement
- Omar Campuzano
- Nadine Chalmers
- Chris Fahey
- Sam Gallivan
- Tom George
- Kelly Khatib
- Robert Jones
- Darren Kempner
- Rachel Maloney
- James Morrell
- Holly Nidell
- Gerald Rott
- Kara Stromberg
- Helen Tederous
- Patricia Wiseman

Consultant Team

- Evan Mancini, Nelson\Nygaard

- Emily Oaksford, Nelson\Nygaard
- Bill Schwartz, Nelson\Nygaard
- Julie Boasi, Highland Planning
- Elaine Camacho, Highland Planning
- Stephanie Hyde, Highland Planning
- Heike Jacob, Highland Planning
- Katrina Lim, Highland Planning

Appendix B: Meeting Photos



The image shows a video player interface. On the left is a blue presentation slide with the NFTA-METRO logo at the top. The slide text includes: "September 23, 2024", "Public Meeting – Study Findings", "NFTA-Metro Paratransit Expansion Study", and "Nelson\Nygaard Consulting Associates, Inc." On the right is a video frame showing a white Ford paratransit van with "NFTA-METRO" and the number "8207" on its side. The van is parked in front of a building with "The Buffalo General Hospital" visible on the wall. A small inset window in the top right of the video frame shows a woman, identified as "Anne - ASL Interpret...", in a dark setting. At the bottom of the video player is a control bar with a progress indicator, a play button, and other standard video controls. The file name "GMT20240924-165837_Recording_gallery_1920x1080" is visible in the bottom left corner of the player.