



Rail-Volution 2020

WNY Delegation Action Plan

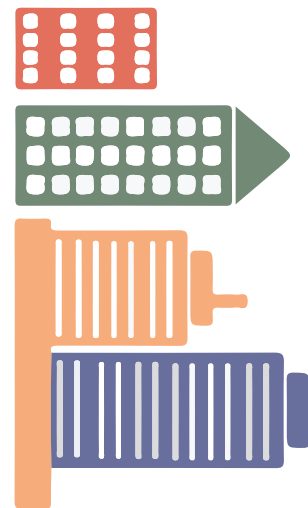
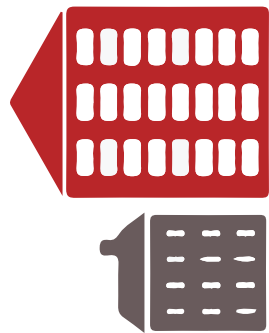
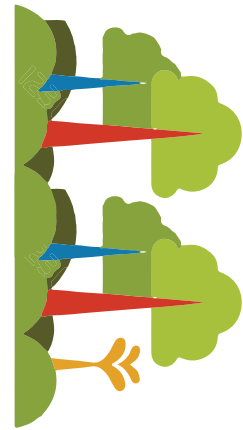
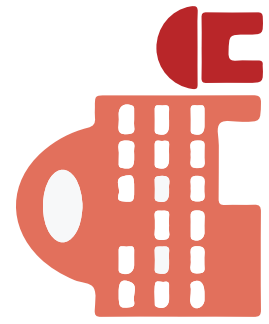


Table of Contents



Why do we need an Action Plan? **4**

Overview of the Process **6**

Challenges **8**

Potential Solutions from Delegates **14**

Coalition Building **16**

Next Steps **24**

Why do we need an Action Plan?

Our regional transportation system affects nearly every aspect of residents' lives. It influences where people are able to live, work, and access services and basic amenities. It impacts how much of a paycheck remains for food, housing, childcare, and other necessities once transportation costs come out. It can dictate how much time families have to spend together before and after a commute. Transportation connects people of all backgrounds, from community to community across our region, but it is also a barrier that separates citizens from one another and from opportunity. Public transit investments are more than a way to improve transportation; they are the difference between building a just, sustainable, and connected region or disconnected communities that cannot compete with well-connected regions across the globe.

Transportation is intrinsically tied to many other factors that contribute to the livability of communities in our region. Although transit was a major focus of this process, delegates explored the relationships between transit and equity, environmental justice, alternative and emerging mobility options, accessibility, public health, and more.

At a time when transit systems around the country are dealing with the fallout of the COVID-19 pandemic on top of persistent pre-pandemic challenges, it is even more crucial for our community's leaders to work together to advocate for sustainable and equitable transportation solutions.



What is the purpose of the Action Plan?

This action plan serves as a starting point for future collaboration. Using a commonly identified vision and challenges as a foundation, it clearly lays out the next steps that regional leaders must take in the coming year to help advance quality of life through transit investments in Buffalo Niagara.

Though many of the actions are small, their cumulative effect may catalyze broader and more robust support for regional transit investments. The report is not just for those who are part of the delegation; it is also a tool others can use to help inform decisions within their personal and professional lives, through a synthesis of the lessons learned from experiences shared and discussed at the 2020 Rail-Volution Conference.

COVID-19 and Impact on Transit

In 2020, transit systems across the country faced the unprecedented challenge of responding to a global pandemic and public health crisis. As millions of Americans began working from home and reducing trips to stores and other businesses, transit agencies recorded drastic drops in ridership. Transit gained a perception as unsafe from the virus, due to the confined space of a bus or rail car, even as agencies quickly adapted new safety protocols and invested in personal protective equipment and other safety measures. Across the country, transit workers made incredible sacrifices to keep transit operational for essential workers who rely on it.

Dramatically declining revenue from lost ridership and new expenses from public safety upgrades put transit agencies in a financial tight spot, forcing some, including the NFTA, to make tough decisions to ensure the long-term sustainability of the transit network. The pandemic underscored how important transit is for essential workers who rely on it to get to their jobs. Agencies like NFTA balance providing adequate transportation services for the community's essential workers and vulnerable populations while ensuring the fiscal stability of the system. The pandemic also wrought havoc on local, state, and federal budgets, potentially making support for transit agencies harder to access in the years ahead. Despite all of these challenges, the NFTA has been able to keep the system intact.

COVID-19 arrived at a time of a national transformation in transit and transportation, and although it created short-term challenges, the paradigm shifts underway before 2020 will continue to shape the next five, ten, and fifty years.

Overview of the Process

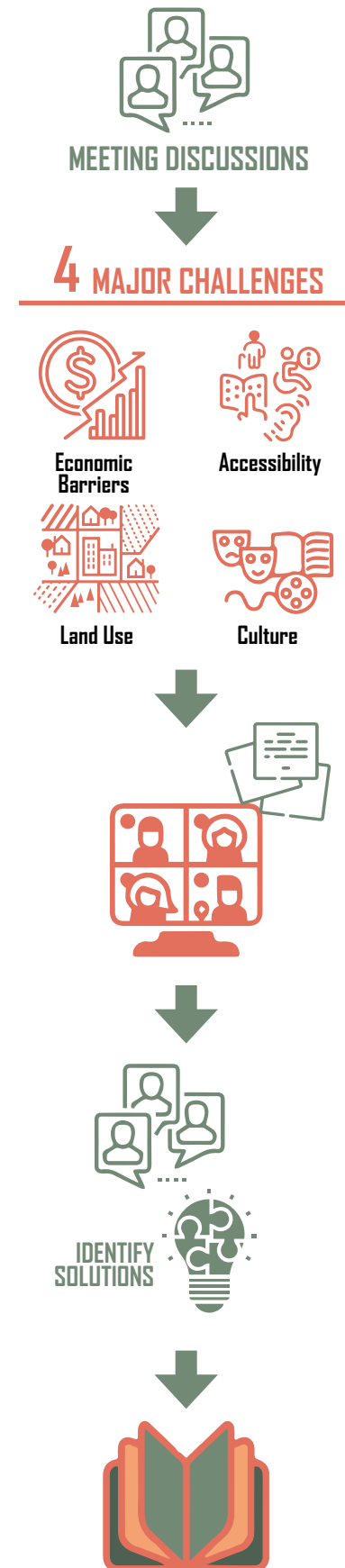
The Western New York delegation to the Rail-Volution conference assembled a diverse group of stakeholders, including representatives from government, the business community, and advocacy groups. About 30 individuals were invited to participate, based on their professional or personal connections to transit and transit-related topics such as housing, development, equity, transportation, policy, youth, environment, seniors, and more. The group listed here includes those who were involved with the delegation at any point in the process.

Delegates:

- Jim Arnone, Chief of Staff, NYS Assemblymember Karen McMahon
- AJ Baynes, President, Amherst Chamber of Commerce
- Justin Booth, Executive Director, GObike Buffalo
- Larry Cook, Vice President, Oishei Mobile Safety Net Team
- Emily Dyett, Youth and Climate Justice Coordinator, WNY Environmental Alliance
- Elizabeth Giles, Board Member, Citizens for Regional Transit
- Shane Green, Intern, Office of Assembly Member Karen McMahon
- Jamie Hamann-Burney, Director of Planning, Buffalo Niagara Medical Campus
- Joani Higgins, Workforce Development Program Manager, Goodwill of WNY
- Carley Hill, President and CEO, CaHill Resources
- Jalonda Hill, Founder, Colored Girls Bike Too
- Randy Hoak, Associate State Director, AARP New York
- Mitch LaRosa, Program Director, Shared Mobility Inc.
- Bonnie Lawrence, Deputy Commissioner of Environment and Planning, Erie County
- Amanda Mays, WNY Regional Director, Empire State Development
- Brittany Perez, Livability Program Officer, LISC WNY
- Seth Piccirillo, Senior Manager of Economic Development, Buffalo Niagara Partnership
- Rick Rodgers, Legislative and Transportation Committee Director, NYS Senator Tim Kennedy
- Heidi Romer, Director of Community Advancement, Jericho Road Community Health Center
- Rick Steinberg, Niagara Region Member, Sierra Club
- David Stinner, President, US itek
- Ryan Undercoffer, Chief Development Officer, Matt Urban Center
- Todd Vaarwerk, Chief Policy Officer, WNY Independent Living

Vision Statement

A well-funded, comprehensive and integrated regional transit network will provide equitable access to jobs, services, homes, and recreation, regardless of socioeconomic status, age, race, or ability.



Pre-conference meetings

The first pre-conference meeting was held in **August** to develop a **shared vision** for how transit should shape the future of the region and its communities. During this meeting, delegates also identified barriers to creating livable communities through transit in Western New York as well as the actors that need to be involved in the process. Four major challenges emerged from the discussion at this meeting – **economics, accessibility, land use, and culture** – that need to be addressed to achieve the vision for regional transit set forth by the delegation.

During the second pre-conference meeting, held in September, delegates, including several who were added to the delegation based off the feedback from the first pre-conference meeting, discussed potential **short-term actions** that could be taken to address the four major challenges, gaps in the knowledge base of the delegation in terms of implementing these actions, and sessions at the conference that would be most helpful in filling in these knowledge gaps. This discussion helped to narrow down the list of conference sessions the delegation wished to attend.

Conference

During the Rail-Volution Conference, held virtually on October 28th and 29th, delegates attended a number of sessions centered around equity, planning for the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on transit ridership, improving first- and last-mile connections, and other topics. Each delegate took notes on the sessions they attended regarding major takeaways from the session, ideas about how to implement the solutions presented in the session in our region, what action steps would need to be taken and who would need to be involved to implement the solutions presented in the session, new questions the session raised for them, and potential contacts to reach out to for advice about implementing the solutions.

Post-conference meetings

During the post-conference meeting, held in November, the notes the delegates took during the conference served as the basis for discussion around the feasibility and effectiveness of potential solutions, with the four major challenges from the first pre-conference meeting in mind. Delegates identified the solutions they believed would best set the region on a path towards achieving its vision for the future of regional transit.

Report

The report, in addition to documenting the outcomes of the pre- and post-conference meetings, lays out an action plan for the delegation to continue to work towards creating livable communities through transit in the region.

Challenges Identified by Delegates

Delegates first assembled in August 2020 to discuss the most pressing transit-related challenges in Western New York. In a set of smaller discussions, delegates shared a wide range of obstacles to a more thriving and livable community through transit. Though the breadth of insights from delegates was broad, challenges fell into four major thematic categories: economic barriers, accessibility, land use, and culture.

Economic barriers, including a lack of funding, decades of population loss, disinvestment in urban areas, and shifting consumer and employment patterns make investment in regional transit more difficult.



Adequate funding for transit is lacking, and revenues alone are not enough to sustain the region's transit network.

Disinvested neighborhoods, most notably on Buffalo's East Side, have left large areas of the region with low density of residents and businesses. Lower density makes transit service less feasible, but it is also an opportunity for reinvestment in areas that have both existing infrastructure and room to grow.

Particularly for those who travel in groups, transit in WNY is not as competitively priced or as convenient as other modes of transportation.

As online shopping continues to overtake brick and mortar retail sales, density of physical retail businesses is declining, reducing the demand for transit for shopping.

The COVID-19 pandemic and a shift toward remote work or working off-hours reduced overall transit demand.

Ongoing capital projects focus on large, expensive expansion projects, but there is a perception that smaller, quicker investments to improve the existing system for current users are not prioritized.

Decades of population loss and sprawling development patterns across the region significantly reduced regional population density, while significantly increasing the area of where people live and work, all of which make transit less financially and logistically feasible.

A lack of political will and knowledge of the benefit of transit among elected officials at varying levels of government means missed opportunities for investment in transit.

In order for transit to be equitable, comfortable, and safe, it must also be accessible.



Missing or difficult "last-mile" connections make using transit more challenging, especially for those with limited ability. NFTA's Paratransit Access Line (PAL) provides origin-to-destination service for riders with disabilities, but rides must be requested at least a day in advance.

During the winter, snow is plowed from the travel lanes into the parking lane and onto the sidewalk, blocking bus stops and forcing people to stand in the street to wait for buses, which puts them at risk of being struck by a vehicle.

Lack of amenities at bus stops, such as benches, shelter, and heating, make using transit less convenient and comfortable, especially for older riders or riders with disabilities, and especially during the winter months.

Despite complying with the requirements under the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), transit is not always accessible for those with disabilities, in practice. For example, due to construction or maintenance, elevators may not be operational at a given Metro station, requiring those who need to use an elevator to travel to the next Metro station.

Transit should be more well-connected to other forms of transportation, such as bicycles.

Extractive traffic calming measures, such as speed cameras, may create disproportionate financial hardship for residents of communities in which they are implemented.

Even if mobility options are accessible in certain communities, they may not be affordable for residents to use.

Police involvement in traffic enforcement is a concern for some residents.

Policies and zoning codes encourage regional sprawl, perpetuating land use patterns that make transit access less feasible. Communities with transit-oriented development policies must also consider potential gentrification and displacement of residents who rely on transit the most.



Much of the region's development over time has been low-density, which is not compatible with traditional transit. Although this pattern of development is now changing, the shift is insufficient in scale.

Roads are designed to prioritize the movement of personal vehicles over the safety of pedestrians and transit riders.

Zoning ordinances are not coordinated across municipal boundaries in corridors that could be served by higher frequency transit.

Pushback against proposed transit projects from residents usually centers around the misperception that transit lowers nearby property values. In actuality, transit increases nearby property values. These increased property values, however, can contribute to gentrification and displacement of long-time, lower-income residents, and prevent residents who rely on transit from being able to live near transit.

Western New York's culture is auto-focused and many in the region attach a negative stigma to transit, which makes garnering support for transit investments among the public and elected officials harder, but could be alleviated through education around the benefits of transit.



A disconnect between the transit system and the business community is a missed opportunity for strategic partnerships to incentivize transit use.

Potential riders may be deterred from using transit if it is not intuitive to use. Transit benefits from improved signage or other helpful technology like live wait times.

Transit is often viewed from a cost-profit perspective, operating as a business aiming to make money, rather than a social service or critical infrastructure.

WNY's transit could benefit from more widespread marketing to encourage ridership, especially using storytelling to humanize transit use.

Transit is often stigmatized, and there is a misconception that transit is unsafe due to crime, and more recently, due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

A longstanding perception persists that expanding light rail hurts businesses, due to a belief that Metro Rail's original construction led to the loss of retail downtown, when other factors, not Metro Rail, hurt those businesses or caused them to move.

An oversupply of subsidized parking, a lack of congestion, and short vehicle travel times incentivize other transportation modes over transit.

Education about economic, environmental, and social benefits of transit for communities is broadly lacking.

Transit investments are hindered by a lack of buy-in from the public resulting from perceived inadequacies in authentic community engagement during project and policy decisions.

The traditional language of street design is not inclusive of all communities, such as the use of the term "Complete Streets" instead of "Just Streets."

Challenges Regional Context

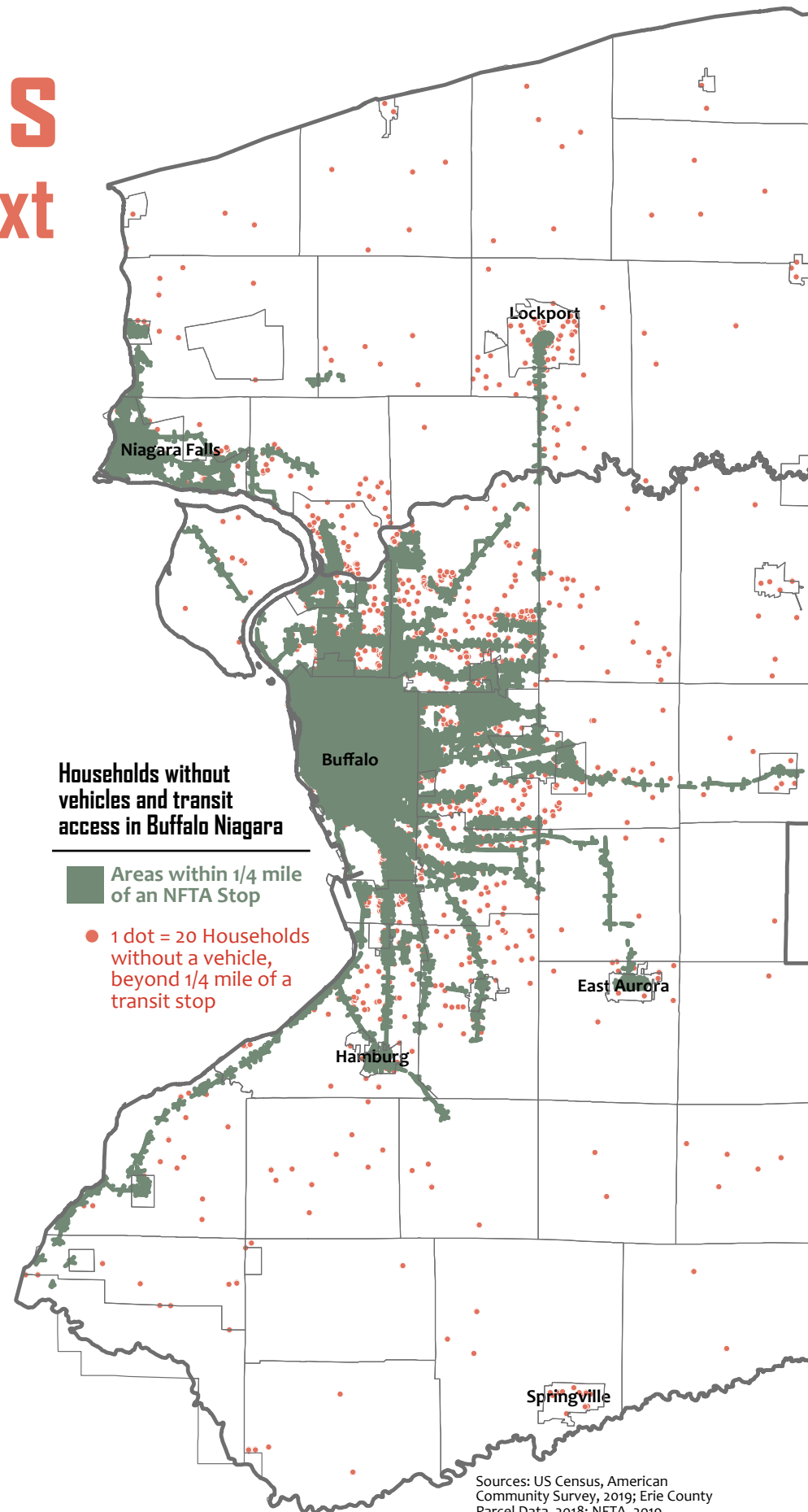
Thousands of households rely on transit, but sprawling land use patterns mean many are **disconnected from jobs and services.**

+32,300 households with no vehicle beyond 1/4 mile of a transit stop

Sources: UBRI analysis of US Census, American Community Survey, 2019; Erie County Parcel Data, 2018; NFTA, 2019.

69% of jobs are beyond a 1/4 mile of a transit stop

Sources: UBRI analysis of US Census, Longitudinal Employment-Household Dynamics, OnTheMap, 2017.

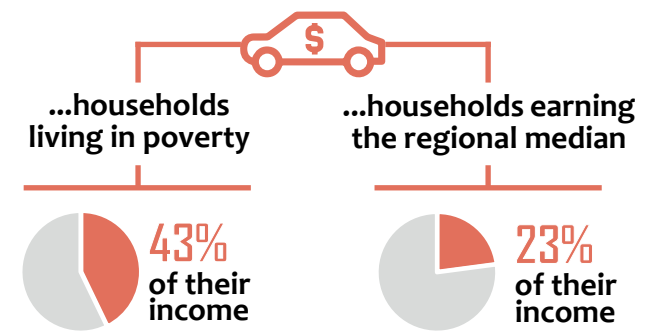


Buffalo Niagara is a car-centric region, but the costs of owning a car can be a burden for many households.

\$9,282
National average annual cost to own a car

\$900
Annual cost of standard NFTA Metro passes

WHAT THAT MEANS FOR...



Sources: AAA, 2019; US HHS, 2020; US Census, 2019.

	Drive Alone to Work	Public Transportation to Work
% of All Commuters	89%	3%
Avg. Commute Time	21 min	40 min
% of Workers who Spend 45 min or More in Daily Commute	7%	36%
Median Income	\$42,082	\$21,072
% People of Color	36%	63%

Sources: US Census, American Community Survey, 2019.

Public transit commuters earn about half as much and spend twice as long getting to work compared to those who drive.

But there are also opportunities...

Promoting transit can help our region rebound. Places that have access to transit have more jobs and higher property values per acre than places that don't.

Places within 1/4 mile of a transit stop have...

...**14x** more jobs per acre and **29x** higher property values per acre compared to areas beyond 1/4 mile of a transit stop.

Sources: UBRI analysis of US Census; Longitudinal Employment-Household Dynamics, OnTheMap, 2017; and Erie County Parcel Data, 2019.

Potential Solutions from Delegates

At the second pre-conference meeting, held in September 2020, delegates brainstormed potential solutions to the challenges they identified during the August meeting. Delegates broke up into groups based on the four major challenges, and shared a variety of ideas ranging from specific, short-term solutions to long-range, big picture changes. In discussing potential solutions, delegates also recognized that many of the ideas they shared are not new, but carrying out these solutions will require leaders who can champion these ideas and bring them to fruition. From the list of specific and broad ideas, potential solutions were distilled down into the thematic list below.



Work with employers to subsidize transit passes for employees and locate jobs in transit-accessible areas.

Remove financial and criminal penalties for fare evasion.

Provide free transit passes for people with low incomes.

Market the economic and other benefits of transit to residents and businesses.

Leverage van services and other types of micromobility such as bikes, e-bikes, and e-scooters to implement equitable first- and last-mile transportation options that better connect people to the transit system.



Improve multimodal connections.

Add long-term bike storage at light rail stations and better accommodate bikes on light rail.

Clearly mark bus stops.

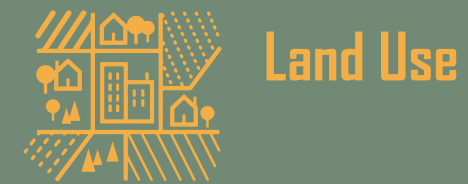
Provide real-time information on the location of buses.

Better coordinate bus schedules to improve connections.

Decrease the police presence at transit stops and shift funding away from the NFTA police towards investments in the transit system.

Create municipal policies that require the City of Buffalo and property owners to keep sidewalks and bus stops clear of snow.

Create new strategic routes that could facilitate access between the city and suburban job centers.



Encourage development near existing transit.

Bring more stakeholders into discussions on regional transit and transit-oriented development (TOD) to promote collaboration and new ideas.

Clearly define what equitable TOD means for the Buffalo Niagara region.

Lift up local case studies of increased property values near transit to highlight benefits of transit access and investments to nearby property owners and the broader public.



Frame the discussion around transit in comparison to single-occupancy vehicle use in ways that emphasize the relative advantages of using transit as well as the externalized costs of car ownership (monopolized curb space, pollution, climate change, etc.).

Create a humanizing narrative and branding for regional transit and alternative modes of transportation to help non-transit users view transit as a viable transportation option and as a key component of livable communities.

Host the Rail~Volution Conference in the future to generate conversation and help change local perceptions around transit.

Increase Black and Brown representation in transportation decision-making, and allow community members to be voting members of the NFTA board and other decision-making entities.

Insights from the Conference

Immediately following the conference, and at the post-conference meeting in December, delegates shared the greatest lessons they took away from the conference sessions they attended. These takeaways led to three major calls to action: advancing equity through investments in transit, increasing collaboration between stakeholders, and realizing the full (co-)benefits of transit.



Advancing Equity

Community engagement must be equitable and accessible, which necessitates evaluating our current strategies and innovating/adapting to improve the community engagement process.

Buffalo Niagara could benefit from a regional equitable development strategy that includes input from immigrant and POC-based community-based organizations and those working on anti-displacement.

Such a regional equitable development strategy could be helpful in building trust in communities that have been historically negatively impacted by transit investments and ensuring projects are equitably guided by the community.

To build trust, the equity benefits of transit must be adequately explained and publicized. Proponents of transit should avoid defending past transit investment decisions which have caused harm.

The Greater Buffalo Racial Equity Roundtable is one leading organization working in this space that could help develop this regional equitable development strategy.

Improving the existing transit system will immediately increase equity and quality of life for those who are transit-dependent.

There needs to be a process for approving prospective projects to judge whether they reflect the needs and values of the present time. For example, projects might be judged on whether they advance equity, improve multimodal connectivity, or reduce greenhouse gas emissions/air pollution.



Increasing Collaboration

Transit and housing, health, education, and economics are all related, which means there is not a single policy that will solve the problem of inequitable investment, but transit investment benefits all those other areas (when done correctly).

The goals of environmental groups; affordable housing, public health, and social justice advocates; and the business community are not mutually exclusive; all of their goals can be met with the correct policy decisions (guided through collaboration, not silos).

Our region has not created a means of bringing all these different interest groups together effectively.

Transit accessibility (or lack thereof) should be considered when siting new developments, and development should be directed away from greenfields toward brownfields/grayfields along existing transit lines.

We need to prioritize building affordable housing near where jobs already exist, or in Western New York's case, creating jobs near where affordable housing already exists.

Building a more efficient transit system (and associated growth and development) should be a regional and state effort, not just local.

To advance transit in our region, we need to identify and coordinate with champions for the cause.



Realizing the (Co-)Benefits of Transit

Sell transit by selling economic development, in addition to environmental, health, and equity benefits.

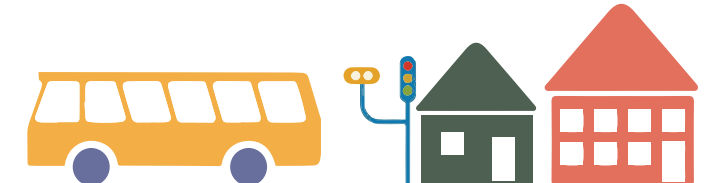
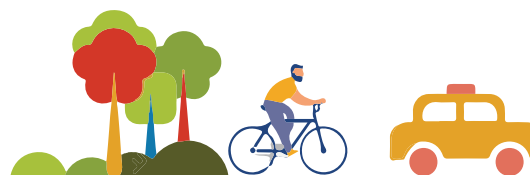
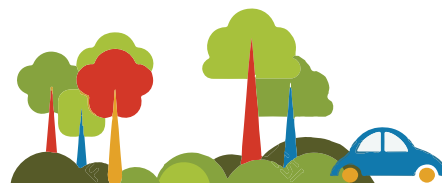
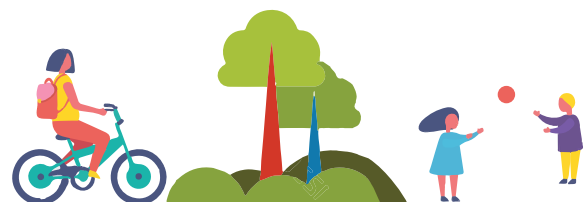
Measuring the success of our transit system should rely less on metrics and more on qualitative user impacts.

Even small improvements, such as dedicated bus lanes, can improve the rider experience.

Those who are transit-dependent must be included in decision-making due to the insights they can share regarding the rider experience.

We must think of transit in a holistic way – beyond light rail to bus rapid transit (BRT), shared mobility, and shared-use paths (feeder modes), and beyond major transit corridors to areas where transit has historically been unavailable/inaccessible.

Transit investments would increase our region's climate change resiliency, reduce greenhouse gas emissions, and improve environmental conditions for residents through air pollution reduction. Equitably improving transit advances environmental justice.



Coalition Building



Thinking up potential solutions to the challenges identified by the delegation is only a first step. Arriving at shared conclusions about “what” needs to happen to affect change is relatively easy. As several delegates expressed during their meetings, many solutions are well known, but enacting them comes down to coalescing the “who” and the “how” around the “what.”

Reflecting on the conference, the delegation found that the region would benefit from increased collaboration and approaching our regional challenges from a more holistic view that looked at the intersectionality of equity, transportation, housing, health, economics, and other fields.

One way to begin thinking about collaboration is exploring the idea of building a coalition. Examples of coalition building in other parts of the country at the conference demonstrated how this type of collaborative effort can benefit communities. Building off of the insights learned from the conference, the delegation explored the idea of coalition building further in the post-conference delegation meeting.

What does a coalition do?

Convenes cross-sectional stakeholders and decision-makers across the region with backgrounds in housing, transit, development, business, community organizations, philanthropy, advocacy, education, and government.

Advocates for policy changes and/or specific projects that advance the focused goals of coalition members.

Why would a coalition be beneficial?

Allows for advocacy that takes an intersectional approach which recognizes the benefits of transit investments in our community beyond transportation.

Provides a platform for a unified voice that, with a large backing of coalition members, is stronger than the individual voices of different organizations.

Identifies common goals for regional transit outcomes and creates space for collaboration/collective action toward those goals.

Advocates to elected officials (local/state/federal), the public, media, and others for funding transit and supporting policy and projects that improve the transit system.





How does a coalition fit into the existing transit advocacy landscape?

Coalitions leverage and amplify the energy of existing transportation advocacy organizations and other community organizations through funding and collaboration with other stakeholders, including private and public sector actors.

What do coalitions look like elsewhere?

Coalitions can take different organizational forms and tackle different objectives of varying size and scope. The following coalitions from Maryland, California, Pennsylvania, and Tennessee demonstrate how coalitions work in other communities in the U.S. Although none of these coalitions would translate to Buffalo Niagara’s needs exactly, elements of each might be helpful in understanding how a coalition might look in this region.

Before delegates discussed how a coalition might work in WNY, they were presented with these examples as a way to illustrate different organizational structures, focus areas, and outcomes. These example coalitions cover a range of focuses, including advocating for funding, policy changes, equitable transit oriented development, or education around transit. But, these examples are only a small sampling of what coalitions can do and how they operate, so a coalition in WNY may take a different approach from any of these four.

	 Purple Line Corridor Coalition	 Move LA	 GoBurgh	 Connect Mid-TN
LOCATION	Bethesda, MD - New Carrollton, MD	Los Angeles, CA	Pittsburgh, PA	Nashville, TN
PURPOSE/FOCUS	Direct investment surrounding the Purple Line light rail in an equitable way, promoting transit access, housing choice, job access, and sustainable/vibrant communities	Advocate for public transportation investments in Los Angeles through new funding streams	Increase local and state funding for transit infrastructure in Pittsburgh	Build support for funding transit in Middle Tennessee
STRUCTURE	Led and administered by the University of Maryland’s National Center for Smart Growth, advised by a Steering Committee with working groups which meet regularly to advance specific goals of workforce, business, housing, and community development	Led by a small, dedicated staff and a leadership board composed of activists, businesses, business organizations, labor organizations, former elected officials, and nonprofit organizations	An initiative of the Pittsburgh Community Reinvestment Group’s Regional Policy program	Transit Alliance of Middle Tennessee manages the grant for Connect Mid-TN
FUNDING	Sponsored by a number of organizations, including Enterprise (a national housing nonprofit) and the Maryland Department of Housing and Community Development	Sponsored by a number of labor organizations, foundations, and private businesses, as well as individuals	Funded by tiered annual membership dues for Pittsburgh Community Reinvestment Group and donations	Connect Mid-TN is supported by a grant, but TAMT is sponsored by a number of businesses, business organizations, municipalities, foundations, educational institutions, and banks
LESSONS LEARNED	Transit investments must go hand-in-hand with investments in equitable, livable communities	A coalition with strong leadership and broad backing can convince elected officials at the local and state levels to support long-term funding for transit	Transit systems operations are just as important as major capital projects, and are in need of funding as well	Through education, everyday citizens and elected officials alike can become effective advocates for transit

Ongoing Advocacy in WNY

During delegation meetings, delegation members recognized the challenges and potential solutions they identified are already well known among those who work in transportation and livability in WNY. Transit- and transportation-related advocacy efforts in Buffalo Niagara are already underway, fueled by passionate citizens and organizations who aim to make our region more equitable, including the organizations listed below. Delegates emphasized the importance of the work already happening to improve quality of life for residents through the efforts of non-profit organizations, community groups, individuals, and coalitions. New efforts for regional coalition building must first recognize how they fit within the existing landscape, ensuring it is either lifting up and supporting these organizations, or filling a need not met by existing efforts. The following organizations are some of the region's major players in transportation and livability advocacy.



Buffalo Transit Riders United

Buffalo Transit Riders United (BTRU) has been advocating for a more efficient, equitable, and responsive public transit system in the greater Buffalo area since 2016. Currently, BTRU is campaigning for the appointment of transit- and paratransit-dependent representatives as voting members of the board of the NFTA.



Citizens for Regional Transit

Citizens for Regional Transit (CRT) is an all-volunteer, non-profit, grassroots organization educating the public, public officials, their authorities, and agencies about the social, economic, health, and environmental benefits of a comprehensive multimodal mobility system in the Buffalo Niagara Region centered on green, equitable public transportation, including an expanded Metro Rail. CRT advocates for developing new, sustainable funding sources for public transportation, and for mobility and connectivity alternatives that reduce overall vehicle-miles travelled.



Colored Girls Bike Too

CGBT is a radical cycling organization that centers on mobility liberation by way of advocating for mobility justice in marginalized communities and promotes the healing and empowerment of Black women, Black gender non-binary folks, and other sis and sibs of color, by bike.



Fair Fines and Fees Coalition

The Fair Fines and Fees Coalition brings together advocates, researchers, government actors, and communities directly affected by disparate ticketing to eliminate fees in our justice system, to ensure fines are fairly imposed and enforced, and to end exploitative traffic enforcement practices in the City of Buffalo.



GObike Buffalo

Founded in 2010, GObike Buffalo advocates for Complete Streets, trails, and greenways in Western New York. GObike also promotes installations of pedestrian and cyclist infrastructure, traffic safety education, and planning efforts. Recent projects include the Niagara Falls Bicycle Master Plan, the Grant Street Streetscape Design Study, the Southern Tier Trail Feasibility Study, and a pop-up protected bicycle lane in Lackawanna.



Planning for Mobility Justice

Key stakeholders in transportation and equity have come together to address systemic inequities that have led to limited mobility for low-income communities of color on the East Side of Buffalo and were exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic. The Western New York COVID-19 Community Response Fund provided grant funding for this project as part of its Moving Forward Together initiative.



Restore Our Community Coalition

The Restore Our Community Coalition (ROCC) was founded in 2007 to advocate for the restoration of Humboldt Parkway, which was largely demolished to make way for the Kensington Expressway in the 1960s, leading to blight and increased rates of respiratory illness in the Hamlin Park and Martin Luther King Park neighborhoods. In late 2019, the New York State Department of Transportation presented concepts for redesigning the Kensington Expressway to address community concerns, but a redesign project has yet to be funded.



Scajaquada Corridor Coalition

The Scajaquada Corridor Coalition advocates for the redesign of the Scajaquada Expressway to increase pedestrian access to Delaware Park, improve traffic safety, and enhance quality of life along the corridor. After several attempted planning processes for the redesign led by the New York State Department of Transportation, Governor Andrew Cuomo announced in late 2019 that the Greater Buffalo Niagara Regional Transportation Council will be leading the effort.



Shared Mobility, Inc.

Shared Mobility, Inc. (SMI) is a nonprofit that works to research, develop, and deploy bikeshare, carshare, and volunteer transportation systems in disadvantaged communities nationwide. In 2009, SMI founded Buffalo CarShare, the first shared mobility program in the nation that focused on low-income communities. More recently, SMI is working with the Volunteer Transportation Center to improve mobility for older adults and people with disabilities in Western New York.

Coalition Building in WNY

Overwhelmingly, the delegates who participated in the conversation about coalition building expressed support for the idea. However, this support also came with reservations about the logistics of forming a new coalition, including questions about leadership, relationships with other organizations, accountability, and focus. Delegates also felt that a new coalition must be action-oriented and not result in a group that has the same familiar conversations without progress.

Support Ongoing Work

Any new coalition forming around transportation and transit must recognize past and ongoing work and lift it up, not overshadow it. Though delegates were generally open to the idea of a new coalition forming around transit or livable communities, there were concerns that another new organization might siphon resources, funding, attention, and human capital away from existing efforts. If a new organization were to form, a primary guiding principle should be to uplift and support the people already working in the community without superseding them. Delegates suggested that a coalition could support existing organizations by finding new funding sources to support initiatives in need of resources.

Take Action

Delegates expressed the need for a coalition to have the ability to make decisions, take action, and get results. Often, groups come together with common goals, a shared vision, and ideas for solutions, but they lack any authority to make those solutions a reality. Some delegates noted that the region does not necessarily need another organization without decision-making power; a coalition must have the capacity to make decisions. How a coalition acquires this authority is unclear, but possible avenues might include bringing elected officials into the coalition, or developing a community benefit agreement signed by local authorities involved in the coalition's efforts.

Represent the Community

Organizational leadership in a coalition should be representative of the community for whom they are advocating. Delegates feel that a coalition needs to work with people on the ground as well as those who hold decision-making power, to serve as a conduit between the community and governance. To convert community needs into action, coalitions can be a tool to demonstrate public support for specific projects or policies and get elected officials on board.

Go Beyond Transit

While a coalition may initially form around a specific project or policy, its vision and goals should extend beyond transit to encompass mobility, equity, and other factors affecting the livability of the region's communities. Delegation members recognize the connections between these and other issues, so collaboration should not be hindered by a narrow thematic focus.

Find a Catalyst

Coalitions are most successful when they form around the energy behind a specific project, program, or policy change. This initial focus could come in the form of a geographic focus, either along a corridor, such as Bailey Avenue, or in a specific area of the region, such as neighborhoods on the East Side of Buffalo. A coalition could also form around a large infrastructure project, such as a light rail extension, or a pilot project. Whatever it may be, a catalyst is necessary to energize collaboration into action.

What could a coalition do in WNY?

Coalitions can be much more beneficial to a region than a scattershot approach to transit advocacy. The strong, unified voice of a coalition advocates for a common goal identified by the members of the coalition, which could be advancing a project, changing policy, or securing funding for transit investments.

Support a Specific Project

A coalition might decide to focus on advancing a specific project. As an example, a coalition might support efforts like Bus Rapid Transit along Bailey Avenue.

The coalition could include business owners, residents, community organizations, and property owners who could advocate for the project, support a shared vision for infrastructure implementation, and collaborate with the City of Buffalo to ensure the community's voice is represented in decision-making for the project.

Advocate for Policy Change Across Municipal Boundaries

Municipalities may collaborate on equitable transit-oriented development and streetscape infrastructure policy along their borders.

Collaboration may also occur on a project-to-project basis. This could be especially powerful along the light rail expansion corridor, which touches several municipalities.

Alternatively, elected officials from neighboring municipalities could sign an agreement that outlines a shared vision and goals for a specific geographic location.

A coalition could advocate for and support policies at the state or federal level as well, such as NYS climate legislation or federal transportation policy.

Create Strategic Funding Collaborations

A coalition may include representation of the region's existing nonprofits through board membership, committee participation, or other collaboration. One action a coalition could take is to collaboratively seek funding to meet the mutual needs of these organizations.



Limitations of the Process

Participation from delegates varied throughout the process. While initial interest was strong for the first meeting, fewer delegates were able to attend the second and third meetings, and not all delegates were able to attend the conference itself. Though the insights gleaned from the conference and the discussion in the final meeting are meaningful and important, they came from a much smaller group than the one at the start of the process.

Next Steps

The 2020 RailVolution Conference delegation process for Western New York brought together passionate individuals from across the region to think about transportation and its connection to livable communities. Together, they identified a shared vision, common challenges, and potential solutions to those challenges. After attending the conference, the group shared what they learned, and brainstormed ways in which the region might consider coalition building as a way to support the work already being done. In a year of unprecedented challenges, individuals and organizations in the realm of advocacy and supportive services are critically examining funding sources, collaboration, structural organization, and an uncertain future. While immediate, pandemic-related needs may take precedence, the delegation still showed a willingness to continue the discussion about collaboration.

In the coming year, delegates may continue this discussion through the following five action steps. Though each action is given a rough time frame, some may occur simultaneously.

1

Decide the Coalition's Focus | Months 1 & 2

A coalition cannot singlehandedly solve all the challenges identified by delegates. Though the coalition may be driven by a broader purpose of improving livability, equity, and mobility throughout the region, it must find a focus to hone its objectives and actions aimed at meeting the needs identified by the delegation. Using the delegation as a starting point, the coalition should seek to gather new individuals and organizations to either collectively determine priorities moving forward or organize around a galvanizing policy change or project. In determining the focus, organizers may also consider a coalition that brings together existing coalitions with related goals.

2

Activate Transportation Champions | Months 1 & 2

“Champions” may be elected officials or other local leaders who have authority to make or influence decisions, change policy, acquire funding, and garner community support. Within Western New York, leaders are already working within their respective spheres to move projects forward that will help build back after COVID-19, improve resiliency in the face of climate change, and advance regional equity. Champions may be members of the coalition, or work separately but collaboratively to elevate the coalition's mission using their platform.

3

Outline the Structure of the Coalition | Months 2-3

Once the coalition defines its focus, members should answer the following questions:

- What is the governing structure?
- Who participates in the governing structure?
- Where does the funding come from?
- What is the legal status of the coalition?
- Are there committees? If so, for what purpose?
- Is there a general membership for the public, or is the coalition only for organizations?
- What authority will the coalition have? How can the coalition make sure it has the capacity to affect change?

4

Garner Community Support | Months 3-9

Community support could make or break the coalition's efforts, so the coalition will need to make sure the community is engaged, heard, and supported by elected officials and decision makers. The coalition should develop and fund an outreach and marketing plan to achieve its goals.

5

Bring Additional Leader Focus | Months 9-12

After members come together, an explicit purpose is established, and the logistics and structure of the coalition are created, strong relationships must be built between the coalition and local, state, and federal elected officials and other community leaders, depending on the geographic focus of the coalition. Upon better understanding community priorities, the coalition can push those priorities further up the ladder of decision-makers.



