

# GBNRTC

Newsletter for the GREATER *BUFFALO-NIAGARA* REGIONAL TRANSPORTATION COUNCIL  
Metropolitan Planning Organization For Erie and Niagara Counties

## GBNRTC works with NFTA on enhanced transit

**T**he GBNRTC is collaborating with the Niagara Frontier Transportation Authority (NFTA) and Transportation Management & Design, Inc. (TMD) in developing a strategy for providing and financing public transit that will meet “the varied and evolving mobility needs of the region.”

TMD, which is under contract with NFTA to conduct the Erie County Transit Service and Fare Study and is based in San Diego, produced the work plan for generating immediate, short-term (3-year) and long-term (12 years) enhancement strategies.

GBNRTC Executive Director Hal Morse and GBNRTC staffers Amy Weymouth and Mathew Grabau are actively involved in work on the strategy. And the GBNRTC travel demand model will be used to “identify major work and non-work travel patterns within the NFTA service area and relevant surrounding areas using GIS (Geographic Information System) analysis.”

Robert Gower, manager of planning for NFTA’s bus and rail service, in a presentation to GBNRTC’s Plan-

ning and Coordinating Committee (PCC), said the study recommendations would “answer how we can best serve our current ridership and future riderships within our financial and operational constraints”

He noted that after years of declining ridership there has been over the past five years a ridership increase. The study would also analyze the implications for transit of the shift of population and employment from city to suburbs.

“We need to update our system to reflect those changes,” he said, as well as an economic shift that increasingly focuses on higher education, medical research and tourism. He noted that numerous meetings are being held with stakeholders and citizen groups to get their input on the plan.

“Our goal as always is to enhance public mobility while improving our performance and sustainability and provide a platform for growth that will encourage continued public investment in transit.” An expansion, in the long term, of light-rail service will be among the considerations, Gower noted.

A final transit service plan is expected by the end of 2009. “Our approach,” according to the TMD, “is to work collaboratively with NFTA and GBNRTC to develop a competitive and responsive transit system and fare structure plan through comprehensive analysis, facilitated brainstorming and inclusive participation by both external and internal stakeholders.”

Key issues, as outlined by TMD, include:

- “NFTA serves a population of 1.2 million” with 950,000 residing in Erie County, “where approximately 90 percent of NFTA service is provided.” Buffalo has “the necessary population density to support enhanced transit services” with a higher density than St. Louis, Cleve-

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land, Seattle and Portland.” (Gower noted that a study of service in Niagara County was “undertaken a couple years ago and we implemented some restructuring of our service there.” He added that although the new study would focus on Erie County it would “include all our service” in both counties.)

- “The local economy is transitioning by refocusing on education, medical research, and tourism. Expansion of the State University of New York campuses, as well as, large investment in Buffalo Niagara Medical Campus and New York State Center of Excellence in Bioinformatics and Life Sciences are evidence of the economic growth potential for the area to support needed mobility enhancement.”

- “The State of New York provides 40 percent of NFTA operating revenue. Recent budget cuts have been announced and other tax-based NFTA revenue is also likely to be reduced. At the same time, NFTA is undertaking major bus replacement and rail-car renewal projects.”

- “Transit service in Erie County serves major radial arterials oriented toward downtown Buffalo. A number of these dense corridors may support new transit enhancements such as Rapid Bus, BRT (Bus Rapid Transit) or even rail extensions, especially with new Smart Growth initiatives.”

- “In recent decades, significant employment has moved to the suburbs, while the region’s transit-dependent riders remain concentrated in the urban core. This results in a ‘spatial mismatch,’ to which NFTA has responded through adjusting/extending service, new Metrolink suburban circulators, and six new suburban transit centers for transfers. Additional network reorientation will be possible with the comprehensive sys-



tem restructuring as successfully demonstrated by such disparate transit systems as Cincinnati, Cleveland and Minneapolis.”

- “NFTA Metro has experienced increasing ridership in the past five years. The likelihood of long-term higher fuel prices together with environmental issues will present an improved market for transit in Greater Buffalo Niagara Region.”

A key part of the strategy, according to the work plan, would be to identify opportunities to simplify the system and make investments where transit can be most successful for each market segment so that it gets “maximum benefit from its resources in meeting current and future needs by building in efficiency, rather than addressing it only in implementation.”

The project manager is Joseph Forgiarini, a senior manager with TMD, assisted by other TMD staffers. Russell Chisolm, President of TMD will also play a significant role in the study. Others on the “Team structure” include Scott Baker and Rick Laver of AECOM Transporta-

tion of Fort Worth, Texas, who bring “extensive transit finance experience,” and Eve Berry of SigniCor LLC at Buffalo, who will lead the community and stakeholder participation program.

TMD “is prepared for each key team member to spend up to a week in the field with time split between riding (being the ‘customer’), trailing NFTA vehicles (bus, rail) and driving the routes and service area.”

Transit competitiveness, such as travel times, with other modes, including private vehicles, will be studied “to determine what factors must be addressed to attract additional discretionary market segments to transit.”

Further information is available at the project web site, which can be accessed through a link from NFTA’s website, [nfta.com](http://nfta.com).

# Transit ridership in 2008 set a modern record

**Public transit ridership in Erie and Niagara Counties** increased by 10.5 percent during 2008. At the national level the increase was 4 percent to set a modern record of 10.7 billion trips, “the highest level of ridership in 52 years,” according to the American Public Transportation Association (APTA).

“Even as gas prices fell for the second half of the year and hundreds of thousands of people lost jobs (almost 60 percent of transit riders go to work), more and more people chose to ride public transportation throughout the country,” according to President William Millar of the APTA.

“For the second year in a row, ridership on all modes of public transportation increased during every quarter of 2008,” added Millar. The biggest increase was in light-rail ridership (“modern streetcars, trolleys and heritage trolleys”), up by 8.3 percent at the national level.

But the comparable figure for the Niagara Frontier Transportation Authority (NFTA) Metro Rail was 23.9 percent, the highest increase for light rail in the nation except for dramatic increases for a new system in Charlotte, North Carolina, and a recovery from Hurricane Katrina for the one in New Orleans.

Bus service nationally showed a ridership increase of 3.9 percent. Again, the NFTA did better, with a 6.75 percent increase.

Paratransit ridership for Erie and Niagara Counties was up by 17.58 percent for 2008 over 2007, compared with 5.9 percent for the nation as a whole.

For the final quarter of 2008 (October, November, December) the regional ridership increases were: Metro rail, 30.96 percent; buses, 7.66 percent; paratransit, 17.3 percent — for a total percentage increase of 12.49 percent.

The average weekday total ridership for the region in 2008 was 105,700, including 78,000 on buses, 26,300 on light rail, and 500 on paratransit. On a yearly basis the total ridership, at 28.3 million, comprised 21.3 million on buses, 6.8 million on light rail, and 129,000 on paratransit.

According to the U.S. Department of Transportation (USDOT), vehicle miles traveled (VMT) on the nation’s roads declined by 3.6 percent in 2008. And that decline continued in January of 2009, with 7 billion fewer vehicle miles traveled, or 3.1 percent less, compared to the same month in 2008. It’s the first ‘back-to-back decline for January since 1981-1982, according to the USDOT.

Millar called upon federal, state and local governments to “increase their investment in public transportation.”

“Currently, transit systems are facing fare increases, service reductions and layoffs – at a time of record ridership – because of declining state and local revenues,” he said.

The NFTA eliminated trips with low ridership early this year and increased the base adult fare by 25 cents, but deferred action on a second 25-cent increase that had been proposed to take effect in July. Federal stimulus plans helped to defray some costs.

The leveling of fuel prices helped to reduce transit operation costs but generated fears that it might also contribute to a ridership decline in 2009. However, the long-term forecast is for rising fuel prices due to growing world demand and production costs.

# Amherst takes initiative on 'livability'

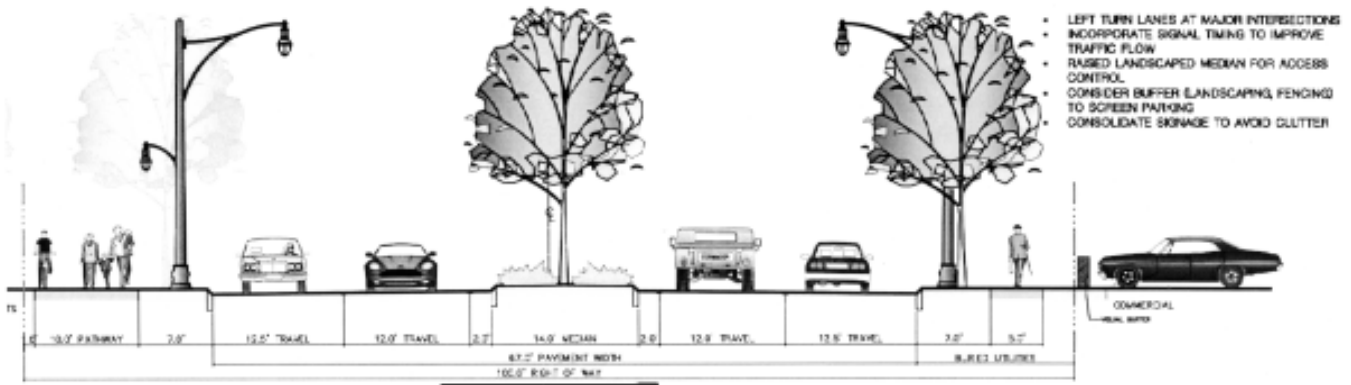


Diagram shows model cross section of a "traditional village" corridor from Amherst Study.

The Town of Amherst has undertaken an initiative on Context Sensitive Design (CSD) on transportation projects that reflects a growing awareness of "livability" issues at the federal, state and regional levels.

The Amherst plan, as described in a study by Wendel Duchscherer consultants, outlines design guidance for representative roadways that will "fit the context of the surrounding neighborhoods."

Joelle Guy, an assistant planner with the town, said, "A key concept that emerged during development of the Amherst Bicentennial Comprehensive Plan was the importance of maintaining the town's diverse physical environment – distinct urban, suburban and rural areas."

The CSD plan recommends, for example, improved corridor aesthetics, such as trees, decorative lighting and harmonious parking patterns, where appropriate, as well as facilitation of alternative forms of transportation, such as walking and bicycling. Guy said it "attempts to move beyond a one-size fits all design."

It resonates with a statement by U.S. Secretary of Transportation Ray LaHood, at his Senate confirmation hearing, that transportation programs must include a focus on "livability — investing in a way that recognizes the unique character of each community" while also "adjusting our course where progress is not rapid enough."

The U.S. Department of Transportation (USDOT) and the New York State Department of Transportation (NYSDOT) in recent years have supported Context Sensitive Solutions (CSS) as "a marked transformation occurring within the industry."

Executive Director Hal Morse of GBNRTC has emphasized the need to relate transportation projects to land use, municipal master plans, and accommodation of transit, biking and walking, along with motor-vehicle facilitation. The agency's Long-Range Plan emphasizes "context-sensitive design principles" for reconstruction and rehabilitation of roadways.

An example of the adjustment to the CSS thinking was the award-winning design modifications that NYSDOT's regional officials made to a Delaware Avenue project several years ago to harmonize with the historic, cultural and scenic setting symbolized by Delaware Park.

Another was the alternative design that NYSDOT

adopted for Route 18F, the Lower River Road in the Towns of Lewiston and Porter to harmonize with the scenic and historic setting.

Traditional transportation planning had often focused almost exclusively on the technical problems involved in facilitating the movement of motor vehicles, sometimes overlooking the impacts on surrounding communities. .

It was a grievance echoed in metropolitan areas across the nation. It's one of the reasons that Congress in 1973 had enacted a Transportation Act that would require every metropolitan region of more than 50,000 population to have a Metropolitan Planning Organization, such as GBNRTC, to get more local input and coordination on transportation projects.

However, Amherst appears to be the first town in Western New York, and possibly in the state, to develop a detailed municipal plan for Context Sensitive Design. The study was financed through a federally funded state Quality Communities Grant of \$35,000 matched by \$8,750 in local funds.

Guy noted that it identifies and studies four types of "character corridors" –traditional, suburban, commercial and rural" and gives the town "a template and a process for integrating context-sensitive design in future highway projects..."

The goals include not only "efficient and effective use of resources" with "minimal disruption to the community," but also project "harmony with the community" in preserving "environmental, scenic, aesthetic, historic and natural resource values of the area."

The project was guided by a Technical Project Advisory Committee, comprising ten members, including Morse, representing the GBNRTC.

Mark Mistretta of Wendel Duchscherer declared, "Amherst is being pro-active in getting ahead of a project by setting the tone desirable for that kind of neighborhood before final decisions are made."

For example a context-sensitive design for a "traditional village" corridor, such as Main Street in the Williamsville business district, might include a raised landscaped median, enhanced signal timing to improve traffic flow, and improved pedestrian accommodations, with "bulb outs" of curbs at intersections

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# *Economy cuts into cross-border traffic*



**C**ross-border traffic at crossings between Ontario and the U.S. dropped by 6.85 percent during 2008 and by another 13.52 percent in the first five months of 2009. Truck traffic declined by 9.16 percent and passenger cars by 6.23 percent during 2008. Both were down by another 25.67 percent and 10.15 percent from January through May in 2009, compared with the same period in 2008.

The Ambassador Bridge at Detroit, which has the most traffic, also had the biggest overall decline, at 19.08 percent in 2008 and another 18.85 percent in January to May in 2009. That included a 15 percent decline in truck traffic for 2008 and another 30.8 percent in early 2009.

Among the Niagara River crossings, the Lewiston-Queenston Bridge had the biggest decline in traffic, at 7.834 percent, including a drop of 11.62 percent in trucks and 6.68 percent in cars in 2008. The decline was 14.52 percent in January through May of 2009 with a 21.94 percent drop in trucks and 12.11 percent in cars.

The Peace Bridge, which is second only to the Ambassador Bridge in total traffic volume, had a dip of 4.28 percent, down 1.88 percent in trucks and 4.91 percent in cars for all of 2008, which accelerated to 8.02 percent in January-May of this year, a 17.53 percent drop in truck traffic and 5.23 in cars.

For all the crossings, between Ontario and New York State and Michigan, the 2008 figures represent the lowest yearly level of traffic at least since 1999, the earliest date for which statistics for both states are available in the GBNRTC records. It represents the largest yearly percentage drop since 2003, when a traffic decline of 7.47 percent was recorded, largely because of an 8.78 percent dip for passenger cars that year.

For the Niagara River bridge crossings, including the Rainbow and Whirlpool Rapids Bridges, it is the lowest yearly level in overall traffic recorded since 1985, the lowest for passenger cars since 1979 and for trucks since 1994.

The sharpest drops in traffic, for both Michigan and New York crossings, were in the last four months of 2008, with percentage drops of 8.69, 11.31, 15.43 and 10.98 for September, October, November and December, and in the first three months of 2009, with traffic drops of 16.20, 12.43, 9.97, 10.79 and 17.98 for January, February, March, April and May compared with the same months in 2008.

Peter Lombardi, a policy analyst with the Regional Institute at the University at Buffalo, blamed the relatively sharp drop in 2008 cross-border traffic on the recession, with cutbacks in the automobile industry having a profound effect on both sides of the border, especially in Michigan, but also in the Buffalo-Niagara region.

Ron Rienas, manager of the Peace (Buffalo & Fort Erie) Bridge Authority, said, "We have more diversity in freight shipments and don't feel the impact of auto-industry cutbacks as much as the Ambassador Bridge."

Lombardi said that the decline in value of the Canadian dollar has probably reduced Canadian interest in shopping in the States and the opening of casinos in both the Niagara and Detroit regions has diverted some traffic from casinos in Ontario.

He also suggested that security issues, such as documentary requirements, may pose what some see as "complications" that diminish their interest in crossing the border.

Stan Korosec, a Canadian who is president of the Public Border Operators Association, and a vice-president at the Blue Water Bridge, declared that the auto industry affects about 25 percent of the international commercial traffic in Michigan and "it's higher than that – perhaps 40 to 50 percent for the Ambassador Bridge."

The only cross-border bridges that showed increases in traffic during 2008 were the Whirlpool Rapids Bridge at

Niagara Falls, with a 14.33 per cent rise in traffic during 2008, and the Ogdensburg Bridge, in St. Lawrence County, which had an increase of .36 percent during 2008. Both carry relatively small volumes of traffic. And although the Whirlpool span showed another 7.02 percent increase from January to May this year, the Ogdensburg traffic declined by 13.32 percent during the same period

The Whirlpool Bridge, which had a traffic increase of 32 percent in 2007, is limited to passenger cars whose drivers have Nexus cards, an increasingly popular documentation, especially among drivers who cross the border with regularity. Traffic volume at the Whirlpool Bridge was 297,464 cars in 2008. That compared with 3,671,787 vehicles, including 789,740 trucks, at the Lewiston-Queenston Bridge and 6,351,814, including 1,285,538 trucks, at the Peace Bridge.

Brent Gallauger, a spokesman for the Niagara Falls Bridge Commission, said the Nexus system at the Whirlpool Bridge offers “a great advantage” for passenger cars.

The Rainbow Bridge at Niagara Falls, also largely confined to passenger cars, carried 3,130,344 vehicles in 2008, a decline of 3.61 percent.

Passage of the trade agreement with Canada resulted in a growth of 9.7 percent per year in Niagara River crossings between 1987 and 1990, with 1990 showing the greatest one-year growth at 12 percent. After that passenger-car volume tended to decline, although the growth in truck traffic continued for another decade.



# An interstate system of bike routes proposed

A corridor-level plan for a 50,000-mile Interstate system of bicycle routes, which would be the largest in the world, has been approved by the American Association of State Highway and Transportation Officials (AASHTO) in collaboration with bicycle groups and federal, as well as state officials.

“I am supportive of AASHTO’s efforts to establish a coordinated system of Interstate bicycle routes,” declared Eric Ophardt, head of the Bicycle and Pedestrian Section of the New York State Department of Transportation. “The concept is great.”

However, Ophardt said the state was still “short on specifics,” such as funding. He noted, however, that a proposed Bicycle Route 30 on the corridors map “appears to follow the route of our State Bicycle Route 5, across the state to the Buffalo area, before turning south along the Lake Erie shoreline toward Cleveland.”

He added that Bicycle Route 3 on the map appears to coincide with “our State Bicycle Route 9,” between New York City and the Canadian border. “Our other state bicycle routes appear to be shown as local or regional routes.”

Virginia Sullivan of the Adventure Cycling Association (ACA), which has worked with an AASHTO Task Force for four years to develop a framework and guidelines, has acknowledged, “We know this route network will not materialize overnight.

“But then neither did the Interstate Highway System. We’re just thrilled to see the high level of interest. We have seen tremendous interest from states that want to make bicycling a much more prominent part of their transportation and tourism portfolios.”

The corridors outlined on the map are 50 miles wide, leaving the selection of specific paths, roadways and highways to individual states, which would be guided by input from local communities and bicycle groups.

John Horsley, executive director of AASHTO, noted, “Bicycling is an increasingly popular transportation option that helps our environment and improves the quality of life for many Americans.”

A primary consideration in choosing the corridors was not only to link major metropolitan areas but to access “destinations with high tourism potential, including routes that incorporate important scenic, historic, cultural and recreational values” and to make “natural connections between adjoining states” as well as Canada and Mexico.

The system could “include major existing and planned bike routes, including both on-road facilities and off-road shared use paths and trails that are suitable for road bikes.”

“The organizations that will be ultimately responsible for criteria are the states themselves,” said Sullivan. “Once they have chosen a route and feel it meets their requirements then they map it, document it turn-by-turn and fill out an AASHTO application which is available on-line.

“Presently, the states are required to adhere substantially to the ‘Guide for the Development of Bicycle Facilities.’ The guide pertains to the development of new facilities and doesn’t address the suitability of existing roads with low traffic volume and existing suitable shoulder widths, which is what the U.S. Bicycle Routes will mainly consist of. The Task Force is presently working on how to address this for states and AASHTO.

# United States Bicycle Route System

Corridor Plan - February 2009

Association of State Highway and Transportation Officials  
Adventure Cycling Association  
[www.adventurecycling.org/usbrs](http://www.adventurecycling.org/usbrs)



\*Alaska and Hawaii's corridors have not been assigned numbers yet.



The proposed “Interstate” Bicycle Route System deliberately uses a numbering system reversed from the Interstate Highways System

“Since this is an ‘interstate’ system, the state must submit the application jointly with the state that the route runs into or, if the neighboring state already has a U.S. Bicycle Route (USBR), make sure the routes align.

“One of the items the Task Force is working on is private/public partnerships that would aid the process. States could use cycling advocates to help them purchase, place or even report on maintenance of the signs. This has worked well in Virginia.”

A TransAmerica Route for bicyclists, USBR 76, runs from Yorktown in Virginia to Astoria in Oregon. Virginia, Michigan and Florida are cited as states that are “moving forward” on the Interstate plan. “Numerous other states have also shown an increasing interest in creating routes that link urban, suburban and rural destinations,” according to the ACA.

The initial concept of a transcontinental bicycle routes system dates back to the 1970s. It has been influenced by an “Adventure Cycling Route Network” of 38,158 miles which began developing

in 1976 by ACA, a premier bicycling group with more than 44,000 members.

A national bicycle system, according to the ACA, would also follow “the pattern of many other countries and regions that are establishing bicycle networks for transportation, recreation and tourism.” A 36,000-mile Euro-Velo network is being constructed across Europe. The United Kingdom has a 12,000-mile National Cycle Network and Germany, Denmark and Switzerland also have “major networks.”

The province of Quebec in Canada has completed a 2,700-mile “Route Verte,” or “Green Route,” that includes urban trails as well as cycling routes in remote areas in the north, and along the St. Lawrence River. It goes to the oldest village in Canada and to “one of the best places to spot whales and playful seals.”

According to the ACA, “Research has shown that well-designed cycling networks generate major increases in non-motorized trips. In the United Kingdom, for example, the national network triggered growth in these trips from 85.5 million in 2000 to 338 million in 2006. Simi-

lar gains are being seen in Quebec, which is also using the network to promote province-wide economic development and tourism.”

According to a survey by the League of American Bicyclists, the state of Washington ranks as the most bicycle-friendly state, followed by Wisconsin, Arizona, Oregon and Minnesota. West Virginia is at the bottom of the list, along with Georgia, Alabama, Mississippi and North Dakota.

New York ranks 34th out of the 50 states. It “has a signed and mapped route network, but no accommodation or complete streets policy and slow progress on safe routes to school.”

However, New York City is cited as “the most populous bicycle friendly community and stands as an example of what can be done with good planning, strong advocates and forward-thinking political leadership.”

More information on the corridor level plan of the U.S. Bicycle Route System is available at [www.adventurecycling.org/usbrs](http://www.adventurecycling.org/usbrs).



**GREATER BUFFALO-NIAGARA  
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## **Meeting Calendar**

### **Planning and Coordinating Committee (PCC)**

*meetings begin at 9:30 A.M.*

**August 5    Niagara Falls**  
Carnegie Building  
1022 Main Street  
Niagara Falls, New York

**September 2    Buffalo**  
City Hall  
Buffalo, New York

**October 7    New York State Thruway Authority**  
455 Cayuga Road  
Cheektowaga, New York

### **Policy Committee**

**July 28**  
meeting begins at 9:00 A.M.

**Main Court Building**  
438 Main Street  
Sixth Floor Conference Room  
Buffalo, New York

*Meeting dates and times are subject to change:  
please call (716) 856-2026 for confirmation.*

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## **Greater Buffalo-Niagara Regional Transportation Council**

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