

GBNRTC

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



A Long-Range Plan for the region being finalized

The GBNRTC's Long-Range Transportation Plan 2030 is scheduled to be finalized by this summer.

The GBNRTC's Douglas Struckle, who is supervising development of the plan with the assistance of Amy Weymouth, said that a draft version will be presented at public hearings in Erie and Niagara Counties this spring. A final version will be submitted for approval by the political and transportation leadership of Erie and Niagara Counties as represented on GBNRTC's Policy Committee.

Basics of the plan were outlined at public forums earlier this year in Buffalo, Niagara Falls, Williamsville and Lockport. Colorful posters illustrated goals and objectives, demographic projections, regional centers and corridors, etc.

Typical concerns expressed at the Buffalo forum included:

"More attention is needed to the aging Baby Boomer generation" to

"healthy paths for walking," to "diverse modes of travel," and to "minority communities."

In Williamsville, issues included traffic congestion on Main Street and at Transit-Wehrle and Central Avenue in Lancaster;

At Niagara Falls, concerns included "eco-tourism needs" and "protection of the natural landscape," status of the Robert Moses Parkway, along with "rehabilitation" in the downtown area.

In Lockport, typical issues included, again, status of the Robert Moses Parkway, drainage improvements on Lincoln Avenue, improvements in transit and Amtrak service and remediation of potholes.

In developing the plan, the GBNRTC analysts give consideration to the following "assumptions:"

- 1 – Diversity of household forms, lifestyles and changing nature of work.
- 2 – Decentralization of settle-

ment patterns and employment opportunities.

3 – Freight movement and globalization.

4 – Fuel supplies and costs.

5 – A growing elderly population.

6 – New technologies.

7 – Climate change.

8 – Changes in public policy.

"Goals and objectives" include not only improvement of the region's economic competitiveness but such

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The fabulous story of the Buffalo Skyway

UB expert stresses need for timely decisions

An assessment of trends, impacts in regional freight under way

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issues as “better inter-jurisdictional coordination of transportation and land-use planning,” reduction of energy consumption, a focus on areas “with existing infrastructure,” enhanced mobility for “all members of the community” and “effective alternatives to single occupant vehicle (SOV) travel.”

Some of the issues listed, especially an emphasis on safety, environment and land use, reflect in part “new perspectives” in the latest federal legislation, SAFETEA-LU (Safe, Accountable, Flexible and Efficient Transportation Act – a Legacy for Users).

The plan must harmonize also with the state’s Master Plan for 2030, the Regional Framework that’s evolving for Erie and Niagara Counties, and the Bi-National Strategy (New York State-Ontario) for cross-border traffic.

Projects under consideration for the regional plan include:

- Reconfiguration of the I-90/290 Interchange;
- Southtowns Corridor Redevelopment, improved access to Buffalo’s Outer Harbor;
- Improved public transit in corridor between Downtown Buffalo and Amherst (UB North Campus, Audubon, and Crosspoint); and LaSalle Light Rail Station to City of Tonawanda; other improvements to be implemented as needed;
- Area-wide signal upgrade and coordination;
- Niagara Falls infrastructure support for improved downtown access;
- Implementation of Bicycle-Pedestrian Master Plan;
- Scajaquada Corridor redevelopment (“to make it more contextually consistent” with Delaware Park).

The fabulous story of the Buffalo Skyway

On Oct. 19, 1955, Buffalo’s “Skyway” officially opened with a 40-car motorcade led by Mayor Steven Pankow, who described as “fabulous” what the press called a “\$12 million ribbon of steel and concrete soaring far above downtown highway congestion” that “heralds a new era for the city.”

Fifty-two years later the Skyway has become a controversial issue. Congressman Brian Higgins has been in the forefront recently of those who criticize it as a barrier to development of the city’s Waterfront. Higgins is sponsor of a “Skyways Alternatives” web site.

The Skyway has a long and complex history. It is a project first proposed in 1922 by Buffalo’s City Planning Committee. But there were long delays and indecision before Gov. Thomas Dewey finally gave the go-ahead for the start of construction in 1950. It was an era when New York State launched its Thruway system and freeways were touted, even in cities, as the way to galvanize the economy.

On that day in 1955, when the Skyway was opened, it was perceived as a vital artery for commuters and the waterfront industrial area to the south, which included Bethlehem Steel, Republic Steel and other employers that have since disappeared.

At the opening ceremony, the state’s public works superintendent, John W. Johnson, himself a Buffalonian, declared, “For many years we of Buffalo have dreamed, pondered and discussed the problem of constructing a suitable passage over the water courses at the Buffalo Harbor and the devious routes in this section of the city.

“This piece of work will relieve the whole area from traffic delays, enhance development, promote prosperity and open a new vista of beauty as magnificent as to be unforgettable.

“With further improvements proposed in all areas within the city, Buffalo can once again resume that appropriate title, Queen City of the Lakes.”

It’s a comment that may have reflected the increased Great Lakes shipping that was anticipated in many quarters for the Port of Buffalo as a result of opening of the St. Lawrence Seaway in the 1950s. However, that event actually resulted in a decline in shipping as well as in the city’s role as a railroad hub.

Another speaker, Dexter P. Rumsey, treasurer of the Buffalo Area Chamber of Commerce, described the “superb engineering feat” as the possible forerunner of ... the start of a new era — of civic progress in mass transportation.”

It was more than a decade later that Mayor Frank Sedita expressed misgivings about the city being turned into “an intersection” for freeways. The Skyway’s vulnerability to winter storms received growing attention, along with maintenance issues. In 1959, a press story reported that the bridge was aptly named because the sky could be seen through a hole in the road.

Planners now focus on tourism, resi-



This 1955 cartoon, reprinted by courtesy of the Buffalo News, dramatizes community support for Skyway at the time it opened.

dential growth, small business, warehousing and assembly plants associated with imports as more realistic goals than manufacturing for waterfront development. The Erie Canal Harbor project, for example, has been an embodiment of this goal and some felt that it was overshadowed by the Skyway.

On the other hand, supporters of the Skyway pointed to a continuing need for an efficient transportation corridor for commuters and commercial operations between downtown Buffalo and points to the South.

On the day the Skyway opened in 1955, the Buffalo News, in an editorial, "Salute to the Skyway," declared: "Buffalo came into its own as a harbor town. Today, ... it looks westward again ... lifting its traffic 100 feet over the busy river, man-made ship canal and rail and street networks that compose its great harbor.

"It is not true that progress is swift, or travels a straight line, or comes easily. But as the Buffalo Skyway attests, given a clear vision and a will to give it life, progress must eventually arrive – as it did today.

"Many hands came together to make this bridge. The Dewey administration, the Dowd and Mruk administrations at

home and the Buffalo Chamber of Commerce all were in the forefront of the steps leading to today's events. The real plaudits, however, must be more widely shared, for the Skyway is indeed a tribute to broad and sustained community effort to which countless citizens gave impetus and support." (The News held a contest, supported by the mayor and City Council, to name the bridge. The winning "Skyway" was proposed by a Lackawanna woman.)

By 2002, the News, in an editorial entitled, "Getting the Skyway Out of the Way," reported:

"The Skyway is one of those things that nobody particularly likes but everyone grudgingly accepts. Except Assemblyman Brian Higgins (then a mem-

ber of the State Assembly). ... Higgins has proposed getting rid of one of Buffalo's most glaring eyesores and replacing it with a tunnel or some other alternative crossing. The structure was built 110 feet above the Buffalo River in 1954 when the city was a major port and ships needed the clearance. Those ships now bypassed Buffalo by using the St. Lawrence Seaway. The Skyway has served its purpose. More to the point, the expense of maintaining this outdated structure poses a persuasive argument for its elimination.

"... From just about every angle — economic development, public safety, cost considerations and urban aesthetics — it makes sense to look for alternatives to the ugly dinosaur that mars our waterfront."

That point of view was more or less reiterated in a 2005 editorial, but with a more cautious phrasing that the Skyway should be removed "if a viable alternative emerges" after a "careful study of options."

In that same year, Buffalo Business First editorialized that the Skyway was the "Great Wall of Buffalo" and "sucks up far too much public money."

Gary Gottlieb, the regional planning

manager for the New York State Department of Transportation (NYSDOT), recently conceded, in a power-point presentation at the bi-annual meeting of GBNRTC's Policy Committee, that "the future of the one-mile long Buffalo Skyway carrying Route 5 has been the subject of considerable public debate."

He reported that NYSDOT had hired Bergmann Associates, which has a headquarters in Rochester and an office in Buffalo, to "research and provide data on the history, function, and operating/maintenance costs" of the Buffalo Skyway. It is the latest in a series of efforts by city and state to deal with waterfront issues.

(As part of the latest effort, the GBNRTC's Steve Szopinski is overseeing a study of traffic trends on the Skyway, based upon peak-hour counts at 14 sites, as well monitoring by a NYSDOT Automatic Traffic Recorder installed at the base of the Skyway. The results could indicate to what extent the removal of tolls on the nearby Niagara Thruway has affected the status of the Skyway.)

NYSDOT last year recommended a variety of roadway and landscaping improvements and connections, including Fuhrmann Boulevard, Ohio and Tiffit Streets, to improve access to the Waterfront as part of a Southtowns Connector/ Buffalo Outer Harbor Project. However, it has not approved downgrading or removal of the Skyway by replacing it with a tunnel or a lift bridge.

The cost of constructing an alternative tunnel, "with the same connectivity between the Outer Harbor and Interstate-190," would range "from \$200 million and \$250 million, with annual maintenance costs totaling roughly \$3 million," and would pose "significant engineering challenges to achieving connections with the Interstate system in Downtown Buffalo," according to a NYSDOT report. In a 1998 evaluation it was considered "not feasible at this time."

A moveable lift bridge has also been described as problematic in that it would slow navigation on the Buffalo River, impede commuter and commercial traffic on Route 5 to the Southtowns, and cause congestion on other routes as well as pose other complications.

“... It was determined that removal of the Skyway without in-kind replacement of a high-volume connection over or under the Buffalo River was not feasible.”

NYS DOT, in an earlier Southtowns Connector Feasibility Study, completed in 1991, had suggested that “a second highway crossing of the Buffalo River,” along a railroad corridor, “would provide significant corridor and regional transportation benefits.”

And in 1992, the Horizons Waterfront Commission, a subsidiary of the New York State Urban Development Corporation, declared that downgrading of the Skyway was desirable but probably couldn’t be feasible unless an alternative route, the Southtowns Connector, was constructed farther inland, southward from Interstate 190.

“... The Horizons Plan considers the NYS Route 5 Skyway crossing of the Buffalo River as an interim solution,” the commission reported, “and strongly suggests that the Skyway should be phased out over time. ... Implementation of this proposal would likely be contingent upon relocating Thruway traffic away from the waterfront area to the proposed Southtowns Connector highway.”

The commission declared that the Southtowns Connector would not only divert traffic between downtown and Southtowns communities from Route 5, but also would “afford the opportunity to develop light rail and bus connections with its right-of-way to improve mobility throughout the waterfront region.” It proposed “downgrading and consolidation” of Route 5 and Fuhrmann Boulevard into a “waterfront boulevard with landscaped median.”

However, after subsequent public hearings, NYS DOT determined in July 1996 that “alternatives in the rail corridor could disturb communities such as the Valley, Old First Ward, Brook Gardens Park and the wildlife communities of

Tift Nature Preserve/ Buffalo River” and were “strongly opposed by the city.”

Finally, Commissioner Thomas Madison Jr. last July announced the “preferred design” which “will help expand investment at the Outer Harbor, improve the safety and mobility of Buffalo’s transportation system and strengthen the region’s economy.”

The “preferred design” would “maintain Route 5 as a four-lane road-



The mile-long Skyway soars across the Buffalo River.

way to serve commuter traffic, while Fuhrmann Boulevard would be converted to a continuous, two-way, four-lane parkway on the west side of Route 5, adjacent to the waterfront” and “facilitate local vehicular, transit, bicycle and pedestrian access from Tift Street to Michigan Avenue.”

Other improvements would include modification of some of the Route 5 ramps, reconstruction of Ohio Street, and a “new local arterial road connecting Tift Street with Interstate 90.”

Higgins and other critics observed that NYS DOT had left options for the Skyway “off the table.”

Last December, Higgins arranged for John Norquist, president of the Congress for New Urbanism (CNU), and Scott Bernstein, president of the Center for Neighborhood Technology (CNT), to give a presentation in Buffalo on “the benefits of replacing elevated highways with more open, street level systems.” Norquist had led a successful crusade for

demolition of an elevated expressway in Milwaukee while mayor of that city.

Also, their agencies, the CNU and CNT, had arranged with Smart Mobility, Inc., of Norwich, Vermont, to make a detailed “Assessment of Transportation Needs for Buffalo’s Waterfront Redevelopment.” That assessment declared:

“Freeways have been successfully replaced in other U.S. cities including recent projects in Milwaukee and San

Francisco. In these cases some traffic engineers forecast disastrous congestion. But these scenarios have not occurred.

“... The Skyway is carrying a relatively low traffic volume for a freeway with 41,500 vehicles per day. ... The intended high-speed function of the Skyway is duplicated by I-90 a short distance to the east. ... Replacing the Skyway with a surface street and a lift bridge would provide more direct access that supports economic development....”

“NYS DOT’s Southtowns Environmental Impact Study (EIS) includes a short description of a Skyway alternative analysis (Scenario 8). Unfortunately, no details of the design assumptions or analysis are provided in the report. ... The projections show the implausible effect of more traffic being diverted onto Ohio Street and I-190 than could be removed from U.S. 5.

“It is likely that the EIS assumes that the Skyway is replaced with only a two-lane at-grade bridge, given the volume is less than half the original Skyway volume. If the analysis is conducted assuming a four lane at-grade bridge, there would likely be very little diversion to other streets.

“... The analysis attempted in the EIS should be conducted again with more realistic and accurate design assumptions, which reflect the consensus of the local officials and vision of the community...”

“...In addition, with the recent removal of tolls on I-190, there will be some diversion of trips to I-190 anyway....”

The report includes data “showing

Buffalo with the second lowest amount of traffic on their freeways (per lane mile) of all U.S. metropolitan areas with at least 1 million residents” and concludes that Buffalo “possesses a great opportunity to correct a mistake made in the post World War II era,” that would help the city to “renew its waterfront and add value to its tax base.”

NYS DOT had previously indicated that it would “undertake a study of the Skyway operations and anticipated future costs for the remaining expected useful life of this bridge and include an assessment of the structural condition of the bridge”...as a “tool for long-term planning.”

Faced with continuing controversy, NYS DOT has given assurances that its assessment, expected to be completed by late summer, will include a review of other regional studies “as they relate to the bridge,” including the CNU/CNT “Assessment of Transportation Needs for Buffalo’s Waterfront Development.”

Gottlieb promised that “a clear, accurate report will be provided for local officials and the general public.” It will include, he said, “a peer review of ‘similar’ studies and projects across the country, including Milwaukee, etc.,” and an “apples-to-apples comparison of issues on other projects across the nation as it pertains to the Skyway.”

The consultant “will contact the Congress for New Urbanism and Center for Neighborhood Technology and local stakeholders as necessary to assure proper benchmarking and consideration of different perspectives,” Gottlieb promised.

Meantime, both Higgins and Erie County Executive Joel Giambra are promoting federal funding for engineering and environmental studies to identify the best site for a new crossing over the Buffalo River.

The congressman said he believes that in the long term there will be several new bridges. According to a Buffalo News account, Higgins believes that “even if the Skyway remains new links will be needed to make it easier for people to get to the shoreline.”

UB expert stresses need for timely decisions



Alfred D. Price, Ph.D., associate professor of urban and regional planning at the University at Buffalo, and a native of the city, said that the changing perspectives on the Skyway reflect the impact on the U.S. economy of the “Second Industrial Revolution – the revolution in electric-telecommunications technology that hit in the first half of the 20th Century.”

“Although we did not understand it for five to seven decades later, this second machine age so radically altered how American enterprise operates – how America does business, if you will – that we can not now blame ourselves in retrospect for misreading what few signposts might have existed at the time.

“When we now look at data describing Buffalo’s output of milled grain from 1935 to 1995, there is precious little variation in total output except for the up-tick represented by World War II’s special needs. However, in that sector of our local economy in 1935, over 2,000 persons were employed. At the same output level 60 years later, fewer than 200 persons were employed.

“When local planners in the 20s, 30s and 40s, even the 50s, looked at Buffalo’s industrial waterfront, they were quite logically impressed with the region’s industrial past and assumed (we now know wrongly) that the region’s future would be a straight-line projection from this illustrious past.

“Who among us would have predicted in 1950 that ‘big capital’ in America would have gone offshore to create facilities where wages were a small fraction of U.S. wages, where no environmental protection existed, where work safety rules were non-existent?

“But those stricken with nostalgia for the good old days of high-paying factory jobs do not always contribute in an intelligent way to the discussion about what we now should be doing.

“The sad truth is that the best of our local community in the 1950s looked backwards at past trends instead of trying to reflect upon then present trends to forecast the future. The Skyway experience should be instructive. We take too long to make strategic decisions, rendering them non-strategic by the time we get around to deciding.

“If we spend too many decades debating the expansion of the Peace Bridge, or what to do about the Skyway, or the Niagara Falls International Airport, others will move to seize the opportunity that should be ours by virtue of natural locational advantage, if nothing else.”

An assessment of trends, impacts in regional freight under way

The GBNRTC has contracted with a worldwide consultant, Wilbur Smith Associates, to examine the relationship between freight and economic growth in the Erie-Niagara region.

Executive Director Hal Morse said the \$600,000 study, expected to take 15 months to complete, is designed to clarify ways in which the region can take advantage of its strategic relationship to international trade corridors.

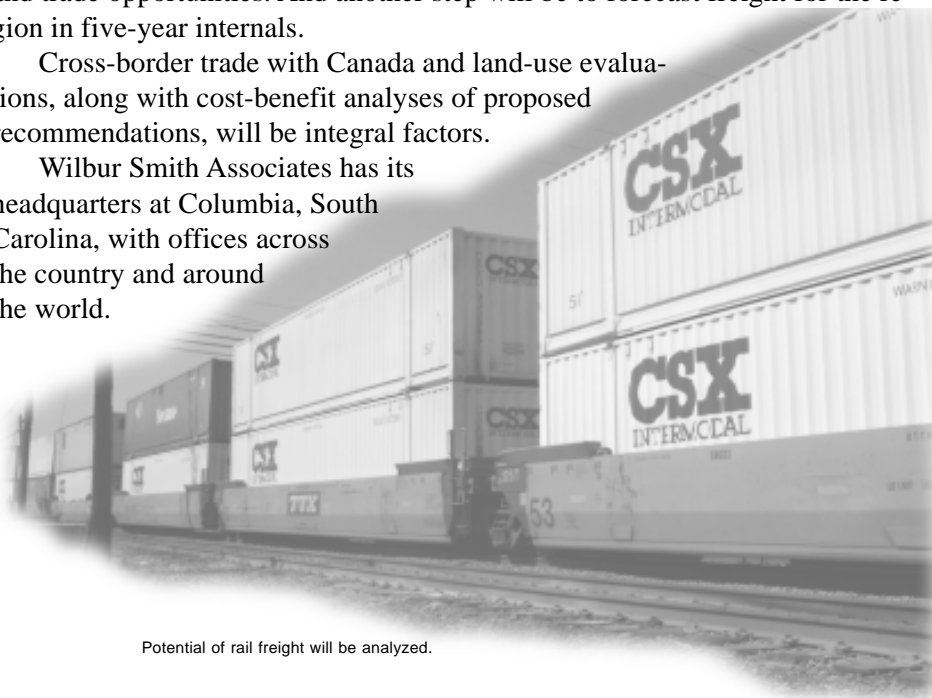
Richard Guarino, a senior analyst with GBNRTC and the study manager, noted that freight mobility is among the factors that Metropolitan Planning Organizations (MPOs) are required by federal mandate to integrate into their planning in terms of both short-term and long-term projects.

The initial phase of the federally funded study is to identify “stakeholders in the city/county/state/federal governments, railroads, transfer terminals, sea-ports and the goods-movement industry,” he said, “as well as to conduct a baseline economic analysis and review of existing freight studies and reports.”

The next phase is a comprehensive assessment of the regional freight transportation network with “system profiles for each mode” – truck, rail, air and water freight — to determine the ability of each to meet changing freight needs and trade opportunities. And another step will be to forecast freight for the region in five-year intervals.

Cross-border trade with Canada and land-use evaluations, along with cost-benefit analyses of proposed recommendations, will be integral factors.

Wilbur Smith Associates has its headquarters at Columbia, South Carolina, with offices across the country and around the world.



Potential of rail freight will be analyzed.

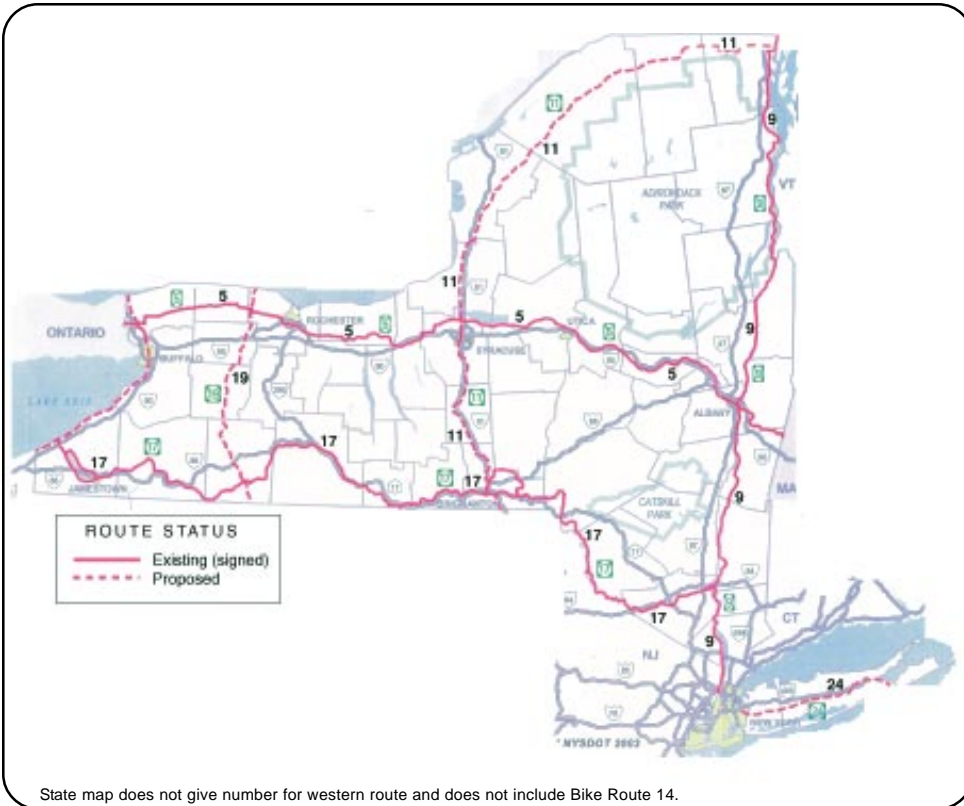
A regional bike artery to Pennsylvania planned

The GBNRTC’s Bicycle and Pedestrian Subcommittee is weighing alternative routings for a proposed state designated and signed bicycle route from Niagara County to the Pennsylvania border.

Gregory Szewczyk, the subcommittee chairman, said that state officials have tentatively identified it as Bike Route 20 on the theory that the 90-to-100-mile route would follow the shoulders of U.S. 20 for a significant distance. He emphasized that this routing was only preliminary.

In any case, it would provide a signed north-south link between two east west routes that cross the state, Bike Route 5, which generally parallels the Erie Canal across the state, and Bike Route 17, which crosses the Southern Tier to the Hudson River. Both intersect with Bike Route 9 which traverses the Hudson and Champlain valleys.

Szewczyk, the bicycle/pedestrian coordinator for the regional office of the New York State Department of Transportation (NYSDOT), noted that a preliminary Albany mapping of the route showed it extending from Lockport south along Transit Road to Southwestern Boulevard and along Route 20 to a connection with Bike Route Z in Pennsylvania.



Traffic congestion and other issues have been raised, Szewczyk said. “We haven’t entirely discounted the original proposal, but stronger consideration is being given to a shoreline route.

“Maybe still starting with a Lockport connection, but along the Erie Canal ... and into Buffalo and its waterfront and take it down along the shore, along Route 5, to Pennsylvania. Alternatives including portions of Route 62 are also being considered. These are just some of the options that we’re exploring.

“At the last meeting of the Bicycle and Pedestrian Subcommittee there was a desire to use a Shoreline Trail as much as possible and about using routings that tie it in with the state’s Seaway Trail.

“We want to try to come up with a route where people would want to go, but also we want to choose the safest route.

“Certainly we’re looking at traffic volumes when we’re choosing

routes, the width of the lane, the width of the shoulder, the number of driveways that you have to ride across, truck percentages, vehicle speeds, even drainage grates that might have to be replaced to facilitate cycling.

“It’s not out of the question that it could go off road in some areas, using some of the trails out there. We are also trying to keep in mind that touring cyclists from the U.S. or Canada may want to cover a lot of territory on their bikes and will be in need of routes that are easy to follow. Travelers will desire maps that clearly show them where to go, how many hills they have to deal with and where to spend the night. And this is the kind of information the state is trying to provide them — with our maps showing the signed routes.”

Four other signed bicycle routes are being proposed by the state.

- Bike Route 19 will extend 112 miles from the Lake Ontario State Parkway, north-

west of Rochester, in Monroe County to the Town of Angelica in Allegany County.

- Bike Route 14 will extend 96 miles from the Town of Sodus in Wayne County south to Chemung County, where it will link with Pennsylvania Bike Route G.

- Bike Route 11 will extend 135 miles from the City of Watertown in Jefferson County south to Broome County, where it will link with Pennsylvania Bike Route L. It will be an extension of a route between Watertown and the City of Plattsburgh in Clinton County.

- Bike Route 25 will extend 83 miles from the Nassau/Suffolk County line to Orient Point on the eastern tip of Long Island.

Szewczyk noted that other bicycle routes, including some shown on GBNRTC’s Bicycle Route Guide, could ultimately be considered for inclusion in the state’s signed system of on-road, long-distance routes for bicyclists.

The purpose, as explained in an Albany release, is to create a “network of interconnecting bicycle routes that will one day span the Northeast, enabling bicycle enthusiasts from across the nation to enjoy the natural beauty and richness of our scenic travel corridors along our safest, most bicycle-friendly highways.”

The New York State Department of Transportation values your input. If you would like to share your comments and thoughts concerning this proposed bicycle route, please contact Greg Szewczyk, NYSDOT Region 5 bicycle and pedestrian coordinator, at either (716) 847-3614 or gszewczyk@dot.state.ny.us.

Traffic Increases from Toll removal on I-190



Significant increases in traffic on the Niagara Thruway and on the adjacent section of the mainline Thruway have been recorded in recent traffic counts, as indicated on the above map. The counts by the Thruway Authority were made after the removal last fall of the Black Rock and Breckenridge tolls. The above figures are based upon average 24-hour weekday traffic. Peak-hour increases are higher. The GBNRTC and the New York State Department of Transportation (NYSDOT) are assessing the traffic impact on adjacent arterials.

Greater Buffalo-Niagara Regional Transportation Council

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GREATER BUFFALO-NIAGARA
 REGIONAL TRANSPORTATION COUNCIL

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Greater Buffalo-Niagara Regional Transportation Council

POLICY COMMITTEE

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- Clyde Burmaster - Niagara County Legislature
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- Hon. Vincenzo V. Anello - City of Niagara Falls
- Astrid C. Glynn - New York State Department of Transportation
- Gregory Stamm - Niagara Frontier Transportation Authority
- William G. Leslie - New York State Thruway Authority

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- Daniel E. Kreuz - City of Buffalo Department of Public Works
- Robert Curtis - City of Niagara Falls
- Gary V. Gottlieb - New York State Department of Transportation
- Walter D. Zmuda - Niagara Frontier Transportation Authority
- Thomas E. Pericak - New York State Thruway Authority

Meeting Calendar

Planning and Coordinating Committee (PCC)

meetings begin at 9:30 A.M.

- May 2** **Niagara Falls**
 Carnegie Building
 1022 Main Street, Niagara Falls, New York

- June 6** **NYS Thruway Authority**
 455 Cayuga Road
 Cheektowaga, New York

- July 11** **Niagara County**
 Public Safety Building
 5526 Niagara Street Extension
 Lockport, New York

Policy Committee

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

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