



INDUSTRY ROUNDTABLE

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A moving experience

PANELISTS DELVE INTO WNY'S PUBLIC TRANSPORTATION CULTURE



COLIN GORDON

Trains, planes and automobiles were in the spotlight as a panel of Buffalo-area executives engaged in a 90-minute discussion centered on public transportation. The industry roundtable was part of a continuing series of discussions involving community decision-makers.

BY JAMES FINK
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Ride sharing, or the lack of it, may be garnering the headlines but that is only one of several public transportation matters facing the region.

Among the issues identified by panelists in a recent transportation roundtable, sponsored by Business First and Hodgson Russ, was whether Buffalo needed a new train station, what should be done to ease the flow of vehicular traffic across

U.S.-Canada border crossings and funding issues for the Niagara Frontier Transportation Authority.

Answers and opinions of the panelists varied.

► When it comes to NFTA service, financial certainty is needed.

“Providing the same level of service when we are facing (federal and state) budget cuts is challenging,” said Kimberley Minkel, NFTA executive director.

► Will Buffalo get a new train station?

Four sites are under consider-

ation and a panel appointed by Mayor Byron Brown is expected to identify a preferred site next month.

Still, there are questions about the need.

Approximately 146,000 passengers a year board Amtrak trains at the Depew and Exchange Street stations.

“Helping that would be a ‘tourist train’ running from Niagara Falls, Ont., to Ellicottville,” said Patrick Whalen, director of the Niagara Global Tourism Institute.

Gov. Andrew Cuomo supports a

revived Buffalo train station.

“The governor has heard people talk about it loud and clear,” said Sam Hoyt, regional president of Empire State Development.

► Biometrics and other proposals for the Peace Bridge and other regional border crossings remain very much a federal issue here and in Canada, according to the panelists.

“We all want answers,” said Ron Reinas, general manager of the Buffalo & Fort Erie Public Bridge Authority.

► ON THE MOVE

Source: Business First research

416

Taxis in Yellow Cab's WNY fleet, the region's largest cab company

4.62M

Passengers who used Buffalo Niagara International Airport last year

26.6M

Ridership on NFTA's Metro Rail and buses in 2016

5.3M

Vehicles that last year crossed the Peace Bridge

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► What is the biggest challenge to moving people around Western New York?

PATRICK WHALEN

Director, Niagara Global Tourism Institute

Culture. We've had 60 years of sprawl without growth and that's inbred in us culturally, where we are used to our cars, because in a lot of cases we need our cars. Over decades we've got accustomed to driving to wherever we work, getting out and going into work. To change that culture is difficult. So frankly, while things are improving and we see millennials moving to the city, singles, couples moving to the city, we see empty nesters moving to the city. Until we fix those schools, those millennials are going to go out there and have 5-year-old kids and go out to the suburbs because the schools here are just intolerable.

HAL MORSE

Executive director, Greater Buffalo Niagara Regional Transportation Council

In the past 30 years, (there are) 16 percent less people and urbanized areas increased by 78 percent. Per-capita average miles per day that we drove increased from eight to 18 in that time. So more than twice as much travel for less people and consuming nearly double the land area we are in. You can see where it would be difficult and challenging to provide public transportation services to fund infrastructure because we have to build or expand infrastructure in the area we grew. Plus, we have to maintain that infrastructure, as well as the existing infrastructure that we have.

KIMBERLEY MINKEL

Executive Director, NFTA

Sprawl is putting a strain on the resources of the public transit system. Trying to provide the same level of service to a much larger area becomes challenging. When you do that, the quality of the system that you have deteriorates. We can't provide the frequency that's really needed to attract and increase the number of transit riders. In spite of that, we have seen transit riders grow. We have seen vehicle miles traveled grow. But the funding to support that nationally has not grown at the same rate.

SAM HOYT

Regional president, Empire State Development

Everybody's speaking from the same hymnal. The fact is, that type of unmanaged, unplanned growth, as everybody has indicated, creates an enormous pressure on

local governments and, as a result, enormous pressure on the individual taxpayer because you have to pay for all of this new infrastructure. And that ultimately gets trickled down to individual homeowners. Government shouldn't be funding sprawl.

ALTHEA LUEHRSEN

CEO, Leadership Buffalo

I'm going to take a different direction. A month ago I took a poverty challenge and I spent the week not using my personal vehicle to get around. I have a very busy schedule so it was quite a challenge. I would say the biggest challenge for moving people in Western New York is options. My options were bugging people for rides, taking a cab when I was supposed to be poor, so I didn't use that option, taking the rail or taking a bus. And the rail is nowhere near my house. My biggest example is I tried to go grocery shopping and it took me three and a half hours and six buses to get two bags of groceries. There are people in our community, 41 percent of them, living below the poverty level and their option is pretty much taking the bus.

WILLIAM SMITH

Director of access and safety, Buffalo Niagara Medical Campus

The lack of a comprehensive transportation system. As Kim said, transit service often is limited in its ability to serve all people, including transit-dependent and choice riders. Street infrastructure often presents an unsafe environment for pedestrians, cyclists. And so rather than focusing on creating the sustainable network, we often focus our attention more toward providing greater efficiencies for the vehicle travel, the result being that today we see a downtown where about 50 percent of land is consumed by parking lots. I don't think the challenge is always moving people but how we do so without shooting ourselves in the foot.

DAN LEONARD

Senior director/economic development, Buffalo Niagara Partnership

It starts with that pretty obvious mathematical problem. We built way more infrastructure than we have had population growth. In fact, we have had a loss of population. So a declining tax base while we are building a tremendous amount of infrastructure over a period of decades. It's incumbent upon us to not just curb it and stop subsidizing it, but we have to facilitate it to going the other way. Among our biggest challenges in growing our economy is workforce development and having enough people to fill jobs. The most common challenge that we hear in

workforce development from the employers is people being able to get to work. Thirty percent of homes in the city of Buffalo do not have a car and it's a major challenge. We can't grow our economy if we don't have the workforce to produce and to fill those jobs.

► What are the solutions?

SAM HOYT

Empire State Development

We have to stop incentivizing. Sprawl means building business parks in the suburbs as opposed to identifying opportunities within the urban core where infrastructure for public transportation exists. Every time a new plant is created in Elma, or fill in the blank, they then come to Kim and say, "Well, we need public transit to get the workers to the plant." Wrong. Can't do that anymore. IDAs and economic development agencies that are providing these subsidies have to stop. The job-creation opportunities need to be where the infrastructure, including public transit, already exists.

► But ESD gives incentives to those same companies.

SAM HOYT

Empire State Development

I think you'll see the pattern has been to strongly overemphasize the urban core and transit-oriented development. The most recent announcement about extending the light rail and the governor putting in \$5 million to that - you might say, "Oh, you are extending it to the suburbs." The University of Buffalo has 25,000 people there. To give those people access to the urban core in terms of housing, in terms of retail and in terms of entertainment, and to give the urban residents opportunities to get to work and also use the retail end of it.

► But with GEICO, you showed them Buffalo Lakeside. They wanted to be in the suburbs.

SAM HOYT

Empire State Development

When it comes to the company insisting that it's an office park, an office campus in Williamsville or Amherst versus an office park in suburban Minnesota, that's when you have to make a decision. But the emphasis absolutely has been on downtown in the past five or six years.



ALL PHOTOS: COLIN GORDON

Sam Hoyt, Empire State Development



Dan Leonard, Buffalo Niagara Partnership



Althea Luehrsen, Leadership Buffalo



Kimberley Minkel, NFTA

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► **What are some of the barriers that must be addressed in order to develop better utilized public transportation?**

KIMBERLEY MINKEL
NFTA

A lot of the discussion has focused on people who need to use public transportation. So I will talk about choice riders, folks who have options, and why they are not using public transit. One of the ways to combat that is through the use of technology, making transit more efficient and more desirable for choice riders. When you have a choice, one of the things you take a look at is time. By improving technology, the project that we're doing on Niagara Street in conjunction with the city, federal funding and state funding is synchronizing the lights to our buses so that the buses get priority. So that taking public transit becomes quicker than using their car. How do we provide better options for the public? One of the ways is to have more frequent service so that I know if I go out to that bus stop, there will be a bus in 10 minutes. Using technology on my Smartphone, I can see exactly where it (a bus) is.

► **CLOSER LOOK AT THE ROUNDTABLE**

The Transportation Industry Roundtable continues a three-year series of discussions with Western New York business leaders. Throughout the year, decision makers from diverse Western New York industries meet for a discussion moderated by Business First journalists. Excerpts are published three weeks after the roundtable. Upcoming topics include architects & developers, manufacturers, family business and workforce development. The discussions, sponsored by Hodgson Russ LLP, are held at the law firm's Pearl Street offices in Buffalo.

► **Will this be across the NFTA network?**

KIMBERLEY MINKEL
NFTA

That's the problem. Where we provide better service is where there is higher ridership. But it doesn't make sense today to provide that level of service to (the town of) Boston, for example, or Elma or some of the other remote locations.

► **Hal, what do you think about it?**

HAL MORSE
Greater Buffalo Niagara Regional Transportation Council

We best serve things by public transportation and we collaborate

with the NFTA to develop the plan around transportation. And working with the medical university, that way we can increase the densities, provide more riders, better housing and access to transportation, make the overall system more efficient, increase property values, use densities in the urbanized area. We talk about the core city but this gets to where we are already growing and can be able to make sure we can stabilize and have first-ring suburbs.

► **Is that the logic as to the proposed Metro Rail expansion?**

KIMBERLEY MINKEL
NFTA

We looked at a couple different alignments to extend the light rail, Millersport Highway versus what we are calling the Niagara Falls Boulevard

corridor. One of the reasons we are looking at that corridor is because one-fifth of all the employment in Western New York occurs within that area, a fifth of the employment. And where people live and the development opportunities make sense within that corridor.

► **The GO train will come to Niagara Falls in 2023. What is happening here to prepare for that?**

PATRICK WHALEN
Niagara Global Tourism Institute

There has been a lot done to prepare for that, the new train station. So theoretically, the GO train could come across the bridge. Everyone would be pre-cleared by Canadian Customs, get on the train and go to Toronto. The station was designed to get those trains across.

SAM HOYT
Empire State Development

That border crossing will dictate how on-time/on-schedule those trains are. And yes, we need to address the problem of the Empire Corridor, which is Niagara Falls to

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New York City. It's owned by CSX. CSX moves freight, and Buffalo is one of the biggest freight centers in the Northeast. So while we want to promote passenger services, CSX and freight will always be the priority. What does that mean? A freight train is coming, Amtrak has to pull over. So the challenge in addressing that is a dedicated line or massive improvements that allow for pass-by, for freight trains or passenger trains to be able to pass by the freight train. But it's an enormous public-works initiative that will be very, very expensive.

► **Is there enough potential in train ridership to justify that type of investment?**

PATRICK WHALEN

Niagara Global Tourism Institute

Yes, I think the investment would be worth it. How do you get to Albany from Buffalo? You drive or take the trains; there is no air service. It's a pretty long trip. I think most people would prefer to take the train than drive there. But you can't really do that if the train is going to be 70 minutes late.

SAM HOYT

Empire State Development

Pat and I have been advocating something that he mentioned earlier that really needs to happen. And you have to be careful about "if you build it, they will come." That's risky business. I believe that if you have a reliable system, on time, affordable, with quality amenities including the train sets themselves to the app through internet service, you are going to see a dramatic increase in the number of people using them.

SAM HOYT

Empire State Development

The bottom line is, with the Exchange Street station and the roof collapsing, that station has been an embarrassment for a long, long time. The opportunity now is created to build a new station.

DAN LEONARD

Buffalo Niagara Partnership

It's important to consider the justification question of investment in the rail infrastructure. It's not just about ridership. It's not just about whether we have enough riders to pay for the justification of a train station. It's the economic opportunity and being able to integrate our region and our economy, I think most especially with Southern Ontario. The GTA has 8 (million) to 9 million people and a potential economic impact to

Western New York. We should be doing everything we can to integrate ourselves in that economy, facilitating business dealings with Western New York and Canadian companies. Ford continues to invest in Western New York because of the Oakville plant in Southern Ontario. We should be finding more opportunities for Western New York businesses to capitalize upon that.

► **Going back to the airport, you didn't have Southwest or JetBlue but you were courting them. Can you make the same argument for better Amtrak service and a new train station?**

KIMBERLEY MINKEL

NFTA

Certainly our experience with the airport, and I'll take even Niagara Falls International Airport: It wasn't until we built the new terminal that we were able to get regularly scheduled service. And today we have daily service. So certainly, if it worked on the aviation side, I would expect it would work on the rail side, as well.

SAM HOYT

Empire State Development

Amtrak's response to a municipality building a new station is to make sure it checks certain boxes in terms of logistical requirements. Otherwise you are on your own. Go ahead and do it, but you have to staff it, you have to maintain it. You own it. We are happy to pull into a grand, spanking-new facility. It's a little different than adding an air route, because there is no \$10 million-per-mile infrastructure cost.

PATRICK WHALEN

Niagara Global Tourism Institute

I'm working with someone now that wants to run a tourist train from Niagara Falls, Ontario, back and forth to Ellicottville. You can't do it on these tracks because when the CSX train or CN train comes across from Canada, that pendulum service is going to have to wait. You would start the train in Niagara Falls, Ontario, and one in Ellicottville every hour. If they have to wait, it doesn't work. You have to fix the infrastructure. In that case, we also need a station. Tourists aren't going to use the Exchange Street station.

► **Ron, can you provide an update on the Peace Bridge and biometrics?**

RON RIENAS

General manager, Buffalo & Fort Erie Public Bridge Authority

To follow up on what's been talked about before in terms of reality of service, the border is no different. The people – if they know it's going to take them 10 minutes to cross the border, that's great. If they expect 10 minutes and it's an hour, that's a big problem. That's what we experienced last year and continue to experience intermittently.

► **Union issues?**

RON RIENAS

Buffalo & Fort Erie Public Bridge Authority

Not just union – resourcing issues, staffing issues. That's a problem. It has to be in both directions. It's great that Customs and Border Protection have done a very good job in terms of providing service entering the U.S. If you are Canadian and you don't have a good experience going back, it's a bad experience overall. It has to work in both directions. On biometrics, we have no idea how that could possibly be implemented. That would increase the lack of reliability. People don't know exactly how long it's going to take to cross. No one has been able to tell us how you can implement biometrics in a car or a truck environment. No one has been able to tell us how it's going to work leaving the U.S. because it would require us to build an outbound plaza.

PATRICK WHALEN

Niagara Global Tourism Institute

The solution is to have the Canadians do the same biometrics and swap the data. Your entry into Canada would be your entry into the U.S., vice versa. Canada has an incentive.

RON RIENAS

Buffalo & Fort Erie Public Bridge Authority

Canada has not expressed any willingness to get into biometrics, to share with the United States. When the executive order came out, the same thing was contemplated. A couple years ago, it was opposed for all the same reasons it's been opposed now. No one knows how it possibly can be done.

DAN LEONARD

Buffalo Niagara Partnership

Border efficiency is always a major component of our transportation and our Can-Am initiatives. It's to the point I made about the trains. We have to better integrate ourselves with that economy to the north of us. The biometrics is certainly another concern of ours.

KIMBERLEY MINKEL

NFTA

We have a large percentage of people who fly out of Buffalo and Niagara Falls who are Canadian citizens. There was a study done about six years ago that they provided \$1 billion-plus in terms of economic development for the region. Restricting or making it more difficult to travel over the border and, as time went by, it's less convenient to fly out of Buffalo or Niagara Falls, would be devastating to our region.

HAL MORSE

Greater Buffalo Niagara Regional Transportation Council

We talked about reliability of the transportation system being integrated. We are looking at the (Interstate) 190, basically from Exit 54 up through border crossing, integrating the QEW all the way to St. Catharines and the parallel arterials. As the technology increases in terms of in-vehicle communications and even using current methods, we can detect and employ technology solutions, provide greater parallel arterials for traffic, divert off the freeways. It required about \$8 million in federal funds to leverage a \$20 million total project to provide solutions.

► **Will there be the funds to implement?**

HAL MORSE

Greater Buffalo Niagara Regional Transportation Council

Funding is being looked at. Technology solutions are often much cheaper than infrastructure. Also, we have the ability to solve many of these issues without building a major capital investment.

RON RIENAS

Buffalo & Fort Erie Public Bridge Authority

It's not just infrastructure and not just technology; it's a proper regulatory environment. There are changes that can be made in both Canada and the U.S. in terms of the customs regulatory framework. For example, on the U.S. side, the U.S. government issues a passport card. It's quicker than a passport because you are not handing over a document. It can be scanned at any booth entering the U.S. But Canada does not have the legislative authority to issue the passport cards. They should be doing it, but they haven't yet. That simple change could make a big difference in terms of entering into Canada.

► **Ride sharing. Why is it not here?**

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ALTHEA LUEHRSEN

Leadership Buffalo

The lack of ride sharing is really affecting a lot of things as far as our tourism. I think it can affect a lot of different things as far as jobs, getting people across the city. I had a friend coming to Buffalo this past summer who wants to open a new business here, expand what he has in Indianapolis. I said, "Do you need a ride from the airport?" And he said, "I'll take Uber." I said, "We don't have Uber." He said that could be a deal breaker and it was because his new business motto depended on having ride sharing.

► **Do you get that at the medical campus?**

WILLIAM SMITH

Buffalo Niagara Medical Campus

On the medical campus, our goal is to provide many options to people to get around. Ride sharing is incredibly important, assuming that some of the labor and some of the ADA issues can be worked out. If we can supplement things like transit, car sharing, bike sharing, this is an added mobility for you so you can come to the campus. You have the ability to easily get around with services like Uber and Lyft. We try to promote that sort of environment at the medical campus. On the campus we don't have Uber. And if you live in the city, it's a bit of a black eye.

PATRICK WHALEN

Niagara Global Tourism Institute

It enhances public transportation, too. In Orlando you get a discount on transit tickets if you take Uber to the train station.

KIMBERLEY MINKEL

NFTA

Uber or ride sharing helps address that first mile/last mile option where public transit may not be serving those areas. For choice riders who don't take public transit because they are afraid of not getting home, we have a Guaranteed Ride Home at the NFTA. Having the ability to utilize Uber or Lyft or other ride-sharing programs would make people more secure about using public transportation. We see it as an enhancement of our system.

WILLIAM SMITH

Buffalo Niagara Medical Campus

At the medical campus, we have our own version with the Guaranteed Ride Home partnered with the taxi service. I don't know if we would get the same level of service with the Guaranteed Ride Home if we were to use Uber or Lyft.

SAM HOYT

Empire State Development

The governor is absolutely committed to making this a reality, for ride sharing to take place in the entire state. It's an embarrassment that it doesn't exist here. You can't claim to be a world-class city if it doesn't exist.

► **The Partnership has been lobbying for Buffalo-to-Albany air service. Is that likely to happen?**

KIMBERLEY MINKEL

NFTA

The airlines are profit-driven. And you are going to put routes and put planes where they have the higher utilization. When they have provided that direct service in the past, it really hasn't performed very well.

► **But what about direct flights between Niagara Falls and Europe?**

KIMBERLEY MINKEL

NFTA

It makes sense for several reasons. No. 1, when you take a look at the Golden Horseshoe, the 9 million people within the Greater Toronto area is a huge group to pull from. Couple that with the longer runway that we have that can accommodate larger planes. Within the next several years I think we'll see something, yes. But we don't have anything lined up right now.

► **What's on your wish list when it comes to public transportation?**

PATRICK WHALEN

Niagara Global Tourism Institute

More rail, making sure we have some rails between Albany and Niagara Falls. I would think that the new train station ought to be integrated with the NFTA Metro Rail so that we can actually move people on to the heavy rail to a train station and they can seamlessly, almost seamlessly, go on to the light rail.

RON RIENAS

Buffalo & Fort Erie Public Bridge Authority

From a border perspective, reliable customs service. That can be achieved through better resourcing, scheduling, some regulatory reform, greater use of technology like IRB technology, promotion of NEXUS.

HAL MORSE

Greater Buffalo Niagara Regional Transportation Council

What I would like to mention in the midst of our long range, 2050, which is a ways off but there are interim steps, too, and that takes into account even many of the things we talked about today in terms of technology. Things like a fully autonomous vehicle fleet operating in Buffalo Niagara.

WILLIAM SMITH

Buffalo Niagara Medical Campus

On autonomous vehicles, we are looking at testing autonomy, shuttles on the private property of the university. And the idea being, eventually, deployment on the medical campus when the Legislature allows autonomous vehicles on the public street.

KIMBERLEY MINKEL

NFTA

Infrastructure investment, both in terms of the airport and public transit systems. We are very fortunate that the governor sees the importance of public transit with his announcement of the \$5 million investment to rail extension. I'm hopeful that there will be future infrastructure investment for public transit and our airports, which are entirely investment.

SAM HOYT

Empire State Development

Let's focus on completing the extension of the light rail to ultimately the University at Buffalo North Campus and then, finally, stop building subdivisions and business parks where transit doesn't already exist.

ALTHEA LUEHRSEN

Leadership Buffalo

Since this is a wish list, I would like to see the train that goes nowhere go somewhere. Amherst is a top priority on my wish list, but at the same time I would like it to also go further to Niagara Falls, to the airport, to the Bills stadium, to really expand and people can actually have that access.

WILLIAM SMITH

Buffalo Niagara Medical Campus

Improve access to transit, obviously, and the rail extension being a big part of that. But I think it's only part of the puzzle. We have to look at how people access the rail. Longer-term solutions bring more transit-oriented interaction with our transit stations and how we can improve that access to transit.



ALL PHOTOS: COLIN GORDON

Hal Morse, Greater Buffalo Niagara Regional Transportation Council



Ron Rienas, Buffalo & Fort Erie Public Bridge Authority



William Smith, Buffalo Niagara Medical Campus



Patrick Whalen, Niagara Global Tourism Institute