

STM Community NFTA Informational Meeting  
August 9, 2023

The meeting was called to order at 7:00 p.m. Pastor Jeane was introduced and thanked for the use of her church (Trinity United Methodist Church) for the meeting.

It was reported that there were now 1100 signatures on the petition. It was also stated that the focus for STM is on bus rapid transit (BRT) as opposed to light rail transit (LRT).

The first speaker was an independent insurance adjuster Richard Tomaszewicz, who was responsible for investigating 100-150 damage claims from property owners during the Main St construction of the light rail. The complaint was sediment cracking. The adjuster stated that most of the claims were due to blasting with dynamite around the stations and the damage extended out approximately ¼ mile from the blast site. The claims were generally confined to the north side of Main St where there were wealthy residents and expensive homes. The adjuster also stated that an inspection service was employed by the NFTA about one year prior to the work beginning to take pictures of the properties which could be affected by the construction. The adjuster recommended that all persons currently owning property in the potentially affected areas take pictures of all portions of their homes, buildings to document existing conditions before the construction.

The second speaker was Jeffrey Amplement, project manager for the current Metro Rail Extension project. Two other NFTA representatives were also present: Tom George, NFTA vice-president for operations; and Bob Gower, consultant to the NFTA. Mr. Amplement used a Power Point presentation to address the purpose underlying the project (to connect areas of WNY, to meet a demand for high quality public transportation and to serve an underserved population), a history of the Metro Rail and the reasons for the extension (major job center in Amherst with job opportunities, connecting UB campuses, population dynamics) and the potential routes which were explored (Bailey Ave and Millersport Highway).

Mr. Amplement explained that federal funds were not initially involved in the project and that the project only entailed the extension of the light rail from the University Station without giving consideration to other options. Once the decision was made to apply for a federal grant, NFTA was required to explore other options in order to qualify for a federal grant, specifically the use of BRT.

According to Mr. Amplement, an LRT system and a BRT system have basic similarities: dedicated stations; dedicated travel lanes and the coordination of traffic signals. The difference is that one would be underground in part; the other would be completely above ground. He also said that the disadvantage with BRT is that passengers would have to transfer from the light rail to the buses to continue on the extension.

Mr. Amplement described the process in which the NFTA is currently involved in order to get funds, a process which is dictated by NEPA (National Environmental Policy Act). He said the NFTA is very early in the process. It has been working on a preliminary design since May 2022 and hopes to have that completed by 2025. It is doing an environmental analysis that includes construction impacts on the area and property acquisition as well as surveying and taking soil samples. A draft environmental impact statement (DEIS) will be released in 2024. Public meetings will be held in 2024 to obtain comments on the DEIS. The final environmental impact statement and final design should be completed by 2027 with shovels in the ground in 2028 and construction anticipated to be completed by 2032.

Mr. Amplement said he welcomes any input from residents and business owners through e-mail, regular mail, telephone or by commenting on the map on the NFTA website. He then opened the floor to questions.

Questions were asked and comments made on the following topics:

1. Has a decision been made on whether the focus of the extension will be on LRT or BRT. The answer was no; both are still on the table;
2. Whether no extension of the light rail was also an option; the answer was that having no extension was merely a “baseline;”
3. Acquisition or partial taking of property; the answer was no final decision has been made but Mr. Amplement did not believe that whole properties would be taken;
4. Noise associated with the light rail emerging from underground including bells/whistles;
5. Issues related to emergency services having access to residents, to fires, to traffic accidents as well as the need for specialized equipment which may be required by the fire departments due to the light rail being in place;
6. Issues related to access to the current businesses along Niagara Falls Blvd during construction and after, and concerns about losing business and/or potential permanent shut-down as a result;
7. Whether the extension is being driven by UB, and if so, consideration should be given as to a more efficient route up Millersport. Mr. Amplement said the UB’s desire to have a light rail extended to the North campus was not an overriding factor;
8. Cost of maintenance for the extension – will taxpayers be expected to foot the bill with tax increases;
9. Ridership issues – is it unrealistic to expect an increase in ridership, especially when it is unlikely that the residents in the neighborhoods in close proximity will use an LRT or BRT.

Pastor Jeane was again thanked for hosting the meeting and Mr. Amplement was thanked for his presentation. The meeting was adjourned at approximately 8:30 p.m.