

Buffalo MOVE Roundtable Executive Summary

The Buffalo MOVE Roundtable took place from November 10-December 22, 2022. The Roundtable was sponsored by Lincoln Institute for Land Policy and hosted by Niagara Frontier Transportation Authority.

Context/focus

The horrific shooting on May 14 impacted the Buffalo community forever. We lost beloved community members, a collective sense of safety and community, and systemic inequities came sharply into focus. Since then, Buffalonians and individuals across the world have stepped up to provide both short- and long-term support and solutions to address what was lost and ongoing challenges. These actions build hope and opportunity for members of our community, particularly those most directly impacted.

Millions of dollars have been raised to support access to healthy food, education, healthcare, jobs, affordable housing, and addressing both immediate needs and systemic changes. So far, transit and transportation have not been an explicit focus of these renewal and redefinition efforts. But between the Biden administration's priority on transportation, availability of federal funding, and major Buffalo transit projects in the works, changes are on the way.

The Buffalo MOVE Roundtable convened a diverse group of leaders to explore the question: *“What is the role of public transit in today’s Buffalo Niagara? How could transit shape greater opportunities and build a better tomorrow for those in the Buffalo region?”*

Initial Outcomes

Throughout the series, Roundtable members frequently mentioned the immense value they experienced from being part of the Roundtable group, with the conversation focusing on the realities of Buffalo transit and related decision-making, involving other Buffalonians who care deeply about their community/communities and its/their future, and identifying what changes are both needed and possible. Members remarked at how unusual and “what a treat” it was to be part of this kind of forum.

While the initial framing of the Roundtable centered transit, during the first meeting, Roundtable members voiced that transparency in decision-making is a major challenge in Buffalo. Members shared that decisions are often made behind closed doors or without community input, despite the fact that local residents might have different priorities. As a result of the composition of the Roundtable, certain members were able to ask hard questions and share frustrations which were immediately heard and addressed by other Roundtable members. In this manner, the Roundtable format served to level the playing field by creating a safe space for open communication. One example is a resident asking about a multi-million dollar intersection reconstruction project and the director of the local metropolitan planning organization responding to her query to share more about the project, how funds were assigned to that project, and the parameters of allowable use for those dollars. Though the resident would likely have allocated those dollars differently (for example, to repair and resurface a couple of streets in East Buffalo that are primary transportation corridors in a Black community,) having more information and being heard by the MPO Director helped the resident understand more about the context of the project and its funding, as well as the limitations of how certain pots of funding can be used.

A main interest and benefit of this group is an ongoing communication pathway so Roundtable members can continue to connect to share ideas, actions, questions, and insights, such that decision-makers and residents alike are better informed by one another. This communication pathway is one step toward shifting the status quo and power dynamic in Buffalo today.

Key priorities identified by the Roundtable are:

- Transparent decision-making (largely government, also investors/developers)
- Meaningful community engagement, not just “check the box”
- Access to information and timelines (vs. finding out about a decision made behind closed doors)

This Roundtable is a group of people who all care deeply about their communities and their city. They recognize the historical, institutional, socioeconomic, and racial lines that divide and define very different life experiences and opportunities for people in Buffalo. Yet, they share a firm belief that Buffalo can and must do better, especially when it comes to its lower-wealth residents of color in East Buffalo and throughout the city.

Suggested next steps:

Based on the Roundtable and our experience in the transit/land use/community development space, Rail~Volution (*now Mpact**) would like to suggest the following:

- *Maintain connectivity and momentum of the group*; there’s power and leverage in numbers. People seem ready and willing, but it will take ongoing convening and collective planning and accountability for efforts to move forward and for change to show and stick.
 - Initial ways this might happen: group email list or monthly coffee hour to provide space and opportunity to share and align, be powerful in your own space and bring in other voices from the Roundtable, advocate together for better transparency in decision-making on transportation issues.
- *Pursue one or two specific ways to activate and nurture greater partnerships both within government and across sectors*, leveraging this moment in Buffalo’s history as a season of redefining expectations and possibility.
 - Initial ways this might happen: Launch NFTA impact team (like the Mayor’s impact team), Create a new city staff position for a mobility coordinator that could help navigate bureaucratic silos that are barriers to collaboration and serve as a beacon for prioritizing multimodal transportation. City strategic planning and public works departments are already working towards greater alignment – recognize and applaud their efforts to ensure this “sticks” and encourage additional partners as appropriate.
- *Advance transparency and clear communication in transportation decision-making*.
 - Initial ways this might happen: Work together to identify and promote effective communication vectors that NFTA/local government can use to share information with residents, such as announcements for route changes and public meetings. Offer “citizen academy” style opportunities for residents to learn more and ask questions about government process and how to effectively engage.
- *Change the story about public transit in Buffalo so transit is viewed as a uniting force rather than a racial/socio-economic divider*. This requires changes at both narrative (word on the

street) and service (experience on the street) levels. Many, many small changes will add up over time; transformative change is required but not possible overnight.

- Initial ways this might happen: Pilot 10-minute headways on one or two specific routes for a day and encourage people to try it and share about their experience. Involve community members (riders and non-riders alike) to a bus route redesign exercise to confer about resource allocation (fewer routes with shorter headways vs. more routes with longer headways, first-last mile options) and identify trade-offs. Designate a “tRide the bus” (“tried”) day to get people to try riding the bus. Address bus stop safety/amenities and build community- and intergovernmental partnerships to make improvements.

**Rail~Volution rebranded as Mpact in November 2022*