

Political Stunt: Niagara University Trolley Study

Leo Tolstoy wrote *War and Peace* in about the same length of time it took Legislator Ceretto and Niagara University to write the report on the feasibility of trolleys conveying tourists around Niagara County--and with a much better result. The Niagara Heritage Partnership membership was in favor of the trolley study when it was initially proposed, so long as the trolleys did not use the gorge Robert Moses Parkway as a route. The first public meeting about the study, however, on 2 October 2008, revealed that the gorge parkway had been chosen to convey tourists to Lewiston and points north. When some audience members from Niagara Falls objected to this route, the response of Ceretto, and Professor Angus, who had supervised the student teams for this study, was: "But it's what the students want!"

NHP then raised objections because we suspected that trying to get tourist trolleys established on the Robert Moses gorge parkway was a backdoor way of giving it a reason to exist--and we'd been advocating for its removal for twelve years. Ceretto has been a longtime opponent of removal, along with two other "Project Leaders" of this study, including Richard Soluri, former Mayor of Lewiston, both of whom were members of the Parkway Preservation Committee. So this assessment seemed clear to us, not a stretch at all. When Ceretto and Angus attended a meeting of the Niagara County Environmental Management Council to discuss the trolley initiative, they were asked repeatedly to state that the proposed trolleys would not run on the gorge parkway. They refused to do so. They may have replayed the "what the students wanted" refrain.

Hypothetically, if the students "wanted" the trolleys to drive 100 mph as they traveled down the parkway between Lewiston and Youngstown, would it have been pointed out to them that going that fast was against the law? If the answer to that question is "yes," then why wasn't it pointed out to them that commercial traffic is prohibited on the Robert Moses Parkway? That's what the signs say. How is it, incidentally, that tour buses and other commercial vehicles routinely use the parkway?

When Ceretto finally unveiled the completed feasibility study report on 14 December 2009, during legislative session, it contained no mention of the parkway at all. We were not comforted by this clumsy evasion. Neither were we impressed by the feasibility study, primarily because it wasn't a feasibility study. It was an accumulation of ideas, some of them good, but in the final analysis nothing beyond what a group of people sitting around a table brainstorming could come up with in a couple of hours. None of the tough questions were answered.

This is the question it proposed to answer: Is it feasible to transport tourists to other attractions around Niagara County after they have seen the waterfalls? Implied in the question is that the study will investigate how these trolley rides would be paid for, by continued tapping of County casino money, by fares, by federal or state grants or other handouts, or by funds raised by businesses whose revenues would be substantially increased by the volume of visitors arriving by trolleys. The report does contain fanciful ideas about raising money by selling souvenirs on the trolleys, sweatshirts, and umbrellas (because "the weather Niagara County is always unpredictable"), but provides no cost-analysis or budget. In addition to stocking souvenirs, the trolleys will be equipped with "large television screens," presumably running continuously during the ride, on which local businesses will be able to purchase commercials. By surveying an undisclosed number of people, the "study" has arrived at \$7.50 for an all day pass, and asks the reader to "Compare this to...a trolley in Waikiki, Hawaii, where an adult one day pass costs \$27.00."

The "study" further notes that our "Explore Niagara" system of trolleys will be "similar" to Hawaii's, which "started in 1986...with just two trolleys and now operates with over fifty. This is the type of success Explore Niagara will have over time." This report doesn't mention that Hawaii has a 365 day annual tourist season of perpetual summer—and we have about a 100 day season and winter. Has this Explore Niagara "study" been peer reviewed?

The question about funding appeared to be answered this way: "Of course it's feasible if someone will throw enough money at us." That's probably a legitimate avenue to explore, but let's not pretend a legitimate feasibility study was conducted. Trolleys roll and carry people, roads exist, drivers can be hired, insurance purchased. "Just give us the money and we'll take care of spreading it around," the report implies. Majestic Tours appears to be first in line for providing the rolling stock and hands-on operational knowledge necessary. Ceretto made it a point of thanking the owner of Majestic for the technical consultation needed to complete the report.

Where else the money might be spread is highly questionable. During the first year of operation, there will be only one trolley. It will start from Fort Niagara and go to Lewiston, but will be a rare sight in the City of Niagara Falls. Other than State Parks and the casino, the only Niagara Falls stops are the Snow Park, and the Aquarium. North Tonawanda gets all of eleven sentences in the study, but no visitation by the trolley. Lockport gets mentioned, a total of four words on two separate pages, but no trolley stops. Lewiston, the district of Cerreto's constituents, gets the bulk of the stops. One of these is the Barton Hill Hotel and Spa, "where guests can spend a few nights in a classy hotel or receive special treatment the spa." Between three and five years later, other routes will be added: the Shopping and Dining Tour and the Wine Tour, the latter to be "considerably more expensive." The Shopping and Dining Tour features Niagara Fashion Outlets ("in close proximity to Wegmans and Walmart"), after which "they can then head to Center Street in Lewiston for more shopping and exquisite dining at one of the many restaurants Lewiston has to offer." This S&D Tour will intersect with the first established tour, the Site Seeing, at a "junction...in Lewiston by Barton Hill Hotel."

Tolstoy, a great lover of realistic writing, fiction, and political intrigue, would have been interested in this Explore Niagara report. He would have, however, probably wanted to re-title it "Explore Lewiston." Most of the Niagara Heritage Partnership members still think the trolley idea could be a good one, but give this superficial and biased "study" of it a two thumbs down. We agree with the resident who emailed us to say that the Niagara University trolley study was a "political stunt."

Niagara University is doing much that is commendable in its outreach to the residents of Niagara Falls, especially via its ReNu initiative, but should be embarrassed over their involvement with this "study." That students were utilized is even more regrettable. The "final report" released by Ceretto appears to be an essay written by a student. By way of contrast, we point to another essay written by a student (Mathew Andreini, July 2009), entitled "Revitalizing Niagara Falls: Recovering from the Legacy of Robert Moses," posted at The Buffalo Activist, A Publication of the Western New York Peace Center, and prominently linked from the NHP website.

The Niagara Frontier Transportation Authority seems to be bankrolling the "Explore Niagara" venture, or at least strongly supporting it. Explore Niagara, in fact, (whoever they are) stated they will be "operating as an off shoot of the Niagara Frontier Transportation Authority." This explains why Henry M. Sloma, Chair of the NFTA, is a "Project Leader" of the Explore Niagara fiction. The NFTA, then, should have

answers to all the tough questions, some of which are asked in additional trolley commentaries found under Recent Postings at www.niagaraheritage.com.

Here's one question NHP would like answered: If, indeed, Niagara University spent the \$2500 of County casino money that Legislator Cerreto procured for this study, how exactly was it spent? Printing costs for the final "report"? Perhaps Senator Maziarz, also a Project Leader for Explore Niagara, could help us out on this one. He was very much in favor of Explore Niagara, though he recently addressed the Ecological Standing Committee of the Niagara River Greenway Commission on the subject of useless "studies." Submitting Freedom of Information Act requests is starting to get tiresome.

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