

NHP Remarks on the Feasibility Study for a Tourist Trolley Route Between Niagara Falls and Lewiston, NY

NOTE: Most of these remarks, 1-9, were provided on 22 October 2008 to the Niagara University students selected to do the trolley study, as well as the brochure "Proposal for the Removal of the Robert Moses Parkway and Restoration of the Natural Landscape."

Niagara Heritage Partnership representatives were unable to attend the forum when the "Explore Niagara" transportation study was discussed (2 Oct. 2008) for the purpose of inviting public comment. We are taking this opportunity to make initial remarks. What follows here is a summary of individual member comments, questions, and concerns.

Generally, reactions to the plan were positive, though questions were asked: 1) Why is the system projected only to serve Lewiston and not the entire County (Lockport, North Tonawanda, Barker, etc.), especially when funding for the study comes from the County? 2) Could the study be extended to include the rest of the County? 3) Has a list of the "various attractions in the western end of the county" been compiled? If so, what are they? 4) Why don't they call it the "Explore Lewiston" study? 5) Taking at face value that the system won't be self-supported by fares, what sources of money will support it? 6) Will the Lower River Region Chamber of Commerce be willing to foot the bill for the trolleys? 7) Is Niagara Greenway funding being considered? 8) Are the people-mover advocates aware that the most authoritative, nationally recognized definitions of greenway stipulate that such parks be non-motorized? 9) Which businesses wouldn't want trolleys (at no cost to them) dropping off customers at their doors? 10) How, specifically, or on what, will the \$2,500 grant money be spent?

Most NHP members were enthusiastic about the proposed trolley service as long as assurances were in place to guarantee that the trolley route would not be running along the gorge Robert Moses Parkway. The idea of trolleys running on the gorge RMP is unacceptable because it is in direct conflict with NHP advocacy for total gorge parkway removal, a nearly twelve-year effort with huge grassroots support. It has this huge grassroots support because of its potential for environmental and economic benefits to the region. Details are available at www.niagaraheritage.org.

Accompanying and underlying the people-mover concept of linking "tourist attractions in Niagara Falls and Lewiston," is the unspoken agenda that establishing a trolley route along the gorge parkway (even by the conclusion of a study and "test program") would shore up a feeble argument for parkway retention made by those in opposition to removal. This perception is supported by the following observations which cite the position of various universities, agencies, municipalities, and individuals who have weighed in on the parkway issue:

- 1) Studies recently completed by teams of students from the Buffalo School of Architecture and Urban Design and urban planning students from Kent State University involving the revitalization of Main Street, Niagara Falls, NY, assumed that the gorge parkway—all four lanes—would be removed. This was their starting point.
- 2) The Office of State Parks, Recreation and Historic Preservation (OPRHP) has indicated that scoping hearings to determine the future disposition of the gorge RMP will be held this fall (no specific date announced). The study of people-mover feasibility to be conducted by Niagara University Students coincides with and exceeds this time span.
- 3) The OPRHP is responsible for the current "compromise" situation of the gorge RMP, which may signal their tendency to prefer a variation of parkway retention: a) as a service road to other state parks (and their subsequent development with food shacks and so on to be run by Delaware North) and b) as a sop to local political figures (Lewiston Village Mayor Soluri, Legislator John Ceretto, et al) who are in favor of retaining the parkway.
- 4) It is likely (though it hasn't been announced) that the OPRHP will be the lead agency for the scoping hearings previously mentioned.

- 5) Legislator John Ceretto (R-Lewiston) is also an OPRHP employee who, as a legislator, sponsored the request for \$2,500 to study the people-mover idea.
- 6) The Niagara County Legislature, in support of the "Explore Niagara" study and test program, some years ago attempted to come out in favor of parkway retention. A draft letter composed under the direction of Sean O'Conner, then the Chair of the Legislature, cited as part of its rationale that the gorge RMP served patrons of the Ransomville Speedway. After it was pointed out that Doreen O'Connor (Sean O'Conner's wife) owned Majestic Tours, a tourism company that may have relied on the RMP, no further action was taken to complete a final draft of the letter and, to our knowledge, it was never used to establish an official legislative position on the issue.
- 7) The Master Plan for the City of Niagara Falls presently calls for the total removal of gorge parkway lanes from a point just north of the Aquarium of Niagara to Findlay Drive, just south of Whirlpool State Park. Master plans can be altered, shelved, or abandoned, of course, for a variety of reasons. Funding can be made unavailable, compromises can be worked out via the complexities of relationships between state agencies and funding dynamics beyond the understanding of mere mortals, and so on. While NHP strongly supports this portion of parkway removal as a good first step, we recognize there's a difference between reality and political reality.
- 8) This difference is in part demonstrated by the attached copy of a letter to Rep. Louise Slaughter that discusses the Town of Lewiston's willingness to spend funding money inappropriately and wastefully to achieve a political end. The town of Lewiston opposes gorge parkway removal.
- 9) In spite of the forthcoming public hearings first promised to be held this fall, the Department of Transportation (DOT) is currently repaving a four-mile length of the RMP. (The DOT, in conjunction with the OSPRHP, evaluated the present state of the gorge RMP a few years ago and concluded the pilot project a success. The NHP response is on our website.
- 10) A recent newspaper article was devoted to the orange cones and barrels on the gorge RMP, in place since the so-called pilot project. It seems people have been complaining about them. The complaining is code, of course, for the prolonged whining of "We want our commuter route back like it was." Assemblywoman DeMonte met with "local leaders" and the DOT Commissioner in part to discuss the orange cone issue, and said "I can't tell you the number of people that (sic) have talked to me over the years...how tired they are of seeing these things. And I can't blame them." It appears some relief is in sight after the DOT paving, so talking with local leaders (which ones, incidentally?) and the Commissioner has paid off big time, hasn't it?
- 11) A 4-million-dollar facelift to Artpark (\$2.5 million obtained by Assemblywoman DeMonte) is designed to make improvements that will more easily accommodate huge concert crowds. Cerreto announced he's "working on bringing a people-mover...to Lewiston," suggesting a parking lot for concertgoers could be established in Niagara Falls and the people could be taken to Lewiston on trolleys. Further, Lewiston village trustee Geiben suggested an exit ramp to the gorge RMP could be created to clear Lewiston traffic congestion caused by vehicles of departing concertgoers. This desperate groping to find reasons for parkway retention may have finally struck a major chord: it might be beneficial to Artpark concertgoers.
- 12) It appears now that the scoping sessions will be postponed until next year.

We hope these comments, questions, observations, and opinions will be helpful.

Sincerely,

Bob Baxter
NHP Conservation Chair