

December 1, 2015

**ERIE COUNTY COUNCIL –  
PUBLIC HEARING – Regional Transit Authority**

Fiore Leone, Chairman, called to order a Public Hearing on the possible establishment of a regional transit authority by the County of Erie, held in the Hirt Auditorium, Blasco Library, Erie, PA, at 5:30 p.m. Following the pledge of Allegiance, Chairman Leone then gave the floor to Dr. Foust, subcommittee Chairman.

Dr. Foust began the meeting by welcoming those in attendance. He was happy that so many people came out to discuss a really important issue for the community going forward. He gave some background as to why the Public Hearing was being held. Dr. Foust stated that a little over a year ago, it became apparent and a little more newsworthy that the EMTA Charter, after 50 years, was set to expire on September 14, 2016. As County Council thought about how to proceed, Council was not interested in going forward with business as it currently operates. On June 18, 2015, a Resolution was passed rejecting the proposed amendment to renew the charter basically as it was. The Council subcommittee, including Dr. Foust, Mr. Horton, and Mr. DiMattio, was charged with negotiating with representatives from the City to try to come to some sort of resolution as to what the next Charter may look like. As an appendage, Dr. Foust explained that County Council has made it clear that they are not interested in going forward as business currently operates so as a contingency, with the assistance of Council Solicitor Talarico, it was decided to look into and go forward at least with the planning of a new transit authority if the other negotiations break down and common ground cannot be found. On October 6, 2015, a resolution was passed indicating that possibility. One of the steps that has to be taken is to have a public hearing on the issue.

Dr. Foust commented that there are a lot of benefits to having a regional transit authority. Currently, approximately ten different municipalities' residents are double taxed for the same service. They have their local municipal tax dollars toward the transit authority as well as their County tax dollars. A regional authority with just one funding source can put an end to that, and those communities can then use those resources on other more pressing matters within their municipal boundaries. Council has received letters of support from Waterford Township, Edinboro Borough, Greenfield Township, City of Corry, Millcreek Township, North East Borough, Wesleyville Borough, Washington Township, and Harborcreek Township. Dr. Foust then gave a brief explanation of how the Public Hearing would proceed. Those who called in ahead of time will receive 5 minutes to speak. All others would receive three minutes. Dr. Foust asked the audience to keep their remarks to speaking about the proposed transit authority. At the end of the meeting, if any of the other Council members wanted to add anything, they would have that opportunity.

Members Present: Mr. Leone, Chairman  
Mr. Fatica, Vice Chairman  
Mr. Breneman  
Mr. DiMattio  
Dr. Foust  
Mr. Horton  
Mrs. Loll

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Brian Pitzer, Edinboro/Washington Township; Executive Director of All Aboard Erie; Mr. Pitzer thanked Council for the opportunity to speak on behalf of All Aboard Erie on this subject. Mr. Pitzer then read the following statement: “We congratulate Erie County Council for its leadership to create a new charter for the future of the region’s transportation systems. This is a wonderful opportunity to start with a clean slate and to envision a transportation system based not on the past, but on what is best for the future. If I may borrow a phrase from the US Army, ‘be the best that a transportation system can be’. While much of the discussion here tonight will likely focus on the future structure of what has been the EMTA and its bus and LIFT operations, I would encourage everyone to think big, to think about a comprehensive transportation system that takes into consideration all modes of surface transportation and bring them together in a seamless, integrated whole. For example, Erie has a port authority, an airport authority, and a transit authority, but no rail authority, no pedestrian or cycling authority. Yet, all of those methods of transportation, by boat, plane, train, bus, walking, or bicycle, are important components of a vibrant 21<sup>st</sup> century community. For that reason, we recommend that the new authority, in whatever form it takes, be in essence and Erie surface transportation authority, with the acronym “ESTA”. There are precedents in other parts of the country for a multi-faceted transportation authority. In Orange County, California, for example, its authority was created in 1990 by combining seven separate County agencies. It now oversees 77 bus routes, coordinates the regional metro commuter rail service within Orange County, controls the County master highway plan, and is even building a four mile long streetcar route. In 2005, it was named America’s best transportation system. All Aboard Erie would also strongly recommend that the board of directors of the new authority include members who actually use the system on a regular basis. Transportation attacks a myriad of important societal issues – jobs and employment, safety, air quality, productivity, social mobility, education, and many more. As Harvard Professor, Rosebeth Moss-Ketcher has written, ‘Public transportation in particular is an important ride out of poverty and into the middle class if it provides access to jobs and education’. It is timely to mention what is taking place a few miles north of us in Ontario. The Ontario government has a plan called The Big Move that will spend \$50 billion over the next 25 years to accommodate not only its current population, but also an expected 2.6 million additional citizens by 2031. Richard Florida, director of the Martin Prosperity Institute at the University of Toronto’s Rotman School of Management. In his research on revitalized cities, he discovered their economies were dominated by creative workers who could choose where they wanted to live and work. The work follows the creative class not the other way around. In an address last week in Waterloo, Ontario, Mr. Florida said, ‘If we are going to become more innovative as a nation, if we are going to become more productive, if we are going to become more competitive, we are not going to do that just on the backs of great firms. We have to have great cities that mobilize those assets that create density, that allow us to generate the start-ups and that’s why we need to grow together as a mega region.’ Mr. Florida then made this recommendation, ‘Ensure that the cities in the region have thriving arts and culture, interesting and diverse neighborhoods where old buildings are preserved and re-used, and vastly improve train service that binds it all together. In this country, we need a commitment to a new kind of rail transport and the time to do it is now. The only way we are going to do it is by stopping to build roads, which don’t fix the problem, and by building a

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new kind of transit and transport that can enable us to get to places quickly.’. Erie would love to have a Google, an Apple, or a Tesla build a high tech industry in our region, but that is something beyond our control. What is in our control is to build an infrastructure that would serve as a magnet to attract those kinds of businesses and the creative workforce Mr. Florida spoke of. I would suggest that Erie follow the Ontario and Orange County examples by creating a transit system or systems that have a vision for where we want to be 25 years from now”.

Julie Minick, city of Erie; Assistant Executive Director of All Aboard Erie, Chair of the Bus Committee; Ms. Minick stated that she is also a bus rider. She thanked Council for having the meeting at a place that can be reached by several bus lines. She stated that at times, public meetings are not on bus lines and it’s difficult for people to attend. She is speaking for bus riders and the idea that the bussing be incorporated into the regional transit system. She commented that many people in Erie and around other cities think that bus riders are low income workers who cannot afford a car. She stated that is simply untrue. Yes, there are a portion of bus riders that are bus dependent, but there are many of them, herself included, who own houses, cars, and specifically chose to live on a bus line for the convenience and savings that the bus system provides. She further commented that if you ride the bus, you will see college professors, nurses, architects, and every profession, and every income level. There are several major employers who have contracts with EMTA, and they pay EMTA so the employees can use their ID’s to ride the bus. Some include Hamot and Erie Insurance. They realize that instead of building parking lots which are only used eight hours a day, it is more cost effective to pay for employees to ride the bus. The main complaint she has heard is that EMTA is not diverse. She felt that much more than the current resident status should be considered in this diversity – there should be economic and racial diversity. She recommended that if a new authority is created, make sure that the board members actually use the transit system. If the majority of the board were standing outside waiting for a bus, everything in the transit system would change. Not only would they get ideas for change, but they would know what is needed. She wanted to make sure that the following questions get answered: How will this restructuring affect the most important part of the transit system – the people that will use it? What reason do you want to create this new authority, is it to provide better service? Incorporate other types of transit? Lower fares and tickets? Or just have new and different board members?

Jason Brendel, city of Erie; Mr. Brendel discussed his journey on the transportation system for the past 20 years. He spoke of the library being at Perry Square and bus route 6. If Erie is trying to establish a regional transit authority, he recalled routes going to Millcreek and going to Edinboro, and that transportation throughout the county has been going on for decades. He relayed stories from a former director of EMTA about getting transportation out to the county in the 90s. He is all for public transportation but stated there is a system that has been working consecutively and as a standing citizen advisory board member of EMTA, there have been meetings held this year discussing what the public needs and wants. He thought it was strange that there is still talk about a key component in the community. He stated 20 years later he is still using bus transportation and he wanted to make sure that the money is used correctly. He felt it was time to stop the talking and take some action. Erie is on the brink of becoming another Detroit and he wants some action

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to back up the words. If it costs the taxpayers a little more, he's okay with that, and if it saves, put that money back into the taxpayer pocket where it belongs. He suggested a referendum to have the public vote on how to save money.

Amy Conn-Pretor, city of Erie; Ms. Conn stated she did some math regarding the city and the county contributions. \$12 million comes from PennDOT, which is state funded. Directly, \$330,000 is donated from the county. \$260,000 is donated from the city of Erie, for a total of \$590,000 combined county and city money, with a grand total of \$12,590,000 in revenue. These figures were given to Ms. Conn by Mike Tann, Executive Director of EMTA. In 1966, it used to be 60% revenue from the city and 40% revenue from the County. Almost 50 years later, those figures have flipped. She stated if she was paying the lion's share, she would think she would have the power to overstep too. She commented that what needs to be done should be in the best interest of all of the citizens, not just some of the citizens. There is nothing preventing the County from creating its own authority. In other cities there are multiple authorities crossing over to provide better transit. She also commented that if the accountability of the city was the major, or get the accountability to 50-50, to work together. She is in board with the citizens who have said that the board ought to be comprised of people who ride the transit system in part. She was curious as to how many people at the meeting drove their own car. She stated she lives on State Street not just because of convenience and access that transit provides. She cannot drive and relies heavily on public transportation. She felt that a 50 year charter is extreme and compared it to having a 50 year lease. She asked that the county consider lowering the number of years for the charter as well. She asked that everyone work together, be accountable, and unify the city and county to work for the people and not against each other. She urged Council to do what is in the best interest of all Erie city and Erie county citizens.

Mike Michaelson, Millcreek Township; Mr. Michaelson is an employee of GE and stated that the bus that runs from his house to GE takes about an hour and forty minutes and he can make that trip in twenty or thirty minutes. Going home on the Bayfront connector is forty minutes. He thanked Council for rethinking the transportation needs. He stated he would like to use the bus but it's not feasible to wake up two hours early to go to work using the bus. He appreciated what Mr. Pitzer stated about creating an authority that encompasses all of the areas of Erie County. He recently bought a Prius because public transportation is also about saving the environment and since he cannot use it as is, he decided to do something on his own. He grew up in Girard and there was no bus service there in the 70s and 80s to get into the city, but today there are more routes to get into the county but it's only one day a week. The only drawback would be the amount of time it would take to get from Corry or Albion into the city. He felt that a light speed rail that could transport quickly. He thanked Council for the work they are doing and hope they are headed in the right direction.

Tecumseh Brown-Eagle, city of Erie; VIP passholder for the Transit Authority. He attends, for training purposes and to assist the County of Erie in fulfilling manufacturing jobs and youth to obtain employment, to assist firsthand at the Erie County Vo-Tech School on Oliver Road. It is 6.7 miles from downtown. He stated there is an issue, and the city cannot be in charge of a regional asset because they are not regionally thinking. The County is more inclusive of all of the citizens.

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Every citizen of Erie is also a citizen of Erie County. In going to the Vo-Tech school, he has to walk 1 mile each way because the bus turns at Lord Corporation, it does not come all the way up Oliver Road. He stated that limits Erie residents who would like to get additional training, increase career possibilities, and improve themselves can't get there. The city citizens who need this opportunity the most don't have access to get there. He commented that he lived in Atlanta, Harrisburg, Philadelphia, Washington DC, and Cleveland, Ohio, and he used public transportation even when he did have a vehicle because parking would "kill him" – waiting in a car in a traffic jam causes stress. The city has a good system but it's not the best system and he doesn't feel it's the best that it can be. If there is more of a regional viewpoint on how to serve all of the citizens, it will be beneficial. He felt if the County manages or oversees it, it will have more of an impact. He stated that he walked down to the meeting this evening and discussed the unbelievable amount of traffic for a little city like Erie. He feels the county needs to have regional transportation and keep the money regionally instead of having businesses getting frustrated and leaving. There are new hotels going up in the city and County residents have no means of public transportation to get to the city.

Daniel Dubaj, North East borough; Mr. Dubaj stated that he drove to the meeting today but if he caught a bus, he would have had to take the 158 from Mercyhurst-North East which is not convenient for him. He commented that there are a lot of constraints on any public service and EMTA and this is no easy task to manage. He felt it is crucially important because people are lifeblood of a vibrant urban center and public transit is the heart of it and gets us around. The health of that system can have far reaching effects on the lives of individuals in the region as far as jobs and training, but also on the economy and culture as a whole. This is what infrastructure looks like – it is a key place where government can actually build a city. While it's tempting to balance rhetoric of running every public organization like a business, this isn't about profit and loss, it's about government's essential function of building a foundation of public infrastructure so the region will be closer to what it could be than what it is today. He stated that as an organizer of Keystone Progress, they have been holding meetings talking about various local issues to work on and every single time, issues with public transit come up. He commented that there are people who work in Millcreek and the restaurant closes at 10 or later and the last bus comes at 9:53. That is one example. Another example is having more sanitation, trash cans, sanitation wipes on public transportation are important. If the system indeed grows, let it grow more responsive as well. He stated it seems that everyone is concerned with seeing more enhanced dialogue between community leaders on this issue so make sure there is a plan for that as well. He has taken some mass public transit and spent most of his life in large cities where there is great public transit, but also spent time in medium sized, small, and large cities that had terrible public transit and one of the big factors is whether there is a strong organized group of community stakeholders in that system who make their voices heard directly to leaders of the transit system. That dialogue on the authority is one of the most important facets to have a more vibrant, robust ridership for the region and for the city. He thanked Council for their time and wished them good luck in moving the Charter forward.

Andy Nye, city of Erie; he wanted to let Council know what they are capable of and he gave some statistics that have pulled mass transit into their vision for the future

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that was in their past and they are now reaping the benefits of mass transit – places such as Phoenix and Baltimore. They decided to pull mass transit in before the recession hit and during the recession, people's homes, that were near mass transit links where people could walk to a light rail station and go to work, kept their value during the recession 40% better than properties that were not near these mass transit links. He wanted Council to have statistic to know if this is done the right way, it will benefit all.

James Will, city of Erie; Mr. Will wanted to commend Council on the construction between 14<sup>th</sup> street and French Street. He is concerned about the gentleman who had the vision of Google and Apple coming in and that those buses becoming automated could cause the drivers to lose their jobs. He likes the idea of a regional transit authority because of the number of aging citizens. He felt it is necessary for them to have a schedule or website that those individuals can call and request transportation. He noticed that the Department of Welfare bought property located on 14<sup>th</sup> Street between German and Division Street and they are going to take those houses that are located there and create parking for the employees that will be filling the brand new bus station that was built.

Jason White, Mayor of Albion; Mr. White came to listen about the plan to regionalize the authority and he thinks it is a very good idea. He stated that Albion houses the state correctional institution. He checked the EMTA website and could not find a route that actually goes to Albion. He was sure that people who may want to visit family and have come in to the airport or bus station in Erie, they have no way to get out to the prison other than maybe a taxi cab which would cost a fortune. He asked that Council keep in mind that the outlying areas are underserved. The nearest bus he found was in Fairview, which is another ten or fifteen miles from Albion. The city is already served well by EMTA but County areas really deserve more consideration.

Dr. Foust commented that the questions and ideas that were brought forth this evening were very interesting. There has not been a lot of structure in the way Council will go forward. He stated that from Council's perspective, the best case scenario is to transfer EMTA to a County-wide authority and that way there is greater accountability to the whole region and scope. He felt it would also help make the funding of the transit authority that much more efficient. Dr. Foust that all the ideas this evening could be incorporated into the Articles of Incorporation that have yet to be written and file so the possibilities are open at this point and he would assume there would be good discussion to take these ideas forward. Dr. Foust then turned the meeting back to Chairman Leone.

Chairman Leone commented that Mr. Pitzer made an excellent statement regarding including board members that use the system. Chairman Leone stated that is part of the problem he has seen with many of these authorities. Everyone wants to put in specific individuals on those authorities that have no idea what the system is all about. He felt that is one of the biggest points brought up this evening and he commended Mr. Pitzer and the others for stating that. He also looks at EMTA – which stands for Erie Metropolitan Transit Authority. Metropolitan doesn't mean just the city. He was not faulting the city of Erie because it's been an authority for a long period of time and they have done what they think is right as far as the system

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is concerned. As was indicated, this has been for 50 years. He felt it was time not to just look at the city of Erie, but the County as a whole. He is a city resident and didn't want anyone to misunderstand, but he believes it is time to make changes. Change is fearsome for many individuals, but a change is necessary. Chairman Leone stated if we continue to go on the path that we are on, Erie will never change and Erie County will never change. We will continue to deteriorate like we have and we will continue to do so unless we start making some of these changes.

There being no further business, the meeting then adjourned at 5:40 p.m.

Deneé M. Breter, Council Secretary

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