

## **Beyond the Peace Bridge: Regional Opportunity, International Trade and Community Regeneration A Partnership for Public Good Policy Brief**

### **Summary**

Now is the time to craft a new direction for the Peace Bridge that reduces local harm and increases regional opportunity, including these steps:

- Create a clear process and timeline that prioritizes public participation.
- Make immediate efforts to improve the health and quality of life of the neighborhood.
- Longer term, remove truck traffic from the Peace Bridge and develop enhanced freight processing elsewhere, in a multi-modal logistics center. Make the Peace Bridge a true International Gateway and driver of the new knowledge and experience economy.
- Modernize the system of governing Buffalo-Niagara's border crossings with closer cooperation between, and eventual merger of, the two bi-national bridge authorities.

### **A Better, More Just Peace Bridge Project**

The long debate about the Peace Bridge has entered another chapter. This summer the

Public Bridge Authority, citing a lack of funding, abandoned its plan for a second bridge and a major plaza expansion. While it is welcome news that the plaza footprint will be reduced to save the historic neighborhood, many questions remain and few answers have been advanced in the months since this project shift became public.

### **A Better, More Just Peace Bridge Project**

PPG's 2011 Community Agenda includes the following plank on the Peace Bridge:

*Address the crisis of respiratory illness on Buffalo's West Side and fully examine the localized effects of the bridge through the development of a health impact study for the residents of the surrounding neighborhoods including effects during proposed construction;*

*Avoid further encroachment and begin restoration of the surrounding historic neighborhoods and Front Park;*

*Capitalize on opportunities for true economic development potential of a regional bi-national trade and transportation system for Western New York including a single entity to manage all Buffalo-Niagara crossings starting with revenue sharing among existing Authorities.*

Needed now are short term actions to reverse the damage being done to the neighborhood, the environment, and public health, along with long term measures to capitalize on the region's border location. Without a defined process for moving forward, confusion and inertia are bound to set in. A clearly delineated timeline that prioritizes public participation will create a better project and avoid the delays that are caused by closed door or insulated decision making. Such a plan must not view the Peace Bridge in isolation; it must take a comprehensive approach to all of the region's crossings.

The Peace Bridge presents a unique chance to reinvigorate Buffalo's waterfront and create real wealth and opportunity for existing and future residents of the region while creating a welcoming signature gateway to Buffalo and the USA. This waterfront project has the potential to become a nexus of revitalization, to strengthen communities and to provide benefits to local residents in quality of life, environmental justice and sustainable employment opportunities.

Buffalo's West Side, adjacent to both the central business district and dense residential neighborhoods, is not a suitable location for freight processing. Capitalizing on this particular location means focusing on passenger traffic and on the knowledge, service, and tourism sectors of the economy, while using other bridge crossings for freight.

### **Health and Quality of Life are Paramount on the West Side**

From longtime residents to newly arrived immigrants and refugees, the people of the

West Side form one of Buffalo's most diverse, dynamic and potential-filled communities. Lamentably, the West Side is also an environmental justice community disproportionately afflicted with asthma and respiratory disease.

*Environmental Justice is the fair treatment and meaningful involvement of all people regardless of race, color, national origin, or income with respect to the development, implementation, and enforcement of environmental laws, regulations, and policies.*

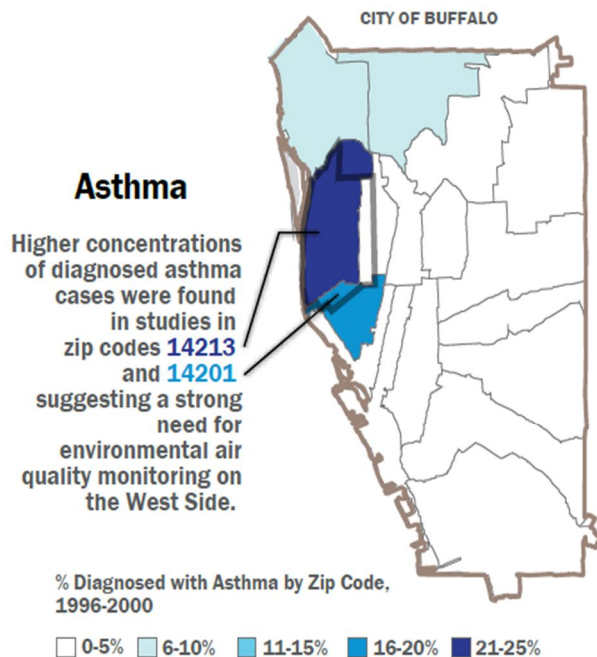
Peer reviewed medical research has determined the commercial traffic at the Peace Bridge "not only contribute[s] to asthma and other respiratory disease exacerbations but may also contribute to high asthma prevalence on Buffalo's West Side."<sup>1</sup> This research has found that rates of asthma and respiratory illness in communities downwind of the Peace Bridge Complex and major roadways supplying it are four times higher than rates in other parts of the region.<sup>2</sup> Nearly 45% of West Side households reported at least one case of chronic respiratory illness or asthma, and the chance of having at least one person with asthma per household was more than 2.5 times that of Buffalo's East Side



Photo courtesy of Clean Air Coalition of WNY

– itself a hotbed of asthma – after adjusting for race, socioeconomic factors, and household triggers.<sup>3</sup>

Unfortunately, Buffalo’s historic street pattern facilitates the migration of these exhaust fumes deep into Buffalo’s West Side, as it captures and distributes prevailing Lake Erie winds inland – making the Peace Bridge area an even worse place for heavy truck traffic.



Oyana PhD, Tonny J., Peter Rogerson PhD, and Jamson S. Lwebuga-Mukasa, MD, PhD. "International Journal of Health Geographics | Full Text | Geographic Variations of Childhood Asthma Hospitalization and Outpatient Visits and Proximity to Ambient Pollution Sources at a U.S.-Canada Border Crossing." *IJHG | Home. Web. 11 Mar. 2011.* <http://www.ij-healthgeographics.com/content/4/1/14>.

Residents cannot be expected to endure this threat to their health any longer. Short term measures should include monitoring neighborhood health and air quality while undertaking pollution elimination and mitigation measures such as:

- processing fewer trucks and wide loads,
- installing electrification stations,
- strictly enforcing idling bans for trucks on the plaza,
- changing queuing patterns,
- creating green buffer zones by planting mature trees, known for their ability to capture pollutants.

Equally necessary are short term efforts to restore the quality of life to the surrounding Prospect Hill neighborhood, which has suffered dramatically from the decades of uncertainty surrounding the bridge expansion proposal. The neighborhood needs to be preserved and restored, and no more land should be ceded for further encroachment of transportation infrastructure. Investment in Niagara Street to develop a strong and vibrant corridor all the way to City Hall is crucial. And capital investment must be allocated to restore Episcopal Church properties, the housing which has been neglected by the PBA, and the privately owned housing that has seen substantial disinvestment due to its former inclusion in the project footprint.

A stronger, healthier community also requires infrastructure improvements and beautification. The Peace Bridge should be a unique and appealing gateway to and from Canada, welcoming visitors into Buffalo and Fort Erie, not just directing them to speed through to highway connections.

Currently pedestrians and cyclists are treated as second class users of the bridge and the neighboring streets. They face confusion and misdirection when reaching customs and immigration on both sides of the border. Cyclists are expected to walk bikes the entire length of the crossing. The network of streets and sidewalks on both sides of the bridge and on the bridge itself should be welcoming to all users. The Complete Streets principles adopted by the City of Buffalo, if fully implemented, will help make sure that the high volume of automotive traffic does not overwhelm the livability and viability of these communities.

Reducing truck traffic goes hand in hand with a long term goal listed in the City of Buffalo's Comprehensive plan: replacing the Niagara Section of I-190 with a boulevard.<sup>4</sup> As demonstrated in cities across the country, freeing up valuable waterfront real estate and improving water access can leverage dramatic private investment and renewal.

Buffalo's Comprehensive Plan calls for an International Gateway that includes the bridge, plaza and surrounding neighborhood and commercial strips, as well as historic parks and waterways. Implementing the City's vision will require a revitalized Niagara Street with thriving, independent businesses that would benefit from a renewed community and an international customer base. By contrast, the previous plan of the PBA was dominated by a large duty free complex that would have siphoned consumer dollars out of the local market.

The parks, parkways and recreational facilities must be restored: Front Park, Porter Avenue,

LaSalle Park, the underutilized shoreline adjacent to the West Side Rowing Club, and the neglected RiverWalk. Funding must also be dedicated to sustainable landscaping surrounding the bridge facilities and throughout the neighborhood, and to the creation of green, walkable, bikeable streets leading to the water's edge. All of these initiatives can and should provide local jobs for local residents, further boosting the area's economic well-being.

In all project considerations, much emphasis needs to be placed on clean and green operations, both to limit the bridge's future environmental impact and utility costs, but also to boldly proclaim to visitors that the region is pursuing a commitment to sustainability and a forward looking economy.



*Niagara Street*



*Front Park Shelter (Copyright 1999, Stanton M. Broderick)*

## A Longer Term Outlook

A better Peace Bridge project requires new thinking not just about the neighborhood but also about the whole region. A new, more diversified economy is emerging, and as Greater Toronto continues to grow, Southern Ontario and Buffalo-Niagara will be well poised to prosper from that growth – if the right infrastructure and institutional frameworks are in place.



A recent Regional Institute study commissioned by Buffalo Niagara Enterprise found that freight movement and storage jobs have fallen by more than 1,500 positions since 2001 and that regional employment in trade, transportation and utilities will decline by 840 jobs (2.5%) by 2016. Despite the fact that the “region’s location across the border from Canada, the nation’s largest trading partner, makes it a prime location for the logistics industry... employment in this target industry accounts for a smaller percentage of the total economy [5.0%] than it does nationally [6.4%]”.<sup>5</sup>

While this and most other segments of the economy relying on freight transport (food production, manufacturing, etc.) are declining, the health sciences, professional, business and education services, leisure and hospitality

industries that rely on the movement and transport of people and information are each expected to grow significantly in the coming years. Moreover, the bulk of activity in this new economy is focused in downtown Buffalo and the Buffalo Niagara Medical Campus, each of which is best served by the Peace Bridge crossing.

A focus on accommodating freight at the Peace Bridge location may bring in higher toll revenue for the Public Bridge Authority, but it does not serve the current and future economic needs of the region. Add-on servicing, freight handling and processing have no space, let alone competitive advantage, on the West Side of Buffalo, but they inflict significant harms and costs.

The opportunities to aid our freight-related industries lie elsewhere. In 2010 the Niagara Frontier Urban Area Freight Transportation Study commissioned by the Greater Buffalo Niagara Regional Transportation Council identified several existing assets that would facilitate the development of a Regional Logistics Center, including four Class I railroads serving the region with good east-west connectivity; good highway corridors for serving end customers both in the U.S. and Canada; significant trade infrastructure including customs brokers, freight forwarders, logistics firms and government agencies; the ability to serve large metropolitan areas including Toronto, Buffalo and Rochester; and the Toronto metropolitan area’s lack of direct connections to the Port of New York/New Jersey.<sup>6</sup>

The report estimates that a \$25 million investment in a logistics center would produce returns of between \$310 million and \$557 million<sup>7</sup> – a much better investment of scarce public dollars than spending multiple times that amount to increase truck traffic at the Peace Bridge, with little or no spin-off benefits and substantial spin-off harms.

In Niagara County, the three bridges specialize separately in tourist traffic (Rainbow Bridge), frequent crossers (Whirlpool Bridge) and trucks (Lewistown-Queenston), rather than trying to maximize all three uses at each location. The Peace Bridge should focus on the new passenger-based economy suited to downtown Buffalo, while freight capacity should be expanded in locations with good rail, water and air cargo connectivity and more sparse residential development.

### **A Contemporary Border Crossing System Requires Contemporary Governance**

The region's interest is in the question: How can the Peace Bridge location best contribute to a bi-national trade and transportation system that enhances Western New York?

Unfortunately, the governance structure of the PBA makes it an isolated entity with every incentive to pursue its own, institutional interest in maximizing revenues – which leads to maximizing truck traffic – including the recent expansion of an oversize load program which is bringing yet more heavy equipment and diesel pollution to the West Side.

The Niagara Falls Bridge Commission operates the three crossings in Niagara County in complete isolation from the PBA operating the Peace Bridge and thus the two bureaucracies

compete with one another for revenue rather than working together to advance the region.



Formed roughly 75 years ago by international agreements, these agencies stand in need of a serious re-evaluation. Merger, or at the very least collaboration, is a crucial step. A revenue sharing agreement, for example, would eliminate the competition for freight traffic and would allow the bridges to be used to their highest and best use for their relative locations. Merger or collaboration could also facilitate more efficient use of the Nexus system, which reduces idling and thus air pollution. A closer relationship between the agencies would serve to foster a common purpose and spur the kind of cooperative, big picture planning and operations crucial for regional prosperity.

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<sup>1</sup> "Geographic Clustering of Adult Asthma Hospitalization and Residential Exposure to Pollution at a United States–Canada Border Crossing". Tonny J. Oyana, PhD, Peter Rogerson, PhD, and Jamson S. Lwebuga-Mukasa, MD, PhD. *American Journal of Public Health*. July 2004, Vol 94, No. 7. p.1256.

<sup>2</sup> Oyana. p.1255.

<sup>3</sup> "Local Ecological Factors, Ultrafine Particulate Concentrations, and Asthma Prevalence Rates in Buffalo, New York, Neighborhoods". Jamson S. Lwebuga-Mukasa, M.D., Ph.D., Tonny J. Oyana, M.Sc., Ph.D., and Caryn Johnson, M.D., M.P.H. *Journal of Asthma*, 42:5,337 — 348. June 2005. p.342.

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<sup>4</sup> "Queen City in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, Buffalo's Comprehensive Plan". City of Buffalo. October 2004. p.78.

<sup>5</sup> "Who's Your Economy: Buffalo Niagara Labor Market Assessment 2010". Buffalo Niagara Enterprise. September 2010. pp.26-27.

<sup>6</sup> "Niagara Frontier Urban Area Freight Transportation Study, Draft Final Report". Greater Buffalo Niagara Regional Transportation Council. August 2010. p.89.

<sup>7</sup> GBNRTC, p.96.

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