

Exploring Tomorrow's Transit

Frequently Asked Questions



Q: What is the purpose of Exploring Tomorrow's Transit (ETT)?

A: Exploring Tomorrow's Transit (ETT) is an outreach initiative by Centro and the Syracuse Metropolitan Transportation Council (SMTC) designed to gain an understanding of our community's public transit needs and expectations. As transportation needs, especially commuting, continue to evolve – accelerated in part by the COVID-19 pandemic – Centro recognizes there may be options beyond the traditional fixed-route, “hub and spoke” bus service to best meet the needs of the community. ETT will explore future designs of the Centro system in Onondaga County, including options such as on-demand services and bus rapid transit, as well as changes in geographic coverage and frequency.

Q: What will SMTC and Centro do with the information gathered through ETT?

A: SMTC will document all of the public feedback throughout this effort, and synthesize this information in a report for Centro. SMTC will not offer recommendations. The information gathered through this effort will be used by Centro in their long-term service planning. Centro staff will use this feedback to help answer questions such as where on-demand services might be implemented, where micromobility (bike, scooter share) would be utilized, what additional connections to BRT are needed, and what additional corridors might be prioritized for higher-frequency bus service.

Q: What is the schedule for the ETT effort? What opportunities will there be for public input, and how can I stay informed?

A: SMTC began compiling and analyzing relevant data and creating outreach materials in summer/fall of 2022. The public engagement began in January 2023 with the launch of the ETT survey and website. SMTC and Centro staff will be out at community events promoting the effort through the winter and early spring of 2023, and we expect to hold some open houses in spring 2023. The effort will culminate with a series of “community discussion meetings” in summer 2023. These meetings will include small-group facilitated discussions, building on all of the initial input we gained through the survey and the open houses, and allow us to have more in-depth conversations with community members about their specific wants and needs for the future of public transportation in Onondaga County. SMTC staff expect to summarize all the public input in a final report to Centro in late 2023.

Continue to check our website www.smtcmpo.org/centroett, and be sure to sign-up for the SMTC's email list to receive updates. And follow SMTC and Centro on Facebook!

Q: How will you ensure that a diversity of voices and perspectives are included in this effort?

A: Centro and the SMTC want to ensure that we are engaging a diverse cross-section of our community in the ETT process. We want to hear from both current Centro bus riders, and people who do not regularly use the bus right now. The initial step in the process is a survey, and we'll be promoting this through "pop up" or tabling events at popular community destinations. The survey includes some demographic questions at the end such as home ZIP code, race, and household income. Although these questions are optional, answers to these questions will allow us to assess whether we are hearing from a wide swath of the community and tell us where we need to target more outreach.

As this effort progresses, we'll be holding some open houses and community discussion meetings. We intend to hold these at locations throughout Onondaga County and the City of Syracuse, at various times, to make these convenient to many members of the community. We'll also be posting information on the SMTC and Centro websites and through social media throughout the process and connecting with other community organizations to help us spread the word about ETT.

All in-person open houses and meetings will be held in facilities that meet ADA accessibility standards. Spanish and ASL interpretation will be provided at major events, and other language assistance can be provided upon request. Significant documents will be translated to Spanish and posted on the study website.

If you have a suggestion for an outreach location or group that we should connect with, please let us know by emailing contactus@smtcmpo.org or calling 315-422-5716.

Q: What is the SMTC and why is the SMTC involved in this effort?

A: The Syracuse Metropolitan Transportation Council (SMTC) is the state-designated Metropolitan Planning Organization (MPO) for the Syracuse region. The SMTC's role is to foster continuous, cooperative, and comprehensive transportation planning in the region. The SMTC is also responsible for administering federal transportation funds for the area through the Transportation Improvement Program (TIP). The SMTC is made up of officials representing local, state, and federal governments or agencies with an interest in comprehensive transportation policies and services; these are known as the SMTC's "member agencies." Centro is one of the SMTC's member agencies. For more information about the SMTC and a full list of our member agencies, see our website: <https://smtcmpo.org/>

SMTC staff provide transportation planning assistance to our member agencies through our annual program of studies, and public engagement is one of the requirements of the transportation planning process. Centro, as an SMTC member agency, requested SMTC

assistance with public engagement through this effort that is now known as “Exploring Tomorrow’s Transit” or ETT.

Q: What area does the SMTC cover?

A: The area that the SMTC covers is called its Metropolitan Planning Area (MPA). The MPA includes all of Onondaga County, the Town of Sullivan in Madison County and the Towns of Hastings, Schroepfel, and West Monroe, plus a small area of the Town of Granby, in Oswego County.

For the ETT effort, we are looking at Centro’s service within Onondaga County.

Q: How is this activity being funded?

A: This study is being funded through the SMTC’s annual planning budget, which is provided by the Federal Highway Administration (FHWA) and the Federal Transit Administration (FTA). This funding is used strictly for metropolitan and/or statewide transportation planning activities and is not used for capital expenses. There is no direct cost to Centro to have the SMTC assist with this effort.

Q: How does this relate to the I-81 project? Are you looking at transit for the period of I-81 construction?

A: The current estimated schedule for the Community Grid Alternative construction (Figure 4-8 in the April 2022 Final Design Report / Final Environmental Impact Statement [FDR/FEIS]) indicates that work will span six years. Much of the work in the first three years will be on the current I-481, preparing to convert that highway to I-81. The ETT effort is expected to wrap-up in late 2023, well before I-81-related construction is complete.

As described in Chapters 4 and 5 of the I-81 Viaduct Project FDR/FEIS, NYSDOT will create a comprehensive Traffic Management Plan to be in place during construction, and it is likely that transit will be an element of that plan. The ETT effort is progressing separately, focused on a long-term, systemic vision for Centro in Onondaga County.

Centro and SMTC staff will continue to coordinate with NYSDOT on the I-81 construction. Although the Community Grid Alternative is not expected to necessitate any significant modifications to the Centro system, we recognize that a construction project of that magnitude may present some opportunities to enhance transit amenities in the project area.

Q: What about transit to the Micron site?

A: The SMTC and Centro recognize that the Micron chip fabrication site, once operational, will have a significant impact on commuting patterns in our region. We also recognize that many members of our community do not have access to a personal vehicle and,

therefore, will need other means of transportation to take full advantage of the job opportunities presented by Micron and associated businesses. We have had, and will continue to have, conversations with the City of Syracuse, Onondaga County, Centerstate CEO, and others about the most equitable and efficient options to provide access to the Micron site for all members of the community. This may take many forms including dedicated shuttle buses from specific areas of the community to the Micron site.

Through previous SMTC studies such as Work Link and the Syracuse Metropolitan Area Regional Transit Study Phase 1 (SMART 1), it is abundantly clear that enhanced transit service is needed now to serve existing employment and education centers. Transit agencies in other mid-sized urban regions, like Syracuse, have implemented BRT service, on-demand service options, and micromobility options (like bike and scooter share) to better serve the changing needs of their community, and this sort of system-wide examination is needed in our region as well.

Q: What about the Bus Rapid Transit system that has already been proposed?

A: A bus rapid transit (BRT)¹ system was recommended in the Syracuse Metropolitan Area Regional Transit Study Phase 1, completed by SMTC and Centro in 2018. Implementation of the BRT system will begin soon; however, several steps are necessary before BRT service can operate, including station construction, upgrades to traffic signal technology, and procurement of new BRT-dedicated buses. It is anticipated that it will take about three years to complete these steps and then initiate BRT service. The BRT system will provide a foundation for enhanced transit in Onondaga County, with traditional bus lines, on-demand service, and micromobility options rounding out a complete mobility system.

Q: Why don't you just bring back OnTrack? How about building a light rail system?

A: OnTrack was a unique rail service that operated in Syracuse from 1994 to 2007, with its final years of operation as a special events service during Dome events. The OnTrack service faced multiple challenges; the rail line that OnTrack ran on is an active freight rail line, and the OnTrack platforms (stations) are generally not located in residential areas, so it always struggled to attract commuters. There may be potential for a special events service to be revived in this corridor if a private entity (or entities) had interest in operating it, but previous studies have concluded that other corridors in and around the City of Syracuse provide much greater potential for supporting public, enhanced transit.

¹ Bus Rapid Transit, or BRT, is an innovative, high capacity, lower cost public transit solution that can significantly improve urban mobility. This permanent, integrated system uses buses or specialized vehicles on roadways or dedicated lanes to quickly and efficiently transport passengers to their destinations, while offering the flexibility to meet transit demand. BRT systems can easily be customized to community needs and incorporate state-of-the-art, low-cost technologies that result in more passengers and less congestion.

The SMART 1 study (mentioned above) also examined the potential for Light Rail Transit (LRT) in Syracuse and concluded that the expected ridership – even in the corridors with the greatest potential for supporting enhanced transit – could not justify the substantial cost of rail-based transit options such as LRT or streetcar.

Q: Have any other transit agencies in Upstate New York done similar efforts?

A: Yes! The Rochester-area Regional Transit Service (RTS) (<https://myrts.com/>) undertook an effort known as “Reimagine RTS” between 2017 and 2019 that asked many similar questions, but with a focus on identifying “Community Mobility Zones” for an on-demand service while focusing traditional fixed-route service on an urban core area. NFTA Metro in the Buffalo region recently completed a Bus Network Improvements effort that included extensive public input gathering as well (<https://metro.nfta.com/2021network>). And in the Capital District, the CDTA has implemented the Flex on-demand service (<https://www.cdta.org/flex>) and multiple BRT lines (<https://www.cdta.org/brt>).