

Another Voice: Reducing air pollution plays

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Another Voice: Reducing air pollution plays a role in social justice

Another Voice
Jul 10, 2020

By Richard Steinberg

Thank you, NFTA, for getting us rolling toward a quieter, healthier electric bus future.

The NFTA has secured a \$2.5 million Federal Transit Authority grant to retrofit the diesel garage on Michigan Avenue and Main Street for electric buses. This retrofit begins the process of eliminating 105 diesel buses and replacing them with nonpolluting electric buses.

In this time of great unemployment, our group of 18 Western New York organizations, who are a cross-section of citizens devoted to social justice, public health, environmental quality, public transportation and climate change mitigation, asks NFTA to keep all jobs and engage the public in appropriate distribution of the nonpolluting buses to help clean up the environment. This is how we think about the issue of social justice and rolling out the new electric buses.

Electric buses are one important, small step toward decreasing Western New York's carbon footprint and eliminating the air pollution that threatens us with asthma, heart disease and increased susceptibility to Covid-19.

According to a study at Harvard University, coronavirus patients in areas with high levels of air pollution before the pandemic were more likely to die from the infection. Here in our neighborhood, the communities that would benefit most from eliminating pollution by cars and buses are those near the Peace Bridge and along Routes 198 and 33. They are largely communities of color.

New York State, under Gov. Andrew M. Cuomo, continues its legacy of climate leadership by committing to motor

vehicle emissions reductions of at least 55% by 2035. Electrifying public transit buses is one key to achieving that goal.

But the solution to climate-changing greenhouse gases and unhealthy air is not simple. A few electric buses alone will not do it. If we look at the statistics, 40% of greenhouse gases are attributable to transportation. Of that 40%, cars contribute 60%.

What is needed, most urgently, to achieve meaningful air quality change is a drastic reduction in miles traveled by cars. One full bus can replace 50 private cars while diminishing the need for parking pave-over and reducing wear-and-tear and congestion on roadways.

Public transit is part of the answer, but also making it safe to bike and walk are essential approaches to the problem of air pollution.

Electric buses are sleek and modern. They are amazingly quiet and their easy acceleration provides a smooth, comfortable ride. The roll-out must address communities in need and nothing short of a major campaign can achieve this.

Richard Steinberg is chairman of the Sierra Niagara Group Zero Emission Bus Committee.

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