

An Exhausting Form of Dependence

Bus Cuts on Long Island and Their Impact on Riders

An Exhausting Form of Dependence

People who take the bus on Long Island deal with inefficient transportation, but with recent cuts to bus routes, getting around is getting even harder.



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Bus Cuts in Both Counties



The Difficulties of Riding the Bus



Map of Long Island's Lost Routes

A Cold Morning Commute: Taking the bus to work on Long Island 5...



No Other Means

Winthrop Hall missed his bus, the s57. He saw it leave but there was no point calling out for it, the bus driver wouldn't have heard him above the wind. He couldn't walk fast enough to catch it, not bound to his rolling walker. He leaned on the walker and trudged to the bus shelter as the cold wind drove at his coat and made his worn hands stiff as boards.

The 62-year-old Hall needed to get from the Smith Haven Mall in Lake Grove to his home in Ronkonkoma, only 3.8 miles and a 13-minute drive away. He had another hour wait in the blowing cold before his bus would show up again.

Hall is limited in just where he can go. He is constrained by where the bus routes run, and the time it takes to ride them. Sitting there in the cold, his thoughts drift back to his days in the Navy, back when he would sail far beyond the constraints of Long Island. "In 1983 I was on a ship that was with the 7th fleet, aboard the aircraft carrier John F. Kennedy," Hall said, his voice coming from under his hat like a strong draft. "We pulled into two towns, one called Recife and one called Salvador. We spent five days in each port. I got to eat some Portuguese food, I loved it."

Now Hall waits for the bus. He has been taking Suffolk buses for 12 years, and now rides them four times a week. He uses it to get to the bank, to do shopping. It is his connection to the world outside his small, ground floor apartment. He has other options: There are taxis, but those are too expensive. There is the Suffolk County Accessible Transportation service, which performs curb-to-curb transportation for people with disabilities, but even that is too much for him at \$4 a trip.

He knows how much he spends just from memory. It is 75 cents for disabled bus fare, it is \$1.50 a day, \$6 a week, \$24 a month. "I save money by not buying gasoline and all this other stuff," Hall said.

The bus comes by again and picks him up. It drops him off at the edge of his apartment complex. It is another long walk in the cold before he can sit down and rest.

Bus riders are locked in an exhausting form of dependence, and it's a common thread among the approximately 22,000 residents of Suffolk County and 52,000 in Nassau County who use the public bus systems on a daily basis. With close to 3 million people living on Long Island, they make up only a fraction of Long Island's overall population. According to Nassau Inter-County Express' 2016

survey of their ridership, a third of NICE riders have an annual household income of less than \$15,000 a year which is below the federal poverty line of \$16,240 for a family of two. This is compared to just 5 percent of the entire county who are similarly below the poverty line. Close to 45 percent of respondents said they take the bus because they lack a car and 17 percent said they take it because they are unable to drive.

History of Long Island Public Transportation



Many bus riders simply do not have the means to afford any other form of transportation. They range from older or infirm people who cannot drive, to college students who have no other way to get to school. The majority of riders are ethnically minority. The NICE survey states that 43 percent of bus riders in Nassau are African American and 28 percent are Latino compared to just 14 percent white. They are people who use the bus to get to work, to their doctor or the hospital, to the bank or simply to do their food shopping.

One early spring afternoon, 63-year-old retired Stony Brook resident Gary Rosen panted to the bus stop from the short walk across the street after talking to a cab driver. The cab driver said it would be \$16 for a 5 minute trip back to his house in Stony Brook. He leaned on the bus stop sign, "God damned bastards," Rosen said. He wasn't just cursing the cab driver, he was also cursing the people who stole his bike the previous night while he was doing last minute shopping at Smith Haven Mall. Three weeks later, Rosen bought a new bike, but it gathers dust in his garage. After years of smoking his lungs can't support him anymore, and he's hooked up to an air machine. As he goes to see doctors and spends time with his family, he hopes to be able to get out of his home. "It's gonna be a nice summer, and I wanna enjoy it. And that means not being in my house, you know taking the buses. Not too adventurous, but it's gonna take a lot of will and a lot of strength."

Taking the bus on Long Island has never been easy, but it has been getting harder because of route cuts in both counties. In Suffolk, county leaders cut 8 routes last year to help deal with a \$78 million deficit. This year, Nassau County leaders cut \$3.8 million in subsidies to their own bus system, which at the

beginning of the year resulted in 10 bus cuts put on the chopping block.

"Unfortunately, those who utilize the public transportation have no other means of transportation. The thing is, we have to go from a system that's only used by those who need it, to one where it's convenient, that everyone can and wants to use, but that is going to take more money," said DuWayne Gregory, the presiding officer of the Suffolk County Legislator. "I think we are a suburban community, and I think people like their cars."

But in cash strapped counties, low ridership impacts more than the timeliness of the buses, it makes those routes a target for cuts by counties whose budgets have potholes big enough to break an axle.

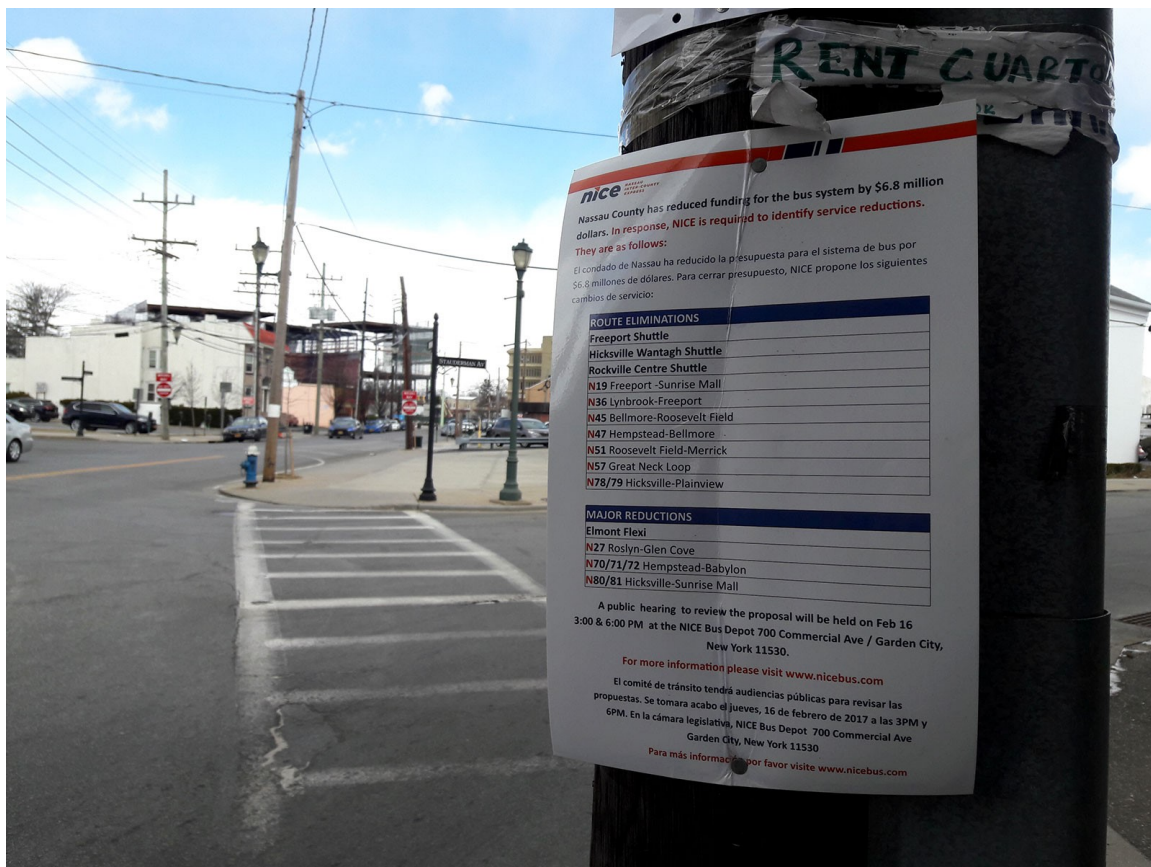
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Aaron Watkins-Lopez' Morning Commute



Loss of the n36

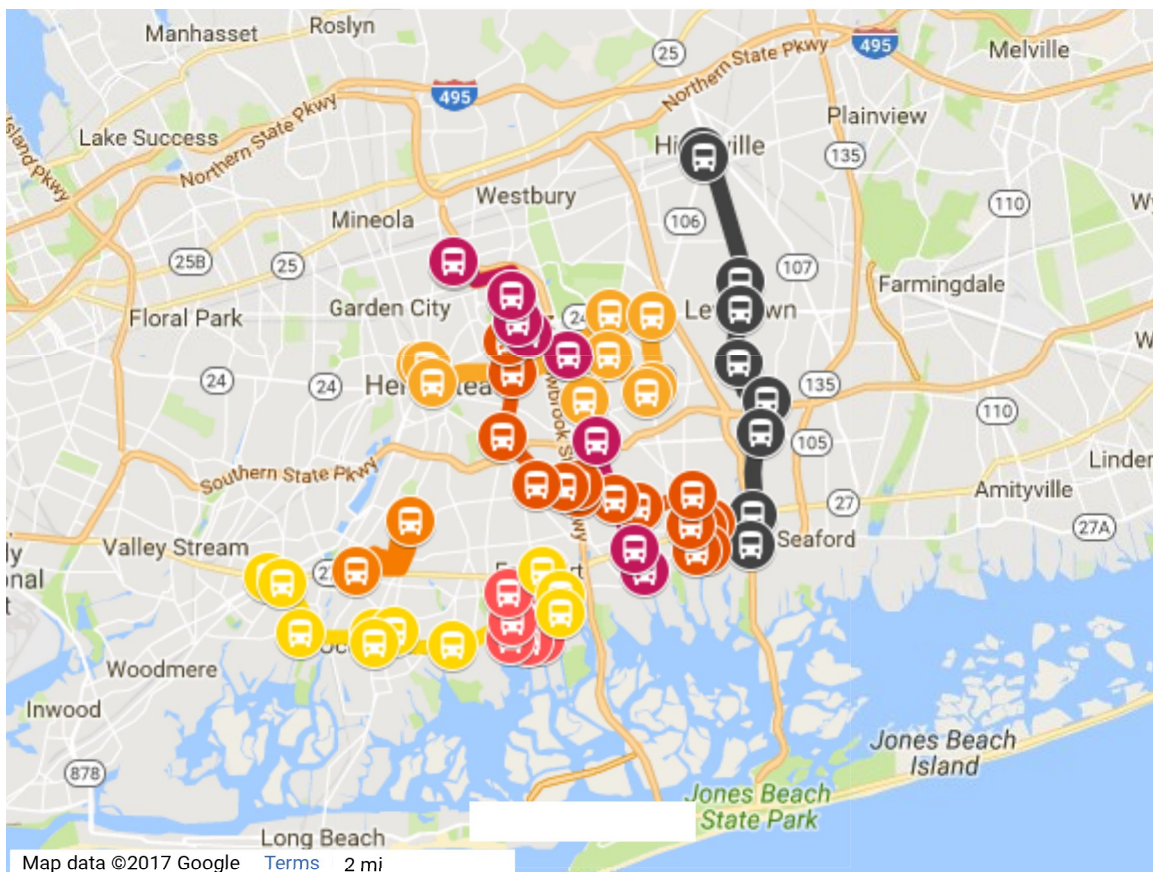


History of Public Transit on Long Island

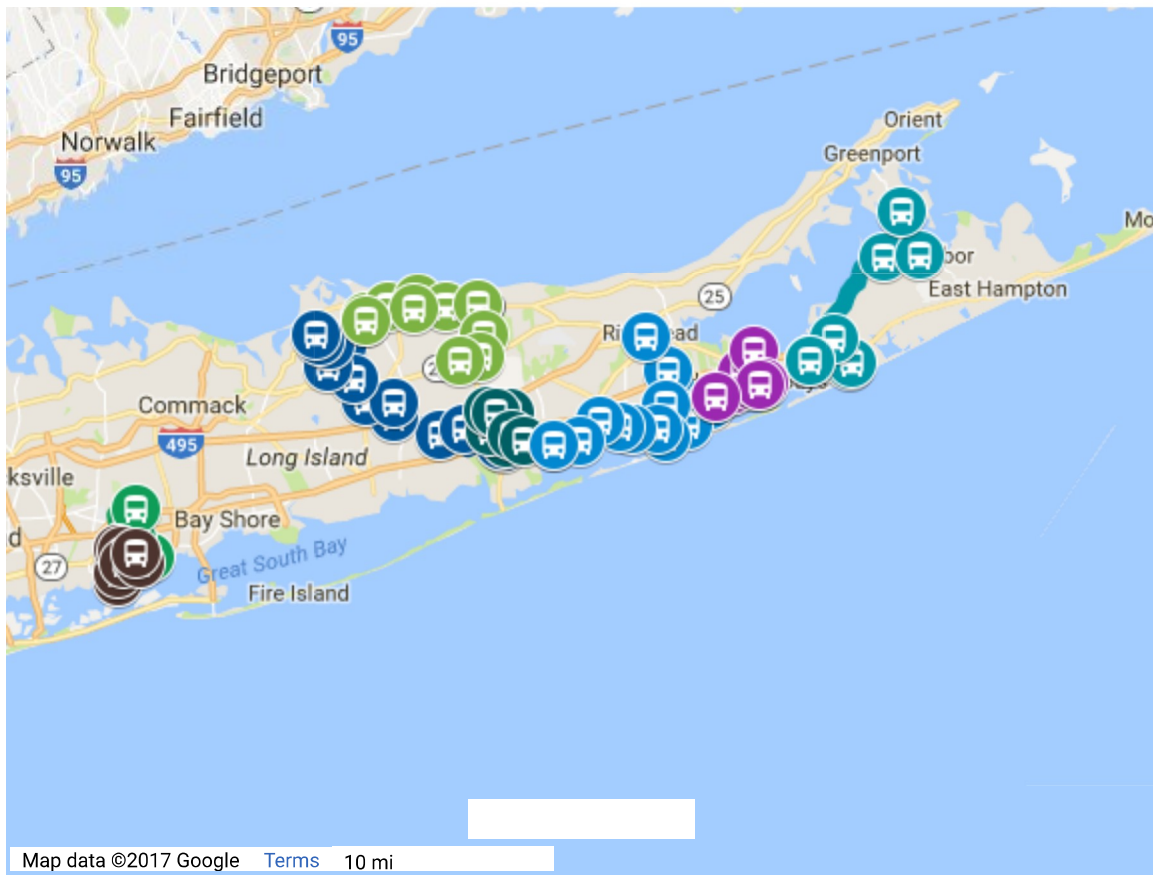
Click on a route to learn the ridership for each route before it was cut.

*Note: Data for Suffolk's routes were based off monthly ridership from 2015. Data for Nassau's routes were based on daily ridership from 2016. There is no current data for shuttle bus routes in Nassau along with ridership for the n51.

Route Cuts in Nassau County ☆



Route Cuts in Suffolk County ☆



As bad as cutting a vein.

In 2016, Suffolk County's budget deficit doubled to \$78 million. County Executive Steve Bellone blamed lagging sales tax receipts for the huge jump in deficit, but the county had to significantly reduce the shortfall. One of the plans Suffolk officials came up with was to cut eight bus routes that the county said would impact the fewest people, about 400 riders. The cuts went into effect last October.

The busiest of those routes was the s71. That bus ran a long route from Shirley to Stony Brook and stopped at both Suffolk County Community College and Stony Brook University. But it was a 26-mile route that in a months' time would

ferry 3000 to 4000 riders, compared to routes like the s58 which runs about the same length but carries an average of 20,000 passengers a month. Yet even with a relatively small number of riders, cutting a single route is like cutting a vein for those riders who need it.

Ammara Saeed, a Stony Brook biology major, had to leave her job as a doctor's office secretary because of the loss of that bus. Without the s71 she would have a several mile hike in the early morning to get to the next closest bus stop. Her father and brother drive far out of their way to pick her up and drop her off at school.

"It's not just me," she said. She said that while during the day there were only a few riders, most would take the route in the mornings and evenings. "The bus was so full in the morning people had to stand, there weren't any seats left. Even if the bus wasn't crowded at all in the evening, we want the bus, and we need the bus."

While Suffolk was dealing with the outcome of its own budget crisis, Nassau's budget was looking at a \$100 million shortfall going into 2017. The Nassau Interim-Finance Authority, which was given the task of monitoring Nassau's budget, told county executive Ed Mangano's office in October that they would have to cut spending to reduce the deficit to \$60 million. In December, Nassau officials cut \$3.8 million in bus subsidies from its revised budget proposal, which cut the subsidies to their minimum so that NICE bus, which itself is a subcompany of an international private public transport company, could still receive state funding. This added to the \$3 million in naturally occurring deficit NICE was experiencing for the past several years.

With a lack of close to 7 million in funds, and without an alternative source of funding, NICE was going to cut routes that would affect close to 5,000 riders.

NICE announced the cuts early in the year, then invited bus riders to an open meeting in February so they could voice their opinions. One of those riders was Daphne Smith, a home health worker from Garden City who would talk with her hands as much as her mouth.

"If you're going to take out 78 or 79, what must I do to reach work?" she asked, her palms open in a pleading motion. "No, it cannot work. We are small, we are little people, and I think we are paying our taxes. What is going to happen to them, what is going to happen to us?"

The Nassau Bus Transit Committee, which is appointed jointly by the county executive and legislature and approves all NICE budgets and initiatives, voted 5-2 in favor of cutting the routes. The alternative to voting against, said CEO of NICE Bus Michael Setzer, might result in even further bus lines needing to be cut down the road.

"It is one of those ironies," said Setzer. "As you get rid of service expense, you get rid of farebox revenue. If we could save these bus lines, we would. But right now there is not much choice."

Part of these cuts included the the closing of the Rockville Center bus depot, something that Larry Penner, who had worked for the United States Department of Transportation Federal Transit Administration in New York for 31 years and now spends his time as a transportation advocate, wholly disagrees with. "That bus depot was a \$10 million investment, it is 26 years old, and it has seen \$10 million in improvements over time." Some of those improvements include containers for Compressed Natural Gas, HVAC, a new roof, doors and bus cleaning machines. The other problem is that the Rockville Center buses will be moved to the Garden City bus depot, which normally has a capacity of 225, versus the total fleet of 308. Penner fears that the buses would degrade faster if they were left outside.

Funding for Nassau buses has varied wildly over the years. In the early 2000s, when Nassau buses were operated by the MTA, the county included over \$8 million in subsidies to help run the bus system. Since 2014, subsidies to NICE have steadily risen to \$6.8 million in 2016. NICE bus yearly makes about a 2 percent profit. In 2015 it made an approximate \$3.8 million in profits.

The meeting was a point that galvanized a number of advocacy groups, local officials and bus riders around saving the bus lines. They had a deadline, April 9, the date set for the bus cuts. New York State's deadline for passing the state budget was April 1. Advocates only had a few months to lobby for the bus system.

In response to both the enacted and proposed cuts to but services Nassau and Suffolk lawmakers, along with numerous advocacy groups met at the end of January to show support for Long Island Buses.

"For years, state funding allocated to Nassau and Suffolk County for operation of their bus systems has not been adequate, and has not allowed for sustainability

or proper expansion of their routes for their 3 million residents. Additional operational assistance towards helping some of Long Island's vulnerable is long-overdue," said Nassau Presiding officer Norma Gonsalves.

"The real concern is that there is potential for future cuts that would impact high ridership routes, and that's what we're trying to prevent," said Suffolk presiding officer Gregory. "We need the state legislature to support it."

"There's a lot of mandates on local government, but none are mandated to provide bus service. Both counties have budget deficits, they do need to come together," said Eric Alexander, the director of Vision Long Island, a nonprofit smart growth advocacy group. "We all want to see amenities to transit services, but you have to keep a baseline of service."

In the two months after the cuts in Nassau were announced, numerous rallies were held all across the island in response to bus cuts in both counties. Aaron Watkins-Lopez, organizer of the Long Island Bus Riders Union and Nassau transit committee member hosted a rally at the Babylon town railroad station calling for an increase in county and state funding for the buses.

26-year-old Watkins-Lopez can be found at practically any rally in support of bus riders, distinct from other advocates not only because of his youth, short cropped beard and newsboy cap. He is the one who speaks up the most. He has been working as the organizer for the Bus Riders Union since 2013, but he has been using public transportation since he was in High School, where he and his friends would take the bus to the mall from his hometown in Lynbrook.

"Regular bus riders are fed up," Watkins-Lopez said. He could drive in the car his romantic partner uses. He could learn to drive and turn his only recently received learner's permit into a license, but he specifically hasn't. That decision to ride the buses, even if it makes a commute hours longer than it would be, is one way he gets his point across.

"I have not seen this kind of energy or passion before, but it's exciting," he said. "It just shows you have to care about us, we are residents and taxpayers."

Others gathered to support the bus line in their own communities. The11518, a grassroots group created by East Rockaway resident Daniel Caracciolo which supports projects in the East Rockaway community, rallied at the Freeport train station in support of the n36, which ran from Freeport to Lynbrook. The rally was attended by several local and state politicians, including New York State

Assemblyman 21st district Brian Curran and New York State Sen. 9th district Todd Kaminsky.

"I just felt we couldn't lose the bus in East Rockaway," Caracciolo said. "It's the only bus here."

Eric Alexander said they made bus funding a key point in their meetings with New York State Lawmakers in Albany during their annual Lobby LI day, where Vision Long Island leads a group of close 90 advocacy groups to Albany to lobby on a number of topics.

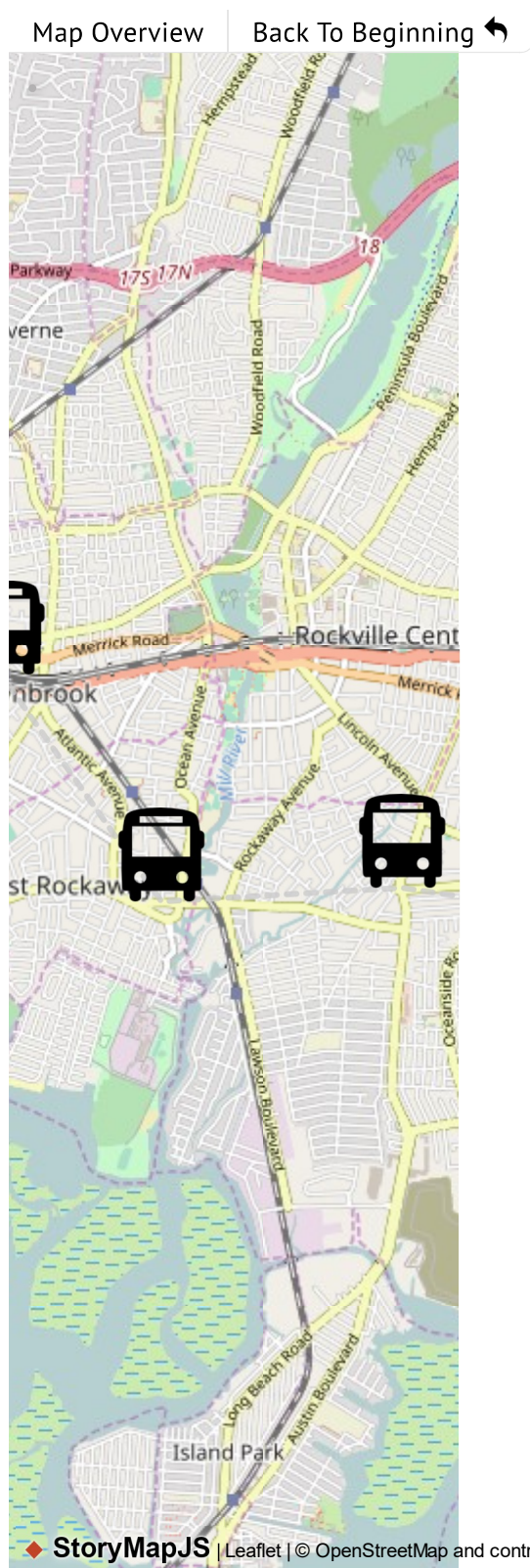
"I saw high levels of support in the state Senate, Assembly and governor's office," Alexander said. "Of course all camps have to agree, but I have high hopes for more funding. The only question is how much will we get in the end."

One of the criticisms that even Setzer lays out at Nassau county is that NICE bus does not have a set amount of money that the county has dedicated specifically to the bus system. "If we had a dedicated revenue source we would have to see a service change proposal every year," Setzer said.

In anticipation of money that it could get from New York State, NICE proposed at the end of March that it would suspend cuts on the three heaviest routes, the n19, n57 and the n78/79. The remaining seven of the proposed routes, including the n36, would be cut. 2,000 of the original 5,000 bus riders would be saved from having their bus cut.

When the New York State budget was finally passed, it included an additional \$3 million in funding for both counties. It had been the first time in several years that the state had included an increase in funding for the downstate region, but for advocates who have seen needs go up and subsidies go down for years, it doesn't fix what causes the cuts in the first place.

"It's the same fight we had in 2014 and 2015. We need to get money," said Watkins-Lopez. "Nassau County needs to stop pretending that this isn't their bus system, they need to pony up, and the administration needs to stop using NICE bus as emergency funds for when they can't even balance their own budget. It comes down to this administration not seeing bus riders or this bus system as a priority, and it never has."



LAST RIDE C N36

The n36 bus line ran from scenic route along Baldwin to downtown shopping of Lynbrook. So the last Friday before it was cut did be gone. Others had it planned in t they would have to take instead, an hours they would have to add to the

In the last days of the n36 bus route Island, riders used the bus for all sc woman took it to pick her kid up from taking it to work, two took it to get some were using it to simply go shopping affected by the loss of the route. Most they were going to do without it.

Take the Bu

"You Gotta Treat Everyone as Family"

Transit riders pump their money and any spare change they can find into the buses, but the money they spend barely make a dent in each system's budget. In the transit industry, most would argue a 50 percent farebox recovery ratio, the money that a bus would make from bus fare, is ideal on a route by route basis, said transit advocate Penner.

"It is much more difficult in Suffolk County to maintain service, even if they're getting better. The farebox recovery rate in Suffolk is so much less than in Nassau, and that's because Nassau is much denser than Suffolk," Penner said.

The Federal Transit Administration's data shows that farebox revenue, the amount of money that riders pay into the overall budget through their fares, makes up only 13.6 percent of the transit revenue in Suffolk County. In Nassau, the amount is better at 36.9 percent.

Suffolk has to subsidize its bus system much more than Nassau. 49.6 percent of Suffolk Transit's budget comes from local funds. Nassau County had to subsidize its bus system by only 5.6 percent in 2015. The rest of the money comes from funding by New York State and Federal Grants by the Federal Transit Authority.

Even though much of bus ridership is under or near the poverty line, not every bus rider is impoverished or disabled, but choice riders are few and far between. People like Tom Seda, who works at the Brookhaven National Lab as an operator of the Hadron Collider, have to quickly learn to adapt without a car to drive. He lost his driver's license last fall from a DUI arrest, which added to a number of priors from years before. He now he uses a bike to get to work from his house in Sound Beach. If he is taking a longer trip, he takes the bus. "It's a lifestyle change, but it's not a big deal after you know what to do. For what I need to use it for, it's fine."

But there is such a limited number of people who choose to take the buses, and that helps drive an agonizing cycle that exists for the bus systems on Long Island. There is such low ridership that the bus systems do not get the funding they would need to overhaul their systems. Yet when funding only allows the systems to exist at a baseline of service or when lack of funding means routes get cut, they have a hard time attracting or convincing new riders to get out of their cars and wait by the side of the

road.

"It's a problem, but I could think that it is a good problem," said Garry Lenberger, the director of transportation operations in Suffolk County. "We had ridership drop in the past year or two, but that means that the economy is taking off. We're at 3.8 unemployment rate. Fringe riders have gone out and bought themselves cars, so with those dynamics, you are going to lose riders."

Watkins-Lopez said that while Suffolk had been improving its transit system with increased weekend service and late night service on some routes, the recent cuts showed how the service had regressed.

"When buses are cut people have to drop out of school, they can't get where they need to go. For many buying a car is a financial investment they cannot afford. People lose jobs because of the inefficiencies of buses or when bus lines get cut," said Watkins-Lopez. "It's not fair to have bus cuts or inefficient service. Not when you're leaving people stranded on snow taller than NBA players."

It begs the question: why would people chose to abandon their cars, especially when riders often stand waiting for the bus in the worst weather, often without shelter. Bus rider Tony Rutherford didn't stand in snow the size of an NBA player, he stood next to it. instead he was immersed in a cold puddle of brackish ice water ankle deep the day after Winter Storm Niko saturated Long Island's streets under a foot of snow and ice. The bus stop sign was several feet to Rutherford's right, buried under four feet of snow piled onto the sidewalk by wandering snow plows. It was either stand in the puddle or stand in the snow.

"I'm accustomed to this," Rutherford said. His voice was muffled with his head ducked under his hood and thick ski mask. He pointed to the bus stop whose sign was only barely visible above the snow, one that read S58. "If you stand on top of the snow, it's all on you. Last time it snowed, somebody had stood on top of the snow, he tripped, and almost landed on the road."

For people with disabilities, a turn of weather can transform a difficult situation even more formidable. 24-year-old Bryanna Copeland, an intern at the Medical Health Association of Nassau County, uses a wheelchair, as her legs were amputated at a young age due to congenital issues. After Niko left the roads laden with blocks of ice that made cars shudder and jolt, Copeland couldn't even get to her bus stop. "I rolled to the bus stop and that was covered in ice. I had to go a total of four blocks away to another stop just to catch the bus. Yeah, I was exhausted after it."

Gregory put some of the blame on the county not being proactive enough in clearing snow.

"The bone of contention is the county that is responsible to take care of bus stops. We need a better mechanism for communicating issues at bus stops to the towns," he said.

Lenberger said part of the problem is that staff is limited, and much of the snow cleanup crews are not staffed full time.

"They often have to be reassigned from other areas to help with snow clean-up," he said. "We will get legislators calling, and constituents calling. But we do the best we can."

With so much of people's lives riding on whether their bus will be on time, the first stop for when riders have problems is often the bus driver, whether or not it's warranted.

Copeland has a masters degree in social work from the Edinboro University of Pennsylvania, where she took paratransit. "It was a rural kind of area, but still all the buses were working, all the ramps were working. Here, sometimes the ramps on the bus don't work. A lot of bus drivers don't know how to lock down a wheelchair. Some claim I have an attitude. They say I need brakes on my wheelchair when I know the [American Disabilities Act] doesn't require it."

The Federal Transit Authority states on their website that, "A transportation operator may not deny transportation to a wheelchair user because the device does not have brakes or the user does not choose to set the brakes."

"I know we are looking at the money aspect, but we also need to look at the people aspect," Copeland said. "That is what's important."

Bus riders have their proponents in both local government and local advocacy groups, the fact is that bus riders are a minority of a minority of the populations in both counties. They are populations that often lack a voice or even time to advocate for themselves. When bus cuts occur, not only are riders affected, the cuts impact bus drivers as well

Because of the Nassau bus cuts, 14 operators of fixed routes and 6 men in the maintenance department lost their jobs, according to Debra Hagan, president of the bus drivers union TWU Local 252.

"This constant uncertainty of county transit funds now have the operators wondering when their job will end instead of looking forward to transit expansion in Suffolk County," she said. "Our operators are daily under pressure from the ridership to be on

time... The bus operators are being harassed by frustrated passengers since the operator is the only person the riders see.

The bus drivers are the first people riders see when something goes wrong. Buses get old, and at the time of this article some buses are 10 to 15 years old, with hundreds of thousands of miles on each vehicle. Suffolk County announced at the end of April that they would be replacing half their fleet with new hybrid buses for normal routes and a number of mid sized buses for routes with less ridership. Nassau is similarly replacing their older vehicles with a draft of 52 new buses. Close to 90 percent of the purchase for the buses in both systems came from Federal and state grants. Deputy commissioner of Suffolk public works Darnell Tyson said they hope that the new buses might increase ridership, which might help in recovering some of the routes lost last year. But the aging buses that remain still have problems, and anything can happen on the road. When a problem arrives, like if a bus breaks down or there is a traffic accident, usually there is nobody to blame but the person behind the wheel.

When it happens, there is little a driver can do, such was with Suffolk bus driver James Oliver. His bus broke down, the s45, right there in front of the Suffolk County Offices bus stop. Oil leaked out the tail of the bus like a sieve, and a county worker dumped litter over the puddle of brown that had stained the road.

"They don't make 'em like they used to," he said. He huddled to keep himself warm, but he didn't go back onto his bus, he needed to make sure that other cars could get around the stranded giant. He knew people were going to be more than inconvenienced by the missing bus. They would be waiting another hour for the next to arrive. But he still believed in simple courtesy. Even if some riders get mad at the drivers, even if some don't listen or don't want to pay.

"You gotta treat everyone as family," he said. A quiet smile brightened on his face. It is his simple philosophy that he takes with him on every bus trip. He understands what people must go through to wait every day. He finds that the little things you can do make their lives a little more bearable. "You know, when you lower the bus for people to get on, when you smile, it changes people's attitudes. They say 'thank you,' you know.

It's all about how you treat people."



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