Class and Community in Nassau County: Organizing Bus Riders with the Long Island Bus Riders Union

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This paper examines the issue of class and community in the context of Nassau County’s 2011 decision to privatize its public bus system known as Long Island Bus (LI Bus) and through the lens of county transit advocates, the LI Bus Riders’ Union, an effort I have been part of since January 2012. My remarks will emphasize identify the areas around which mobilization of riders has succeeded as well as describe processes of emerging bus-rider consciousness. As this is an ongoing political project, the conclusions I offer today are tentative and should be understood as openings to further explorations about class, work and community in Nassau County.

The private automobile has long been recognized as a major factor of suburban politics and culture. Long Island’s material landscape reflects the geography of the automobile: the suburban tract housing, the shopping malls surrounded by parking lots, the highways and retail malls, hospitals and office-parks, the above-ground train-tracks on some of the lines of the LIRR built to accommodate automobiles and parking below.

1 A paper to presented at 2012 How Class Works Conference, SUNY Stony Brook, June 8, 2012. Draft: Please do not cite or reproduce without written permission. The author thanks Charlene Obernauer, Executive Director, LI Jobs with Justice for her comments and review of this paper.

2 This effort, in fact, originated in late December, early January with LI Jobs with Justice and grew out of the Coalition to Save LI Bus—an alliance of transportation advocacy groups, social movement organizations and community groups that (among other things) mobilized riders in August 2011 for a public hearing when the County was generally doing little to nothing to inform the public about bus-service. Following the county’s decision on December 5, 2011 to privatize the bus, it seemed imperative that bus riders have representation, especially given that the contract between the County and Veolia specified no role for bus-riders on the County’s much touted Transit Committee.
Work and commuting in Nassau County is shaped by sizeable class inequalities. The majority of county-residents rely on the private automobile, with 422,687 commuters daily driving to work alone in a private car out of a total 554,385 workers over 16 years of age who work outside the home.³ Both in terms of time spent commuting and annual income reported commuters who drive to work alone differ from commuters dependent on public transportation in Nassau County. ⁴ A glimpse at some data regarding users of public transportation tells us that the population of bus-riders, especially those most dependent on the bus, are more likely to be low-income wage earners and more likely to speak a language other than English at home. ⁵

Compared to the 422,876 daily drivers who drove alone to work in Nassau County (502,020 in Suffolk county), 34,884 used public transportation in Nassau County (10,332 in ³ US Census, “Means of Transportation to Work by Selected Characteristics for Workplace Geography,” 2010 American Community Survey 1-year Estimates. Out of a total county-wide population of 1,341,245, the number of workers aged 16 years and up who do not work at home in Nassau County is 554,835. Of this population, it is estimated that 34,884 (in Nassau County) relied on public transportation while 422,876 drove alone to work in car, truck or van. From these findings one can begin to build a profile of the public-transportation dependent in Nassau County. One must be cautioned about the data’s limitations. Not included in this preliminary report of findings are generalizations about the ridership in Nassau County that originates outside Nassau County in Queens (a group, I suspect, which constitutes a large number of the daily-riders). The data regarding public-transportation analyzed in this report cannot make inferences specifically about the bus-riding public as the data does not specify whether the public-transportation in question is the bus or the railroad (or some combination of the two. We know only that this category excludes taxis.

⁴ The median earning of Nassau County workers is estimated at $40,117. For those workers who take public transportation, median earnings are estimated at $23,064. More relevant than earnings for looking at the workers who rely on public-transportation to commute to work may be the kind of work they do as salaried, wage-workers in service or sales rather than as managers with responsibility over others (compared to car-drivers who drive to work alone. 42.4% of workers who drive to work alone report to be in management positions. Income is also significant—those who drive to work are more likely to be high-wage earners (with 24.9% reporting earnings above $75,000).

⁵ As Charlene Obernauer (August 1, 2011) notes, “Public transportation ridership is largely dependent on income, especially in suburbs like Nassau County. Immigrants are more likely to have lower incomes than their native-born counterparts, and, hence, are twice as likely to use public transportation. For example, Hempstead has the largest Latino population in the county at 44.21 percent, and the largest population with limited English proficiency, 40 percent. In Hempstead, 32 percent of the population uses Long Island Bus to get to work or school.” Source: http://www.longislandwins.com/index.php/features/detail/cuts_to_long_island_bus_serviceould_draw_civil_rightslawsuits/
Suffolk). According to data compiled by the American Community Survey (2010) the individual who relies on public-transportation to go to work in Nassau County earns significantly below the median earning reported in Nassau County and is likely to spend a greater part of their day commuting (over 60 minutes).

The majority of bus riders are by and large workers, many of whom work in low-wage jobs without access to union-membership (in the retail and service sectors, for instance). Bus riders are also students (many of whom are also workers), and a smaller population of bus-riders are the elderly and disabled county residents (1,130 daily Able-Ride passengers) who rely on the bus out of necessity. Furthermore, many county-bus riders reside outside Nassau County and are essentially disenfranchised by the decisions made in Nassau County by representatives of county citizens who do not use the bus. This makes them especially vulnerable to the political decisions that affect them (namely the county’s decision to or not to subsidize the bus).

If we examine the data about bus-riders we see that structural impediments to participation are real. First, bus-riders are among the County’s poorest workers and residents. Figures presented by LI BUS in 2011 noted 31 million riders annually, with over 100,000 riders

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7 Noted Patricia T. Caro (2005) “The Queens Nassau Border” LI Historical Journal “From 1998-2004, the ridership on the Nassau-Queens routes increased far more than ridership on the routes that did not enter Queens. The average weekday ridership on the Nassau-Queens routes increased by 18.8 per cent, as compared to 0.2 per cent for the others; the average Saturday ridership on the Nassau-Queens routes increased by 17.6 percent as compared to 5.7 per cent for the others; and average Sunday ridership increased by 24.6 per cent as compared to 10.9 per cent for the others. Of its average weekly ridership of approximately 592,000 in 2004, Long Island Bus was carrying 296,600 passengers on lines traversing the Queens-Nassau border.
daily. The bulk of daily ridership was concentrated in bus-lines that serve the heavy traffic of the Jamaica-Nassau Corridor either through Hicksville (N22, N24, N22A) or through Elmont and Valley Stream (N2, N6). With the bulk of riders concentrated on the lines serving Jamaica (N6 with 15,889 daily riders) and the lines that connected Jamaica to Mineola and Hicksville (N24, N22), bus ridership is especially strong in places under-served by the LIRR.

In its final study of the LI BUS (as part of the MTA 2011 Budget) the MTA noted:

The largest ridership is found in Southern Nassau County; in the area north of the West Babylon and south of the Ronkonkoma branches of the LIRR. The second densest area is found in the northeastern portion of the County, south of Oyster Bay and north of the Port Jefferson branches. The third and fourth notable areas are the Port Washington peninsula and the area immediately east of the Hicksville train station. When observing these ridership trends in terms of median income, it is noted that the three areas with the highest percentage of households below the poverty line (Hempstead, Freeport, and Westbury), show elevated bus ridership rates when compared to the County as a whole.  

A second factor related to class and commuting in Nassau County is the very invisibility of the bus-riders from a political perspective. If you speak to bus-riders in Nassau county you sense immediately their isolation from the railroad, from taxis and private automobiles and their utter dependence on the bus—often more than 1 bus per commute—and their exclusion from the discussion (to the extent that there is one and I am not sure that there is much of one) about the politics of work and commuting in Nassau county. The very invisibility of bus-riders is one reason why the Long Island Bus riders is both so necessary and vital at this time—especially as the County’s Transit Committee excludes county bus-riders. Bus riders’ unions exist in 24 cities

* Source: MTA LI BUS: A Financial Review, Regional Comparison and Brief Discussion on Privatization, George Maragos, County Comptroller, November 17 2010
and represent a range of efforts to serve immediate goals of advocating for bus-riders to more long-term goals of alleviating social injustice and structural racism built into the politics of suburban transportation.

**Brief History of LI BUS and Bus Transportation in Nassau County**

The formation of LI BUS goes back to 1973 when ten private bus lines were consolidated under county control and run by the MTA in a partnership called the Metropolitan Suburban Bus Authority. By 2011, LI Bus served 31 million annual riders. The development of a county-wide bus-system was overshadowed by the early dominance of the Long Island Rail Road and the construction of highways and roads which facilitated traffic by private automobile. Nevertheless, a multitude of private bus-lines had operated in the county since the 1920s.

The first franchise for a bus-line in the county was in 1923 to operate a bus between Rockville Centre and Hempstead for a twenty-cent fare (Smits 1974, 1954). Three years later the Hempstead Bus Company began to operate buses between Mineola and Freeport. The expansion of private bus-service in the 1920s was tied to the expansion of towns and the movement of workers and shoppers within the county.

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9 The county spent close to $29,000,000 to purchase and run the buses from private operators. Many of the buses had been badly run and were in poor condition at the time of the purchase. See “MTA Says Busses Badly Maintained,” *Newsday*, June 9, 1973. Andrew G. Schiavone, the County’s Executive Officer of the Metropolitan Suburban Transportation Authority noted in 1973 that the County would have to spend over $1 million just to cover the system’s expected deficit. See “Bus Service Changes, But Only in Color,” *Newsday*, June 4, 1973.

10 The trolleys’ emergence in the early 1900s pointed to a history of conflict and rivalry between private operators and financiers Local resistance to the construction of trolley tracks was also strong, with some who saw trolleys as “a public nuisance” Problems with electrification of routes, track construction and furious bickering between private providers rendered the trolley car dysfunctional. See Edward J. Smits, *Nassau: Suburbia* 1974: 156.
The formation of the Metropolitan Suburban Bus Authority in 1973 was driven by several factors: 1) the rise in reverse commuting from Queens to newly constructed office-parks in Nassau County and 2) the impending bankruptcy of private bus lines operating in the county. Commuting by car grew from the 1960s through the 1970s up from 62% in 1960 to over 71% in 1970 commuting to work by automobile, an increase from 293,895 auto-users to 398,000 (Teaford 1997). Jon Teaford reported a growth by the late 1950s in reverse commuting from New York City to Nassau driven by the growth in office in jobs in Nassau County rose 41% between 1959 and 1965. The development of new office-complexes was all accompanied by a massive building of new roads. Between 1945 and 1970 over 800 miles of streets were built by developers in the county (Smits 1974: 241). The rise in reverse-commuting in Nassau County from Queens fueled demand for an increase in bus-routes from Queens to the county beginning in the 1960s.

Finances had served as the main dynamics to consolidate the county’s 10 separate private bus lines under the MTA in June 1973. Then, the issue had been the bankruptcy faced by private operators. County finances framed the debate for privatization in 2010 after the County refused to pay the MTA a $36 million subsidy to continue running Long Island Bus. The MTA vowed to slash service by over 50%. A private operator was sought.

The partnership between LI Bus, the MTA and Nassau County was terminated on January 1, 2012 when Veolia, a French Multinational Company, began its formal take-over of bus-service in Nassau County. The decision by the County to accept the County’s contract with

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Veolia was one that had been in the making for the entirety of 2011, with speculation about privatization becoming a reality on December 12, 2011 when the County voted unanimously to accept the contract with Veolia.

At the only public hearing sponsored by Nassau County to hear from the bus-riding public scheduled in late November, 2011, riders gave especially moving testimony of the role the LI Bus played in their lives. While County Executive Edward Mangano characterized the LI Bus as ineptly-run, inefficient and expensive, rider testimony told a very different story. Students told of their ability to attend college because the bus could help them juggle both school and work. Disabled bus-riders tearfully recalled the independence and autonomy they had in their lives because of the bus. Drivers and mechanics spoke of their years of service to LI Bus.

The legislature moved up the vote to December 5 and voted unanimously for the contract with Veolia. Democrats pushed for some changes in the contract (including fares fixed for 1-year at $2.25 and three years fixed fare for Able-Rider at $3.75). In January 2012, the new bus service, renamed NICE (Nassau Inter-County Express) was launched. The impact of privatization on the bus is evident in the language used by Veolia to frame its provision of public-transportation. Further apparent is a deliberate shift in obligation from the county to the company (a private corporation with no accountability to the riders and whose main obligation is to “maximize every dollar put into public transportation” and to maximize efficiency which they supposedly have done by reducing salaried workforce, having drivers/mechanics do both tasks, for example. Nassau county is now “a client of Veolia”\(^\text{12}\) and bus service is defined in terms of

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\(^{12}\) Quote attributed to Katherine Heaviside, Public Relations Consultant to Veolia. Community Meeting, March 26, Great Neck Library.
what Veolia are “contractually obligated to do,” which as the Company CEO and spokesman, Mike Setzer articulated more than once was to: “by April 1, 2012 [Veolia are to] implement a route and service network adapted to state, federal and local funding budgeted for the transit-system.”

**The Formation of the LI Bus Riders Union (LIBRU)**

A combination of strategies—ranging from the holding of press-conferences to organizing monthly meetings of bus-riders and leafleting at transit hubs characterize the early actions of the Bus Riders’ Union from January-May 2012. The decision to form a bus riders’ union grew out of the efforts by transit advocates, LI Jobs with Justice and the Campaign to Save LI Bus that began in 2011 when transit advocates organized their own hearing on the future of LI Bus at the Ethical Humanist Society in Garden City.

The first meeting of the Bus Riders’ Union held in mid-January 2012 hinted at its base in organized labor on Long Island. Held at the 1199 SEIU office in Hicksville, the meeting was well-attended by transit advocates, labor representatives, community-development advocates, student advocates for transit, bus-riders and activists attended the first meeting in mid-January 2012 in Hicksville following the first two weeks of privatized bus-service in Nassau County. This momentum gave ground to early efforts to talk to bus-riders at major commuting hubs in the county: early afternoon leafleting at Roosevelt Field, morning leafleting at Hempstead, an afternoon spent canvassing at Hicksville Bus depot revealed a thin smattering of afternoon bus-

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13 Mike Setzer’s remarks at the Veolia Community meeting in Great Neck, February 23 2012 and reiterated at the County’s first Transit Committee Meeting, April 18, 2012.

commuters. Many commuters were eager to tell their stories of nightmarish waits for new express buses that passed them in the cold winter mornings. Commuters eagerly signed our petitions and applauded our efforts telling us that the Bus Riders Union was “something we needed.”

The Long Island Bus Riders’ Union held their first press conference outside Veolia headquarters on Commercial Avenue in Garden City (and attended by about 12 activists, including representatives from TWU and AFL CIO, as well as Jobs with Justice, the LIBRU released its first report “From Privatization to Discrimination,” on February 21, 2012. Against the backdrop of fairly positive press coverage of NICE Bus, this served as some of the first public criticism of the new county bus-service.

This report highlighted early concerns with the Veolia’s failure to provide information about schedules and service changes in Spanish and to adequately maintain service announcements on-board the bus for the sight-impaired. It concluded

As Veolia continues to make its transition in Nassau County, we need to ensure that the voices of transit riders continue to be prioritized. Long Island Bus Riders’ Union is calling for demands for better service in Nassau County; we are calling

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15 Commuter at Roosevelt Field, January 2012.

16 Press coverage tended to focus on riders’ approval of cleaner buses and nicer drivers. Riders interviewed by Newsday appeared not to notice that over 80% of drivers with NICE were existing MTA/LI Bus drivers. Comment made by TWU Local 252 member at Long Island Bus Riders Union first press conference on February 21, 2012.

for an end to discriminatory policies for immigrant and disabled riders; and for bus-service that treats all riders with dignity and respect.\footnote{Long Island Jobs with Justice and Long Island Bus Riders’ Union, \textit{From Privatization to Discrimination: Demands for a Transparent, Accountable and Equitable Public Transportation System in Nassau County}. February 21, 2012, p. 5.}

In February 2012, when Veolia announced a “system re-design” and “service adjustments” after months of “research” and riding the bus, Veolia chose to unveil these cuts in manner in which they retained virtually complete control over the proceedings. There was no angry public to deal with as the meetings were held in venues far from public bus-stops and transportation hubs in two isolated enclaves.

The first community meeting at the Uniondale Marriott was held on February 22\textsuperscript{nd} and was more heavily attended than the second “community meeting” at Great Neck Public Library on February 23\textsuperscript{rd}. Veolia provided free shuttle service to and from these meetings with pick-up from Roosevelt Field for the Uniondale meeting and pick-up from Great Neck LIRR station for the second meeting. In the lavish conference rooms set up at the Marriott, Veolia employees stood behind tables and mingled in the crowd to answer questions from bus-riders. Copies of bus-maps and redesigned routes were displayed, demonstrating how routes would change, or in some cases, be eliminated or consolidated.

The LI BRU attended both Community meetings, talked to riders as they left and circulated in the audience alongside the Veolia employees. Announced with less than a week’s notice, the “eight hours” of community meetings had low-turnout and served to diffuse a lot of public anger about the bus—with lots of emphasis on “good news”—new express lines N6x and N22x being added, restoration of bus service to Mercy Medical Service and to Jones Beach.
(during the summer) and minimized the negatives: elimination of Saturday service on two routes, elimination of off-peak service on several routes, consolidation of 6 routes and longer waits of up to 30 to 60 minutes on several lines.

Unlike a public hearing where the questions asked (and answered) were done in public, questions were actively discouraged by Veolia spokesman until after the demonstration of information by the company when those with questions were diverted to “listening stations” where Veolia employees answered questions about specific route changes. This meant, in fact, no public discussions at all and in place of vigorous question and answer sessions, bus-riders were whisked away to individual tables organized by routes

With a large number of employees (at Great Neck library, for instance, employees outnumbered riders) it was easy for the company to dominate the proceedings. Compared to the last County-sponsored public hearing about the bus in late November, 2011, the community meetings were somber affairs with little public interference with the exercise of private power. One could walk away from these meetings believing not only that the ridership was small (very small), but in both cases, the meetings were held at venues far from actual riders and at sites far from municipal bus-stops in enclaves shut off from access (free-bus shuttles were provided from Roosevelt Field—and not from Hempstead--and from Great Neck Train-station but they did not seem to be very busy—in many cases just one or two riders each). Despite the presence of a Spanish translator in the audience, no Spanish-speaking bus-riders were present as no announcements in Spanish for the community meetings had been posted in any buses. Held from 5 to 8 pm (during peak commuting times), the community meetings displayed a slick corporate approach.
April Service Cuts: New Phase of Mobilization

Service cuts implemented in April 2012 have created new opportunities for mobilization among the hundreds of riders stranded on lines no longer served by local buses (N6 between Jamaica and Hempstead) runs more frequently as an Express bus (N6X) with local service restricted to the less frequently running (and more overcrowded) N6 Local. And disabled riders dependent on the county’s para-transit service known as “Able-Ride,” (serving 1,130 daily passengers) report longer waiting times on routes by as much as two-hours late over the assigned pick-up time.

Challenges of Mobilizing Bus Riders: The First Four Months of the LI BUS Riders’ Union

Mobilization of bus riders since privatization remains a challenge. As long as the bus remained a County-administered public service, fare-increases and service cuts were subject to public oversight through required public hearings. Under the terms of the County’s contract with Veolia, the French Multinational transportation company selected by the County to run the county’s busses, public hearings are required only when 25% or more of ridership is affected on a particular route. Veolia retained the authority to cut service “if a trip within a route was less than

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19 Under the LI Bus, Nassau County administered two types of bus service: fixed-routes service, of which served the bulk of the county’s 31 million annual ridership and para-transit routes known as Able Ride which is a service that follows the routes of fixed-route buses but which can also stop for appointed stops for pick-up of disabled passengers. In 2011 Able-Ride served 400,000 annual riders in Nassau County. See Comptroller Maragos’ report (2011) MTA Long Island Bus: A Financial Review, Regional Comparison and Brief Discussion of Privatization, p. 1.


20% profitable […] or if a trip on a route serves less than 25%” without triggering the need for any public hearing. As a result, the first cuts made by Veolia were an array of cuts within routes and of adjustments in service hours (cuts during off-peak hours, some increases during peak hours on some, but not all, routes) that fell just to within the 25% threshold. According to analysis conducted by Tri-State Transportation Campaign, 50% of the service on NICE Bus routes was cut at 15% or more.22

Mobilizing riders was complicated by the manner in which service cuts and “adjustments” proceeded. A narrative focused solely on straightforward cuts (rather than on mere adjustments on over 39 routes) would have been a powerful tool for mobilization of riders. In reality, however, riders tended to focus on the routes they most depended on at the expense of the system as a whole (a “cut to one route was not understood as an injury to all” only to those who depended on it). This meant talking about the cuts or adjustments was not a simple matter and thus weakened mobilization efforts until after the implementation of cuts took place on April 8, 2012, when it was too late to do much to stop the cuts from happening in the first place.

Mobilizing bus riders is further complicated by bus-riders’ low preparedness for participation in mobilization among bus-riders and by the relatively-high barriers to participation.21 Bus commuters spend a long time commuting and their demanding schedules of juggling work, school and home responsibilities limit their ability to participate in social activism beyond relatively low-commitment activities such as signing petitions. Bus-riders constitute a

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very diverse community in terms of ethnic background, language background and nationality, with employment largely in the private service sector making talk of “unions” alien and foreign to some riders. Recessionary-economics also led efforts by drivers to mobilize passengers to backfire. A Nassau County Bus Driver recently told me that passengers did not see bus-drivers as potential allies, but as union-members whose jobs would be protected, regardless of service-cuts.24

Bus riders in Nassau County are not uniformly against privatization. Many harbor bitter memories of the MTA run buses. A few riders expressed early confidence in the company and felt the decision to prioritize was necessary. One bus-rider told me we “should give [Veolia] a chance.”25 The anger some felt about privatization did not seem shared equally by bus riders, some of whom expressed resignation to bad service and to sentiments of feeling ignored by the County. Some riders understood the county’s spending priorities were shaped by racist prejudice. One African-American commuter told me that the County wasn’t prepared to ever spend money on “blacks” [sic]. 26

Through leafleting at Hempstead Transit Center, the LI BRU has gathered approximately 200 emails and signatures since January 2012 (with a goal to reach 1,000 signatures by the summer’s end in support for the Bus Riders Union) we have not, as yet, converted a large number of petitioners into willing agents of mobilization. Many bus riders at Hempstead where we most regularly flyer are willing to talk, to describe their grievances and to sign our petition

24 *Long Island Bus Riders’ Union Meeting*, June 5, 2012, Hicksville, NY.


26 Comment by commuter at Hempstead Transit Center, April 2012.
but few riders reached out to in this way have also attended monthly meetings. A small number of riders resist signing the petition for unspecified reasons.

Are these actions rooted in a sense of mistrust of strangers\textsuperscript{27} or is the failure to convert participants into mobilized participants a function of the lack of community and solidarity among bus-riders? Is the social shame attached to riding the bus in Nassau County a further hindrance with the efforts to build a sense of solidarity among bus-riders?\textsuperscript{28} Limitations to building solidarity among bus-riders must be understood as the result of structural impediments to participation in mobilization rather than by individual factors of failure to participate.

\textbf{Tentative Conclusions}

Insofar as class has been examined in the context of suburban life, it has been to reinforce the perspective of middle-class, bourgeois life. The world of bus-riders in the suburbs is one far from the culture of leisure, privilege, consumer and status anxiety that so characterized intellectual and literary explorations of the suburbs in the past. And yet there is a culture nevertheless that can be attributed to bus riders that tells a different narrative about suburban life today. The story it would tell would be one where work by low-wage workers prevails, where students juggle school with demands of home, family and work and where the sick who cannot afford taxis rely on the bus for health-care and social services. Bus riders are workers in many of the county’s largest health-care centers and in the provision of government services—ranging from higher-education to public welfare.

\textsuperscript{27} Anita Halasz, an organizer with Jobs with Justice and the Long Island Bus Riders’ Union once speculated to me that efforts to organize in Hempstead may be more difficult given the relative transience of the bus-terminal and the known dangers associated with the bus-terminal. Conversation after leafleting in May 2012.

\textsuperscript{28} Question raised by audience participant at How Class Works Conference 2012
The bus is also a means to escape from drudgery of work: to worship, to shop and for leisure. In a county where transportation for most occurs in the private confines of an automobile, the bus remains for those who use it a unique public space. The dominance of the private automobile and the landscape of the highways, retail outlets, private homes and increasingly, private gated communities demonstrate the class-exclusion of private power.

As we face the libertarian argument against government we must ask whether suburbs and the individualism celebrated by their existence are in fact antithetical to the broader goals of community? In a sense this is not a new problem in the county. Nassau County Executive Eugene Nickerson was quoted by Edward J Smits as having said in 1969, “Residents of the county have no sense of living in the town. They will tell you they live in East Meadow or Levittown or Rockville Center but not in the Town of Hempstead.” Smits surmised that “[county] residents not only had difficult in sensing a town relationship, but a county consciousness was equally distant.”

The Regional Plan Association’s remarks in 1969 captured the sense of newness that accompanied the identity of Nassau: “Overall Nassau County cannot be sensed as a place because until recently no one thought of it as a place.” While Nickerson’s quote emphasizes how county-residents outlook remained parochial and local, ultimately fixed in a consciousness that excluded broader imaginings with a larger county population, the second quote notes a

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failure to build (from both a planning perspective and a suburban perspective) a specific sense of place rooted in belonging to a community.

Bus commuters may not all be county-residents but the services rendered by them to county residents and the interdependence of county-residents on these workers and services illustrate the centrality of the bus to Nassau County. Withdrawal of funding for the bus is not simply a matter of dollars and cents, it is to ignore this interdependence between workers and residents and the services on which suburban communities ultimately depend. Efforts to organize bus-riders must also overcome the public animosity towards bus-riders and the notion that the bus serves only the poor and welfare-dependent. The generally negative perception of bus riders and bus-service in Nassau County reflects class-animus against the working poor. The many subsidies, tax–breaks and federal dollars allocated to road repairs and highways ignored by suburban drivers give rise to the perception that public transportation is a cost to the public with no tangible benefits. This attitude, coupled with the austerity politics of Nassau County since Mangano’s election in 2009, combined to create a toxic atmosphere conducive to privatization of the county-bus.
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