Monroe County Legislature

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County Executive Adam Bello
39 W. Main Street, Suite 110
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County Executive Bello:

I am writing to request that the 2027 Monroe County Budget include an additional $1 in annual operating assistance for the Rochester-Genesee Regional Transportation Authority (RGRTA).

RGRTA faces a structural deficit of $31.4 million. It has balanced its budget with $15.5 million in federal capital funding and $15.9 million from savings, an approach that is not sustainable. On Wednesday, RTS announced it will eliminate RTS On Demand in Monroe County early next year. Service ends Jan. 22 in Brockport, Irondequoit, Pittsford and Webster, and April 2 in Greece, Henrietta and the Lexington Avenue area.

I understand the reasoning. On Demand carries less than 3 percent of RTS riders but consumes 14 percent of its budget. However, eliminating an inefficient service should not mean abandoning the people who rely on it. RTS will add some fixed routes, but by its own account those routes will not replace every trip. We should be working with RGRTA to expand frequent, reliable fixed-route service to underserved areas.

Eliminating On Demand will save about $5 million, leaving RGRTA roughly $11 million short of what it needs to stop drawing down its savings. RTS has already identified further options, including fixed-route fare increases, reductions to paratransit and cuts to fixed-route service. Without new local investment, the riders who remain on the system are likely to face the next round of cuts.

For many residents, especially people with disabilities, older adults and those who cannot afford a car, public transit is the only way to get to work, medical care and community life. They cannot simply substitute a personal vehicle for a lost bus connection.

The county has recognized that transportation is a barrier to employment. But its recent investments have focused on helping individuals obtain and keep private vehicles.

The county awarded about $1.28 million in American Rescue Plan Act funding to Project RIDE, which provides job-readiness training, driving lessons and help with vehicle repairs. According to

the county's July 2026 ARPA report, 102 participants had graduated by the end of 2025, or roughly $12,500 in allocated funding per graduate. The county also awarded $429,491 to Driven2Success, which provides financial counseling to help residents qualify for affordable auto loans. The same report credits the program with 134 approved loans. That works out to about $3,200 in program funding for each loan approved.

These programs helped people. But together they received about $1.7 million in federal funds and produced fewer than 250 graduates and approved loans. Subsidizing car ownership is not sound long-term transportation policy. Cars are expensive to buy, insure, maintain and operate, and many residents cannot drive because of age, disability or other circumstances.

As ARPA ends this year, the county has an opportunity to replace temporary, individualized grants with a sustained commitment to public transportation.

We already treat roads as core infrastructure. The 2026 Department of Transportation budget totals $48.1 million, including $14.7 million in debt service. After state and federal aid, fees and other revenue, county taxpayers support the department with $28.1 million. By comparison, the county contributes about $3.5 million to RGRTA. Road and bridge spending is an appropriate investment. But decades of transportation and land-use decisions have made car ownership a necessity in much of Monroe County, and investing far more in driving perpetuates that dependence. Public transportation is essential infrastructure, too.

Funding alone will not solve this. Transit works when jobs and housing are built alongside it, and RTS is already planning service around development, extending Route 97 to reach a planned housing project in Henrietta. The County of Monroe Industrial Development Agency (COMIDA) offers tax incentives to employers and developers every year. I urge your administration to work with COMIDA to make access to frequent transit a significant factor in awarding those incentives, and to ask large employers seeking assistance how workers without cars will get to the job.

Monroe County's statutory contribution of $3.5 million a year to RGRTA has not changed since at least 2007. I am asking the county to voluntarily add $1 annually, beginning in 2027, directed toward improving and expanding fixed-route service and filling gaps left by the end of On Demand. This would be a meaningful increase in our commitment while remaining modest relative to the overall budget.

Some will ask where this money should come from. I will review your proposed budget with that question in mind, and I may attempt to offer an amendment if the funding is not included. But the administration, which builds the budget and gives the legislature only a few weeks to review it, is best positioned to find room.

New York State and the federal government must play the primary role in solving RGRTA's structural funding problems. But Monroe County has a responsibility to be part of the solution. We cannot keep treating roads and bridges as essential infrastructure while treating public transportation as somebody else's responsibility.

Sincerely,

Rachel Barnhart

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