

3

Socioeconomic Conditions

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Acronyms/Abbreviations

ACS	American Community Survey
GBNRTC	Greater Buffalo- Niagara Region Transportation Council
NEPA	National Environmental Policy Act
NFTA	Niagara Frontier Transportation Authority
O&M.....	operations and maintenance
SEQRA	State Environmental Quality Review Act
TAZ	traffic analysis zone
TOD.....	transit-oriented development

3 Socioeconomic Conditions

This chapter describes existing population, housing, and economic conditions within the study area for the Proposed Action. This chapter also includes a discussion of the potential socioeconomic effects of the Proposed Action and its impact on the local economy. Potential mitigation measures are also included, where necessary. Socioeconomic effects related to construction of the Proposed Action are described in Chapter 19, “Construction Effects”. Demographic data on minority populations and/or low-income populations (referred to as environmental justice populations) are described in Chapter 6, “Environmental Justice,” along with an analysis of the Proposed Action’s potential effects on environmental justice populations.

3.1 REGULATORY CONTEXT

The following regulations and guidance apply to socioeconomic conditions:

- **New York State Environmental Quality Review Act (SEQRA)** gives weight to social and economic considerations as well as environmental factors in the process of reviewing the impacts of a given action. SEQRA aims to strike “a suitable balance of social, economic, and environmental factors be incorporated into the planning and decision-making processes of state, regional, and local agencies.”¹
- **National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA)** requires federal agencies to consider environmental effects that include, among others, impacts on social, cultural, and economic resources, as well as natural resources. For purposes of NEPA, “effects” and “impacts” mean the same thing. They include ecological, aesthetic, historic, cultural, economic, social, or health impacts, whether adverse or beneficial.²

3.2 METHODOLOGY

A study area for a socioeconomic analysis is the area within which there is the greatest potential to directly or indirectly affect population, housing, and economic activities. The study area for the assessment of socioeconomic conditions is defined as a 1/4 mile on either side of the Proposed Action alignment and a 1/2-mile radius around each proposed station. Because socioeconomic analyses depend on demographic data, it is appropriate to adjust the study area boundary to conform to the census tract delineation that most closely approximates the desired radius. As such, all census tracts that fall either wholly or partly within these distances were included in the study area.

¹ New York Codes, Regulations, and Rules (2019) 6 CRR-NY 617.1. Accessed at [https://govt.westlaw.com/nycrr/Document/14ec3a75bcd1711dda432a117e6e0f345?viewType=FullText&originationContext=documenttoc&transitionType=CategoryPageItem&contextData=\(sc.Default\)](https://govt.westlaw.com/nycrr/Document/14ec3a75bcd1711dda432a117e6e0f345?viewType=FullText&originationContext=documenttoc&transitionType=CategoryPageItem&contextData=(sc.Default))

² Council on Environmental Quality, 40 Code of Federal Regulations, Section 1508.8.

Data on the socioeconomic composition of the study area and affected communities were compiled from the following sources:

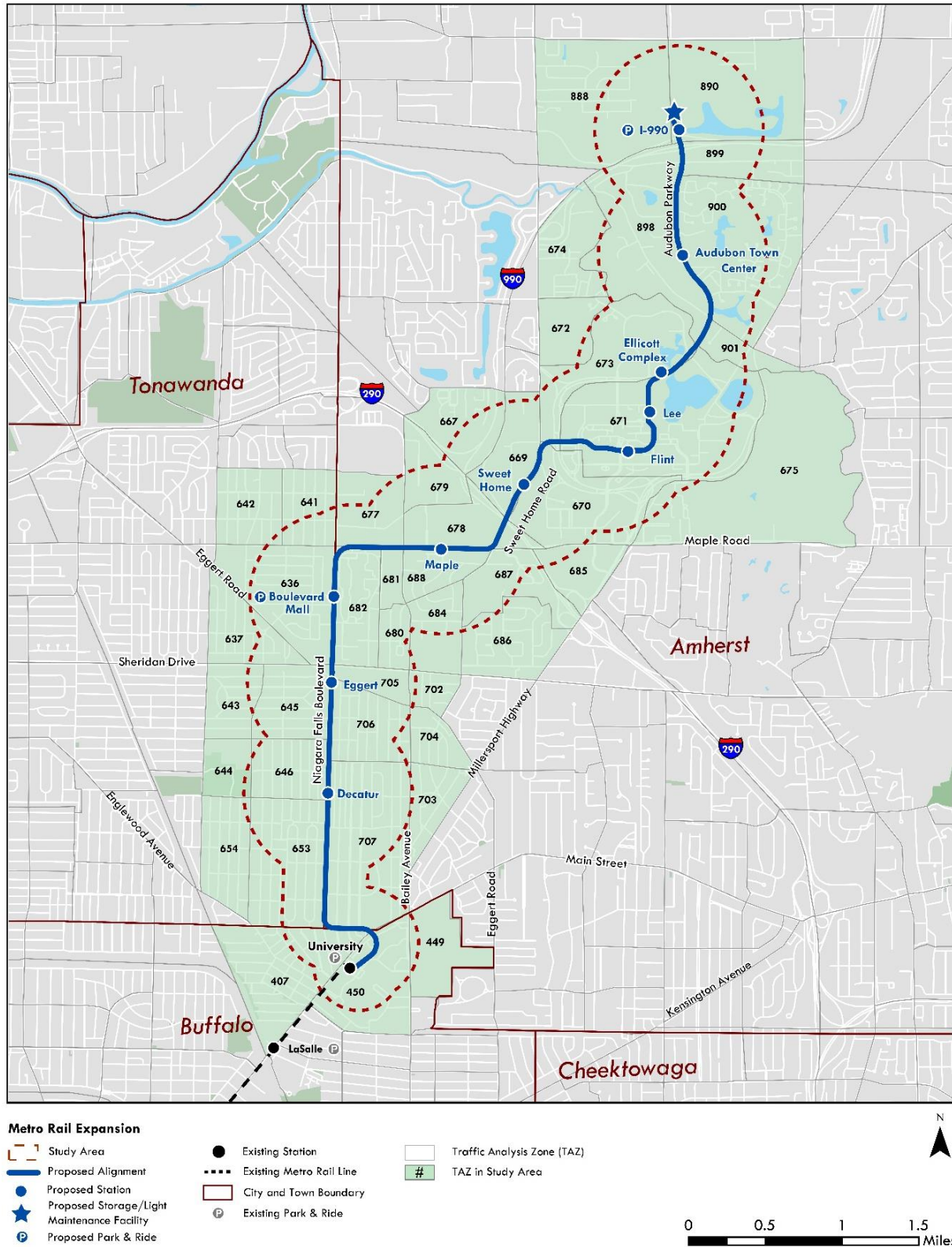
- **U.S. Decennial Census 2010:** 2010 U.S. Decennial Census was used in this report to analyze demographic trends.
- **American Community Survey 1-Year and 5-Year Estimates:** The American Community Survey (ACS) Estimates present statistical estimates based on data gathered over a specified period of time rather than a single point in time. The estimates provide increased statistical reliability for small population areas. The 2013-2017ACS Estimates are used in place of the Decennial Census where the relevant data is not available.
- **ESRI Business Analyst:** ESRI Business Analyst is used in this report for business sales, employment and consumer demand data. ESRI uses data from the Bureau of Labor Statistics, Consumer Expenditure Survey and Economic Census to calculate market potential and consumer demand.
- **Greater Buffalo-Niagara Regional Transportation Council Population, Household and Employment Projections:** The Greater Buffalo Niagara Region Transportation Council (GBNRTC) prepares projections for the region’s future population, households, and employment, which are used for transportation demand modeling purposes. Total population, households, and employment growth are projected at the regional level and then allocated to smaller geographies (i.e., traffic analysis zone [TAZ]) to understand travel demand at the local scale. In 2016, GBNRTC updated its forecast methodology and documented the allocation of regional data and forecasts for 2040. The methodology report, *Regional Demographic and Economic Profile Update, Projections, and Spatial Allocation Project*, describes the methods used to develop projections for the region using a land use-driven population allocation approach (in contrast to a straight-line growth methodology).³ Data from those projections (at the TAZ level) are explored further in this chapter.

The GBNRTC regional travel demand model includes the Proposed Action in its 2040 projections. Therefore, an adjustment to future projections was applied to account for growth in the No Action condition. This adjustment was also used in the Comprehensive Transit-Oriented Development Plan (2018), and the methodology was agreed upon by GBNRTC and the Niagara Frontier Transportation Authority (NFTA). Because the travel demand model allocates growth to individual TAZs based on a variety of inputs, the rate of growth (or decline) across TAZs varies. For example, growth rates within TAZs included in the study area range from negative growth (decline) to positive growth near 47 percent. For purposes of this analysis, a constant growth rate was applied to the study area for the No Action condition. Procedural steps for using the TAZ data are described below:

1. Each proposed station location was plotted on a map showing 2010 census tracts and TAZs.
2. A 1/2-mile radius was measured around each station and a 1/4-mile radius was measured around the proposed alignment to define the study area (Figure 3-1).

³ *GBNRTC Regional Demographic and Economic Profile Update, Projections, and Spatial Allocation Project. 2016.*

Figure 3-1. Study Area (Socioeconomic Conditions) – Traffic Analysis Zones



Source: Erie County and Greater Buffalo-Niagara Region Transportation Authority, 2019

3. The total land area, population, households, and employment forecasts for the TAZs that fell partially or completely within the study area were obtained from the GBNRTC model (as an ArcMap shapefiles).
4. The total land area, population, households, and employment allocated to each station area was estimated by allocating a proportion of population, housing, and employment based on the proportion of each TAZ within a proposed station area. For TAZs that partially fell within the 1/2-mile proposed station radius, station-area population, households, and employment were estimated by multiplying the total for the TAZ by the proportion of the TAZ estimated to fall within the 1/2-mile radius. The proportion of the TAZ falling within the 1/2-mile radius was measured by calculating the geometry with ArcGIS.
5. Double counting of population and employment for proposed stations that are less than 1 mile apart was avoided by grouping proposed stations that are less than 1 mile apart into clusters and reporting total data for each cluster.
6. Maps showing station locations, 1/2-mile radii, and census tracts or TAZs, along with a table listing the tracts or zones, that estimated proportions of each within a 1/2 mile of the proposed station, and population, households, and/or employment for the tract are attached.

In addition to these data sources, the Greater Buffalo-Niagara Regional Transportation Council (GBNRTC) Comprehensive Transit-Oriented Development Plan was used as a reference document. In 2018, GBNRTC completed the Comprehensive Transit-Oriented Development Plan (TOD Plan). The purpose of the TOD Plan was to identify, measure, communicate, and enhance the economic and community development potential and develop a plan for the transit-land use connection along the proposed alignment. A market and fiscal analysis was conducted that explores the likely impact of design and construction of the Proposed Action as well as the market readiness for TOD along the corridor. The analysis concluded that the Proposed Action would enhance regional mobility and would be part of a larger regional investment strategy to leverage economic and community development opportunities associated with transit investment.⁴

3.3 EXISTING CONDITIONS

The following discussions focus on the existing population, housing and employment within the study area.

3.3.1 Population, Housing, and Employment

The Proposed Action is located within Erie County, New York. The estimated population of Erie County was 923,995 (2013-2017 ACS). The Proposed Action would pass through portions of Buffalo, Amherst, and Tonawanda. Together, those three municipalities comprise 457,642 residents, which is approximately half of the county's total population.

⁴ Greater Buffalo- Niagara Region Transportation Authority. Comprehensive Transit-Oriented Development Plan. 2018. Accessed at <https://static1.squarespace.com/static/56ccbffd3c44d8670dbd1d84/t/5ba50772e2c4837b698a9a1b/1537542056538/Comprehensive+Transit-Oriented+Development+Plan+Executive+Summary+August+2018.pdf>

The population of the study area was estimated to be 43,680, which was approximately 4.7 percent of Erie County's population (Table 3-1). The population of the study area grew by 0.75 percent between 2010 and 2017, which represents a faster growth rate than Erie County, Buffalo, and Tonawanda, but slower than Amherst and New York State during that same time frame.

Table 3-1. Population: Study Area, Buffalo, Amherst, Tonawanda, Erie County, and New York State (2010 and 2017)

Population	Study Area	City of Buffalo	Town of Amherst	Town of Tonawanda	Erie County
2010 Total Population	43,356	261,310	122,366	73,567	919,040
2017 5-Year Total Population	43,680	259,574	125,024	73,044	923,995
2010 Population Density (Pop per Square Mile)	3,604	6,471	2,300	3,927	881
2017 ACS 5-Year Population Density (Pop per Square Mile)	3,631	6,428	2,350	3,899	886

Source: U.S. Census Bureau, 2013-2017 American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates

The population density within the study area (people per square mile) was higher than New York State, Erie County and Amherst, but lower than Buffalo and about the same as Tonawanda.

An estimated 15,928 households were in the study area in 2017, which is about four percent of households in Erie County. Average household size in the study area (2.74) was larger than in Erie County (2.39) (Table 3-2).

Table 3-2. Households and Size: Study Area and Erie County (2017)

Household and Size	Study Area	Erie County
Total Households	15,928	386,371
Average Household Size	2.74	2.39

Source: U.S. Census Bureau, 2013-2017 American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates

Housing characteristics, such as tenure, can help understand the makeup of a community by highlighting the proportion of residents who rent or own a home. Renter-occupied households and households without access to a vehicle may be more likely to use (and/or depend on) transit. As of 2017, approximately 17,216 housing units were within the study area, which constituted about four percent of housing units in Erie County (Table 3-3). Of the housing units in the study area, about 9,717 (56 percent) were owner-occupied—which was slightly lower than the percentage of owner-occupied households in Erie County as a whole (59 percent). The proportion of renter-occupied households without access to a vehicle (10.5 percent) was roughly the same in the study area as county-wide (10.4 percent). Conversely, the proportion of owner-occupied households without access to a vehicle was slightly lower in the study area than county-wide.

Table 3-3. Housing Units and Tenure and Households with No Vehicles: Study Area and Erie County (2017)

	Study Area	Erie County
Total Housing Units	17,216	425,716
Owner Occupied Housing Units	9,717	251,212
Owner Occupied Housing Units (%)	56.4%	59.0%
Renter Households with No Vehicles (%)	10.5%	10.4%

	Study Area	Erie County
Owner Households with No Vehicles (%)	2.7%	3.0%

Source: U.S. Census Bureau, 2013-2017 American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates

Income is considered a key economic indicator, because changes in both personal and household income can reflect economic growth or decline in an area. Comparisons between the study area and surrounding geographies can also reveal the economic well-being of a community and whether the regional economy adequately supports residents. The median household income in the study area was \$48,983 as of the 2013-2017 ACS, which was lower than Erie County (\$54,006). The percentage of households receiving food stamps in the study area was lower than Erie County.

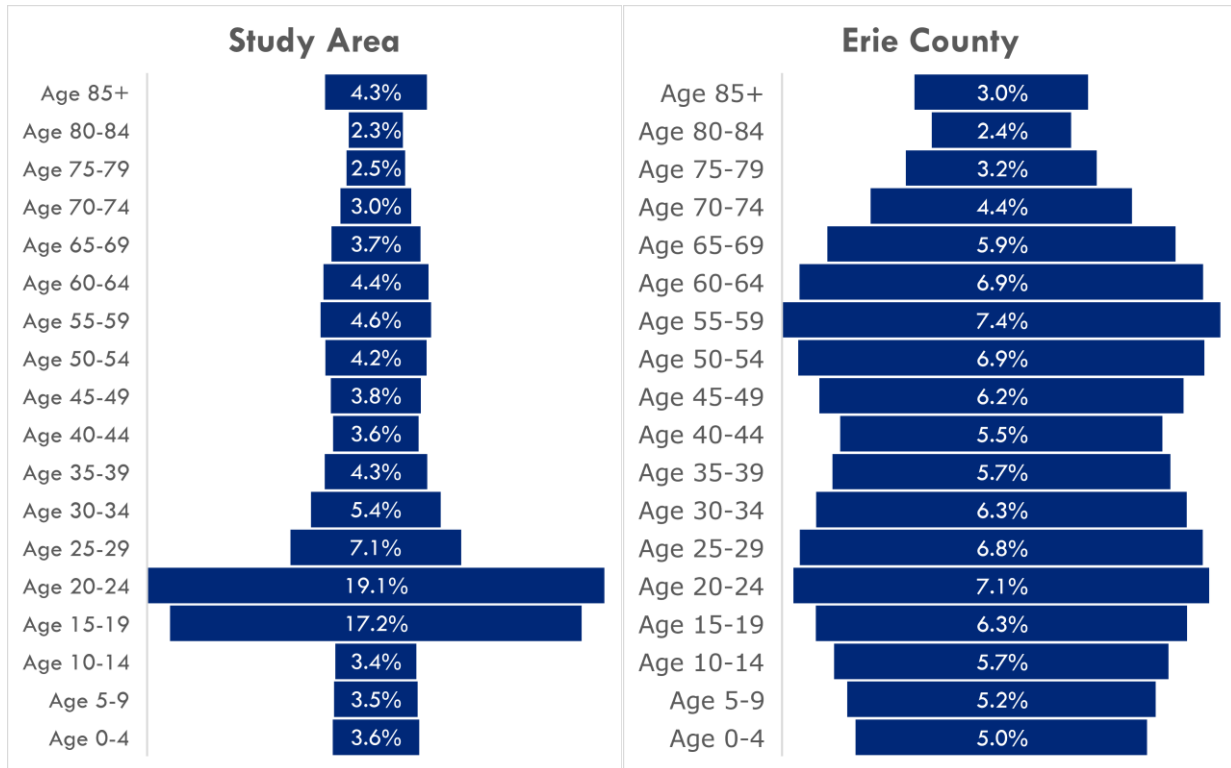
Table 3-4. Income: Study Area and Erie County (2017)

	Study Area	Erie County
Median Household Income	\$48,983	\$54,006
Households Receiving Food Stamps/SNAP (%)	13.68%	16.25%

Source: U.S. Census Bureau, 2013-2017 American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates

Age is an important factor to understand in the context of transit improvements, because younger and older populations may be more likely to use (or depend on) transit than other age segments. The median age in the study area is 27.2, which is lower than the county’s median (41.2) and lower than the national median age (36.8). Figure 3-2 shows the age profile in 2018 for the study area and Erie County. The study area contains higher proportions of young people ages 15 to 24 than the county. This age profile is expected, given the presence of University at Buffalo within the study area.

Figure 3-2. Age Profile: Study Area and Erie County (2018)



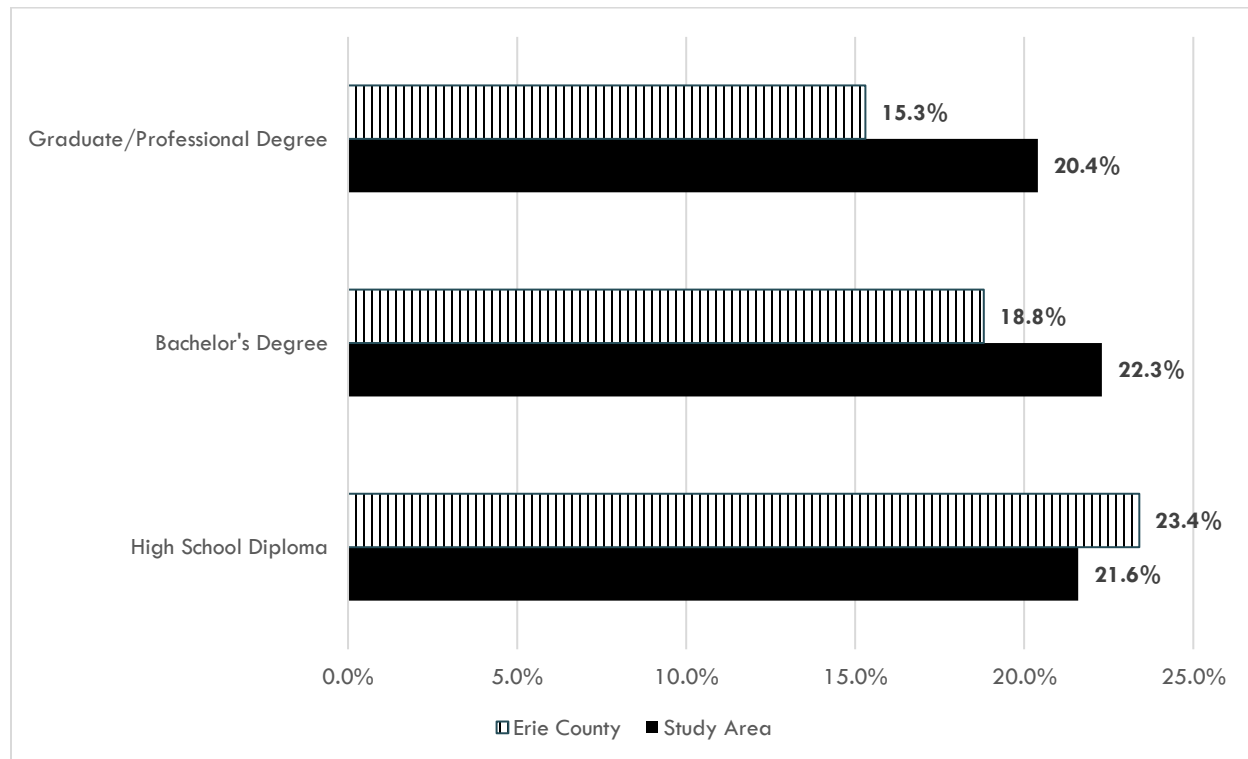
Source: ESRI Business Analyst, U.S. Census Bureau (2018)

The high number of students may be used by decision makers to determine the types of transportation services that will be needed in the short- and long-term. A more highly educated population may be more favorably disposed to public transportation: a 2017 report by the American Public Transportation Association found that 51% of riders had a college degree or higher,⁵ a larger percentage than the overall U.S. population. It is also closely related to income, and the education level of a community is an important economic and health indicator in the following ways:

- An educated population is an attractive feature to businesses looking for a qualified workforce.
- A better educated population can more easily adapt to changing economic environments and employment needs.
- Highly educated populations are healthier and live longer.⁶

Figure 3-3 shows the highest form of education for the population living within the study area and Erie County. A higher proportion of study area residents have a professional/graduate degree or a bachelor's degree relative to the county as a whole. Approximately 21.6 percent of study area residents earned a high school diploma as the highest form of education, which is slightly lower compared to the county.

Figure 3-3. Educational Attainment: Study Area and Erie County (2017)



Source: U.S. Census Bureau, 2013-2017 American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates

⁵ Who Rides Public Transportation (2017)

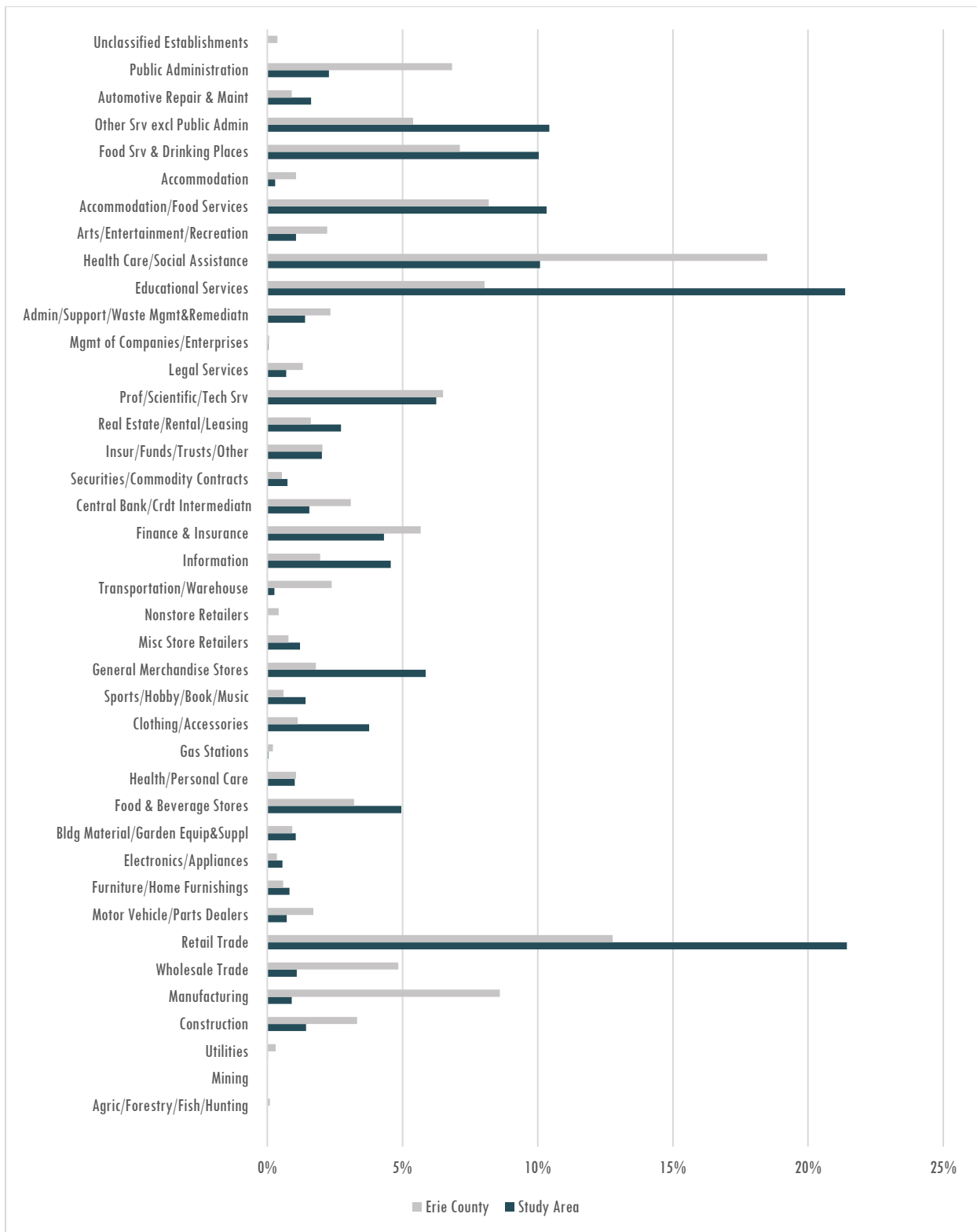
⁶ An Economic Development Toolbox: Strategies and Methods, American Planning Association Planning Advisory Service Report 541

Many factors that influence growth and change in a community come from outside forces, such as regional, state, and national trends. Larger economic trends can be less visible or less direct than local trends, but they have an impact on the economic activity in smaller geographies.

Understanding which industries and businesses provide the largest proportion of jobs in the larger region and in the county can help better understand which industries have the biggest impact on the local economy as well as the community's dependence on certain industries.

In 2018, the total employed civilian population over the age of 16 in the study area was 9,605, which was just over 2 percent of total employment in Erie County (446,472). The unemployment rate in the study area was slightly lower in 2018 (5 percent) than the county as a whole (5.6 percent). Figure 3-4 shows total employment by industry sector for the study area and Erie County. A substantially larger proportion of study area employees work in the following North American Industry Classification System categories relative to the county as a whole: Retail Trade, Educational Services, Accommodation/Food Services. In fact, Retail Trade and Educational Services account for almost 43 percent of jobs in the study area, compared to 20 percent county-wide. This is expected given the presence of University at Buffalo, as well as retail establishments along Niagara Falls Boulevard.

Figure 3-4. Employment by Industry: Study Area and Erie County (2018)



Source: North American Industry Classification System and ESRI Business Analyst (2018)

3.4 FUTURE WITHOUT THE PROPOSED ACTION

As described in Chapter 2, “Land Use, Zoning, and Community Character”, the No Action condition consists of several residential and mixed-use developments along the corridor. No Action condition projects are located in Amherst and consist of two student housing projects, two hotels, a 12-unit apartment building, and two mixed-use developments: Northtown Plaza Redevelopment and Muir Woods Development. These projects are anticipated to result in a change to population, housing, and employment within the study area.

Table 3-5 summarizes the No Action condition growth rates, which are the same as those applied in the 2018 TOD Plan. Table 3-5 also includes the GBNRTC growth rates for context. Table 3-6 presents population, households, and employment data for the No Action condition using these growth rates.

Table 3-5. Growth Rates/Assumptions: Study Area (2015–2040)

	GBNRTC Model	No Action Condition
Population	-0.04%	1.30%
Households	0.57%	1.30%
Employment	9.2%	12.5%

Source: GBNRTC Travel Demand Model, 2018 Comprehensive TOD Plan.

Notes: The No Action condition growth rate represents the regional growth rate identified in the 2018 TOD Plan. GBNRTC model growth rates vary across individual TAZs. Percentages in this table calculates a combined growth rate for portions of TAZs physically located within the study area.

Table 3-6 Existing and No Action Condition Population, Households, and Employment: Study Area (2015 – 2040)

	Existing (2015)	No Action (2040)
Population	25,557	25,889
Households	8,685	8,798
Employment	33,326	37,491

Source: GBNRTC Travel Demand Model, 2018 Comprehensive TOD Plan

While population, households, and employment would grow under the Proposed Action, the No Action condition would provide fewer opportunities for redevelopment and revitalization along the corridor, particularly around proposed station locations, and would not realize future economic development related to plans and policies for transit-supportive development. This could also indirectly affect future property values and tax revenues. Additional detail regarding indirect impacts can be found in Chapter 20, “Indirect and Cumulative Effects.”

3.5 POTENTIAL IMPACTS OF THE PROPOSED ACTION

3.5.1 Population, Housing, and Employment

Table 3-7 shows the estimated population, households, and total employment in 2040 within the study area, based on the GBNRTC model. Due to increased connectivity, mobility, and reductions in travel time that would result from the Proposed Action, increased development would occur in the study area. As a result, the Proposed Action would result in an increase in population, housing, and employment in the study area.

Table 3-7 Proposed Action and No Action Population, Households, and Employment: Study Area (2040)

	No Action (2040)	Proposed Action (2040)
Population	25,889	27,039
Households	8,798	9,258
Employment	37,491	37,758

Source: GBNRTC Travel Demand Model, 2018 Comprehensive TOD Plan.

Compared to the No Action condition, the Proposed Action would result in increased development. The 2018 Comprehensive TOD Plan demonstrates that transit investment would enhance mobility options for the community and support broader social and economic goals by promoting TOD. According to the analysis completed for the Comprehensive TOD Plan, the Proposed Action would facilitate future real estate development comprising approximately 8.4 million square feet of commercial (office and retail) and residential space throughout the corridor, worth a total assessed valuation of approximately \$1.7 billion. Existing properties where the current buildings and uses are expected to remain should see their cumulative assessed value increase by upwards of \$310 million as a result of their proximity to the corridor. As a result, Buffalo and Amherst would collect approximately \$61.5 million in property tax revenues from properties in the Proposed Action corridor, 32 percent more than the No Action condition. In addition, the potential retail development linked to the Proposed Action would lead to approximately \$8.7 million in sales tax revenues for the State of New York and \$10.3 million in sales tax revenues for Erie County.⁷

The American Public Transportation Association (APTA) completed a study in October 2019 entitled “The Real Estate Mantra: Locate Near Public Transportation,” which concluded that property located near public transportation experiences higher rates of appreciation than property not located near public transportation. The study analyzed seven regions between 2012 and 2016, finding that residential and commercial median sales price increases for properties near public transportation stations were 4 to 42 percent higher than properties not located near public transportation stations. The highest gains in appreciate were seen in areas near rapid rail transit, bus rapid transit, and commuter rail. In addition, the average transportation cost savings per household located near public transportation was between \$2,500 and \$4,400 per year.⁸

The Proposed Action would enhance regional mobility, and is part of a larger regional investment strategy to leverage economic and community development opportunities associated with transit investment. Buffalo, Amherst, Tonawanda, and Erie County are committed to ensuring that development principles enhance the community and provide for sustainable growth. For that effort, several regional plans and policies have been instituted to promote increased development, infill development, and/or redevelopment in established urban cores, and to limit development away from primary activity centers. These plans and policies are described in detail in Chapter 2, “Land Use, Zoning, and Community Character”. Therefore, in conjunction with associated land use policies, zoning and plans, the Proposed Action is expected to result in positive effects on development. The Proposed Action would contribute to economic benefits by encouraging and supporting high-density land uses, particularly around station locations.

⁷ Comprehensive Transit Oriented Development Plan, GBNRTC, August 2018

⁸ The Real Estate Mantra: Locate Near Public Transportation, American Public Transportation Association (APTA), October 2019

The Proposed Action would result in increased short-term employment and spending in the study area during construction, as well as long-term employment benefits resulting from the operations and maintenance of the Proposed Action.

The Proposed Action would also create jobs and additional earnings from operations and maintenance (O&M) expenditures. O&M expenditures include, but are not limited to, the expenses associated with rail operators, vehicle maintenance, right-of-way maintenance, station maintenance, and safety and security, including additional NFTA police. It is assumed that O&M funding would be procured from local and project-generated funds, and although these expenses would be generated at the local level, O&M expenditures would not happen without the Proposed Action.

3.5.2 Tax Revenue

When private property is acquired by a public entity, the property is no longer subject to property taxes and is removed from the tax base. Properties that would be acquired for the Proposed Action are documented in Chapter 4, “Property Acquisition and Displacement.” The Proposed Action would result in the full acquisition and displacement of 14 private properties, which would result in tax revenue loss. However, it is anticipated that the short-term tax revenue loss would be offset by the long-term increase in property values (and resulting taxes) that are expected from economic development that would occur as a result of the Proposed Action.

3.6 MITIGATION

The Proposed Action would result in an increase in population, housing supply, and employment, particularly around the proposed stations. These changes would be consistent with existing plans and policies. Therefore, no mitigation is warranted.

The Proposed Action would facilitate future transit-oriented development, which is called for in existing local and regional plans. No mitigation is warranted.

Tax revenue would be lost as a result of the Proposed Action, due to private property acquisition. See Chapter 4, “Acquisitions and Displacements.” However, the overall loss would be small compared to the town and county’s total tax base. Moreover, the Proposed Action would support future TOD, resulting in millions of dollars of tax revenues. Therefore, no mitigation is warranted. Additionally, the town of Amherst has instituted plans and policies to promote increased development, infill development, and/or redevelopment. These efforts will create positive effects on development and contributing economic benefits.