The following is a report of the February 18, 2017,  conference call with Mayor Frank Jackson and members of the Cuyahoga County and Cleveland chapters.

Milena Zavoli’s Notes:

Q. Why is the City of Cleveland denying RTA bus access to Public Square?

A. Five years ago, RTA and a consulting group were invited to redesign public spaces downtown. Among other projects was a bridge connecting Mall C to the Lakefront. RTA was also invited to weigh in on the design of Public Square, and it hired a consultant to study the area. It said that, if the Square stayed open, it would be easier for buses to go up superior. When it was finished last year, it was agreed that the Square would stay closed until after the Republican Convention due to protests. Before the convention got started, the Mayor’s Office received many calls from constituents who preferred that the Square be kept closed permanently. The Mayor informed them that doing so, would be in opposition to the agreement between the City and the Federal Transit Administration (FTA) who provided part of the funding to build the Square, as well as the Healthline, a commonly used bus route on Cleveland’s East side known as the Euclid Corridor. He asked RTA’S CEO, Joe Calabrese, to come up with options that would keep the Square closed and still allow buses to travel around that area. Mr. Calabrese informed Mayor Jackson that keeping the square closed would impose operational and financial hardship on RTA because it costs more money to go around the Square than through it. Mayor Jackson wanted proof of financial hardship. From that point on, other municipal factions and commercial establishments responded:

\* The Police Department:  The City of Cleveland Police Department informed the Mayor that the square is being  used as a water park, and that’s a problem

because the kids were unaware that they were playing in traffic. The police advised the mayor to keep that in mind before opening up the square because it would jeopardize public safety.

      \* Homeland Security: Terrorist activities can take place anywhere, and closing the Square to traffic won’t solve the problem. A sniper can shoot from anywhere; a bomb can be carried anywhere as well as a knife. However,the mayor’s intelligence people tell him that keeping the Square closed will minimize the incidence of a terrorist using a vehicle to barrel through a crowd to inflict harm.

\*Businesses:  According to the mayor, businesses want the Square to reopen to traffic because doing so would allow business to grow and prosper due to

increased pedestrian and vehicle activity.  However, it is generally thought that businesses around the Square would rather see foot traffic.

Mayor Jackson never said that he wanted the square to be kept closed.  What he said was that he wanted RTA to prove how keeping it closed would affect the agency’s finances and operations. His staff will assess RTA’s hardship claims and will respond in due time.

Additionally, this Monday, February 20, traffic engineers will conduct a test to determine whether buses can navigate safely through the Square without injuring pedestrians.

During the call, Zavoli asked the Mayor about the inconvenience that going around the Square would pose to pedestrians when transferring to another bus or train. Jackson said she should discuss the routing issue with the RTA. Furthermore, he pointed out that there are many obstacles in the square with walls,

hills, and benches, and he also advised the NFB to consult with RTA about dealing with any physical barriers or pedestrian safety concerns. Zavoli said she had heard that moving bus shelters around the Square would cost RTA about $1 million, a prohibitive  cost to an agency strapped for funding. Jackson stated that this figure is “misinformation.”

The Mayor didn’t see a problem with the paratransit vehicles going around the Square because most venues of interest, such as the Casino, the Renaissance Hotel, and Tower City, lie outside the Square, and the passenger can reach his or her destination without difficulty.

Will the Mayor reopen the Square to vehicles? He has until March 7 to provide the answer.  This is the second extension he has requested from the FTA. If the response is negative, the City stands in violation of the FTA’S agreement, and at least $12 million will need to be repaid, and possibly the entire cost of the funding to build the Healthline Corridor on Euclid Avenue, equaling $142.8

million.

If you want to express your displeasure at the closing of Public Square to buses, call the Mayor's Action Center at (216) 664-2900 or e-mail the office

at

communications@city.cleveland.oh.us

On February 21, 2017, a news item appeared on WEWS TV, Channel 5 saying that, as promised, RTA sent an empty bus through Public Square on Presidents’ Day to determine whether it could be regularly routed through the area.  An RTA official proposed putting guard rails in the Square to separate pedestrians from buses, and placing barricades to keep all other vehicles out.

Cheryl Field’s Notes:

In November 2016, the NFB adopted a resolution asserting the right of all disabled people to  public transportation. The troubling point is that, if the Cleveland repayment is enforced, riders will pay another fare increase in addition to the last one, which was implemented in the summer of 2016, and more bus routes will cease to operate.  RTA is operating on a $4 million deficit, and Governor Kasich’s proposed budget will further deplete funding for public transportation in Ohio.  Riders can look forward to higher fares and discontinued routes.

The nightmare shows no signs of going away.  Paratransit riders depend on bus routes to remain active.  Each time a bus route is discontinued, so is Paratransit service to the area, preventing passengers from going to work, attending religious services, going shopping, and carrying out other activities. The Americans With Disabilities Act is very clear about transportation for persons with disabilities. If the repayment of these funds is demanded, it will greatly inhibit our right to have reasonable accommodations and will curtail our travel independence.

Cheryl Field’s Update:

Fields reports that the Mayor's Chief Operations Officer called her to make sure all of our concerns had been addressed. She reinforced the need to have access to Public Square for events. To insure safety for everyone, she suggested that curbs be adequately marked, traffic signals be installed and ramps be placed at crosswalks. Additionally, Fields intends to get a group of NFB members to walk through the area before the final architectural plan is approved. It would be beneficial for the blind community to be involved during the initial planning of any construction project, not just contacted as an afterthought.

The Mayor's Chief Operations Officer will share our concerns and  suggestions with the safety committee, the Mayor, and RTA. It is encouraging to know that we have been heard.

In conclusion, A new two-year State budget takes effect July 1, which will have a large impact on the Greater Cleveland Regional Transit Authority. Although Governor John Kasich plans to help out counties and transit systems that depend largely on the sales tax to fund public transit, new federal guidelines would prohibit the State of Ohio from charging a sales tax levied on Medicaid managed-care organizations. That means that RTA would lose $4.5 million in the fourth quarter of this year, $18 million in 2018, and every year from then on. Governor Kasich will cover the 4.5 budget gap in 2017. For 2018, the State will allocate a one-time payment, based upon a needs formula to be developed, that will cover a percentage of the anticipated revenue loss, which will be $2 million, according to the Governor’s proposal. There will be no State assistance for 2019 and beyond, which leaves RTA with a deficit of $18 million. To insure miminal loss of funds, CEO Joe Calabrese will continue to work with the North East Ohio delegation in the General Assembly, and the Ohio Public Transit Association (OPTA). Ultimately, the final budget must be adopted by the State General Assembly.

More updates will follow.