



# Bills QB room having 'a blast'

Allen, Trubisky reunite but on a much different team | PAGE C1

# THE BUFFALO NEWS

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## Why better train service could be around the bend



BUFFALO NEWS FILE PHOTO

An Amtrak passenger train departs from the Niagara Falls Train Station heading east in 2020.

Ridership growing, DOT eyes 'higher-speed rail'

MARK SOMMER  
News Staff Reporter

Ground was broken two months ago in Las Vegas to bring high-speed rail to Los Angeles at a maximum speed of 186 mph, which four years from now is expected to cut the trip by train between the cities to half the driving time.

Massive viaducts and bridges are being constructed in California's Central Valley for high-speed rail that will take passengers less than three hours to go from Los Angeles to San Francisco, with final statewide environmental clearance for the project announced last week.

In Florida, privately operated high-speed trains between Orlando and Miami began last year with a maximum speed of 130 mph. Amtrak is also considering high-speed rail service between Houston and Dallas that would take 90 minutes, compared with 4 1/2 hours by car.

So is high-speed rail, still a rarity in the United States, in New York State's future?

No, but a 12-year-long state and federal review, "High Speed Rail Empire Corridor," released early last year, provides a blueprint on how to reduce travel times and, perhaps most importantly, make travel more dependable in a rail system plagued by unreliability.

"There has been talk of having higher efficiency rail across upstate New York for decades," said Bruce Becker, communications director and former president of Empire State Passengers Association. "I have two plastic bins full of old studies dating back to the 1960s. We are extremely hopeful that the current efforts to improve rail service will finally bring improvements."

Alternative 90B, chosen by the New York State Department of Transportation and the Federal Railroad Administration, with a cost of nearly \$6 billion in 2017 dollars, would see

trains travel at a peak speed of 90 mph, well below the sustained speeds of 125 mph typically considered the cutoff for high-speed rail in the U.S.

Although the environmental impact statement was concluded 18 months ago, there is still no timeline for when work on the rail corridor will start.

Matthew Janiszewski, upstate press spokesman for Gov. Kathy Hochul, called the rail corridor study "an important milestone."

"The Department of Transportation is now working with the Federal Railroad Administration to identify and progress a pipeline of intercity passenger rail projects that will allow us to achieve the goal of faster, safer and more reliable rail service throughout the entire Empire Corridor," Janiszewski told The Buffalo News.

High-speed rail is still largely elusive in America. Amtrak, which received \$66 billion from the 2021 infrastructure bill, is pursuing numerous new routes across states and repairing old ones, but very few provide for high-speed rail.

Becker said it is not always about how fast a train can go.

"Increasing speed at low-speed areas - say going from 25 to 50 miles per hour - can be of greater benefit than increasing speeds from 70 to 90 miles per hour," he said.

### The study

The state study began under President Obama, who entered office with a goal of establishing a national high-speed rail network. Those plans were ultimately dashed in 2010, after Republican governors in Wisconsin, Florida and Ohio rejected federal money for train routes through their states.

The goals for improving rail service on the 463-mile corridor from Niagara Falls International Railway Station to Penn Station in

Please see TRAIN, Page A4

## Special education in preschool sees a sharp increase

City, county officials face large backlog

BEN TSUJIMOTO  
News Staff Reporter

The number of children under 5 years old referred for special education evaluation has increased substantially in Western New York, but traditional resources to help children with disabilities have not kept pace.

Erie County Department of Health officials have charted a rise over the past decade of referrals for potential disabilities or developmental delays in children 5 years old and younger. Ten years ago, it was about 3,500 referrals annually. It is between 4,500 and 5,000 now, the county said.

Mary Martin, who directs Early Intervention Services for the county's Department of Health, described the increase as "not an alarmingly higher rate," but she said it is a prominent issue that has been discussed for years at state-level task force meetings.

For Buffalo Public Schools' special education department, however, a sharp increase in preschool students with disabilities has administrators scrambling for solutions that staffing-starved agencies can no longer satisfy.

"It's hard to keep up," Kim Hoelscher, Buffalo Schools' assistant superintendent for special education, said in a spring interview.

Comparing annual data published by the district, Buffalo Schools for the 2023-24 school year reported 1,858 preschool students with a disability, an increase of 284 from the year prior. The Committee on Special Education (CPSE) completed 1,166 initial evaluations of referred students ages 3-5, the most in a six-year span.

One strategy Buffalo Schools has deployed to accommodate the influx of students is by opening its own self-contained prekindergarten special education classrooms. The district operated 11 last year, Hoelscher said, and has applied to the state to open 15 classrooms this year. These typically have eight students, one teacher and either two or three para-

professionals.

"We're losing kids - we're really trying to help pick up the need for the classrooms," said Margie Loomis, Buffalo Schools' supervisor of special education for CPSE.

Buffalo's budget projects \$7.8 million in state funds to run these classrooms in 2024-25, an increase from \$4 million last year. Additionally, the district expects special education itinerant teachers (SEIT) to help transition students with special needs into general prekindergarten classrooms, which could also benefit from push-in, pull-out approaches.

The mission, as federal law demands, is to ensure students with disabilities learn in their least-restrictive environment.

Even with CPSE bumping its meeting metrics and applying for more classrooms, Maelena Fisher, chair of the Special Education Parent Advisory Committee, through her discussions with parents believes there's a "huge backlog" of children waiting for evaluation. "There's students who requested evaluations four months ago that are still waiting," Fisher said Friday.

### Evidence of higher needs

Not only are more students showing developmental delays and receiving disability diagnoses, but their degree of need is higher, too.

"It started out, it was speech and communication delays, now it's children who are more involved," Loomis said, referring to global development delays in which students may be slow to reach milestones in several areas, such as both speech and fine motor skills.

Hoelscher said Buffalo's special education office has recently seen more behavioral issues and students with autism; the two are not mutually exclusive. A disability diagnosis can be challenging because behaviors can be a manifestation of several disabilities, not only "emotional disturbance."

Please see PRESCHOOL, Page A4

## Couples fast-forward to save money on rent

MELISSA ROHMAN  
New York Times

For Caroline Li and Colin Wang, moving in together after dating for eight months was a matter of serendipity and urgency.

Last fall, Wang, 28, was completing his final year of medical school at the University of California, Los Angeles, when he learned that the two-bedroom apartment he shared with one roommate had a mold infestation. He had to move out immediately, but had trouble finding new housing.

"It was very difficult to find something that was pretty close to campus that was reasonable in price, and it was also in the middle of the school year," said

Wang, who had reached UCLA's three-year limit on student housing, which allowed him to pay \$1,425 per month in rent instead of the market rate of \$2,000 or more.

At the same time, Li, 24, a registered nurse, learned that one of her two roommates was moving out of their \$5,000-a-month, three-bedroom apartment near Santa Monica, Calif., in the middle of their lease. Li and Wang realized that they could resolve both of their issues by having Wang move in with Li and her roommate.

Li and the roommate each pay \$1,750 per month, and Wang pays \$1,500.

Please see COHABIT, Page A5

### WHITE HOUSE MEMO

## As tide rises, is Biden relying on resilience or defiance?

KATIE ROGERS  
New York Times

WASHINGTON - Over the course of his long career, President Biden has overcome personal tragedy and political odds, and he has used his resilience to power his ambition. But now that he is in the fight of his political life, his irrepressible pursuit of the comeback risks looking like blind defiance in the face of a rising tide.

"You've been wrong about everything so far," Biden told a group of reporters who asked him Friday why he still felt he was the best person to de-

feat former President Donald Trump, after a dismal debate performance in Atlanta plunged his campaign into crisis.

"You were wrong about 2020. You were wrong about 2022. We were going to get wiped out - remember the red wave," he said, referring to an expected wave of Republican gains that never materialized in the midterm elections. Instead, Democrats did far better than expected, a decisive factor in Biden's decision to run for a second term.

He took that spirit with him into a 22-minute ABC interview with George Stephanopoulos on

Friday, in which he was asked about his approval rating of 36%.

"Well, I don't believe that's my approval rating," Biden said. "That's not what our polls show."

In an effort to turn out his supporters, the president was scheduled to attend several campaign events in Pennsylvania with the first lady on Sunday.

The comeback-kid mythology that Biden has built over a half century in politics is colliding with a new reality, where he is

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## Preschool

From A1

Sensory issues have increased over the last decade, Loomis continued, which makes occupational therapy critical for development. “If children come into a classroom and are expected to attend to a task or sit for an extended period of time, they have a greater difficulty with that,” she said.

Why are individual needs more intense? There is not one reason. “There are probably a million sociological reasons for increased needs,” Martin said.

So, what can parents do?

## How the system works

Determining eligibility, establishing an education plan and providing resources for students with a disability are among the most overwhelming tasks for parents. For children under 3 in Buffalo, the pathway often begins at the doctor’s office, rolls through Erie County and its partner agencies and flows into Buffalo Public Schools.

Martin, Erie County’s division director for early intervention, said in May that parents, pediatricians or nursery schools identify a developmental delay or disorder and then submit a referral to the county, which sets the process in motion. A service coordinator then visits the child and coordinates an evaluation. If the child is deemed

eligible for the program, a plan is designed and appropriate services are offered, primarily through the county’s agency partners. The child’s progress is reviewed, and an annual evaluation is completed.

From ages 3-5, the child transitions to CPSE, which is led by a school district chairperson and usually comprises the parent of the child, a special education teacher or agency representative, and a coordinator from the county. The committee may develop an Individualized Education Program, or IEP, a legal document that lays out a plan of supports and services designed for the student with the disability.

Since most of these children are not yet in kindergarten, they may receive services at a variety of locations, such as at one of the district-affiliated Head Start preschools, in a Buffalo Schools pre-kindergarten classroom or at a special needs specific program, such as those at The Summit Center or Buffalo Hearing & Speech Center.

Seven CPSE chairpersons evaluate students’ eligibility for services, review evaluations and write IEPs, Loomis said. The team has conducted more than 2,100 meetings this year, she said, and district data shows 855 annual reviews of preschool IEPs, nearly 200 above last year’s total. On-call personnel – such as speech pathologists and occupational and physical therapists – have expedited the evaluation process.

In kindergarten, they transition to oversight by the Committee on Special Education (CSE), which makes a specific classification from the 13 different disability categories. Children in CPSE are classified as a “prekindergarten student with a disability.” It’s common for students with disabilities to make significant improvement and shed their classification.

## Agencies: Shrinking yet needed

Martin and the Buffalo Schools officials agreed that agencies – specialized service partners that employ therapists – are struggling to a point where creative alternatives are required. Tasks handled by agencies in the past – such as conducting evaluations, offering their own education settings and providing services directly to schools – are no longer a given.

“Many agencies we work with have closed classrooms, which is why we have had to open them,” said Loomis, who worked for an agency before she moved to Buffalo. Martin, from Erie County, said she is actually working with more agencies overall – but those agencies employ significantly fewer therapists.

“People are retiring, and there’s not an influx of young people,” said Martin, who added that salaries for human service workers pale when compared to fields such as computer programming. “It’s a differ-

ent world.”

She said New York is implementing recruiting tools, but wages and a low state reimbursement rate for providers do not align with the demanding work required to help high-need students. National education media continue to criticize insufficient federal funding for workers in special education. Martin admires those who persevere.

“These are people who are truly dedicated to the population and truly believe in the work,” she said. Hoelscher understands the dilemma and calls for government to act.

“Reimbursement is not what it should be,” the assistant superintendent said. “Agencies don’t take on (special education) evaluations because they don’t provide enough money to pay that evaluator a full salary.”

In a panel on the county website, New York mentions the shortage and advertises jobs in several fields: audiologists, mental health practitioners, behavioral analysts, psychologists and social workers, to name a few.

## Positives and a path forward

There is a positive angle: Higher numbers of preschool special education referrals show improved awareness for and identification of special needs.

Screening tools are working, and the general public is better

informed about autism. Collaboration between Erie County, Buffalo Schools and local agencies has shown the fruits of early intervention, which research shows are intellectual, social-emotional and physical.

“We provide supports to them at an earlier age in hopes that those supports will weed out as they get to school age,” Loomis said. “These are their foundation years. Their brains are developing, their bodies are developing – we want those skills to become second nature. We want to be able to pull back special ed services by second grade.”

Expect significant attention next school year on special education in Buffalo Schools. In a May presentation to the School Board, at-large board member Ann Rivera urged the district to carefully evaluate its existing program and demanded changes. “They are our students,” Rivera said. “They’re not something separate.”

Even though Rivera will not run for reelection, two committees on special education – one with School Board members and the other an ad hoc district group – were approved in February to produce a comprehensive review, similar to the work of the Council of the Great City Schools in 2014.

“The importance is very high in students who are preschool age because it’s the very beginning of their school journey,” she said, “and it’s going to affect everything else that comes next.”

## Train

From A1

New York City – 322 miles of it west of the Albany-Rensselaer Station – call for improving on-time performance to at least 90%, reducing travel time, increasing frequency of service and minimizing interference with freight rail, since CSX, alone, owns more than half of the Empire Corridor.

“Existing inadequate infrastructure to support rail operations limits Empire Corridor service,” the report said, contributing to trains that operate between Albany and Buffalo being late 52% of the time, with an average late time of almost 28 minutes.

Stephanie Clark, a Rochester transplant who frequently takes Amtrak to Buffalo to visit family members, said her experience is usually a good one, but there is room for improvement.

“There are some times where friends and family come to visit and the train stalls or we have major delays,” Clark said Sunday at the Buffalo Exchange Station, where she was returning home with two children and a grandchild.

Alternative 9B calls for the installation of 370 miles of track, upgrades to 17 grade crossings and warning systems, a new signal system and 74 undergrade bridges.

Significantly, the plan calls for a new dedicated third passenger track between Buffalo and Schenectady that would allow Amtrak to get around freight trains, a significant source of delays. There would also be a fourth track in limited locations.

While the maximum speed from Albany to Niagara Falls would be 90 mph, the average speed would be to 61 mph, 17% faster than current speeds. It would shave 90 minutes off the current timeline.

“We call it ‘higher-speed rail’



DEREK GEE/NEWS FILE PHOTO

## Shorter travel times and greater dependability would benefit travelers who board Amtrak at the Buffalo Exchange Street Station.

internally,” said Janet Ho, DOT assistant commissioner for finance and integrated modal systems. “The public perception of high-speed rail is what you see in other countries, and coming out of the EIS, you can just see there are a large number of hurdles in New York State to get us there at that level.

“Reliability is key for people, and I think we recognize that and understand that,” she said.

The plan envisions doubling the number of daily round trips to Albany to eight, with four round trips added between Albany and New York City.

The study projected a capital cost of \$5.97 billion and a ridership increase of 2.6 million passengers in 2035, a gain of 1 million annually if the current system is not updated. Both estimates used 2017 data and are being revisited.

The plan was also estimated to reduce greenhouse gas emissions by 33,000 metric tons per year.

## Higher speeds

Two alternatives called for higher speeds, but brought their own share of challenges and costs.

One would allow a maximum speed of 110 mph, but still averaged 63 mph. Unlike Alternative 90B, which would have land use impacts in nine areas in six counties, Alternative 110 would require acquiring land in 53 areas in eight counties. The project cost was \$6.7 billion.

For Alternative 125, which would allow trains to go 125 mph, 2,000 to 3,000 acres in 12 counties would have to be acquired to construct the sealed high-speed rail corridor, disrupting wetlands, potentially tribal lands and “bisecting and isolating sections of prime farmland and farmlands of state significance.”

Another major hurdle: CSX requires trains going 125 mph to operate 30 feet from freight track.

The total project cost for high-speed rail, in 2017 dollars, was \$15.7 billion, more than double the cost of the nearest alternative.

Alternative 125, which was projected to boost ridership to some 4.3 million passengers and provide 19 daily roundtrips between Buffalo and Albany, received the most favorable public comments. CSX, shippers and companies relying on freight rail overwhelmingly favored

no changes to the current system. “The selection of Alternative 90B balances the preferences of these different constituencies,” the report said.

## Changing the sequence

The study calls for starting the rail improvements downstate, with 10 years elapsing before work would begin west of Albany. It would take another 15 years, the study said, to complete track and other improvements in Buffalo and Niagara Falls.

But with billions of federal infrastructure dollars available this year and the next two years, the state DOT may alter the sequence of work to tap into billions of federal infrastructure dollars available during that period.

Because it took so long to complete the study, the Federal Railway Administration is requiring some of the projections from 2017 to be updated. The DOT is using a \$500,000 federal grant to update the study’s Service Development Plan, which also provided the timeline for proposed improvements across the entire state, project by project.

That has contributed to the idea in DOT, Ho said, of seeking money for whatever projects are ready to go, regardless of the geographical sequence the report suggested.

“That put us in a really good place to figure out what we think that universe of rail projects looks like,” Ho said.

Doing projects across the state, rather than in order, would be a welcome and significant development, Becker said.

“I am very encouraged that they are looking at it in a more pragmatic matter,” he said, “as opposed to starting at New York City and ending up in Western New York.”

## Not ‘in the queue’

A former planner for the City of Niagara Falls isn’t pleased with the state’s readiness.

DOT dropped the ball by not being better prepared to take advantage of the spigot of money now flowing from the federal government, said Thomas DeSantis, who led the planning for the Niagara Falls Station and is a board member of Citizens For Regional Transportation.

The transportation department should have identified a dozen or more projects in different locations years ago, he said, and had them “in the queue, ready to go.”

“It would have provided hope for the general public that this isn’t some kind of crazy pipe dream that will never get implemented because the timelines are too long, the budgets are too big and the political will may not be there,” DeSantis said.

He would like to see DOT work with regional metropolitan planning agencies on rail projects they want to advance.

“I’m disgusted because a lot of work went into this, starting 20 years ago,” DeSantis said. “There was an environmental impact statement undertaken by the state to implement the plan at great cost, but never completed for 12 years. Are we expected to wait another 15 years to start projects west of Albany?”

“It’s time to do it,” he said. “The plan is there and the money can be there, so we need to actually start now.”

## Ridership levels up

Train ridership across upstate New York has rebounded since the pandemic.

Empire Service ridership was 72,600 more from October 2023 to April 2024 than over the same period from 2018 to 2019, prior to the spread of Covid-19.

“While we are looking forward to future improvements,” Becker said, “we shouldn’t overlook the fact that ridership continues to grow.”

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