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An easier way to get to Bills games: NFTA 'Bills Express' service returns for 2023 season

STORY AND PHOTO BY TERRY DUFFY

Editor-in-Chief

The Buffalo Bills opened the 2023 preseason at home in Orchard Park on Saturday versus the Indianapolis Colts. The game itself was exciting for the more than 70,000 who attended, with a 23-19 win; the on-field return of safety Damar Hamlin; strong Bills showings on both sides of the ball; and a chance for many younger visitors to experience the thrills of Bills football for the first time.

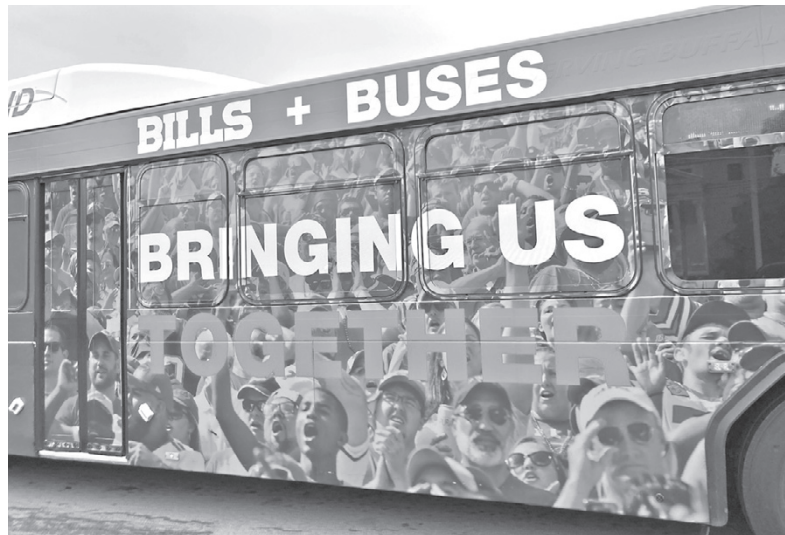
But for those who drove, just getting there was to become a challenge that many might not have fully realized.

As most Bills fans are well aware, construction for the new, 60,000-seat-plus Bills stadium is underway on Abbott Road across from the current stadium. And with that construction has come a host of disruptions. Namely parking.

Attending fans discovered that on Saturday. Parking that once existed in the massive Abbott Road lots to the west has, for the most part, been eliminated. That includes hundreds designated for overnight camping, as well as tailgating experiences for thousands of "Bills Mafia" fans who patronize the Bills-controlled parking areas, as well those like the Hammer lot on the west end.

As the Bills embark on the "largest construction project in the history of Western New York" the team advised fans, "Changes can be expected that will impact the parking experience of our valued fans throughout the 2023 football season."

Simply put, those long-familiar parking arrangements in Bills-controlled lots are no longer available to many fans for the upcoming 2023 regular season and beyond. Gone for the next few seasons is much of the famed Bills tailgating



The NFTA "Bills Game Day Express" is back in business for the 2023 season.

experience for game-day visitors, as well as the RV crowd who set up for weekend camping.

One affected area is the Colton RV camper lot alongside Abbott Road. This popular setup for campers "has been temporarily removed from the Highmark Stadium campus" the team said. "Campers/RVs will be unable to park within any Buffalo Bills-controlled parking lots."

"We look forward to the return of the new RV Camper lot experience for the 2026 season," the team said. But for the 2023, '24 and the '25 seasons at least, those users would be limited to finding availability in the various private-owned/controlled lots in the neighborhoods that surround the Orchard Park stadium.

Other parking disruptions include:

- The bus and limo lot has been relocated to an area east of the Abbott Road construction site. Parking is now found adjacent to the Bills' Lot 6 preferred area, found across Abbott Road to the east and north of the stadium off Southwestern Boulevard.

- The center access road from Abbott Road to the ECC campus is

no longer open.

- The southernmost portion of Lot 4 on Abbott Road is no longer available, with parking now limited to permitholders and credit card customers

- Lot 3 parking has been relocated to a corner area at Big Tree and Abbott roads.

Needless to say, this has all resulted in disruptions to Bills fans.

Orchard Park Police and units from the Erie County Sheriff's Office who maintain traffic reported typical delays Saturday and, with the limited parking, strongly advised fans driving to plan to get there early.

Many did – but now a new alternative has also resurfaced.

Following a lapse of several years, the Niagara Frontier Transportation Authority announced the return, this season, of its popular "Bills Game Day Express" buses to home games in Orchard Park. NFTA discontinued this service in past years due to low ridership, but returned it in 2022 on a trial basis for the Denver game. It drew strong support. For 2023, it is resuming for riders.

The cost to ride the "Bills Game Day Express" is \$5 each way, with payment either cash or prepay via NFTA's new Token Transit app available to iPhone and Android users. NFTA advised riders this offering was exclusively an express service with stops limited to designated boarding locations, and not its normal bus routes. Further, it issued guidelines barring any eating, drinking or smoking while on board.

Priority seating is designated for seniors and disabled riders, and all using the service were requested to be courteous with others.

For the Bills-Colts game, the NFTA offered the "Bills Game Day Express" service from four departure sites, including one in Niagara

County. Locations included Route 251, departing from the Niagara Falls Transportation Center near the Fashion Outlets Mall, with a stop at a park-and-ride location in Athol Springs near Hamburg. Also, Route 252, departing the University Station on the UB South campus, with a stop at the NFTA Metro Rail Station on Utica Street in Buffalo; Route 253, departing the Metro Transportation Center in downtown Buffalo, with a stop at the McKinley Mall in Hamburg; and Route 254, departing the Eastern Hills Mall in Clarence, with a stop at the Thruway Mall in Cheektowaga.

All rides offered convenient morning departure times for fans. What's more, the "Bills Game Day Express" included a neat feature – escorts by NFTA transit police to ensure the buses were able to navigate the heavy traffic enroute and arrive in Orchard Park without delay at Highmark Stadium.

Drop-off for fans was at a designated site just yards away from the Highmark Stadium gates, with a pickup for the return ride following the game in an area on One Bills Drive near Abbott Road.

So how did it go? Surprisingly well for this first-time rider. We arrived at the UB South Campus in Buffalo (my ticket guest that day lives in the city), and we waited for 20 minutes with our ride already purchased via the Token Transit app. A number of Bills fans were waiting, including one fan who traveled into the city from Darien.

"This is great; the first time I've ever done this," he said. The man waited for his disabled friend in a wheelchair to arrive, and the two were among the first to board.

Soon, the bus was filled with excited, but well-behaved Bills fans from UB and down at the Utica Street Station for our ride. All in all, it was a cool experience. Our trip went out the Skyway to Route 179 by the Ford plant. We headed east to Abbott Road, then south toward the stadium. With our NFTA police escort breezing us through the heavy traffic, the bus meandered the maze and, within 50 minutes from starting, we were pulling into the Bills south drive off of Big Tree Road, yards away from the gates.

The cost to get there: \$5 one way. No \$50-plus expense for gas; no \$30-\$40 shelled out to park in a lot; and no aggravating traffic to contend with. On the way home, fans boarded the "Bills Game Day Express" on One Bills Drive, and the ride back via the Thruway and into the city was just as easy.

As a season ticketholder, I think I may have found a new way to get to Orchard Park for Bills home games this season.

For more information on this new riding experience, visit the Niagara Frontier Transportation Authority online at www.nfta.com.

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