

Vergennes PEL Study Community Liaison Engagement Report 2023

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Executive Summary

In 2023 the Vermont Agency of Transportation hired a community liaison to enhance the Vergennes Planning and Environment Linkages (PEL) Study team's ability to engage widely and deeply with stakeholders across all seven communities involved in the PEL Study. The first few months of community liaison engagement focused on in-person meetings with 1) Selectboard and Planning Commission chairs, 2) large local employers and Vergennes Main Street business owners, and 3) residents concerned about the impact of a specific route on their home. This document summarizes the engagement efforts and the input we have received.

Community Engagement by the Numbers

First, let's look at an overview of the scope of work during the period May through December 2023.

- **475+** hours of community engagement
- **35** individual stakeholder meetings
- **50** PEL Study team planning and strategy meetings
- **30** hours working the Addison County Field Days and Vergennes Day exhibits
- **900+** completed public surveys
- **250+** attendees at the December and January Land Use Visioning Workshops¹
- **300+** miles traveled on the roads of Addison County to meet with stakeholders.

Stakeholder Meetings

Here is a listing of stakeholders met with during the second half of 2023.

- Northlands Job Corps executive team
- Six Selectboard chairs, one Mayor
- Several municipal Planning Commissions
- Collins Aerospace facility manager
- Addison County legislators
- Addison Housing Works (formerly Addison County Community Trust) executive director
- Church Street residents
- Vergennes Rotary Club
- Main Street Vergennes business owners
- Vermont Truck & Bus Association Government Affairs Director
- ACRPC Transportation Advisory Committee

Qualitative Impacts of Engagement

The community liaison's personal engagement with community members supported the outreach activities conducted as part of the PEL Study (e.g., the PEL Study website, public survey, and land use workshops). As a result of this collaborative effort, we can confidently state that:

- **Awareness** of the PEL Study increased significantly in 2023, driven by:
 - ✓ Release of the public survey
 - ✓ Publication of the route maps
 - ✓ Individual stakeholder meetings
 - ✓ Coverage in *The Addison Independent*
 - ✓ Information forwarded by stakeholders to their networks – e.g., the Vergennes Partnership listserv and municipal Front Porch Forum and Facebook accounts

¹ A summary of engagement during the land use visioning task will be included within the upcoming Land Use Technical Memo.

- **Anxiety** over potential property impacts is transitioning to engagement with the PEL process
 - ✓ Example: Church Street neighborhood bordering Ferrisburgh, Waltham, and Vergennes
 - ✓ Example: Bailey Farm vineyard on 22A in Panton
- People are **Deeply Vested** in the PEL Study's outcome
 - ✓ Responses to the Public Survey far exceeded expectations
 - ✓ Turnout at all five land use workshop far exceeded expectations

Key Questions

2023 engagement revealed several issues of concern that need further attention, including:

- The impact of a truck route on **Vergennes businesses** remains a concern for some
 - ✓ There remains divided opinion on whether a truck route would harm or benefit Main Street businesses
- There is a lack of understanding about the PEL Study's **Final Recommendation**
 - ✓ Who makes the decision?
 - ✓ How and when will it be made?
 - ✓ What happens after that?
- **Road Safety** is a concern for ALL who live on or travel VT 22A and VT 17
 - ✓ How might a truck route improve road safety on state highways extending north and east from Addison Four Corners to Route 7?
- **Consensus** among all seven communities seems unlikely. "This is a Vergennes problem" is a commonly heard refrain.
 - ✓ There is the sentiment that the PEL Study has pitted one community against another
 - ✓ Given widespread concern with road safety on VT 22A and VT 17, how do we promote a shared approach to a shared problem? What are the tangible benefits of collaboration?
 - ✓ How might Policy Committee members facilitate productive, collaborative discussion during the final, critical stages of the PEL Study?

Summaries of Engagement by Type

The rest of this document summarizes what the community liaison heard between July and November 2023. A separate summary of results from the public survey was published in January 2024 on the Vergennes PEL website. A summary of land use visioning engagement will be published on the Vergennes PEL website in the coming months.

Municipal Leaders

Meetings with Selectboard and Planning Commission Chairs (Ongoing, starting in July)

One of the first tasks was to meet with the municipal decision-makers in each of the seven communities engaged in the PEL Study to understand each community's issues and concerns. Panton was a particular focus given its clear dissatisfaction with the process. What emerged from these meetings was the sense that common ground would be hard to find as each municipality's leadership quite naturally feels impelled to define and defend its own best interests. Municipal boundary and fire service compensation disagreements complicate the picture.

The following meetings took place:

- Vergennes Mayor Chris Bearor, Vergennes City Council member Dickie Austin, Main Street business owner Tim Ryan

- Ferrisburgh Selectboard Chair Clark Hinsdale, Panton Selectboard Chair Howard Hall, Vergennes Mayor Chris Bearor
- New Haven Selectboard Chair John Roleau
- Waltham Selectboard Chair Brent Newton and Planning Commission Chair Jeff Glassberg
- Addison Selectboard Chair Roger Waterman
- Weybridge Selectboard Chair Megan Sutton
- Panton Planning Commission Chair Mary Rudd and Planning Commission members Annie Hopper and Gretchen Bailey

Vergennes Business Community

Collins Aerospace—August

#1 Takeaway: According to Nathan Hill, facilities manager for Collins Aerospace, the biggest benefit of an alternate truck route for Collins would be a reduction in commute time for its employees (and a resulting reduction of traffic on Main Street in downtown Vergennes during rush hour) if a western route were built that included an exit onto Panton Road. Following are specifics:

- Collins employs 960 people working in three shifts, though most (900+) work the first shift, 7 AM – 3:30 PM. Traffic onto Panton Road and at the intersection of Panton Road and VT 22A can substantially back up at shift end and during lunch hour.
- The facility assembles components that are manufactured elsewhere for the aerospace industry, both commercial and defense.
- Collins is now owned by Raytheon and generates some \$400 million in annual revenue.
- Truck traffic in and out of Collins is relatively light. Components are relatively small and are frequently delivered by FedEx and UPS. There are an estimated 2-3 tractor trailer deliveries per day.

Addison Housing Works (AHW) (formerly Addison County Community Trust)—August

#1 Takeaway: According to executive director Elise Shanbacker, Addison Housing Works owns 750 units of affordable housing in Addison County, including 150 residents who live in AHW housing in the Vergennes area. Addison Housing Works has owned the 73 mobile home units of Otter Creek Park since 1991. In addition:

- Elise distributed our Fall public survey to the 150 residents who live in AHW-owned housing in the Vergennes area.
- Addison Housing Works' office is at 272 West Main Street in Vergennes, near the corner of 22A and Macdonough Drive, across Macdonough from Bixby Library and adjacent to the proposed Orange Route.
- There has been some discussion of relocating the residents of Otter Creek Park to “better housing” as part of an alternative route construction. Elise estimated the cost of relocation at \$10 million “plus infrastructure” using modular homes, cited the state-owned land north of the river as a potential site, and noted that some of the residents “were born there and were determined to die there.”

Northlands Job Corps—September

#1 Takeaway: According to Center Director Mike Dooley, Safety Manager Mike Mills, and Community Outreach Coordinator Tony Severo, Northlands' concerns with the Pink and Blue routes center on the potential for a) traffic noise and air pollution and b) increased traffic on Macdonough Drive, which intersects the campus and seems to be a lightly traveled route.

- Northlands employs a staff of 120, approximately 20% of whom reside in New York and presumably travel VT 17 and 22A to get to work.

- Northlands is one of 124 Job Corps centers in the U.S. offering career technical training for 16- to 24-year-olds, typically at-risk youth.
- Technical training ranges from automotive technology and welding to culinary arts and urban forestry.
- The facility can accommodate up to 200 students though it currently houses just 125 students as the buildings are being fitted with new HVAC systems.
- The Northlands campus sits on 66 acres, which are leased by the U.S. Department of Labor from the State of Vermont.
- The U.S. Dept of Labor subcontracts the running of Job Corps centers. Education Training Resources, a for-profit organization, has run Northlands since 2018. Its current contract extends through 2027.
- Northlands in recent years has risen in rankings from number 118 to number 2 as measured by U.S. Dept of Labor criteria.
- Northlands has no plans to develop the site further.
- They have daily truck deliveries of food, packages, and materials for the training programs (e.g., the building construction track), coming both from Burlington and from the south.
- Center Director Mike Dooley distributed our Fall public survey to the 120 employees of Northlands.

Meetings with Main Street Business Owners (Ongoing, starting in July)

A key concern of the PEL Study is the extent to which Main Street business owners view an alternate truck route as a positive or negative development. Broadly speaking—based on discussions with the individual business owners listed below and with the Vergennes business advocacy groups the Vergennes Partnership and the Vergennes Economic Development Committee—the expected improvements to quality of life and safety would outweigh the potential for lost business due to tourists following a “bypass.” This seems to be particularly true for Main Street restaurants—Black Sheep Bistro, Vergennes Laundry, 3 Squares Café, Park Squeeze, and Rockers—which would benefit from sidewalk seating. But, given the stakes, more engagement needs to be done with local business owners.

The following meetings have taken place:

- Vergennes Partnership executive director Julie Basol
- Vergennes Economic Development Committee
- Tim Ryan, owner, J.W. and D.E. Ryan Plumbing & Heating
- Dickie Austin, general manager, Black Sheep Bistro
- Bob Feuerstein, owner, Kennedy Brothers
- Linda Cook, owner, Linda’s Apparel & Gifts
- Danelle and Matt Birong, owners (now former), 3 Squares Cafe
- Vergennes Rotary

The Trucking Industry

Vermont Truck & Bus Association (VTBA)—September

#1 Takeaway: According to Bill Smith, Governmental Affairs Director, what VTBA would consider a “win” coming out of the PEL Study would be a truck route that is “as short and flat as possible.” Bill pointed to the Pink Route as meeting that goal. The specifics:

- Trucking today, with the focus on just-in-time inventory, is all about meeting a timeline. If a truck arrives 5 minutes past its scheduled time at Walmart, it may have to wait for as much as 24 hours to unload. The traffic jams in Vergennes work against this. Route 17 would add time to trucking schedules.

- An alternate truck route should be kept as close to Vergennes as possible so tourists would be encouraged to stay on Main Street.
- Consumer demand is driving the increase in trucking volume.
- VTBS has 300 members, including state representatives for FedEx and UPS.
- The average age of truckers today is 55.
- Bellavance Trucking is the largest freight hauler in Vermont.
- Barrett Trucking is one of the largest construction trucking companies in Vermont. They deliver road salt around the state.
- Bus members such as Lamoille Valley Bus Company transport college sports teams, leaf peepers, etc.
- Electric trucks are a long way off at this point because of cost.
- While residents complain about jake brakes, it was observed that only jake brakes that have been improperly installed or maintained are audible.
- Bill forwarded the public survey to VTBS membership.

Community Events

Addison County Field Days—August

The 75th anniversary of Vermont's largest agricultural fair — Addison County Fair & Field Days — was held in New Haven VT over five days from Tuesday, August 8, through the following Saturday. It presented the Vergennes PEL Study team with a unique opportunity to converse with local Vermonters, many of whom are unlikely to attend and voice their opinion in public meetings, such as parents of young children, working farmers, and those who live outside the study area but regularly travel through it on VT 22A.



Figure 1: Booth at Addison County Field Days 2023

Our Field Days exhibit, a 10 x 10 booth in the Paquette Exhibit Hall (Go! Vermont, an initiative of the Public Transit Section of VTrans, shared the booth with us) extended the reach of the Vergennes PEL Study outreach activities. Highlights follow.

- We staffed the exhibit booth for 30 hours over the five days and had direct engagements with 120 individuals who stopped by the booth. These direct engagements ranged from brief conversations about the purpose of the PEL Study to lengthy discussions about alternative truck routes, the need for those routes, and the general condition of VT 22A.
- Those we engaged in the booth represented all the PEL Study communities as well as Bridport, Shoreham, Middlebury, Bristol, Salisbury, Leicester, Lincoln, Goshen, Whiting, Shelburne, Charlotte, Burlington, Hinesburg, and Milton. The common thread running through these conversations was deep concern about the safety of VT 22A, from its intersection with Route 4 in Fair Haven up to its termination at Route 7 in Ferrisburgh. Many of those we talked with regularly drive VT 22A and/or live adjacent to the highway. The latter group frequently noted the impact of 24/7 truck traffic on their quality of life.
- Interestingly, many of those who took a close look at the routes being evaluated and were familiar with the land over which they would cross favored the Green Route, suggesting that it would be the least intrusive and least expensive of the routes under study. One individual pointed to the Orange Route as preferable because it does not require construction of a bridge.

- A few individuals asked about improvements to bicycle and pedestrian mobility. Specifically, in one case, if the Pink Route or Blue Route is built, could a multi-use path be added to connect it north of the river to downtown Vergennes?
- We do need to do more outreach to those who drive trucks for a living, and, in that regard, we did connect with the owners of a local trucking company.
- While several people provided their emails on our sign-up sheet to subscribe to the PEL Study website, most were reluctant to do so. “I get too many emails already” was a common response.
- The more conversations we had the clearer the picture became of the very real impact of truck traffic on those both in and outside of the study area. The poor condition of the roadway was a constant theme. In the background of these conversations was the idea that Vermont’s agricultural heritage is slowly (or maybe not so slowly) eroding.
- A certain cynicism emerged frequently in our conversations along the lines of “They’ve been studying this since I was a kid. It’ll never happen.” This provides us with an opportunity to bring this long-running process to closure.
- There was also some cynicism about how “they’ve already decided,” particularly from those who live in Pantton. As we move forward, we do need to stress that no decision about an alternative route has yet been made.

Vergennes Day—August

Vergennes Day took place on Saturday, August 26. Highlights of this outreach effort are outlined below.

- This was a sold-out event for vendors. We were one of 60 booths displayed on the Vergennes town green. Our booth was identified as “Vergennes PEL Study, Addison County VT.”
- Overall attendance is difficult to estimate because there was no admission fee, but I reached out to Maria Benoit of the Addison County Chamber of Commerce after the event, and she estimated it at “several thousand” and felt it was the best-attended Vergennes Day yet despite the intermittent rain.
- Booth hours ran from 10 AM – 3 PM and during those five hours three study team members engaged with dozens of residents. Many were from Vergennes, but the event drew from all over northern Addison County and included out-of-state visitors as well.
- Awareness of the PEL Study and the public survey was high, and many of those who stopped by the booth told us they had filled out the survey, which had only just been released.
- Unlike Field Days, where most engagements were relatively short, we had many lengthy discussions with locals.



Figure 2: Booth at Vergennes Day 2023

Property Owners/Neighborhoods

Church Street Neighborhood—(Ongoing, starting in September)

This neighborhood is on the border of three towns – Ferrisburgh, Vergennes and Waltham – close to the intersection with Route 7 where the Green Route would connect.

Meetings with Church Street neighborhood residents started with the owners of a mid-19th century home at the intersection of New Haven Road and Church Street. The Green Route, as depicted in the conceptual draft route maps, appears to run right through their property, which prompted their communication with the team. The community liaison explained the PEL process, including next steps and timelines, and shared the routes under consideration. He also explained the steps and timelines that would follow the PEL Study if there was consensus on an alternative truck route and if funding were found. The residents are concerned about their home but also about their ability to sell the home down the road if it were known that a truck route would eventually be built through or near the property. They were encouraged to stay involved with the process going forwards.

The second meeting with residents in the neighborhood was sparked from comments on the AOT Facebook page that were highly critical of the PEL Study process. Their home was built in the 1930s, has been handed down through family, and they have invested a substantial amount in restoring the house. Unfortunately, they did not hear about the study from various engagement activities of the study team, but instead through a local connection. The community liaison shared information about

the PEL study and how the team has tried to reach everyone in the seven-community region. This productive conversation set the stage for future engagement with the Church Street neighborhood, including the Champlain Valley Christian School and Church. All four property owners met with subsequently attended the Green Route land use workshop.

Bailey Farm/La Garagista Vineyard, Panton—October

This vineyard in Panton sits at the proposed intersection of the Blue Route and VT 22A. This meeting illustrates a) the success we've had in engaging the community around these routes, b) the changing nature of agricultural land use in Addison County, and c) some of the challenges of building a new roadway that we're discovering as we dig into the specifics.

Formerly the 125-acre Bailey dairy farm, the property (which includes a farmhouse, dairy barn, and pole barn) was acquired in 2007, with 100 acres sold to a nearby farmer and the remaining acreage set aside to be developed into a vineyard. Unlike most of Addison County, whose soil is heavily clay, the soil on the farm is exceptionally rich and well suited for a vineyard. The farm is one of the most photographed views in Addison County, particularly with its farmhouse so close to VT 22A.

The community liaison met with the landowners, their winery partners, and several neighbors for a constructive conversation and exchange of ideas. They are hopeful that plans for the Blue Route will change as the PEL Study team gets to know their story. The land is important as a place to experiment with new grape varieties as climate change impacts Vermont. The land is also being managed to encourage regenerative soil, a farming technique that focuses on improving soil health by restoring its natural properties.