

VERGENNES PLANNING AND ENVIRONMENT LINKAGES (PEL) STUDY

Public Involvement Plan

Approved by Vergennes PEL Technical Committee on August 5, 2021

Updated February 2024



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Acronyms

ACP	Agency Coordination Plan
ACRPC	Addison County Regional Planning Commission
ADA	Americans with Disabilities Act
EIS	Environmental Impact Statement
FHWA	Federal Highway Administration
NEPA	National Environmental Policy Act
OML	Vermont Open Meeting Law
PEL	Planning and Environment Linkages
PIP	Public Involvement Plan
VTrans	Vermont Agency of Transportation

1. Introduction

1.1 PURPOSE OF THE PUBLIC INVOLVEMENT PLAN

The Vermont Agency of Transportation (VTrans), in cooperation with the Federal Highway Administration (FHWA), is preparing a Planning and Environment Linkages Study (Vergennes PEL Study) to evaluate transportation alternatives to reduce the impacts of large trucks on VT Route 22A in Downtown Vergennes, while also enhancing the quality of life and economic vitality for residents in the City and surrounding towns. The PEL Study will build off previous planning efforts completed over the last twenty-five years that considered alternatives at different levels of detail. Two of the primary outcomes will be the preparation of a statement of purpose and need and the identification of a list of reasonable transportation alternatives that may move forward for evaluation in a future environmental review as required in the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA). Another important outcome will be coordination of a short list of transportation alternatives with local land use visioning; the result of which would be advanced through separate environmental reviews. The Vergennes PEL Study will also include an implementation plan.

The environmental provisions in 23 U.S.C §139 require that lead agencies establish a plan for coordinating public and agency participation and comment on the environmental review process for a project. Accordingly, the FHWA and VTrans have prepared this Public Involvement Plan (PIP) for the PEL Study to describe the process and communication methods for disseminating information about the Study and for soliciting input from the public and agencies. The PIP complies with the current federal surface transportation law, Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act (IIJA) (Public Law 117-58, also known as the “Bipartisan Infrastructure Law”).

The PIP is a flexible, “living” document that can be amended as needed during the process. Changes to the PIP are documented in Section 10: Revision History.

1.2 STUDY OVERVIEW

In May 2019, the VT 22A Truck Route Study was completed by the Addison County Regional Planning Commission (ACRPC) in partnership with VTrans in response to renewed interest in addressing the impact of trucks passing through VT 22A in Downtown Vergennes. It is the most recent study which evaluated several alternatives and recommends moving forward with a new bypass road on the west side of Vergennes with connections to VT 22A north and south of Downtown.

As the study evolved, the City of Vergennes recognized the potential opportunities a new road could provide and reframed the truck route alternative as the Vergennes Economic Corridor. VTrans recommended that a PEL Study be conducted to consider how transportation alternatives would support the land use and economic development visions of Vergennes and surrounding communities and evaluate alternatives including those explored in previous planning efforts and others that may emerge through a comprehensive planning process. The recommendation was supported by Vergennes and the six proximate municipalities.

PEL provides a collaborative and integrated approach to transportation decision making that considers benefits and impacts of proposed transportation system improvements to the environment, community, and economy during the transportation planning process. The Vergennes PEL Study includes robust public engagement to help inform the planning decisions made during the study. When completed, the PEL Study will improve the efficiency of the NEPA environmental review process by supporting the adoption of purpose and need and a preliminary range of reasonable alternatives. The PEL Study will also support a more efficient environmental review by identifying potential environmental impacts that require detailed analyses in a future environmental review.

2. Goals & Objectives of the Public Involvement Plan

The purpose of this PIP is to establish a process for soliciting early and frequent feedback from the public and stakeholders; encouraging open discussion of study details and issues of concern; and providing opportunities for public comments and questions related to the Vergennes PEL Study throughout the study development process. The PIP will be updated during the study development process to incorporate new information, methods, and mechanisms employed during public outreach, as needed.

Specific goals of the public and stakeholder involvement process include:

- Provide clear and timely information to promote public understanding and dialogue on the purpose, benefits, and outcomes of the study process
- Seek ideas and insight from the public related to identifying potential issues, developing a Purpose and Need Statement, a reasonable range of alternatives, and community land use visions to be considered in the PEL Study
- Gather public feedback on draft concepts and materials at well-defined stages of the process
- Provide transparency throughout the study process

Since embarking on the study in 2021, two additional goals have been added:

- Foster relationships of trust with stakeholders and the general public in the seven study communities
- Seek consensus on how to move forward with the study from a regional perspective

Means to help meet these goals include:

- Identify community and industry organizations who can aid in the dissemination of information pertaining to public outreach efforts and opportunities
- Provide forums and venues where members of the community can participate in the public involvement process
- Provide timely notice of public meetings and the release of study documents
- Endeavor to provide stakeholders with meaningful and equitable access to study information and the opportunity to provide comments, as described in Section 3

Since embarking on the study in 2021, these additional means are being employed to help meet these goals:

- Hire a community liaison to meet with community representatives, businesses, and local residents

- Attend existing local meetings and events to share information about the study and seek input, including Selectboard meetings and community events
- Carry out a survey to collect feedback on route options from a wide cross section of the population that represents the seven communities

3. Equitable Engagement Guidelines

3.1 LANGUAGE ACCESSIBILITY

The Vergennes PEL Study will take steps to provide meaningful access to information for individuals in the study area who may not speak English as their primary language and/or who may have limited ability to read, speak, write, or understand English. Individuals will have the ability to request that the Agency of Transportation provide both written and oral interpretation services at public meetings or workshops (virtual or in-person) upon advance request of at least 5 business days prior to the meeting.

3.2 AMERICANS WITH DISABILITIES ACT (ADA)

Public workshops that take place in -person will be held in locations that comply with the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) to assure that stakeholders who are people with disabilities or elders may have convenient access to meetings. Sign language interpreters will be available at public workshops, and other meetings, if requested. See 3.1 for additional information on translation services. Public notices announcing public workshops will provide instructions for requesting special accommodations. The Vergennes PEL Study website will be designed to accommodate people with visual impairments (i.e., the platform will be compatible with third-party web browser or application features such that direct website content is convertible to screen readers and text size adjustable).

3.3 MARGINALIZED COMMUNITIES

The Vergennes PEL Study will ensure access to equal opportunities for participation among all stakeholder communities, with focused attention to the categories defined below:

Title VI Communities: As stated in the “Federal Highway Administration Title VI Program Implementation Plan 2024” (vermont.gov), the Vermont Agency of Transportation (AOT) is a recipient of federal funds from the U.S. Department of Transportation modal agencies, including the Federal Highway Administration (FHWA) and the Federal Transit Administration (FTA). All recipients of federal funding must comply with the requirements of Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and other nondiscrimination statutes, regulations, and authorities. VTrans requires that no person shall, on the grounds of race, color, national origin, sex, age or disability be excluded from participation in, be denied the benefits of, or otherwise be subjected to discrimination in any federally assisted program or activity. The VTrans Title VI Nondiscrimination Statement issued September 4th, 2020 by Joe Flynn (Secretary, Agency of Transportation) can be found here: [TitleVINondiscrimStatement.pdf \(vermont.gov\)](#).

Environmental Justice Communities: Executive Order (EO) 12898, Federal Actions to Address Environmental Justice in Minority Populations and Low-Income Populations, dated February 11, 1994, requires consideration of whether a proposed action would disproportionately affect minority or low-income groups (59 Fed Reg. 7629 [1994]).

Traditionally Underserved Communities: The Federal Register defines underserved communities as populations sharing a particular characteristic, as well as geographic communities, that have been systematically denied a full opportunity to participate in aspects of economic, social, and civic life, as exemplified by the list in the preceding definition of “equity.” (<https://www.federalregister.gov/d/2021-09109/p-27>).

Per the definitions above, the following communities may be impacted by work in the Vergennes area:

- Migrant farmworkers
- People with low incomes and/or experiencing poverty
 - Tenants
 - Families with children, particularly single parents
 - People living with disabilities
- People experiencing housing instability/homelessness
- Mobile Home Park residents
- New Americans

The study team will identify marginalized populations and engage these populations in public outreach efforts throughout the PEL Study. The following principles will be adopted to support involvement of local Title VI, Environmental Justice and Traditionally Underserved communities in the Vergennes PEL Study area:

- Documents, notices, and meetings will be made concise, understandable, and readily accessible to the public
- When appropriate, notices and meeting materials will be provided in languages other than English as requested
- The study website will be developed in English and the platform will be compatible with third-party web browser or application features to translate direct website contact based on user language preference
- Public events will be scheduled at convenient and accessible locations and times
- The study team will collaborate with local groups to attend and participate in regularly held local meetings/events to share study information and garner feedback as appropriate
- The study team will collaborate with key community leaders, stakeholders and local organizations on the development and dissemination of messaging and notification pertaining to public events and encouraging community participation
- Study materials will be provided digitally and in paper-based form upon request to increase accessibility to persons who may not have internet access.

4. Vermont Open Meeting Law

Vermont's Open Meeting Law (OML) ([1 V.S.A. §§ 312](#)) requires all meetings of public bodies to be open to the public at all times, unless a specific exception applies.

Some of the engagement activities performed as part of the Vergennes PEL study are subject to the OML:

- Technical Committee and Agency Coordination meetings are not subject to OML
- Policy Committee meetings are subject to OML
- Public meetings and workshops are not subject to OML
- When study team members attend Selectboard or City Council meetings, they are facilitated by the municipality according to OML

The following is a summary of key elements of the Open Meeting Law which are pertinent to this study:

- Agendas are published online at least 48 hours ahead of the meeting. The Vermont Department of Libraries Public Meetings Calendar webpage is considered the official VTrans website for this posting. https://libraries.vermont.gov/public_meetings_request.
 - Outside OML, but good practice followed in this study - agendas will also be available on the study website at <https://vergennespel.com/>
- The first action within the agenda is changes to the agenda.
- Minutes will be available on the study website within 5 calendar days of the meeting. These minutes focus on who attended the meeting and any important decisions.
 - Outside OML, but good practice followed in this study – full meeting notes will be available within a few weeks of the meeting
- Meetings are open to the public, including with a physical location where people can join the meeting.
 - Note: In 2019, during the state of emergency declared in Vermont as a response to Covid-19, a memorandum was issued by Secretary of State Jim Condos that allowed public meetings to occur online only without a physical location. This memorandum has been extended several times, with the current extension signed in 1/25/2023 as part of H42, extending this provision to 7/1/2024.
 - Outside current OML rules, but good practice followed in this study – where possible a physical location is provided for meetings.

The Vergennes PEL Study will arrange physical meeting locations for public information meetings, public workshops, and Land Use Community Visioning Meetings, with an opportunity to attend virtually. Presentations, handouts, notes, and recordings as available will be made available to the public.

Policy Committee meetings will be held online and presentations, notes, and recordings from those meetings will be made available to the public. Technical Committee and Agency Coordination meetings will be held online and presentations and notes from those meetings will be made available to the public.

The study team will remain attentive to any changes to the Vermont Open Meeting Law requirements and adjust accordingly.

5. Committee Oversight and Agency Coordination

Throughout the PEL Study, the Vergennes PEL Study team will consult with specialized committees/working groups that will provide topic-specific input and play a role in guiding the direction of the study. Members of the committees will include but not be limited to representatives from regional, state agencies and local businesses and organizations. Committees will be notified of the availability of study results and will be given opportunities to provide comments and consultation at various stages throughout the planning process. Technical Committee, Policy Committee, and Interagency Coordination efforts are outlined below.

5.1 TECHNICAL COMMITTEE

The Technical Committee consists of subject matter experts that review and verify the scope of work, methods and assumptions used by the consultants to carry out the study and any resulting recommendations. The Technical Committee's role is to ensure that the Policy Committee has reliable information on which to base its findings and decisions. Membership includes VTrans planning, highway design, structures, bicycle and pedestrian, and environmental staff, ACRPC and municipal land use planners, FHWA staff, municipal public works and road foreman, and economic development specialists. The Technical Committee will meet approximately three to four times a year, with their meetings aligned to provide feedback on key technical element at notable decision points.

Starting in November 2022, the Technical Committee and Coordinating Agencies elected to have future meetings jointly to promote dialogue between the two groups.

5.2 POLICY COMMITTEE

The Policy Committee is charged with endorsing the findings in the PEL and making recommendations to VTrans on study planning decisions (i.e., Statement of Purpose and Need, Initial Short-list of Alternatives) which would be carried forward into a future environmental review. It will function as a body with wide knowledge that can speak on behalf of many communities impacted by this study and will take into consideration recommendations from the Technical Committee in its decision-making process. It consists of representatives from the seven municipalities potentially affected by the alternatives (Addison, Ferrisburgh, Panton, New Haven, Vergennes, Waltham, and Weybridge), VTrans, and other stakeholders representing the region, environment, and economy. The Policy Committee will meet approximately two to three times a year, with their meetings aligned to provide feedback at notable decision points.

5.3 AGENCY COORDINATION

In addition to this PIP, an Agency Coordination Plan (ACP) has been prepared to identify likely cooperating and likely participating agencies and the roles and responsibilities of each agency in the study process consistent with 23 U.S.C 139. In anticipation of initiating future NEPA environmental reviews for projects in the Vergennes PEL Study corridor, VTrans, in cooperation with FHWA, will collaborate with likely cooperating and participating agencies in reviewing and refining the Vergennes PEL Study purpose and need, preliminary range of alternatives, and methodologies for documenting environmental conditions, and assessing impacts. While consensus is not required in the development of impact assessment methodologies, VTrans, in cooperation with FHWA, will consider the views of the agencies with relevant interests before making a decision on a particular methodology. After collaboration has taken place, VTrans, in cooperation with FHWA, will make the decision on the methodology and level of detail to be used. Likely cooperating and likely participating agencies will meet approximately every four to six months while the study is underway. Starting in November 2022, the Technical Committee and likely cooperating and likely participating agencies elected to have future meetings jointly. See the [Agency Coordination Plan](#) for more information.

6. Public and Stakeholder Meetings / Events

For more details on the schedule of outreach activities, see Section 9, Public Involvement Schedule and Key Milestones including Table 9-1 Schedule of Outreach Activities Completed to Date (January 2024) and Table 9-2 Expected Schedule of Outreach Activities to be Completed.

6.1 PUBLIC MEETINGS

Public meetings will be scheduled to gather input in support of and coincide with the completion of major Vergennes PEL Study milestones. In some cases workshops or other events will be used at major milestones, depending on what kind of engagement. Notice for public meetings will be advertised at least two weeks in advance, and public meetings will be offered with both a physical location and virtual option offered for participation. Meetings will also be recorded and posted to the study website to allow for viewing later and additional public comment.

Public meetings will be accessible to persons with disabilities and persons who speak a primary language other than English. Special services, such as an interpreter or sign language services, will also be available upon advance request of at least five business days prior to the meeting. Public notices announcing these meetings will provide instructions for requesting these services.

Physical venues that will be considered for public meetings include the Vergennes Opera House, the Bixby Memorial Free Library, the Vergennes Volunteer Fire Department station, and venues in neighboring towns impacted by the study (Ferrisburgh, Panton, Addison, Waltham, New Haven and Weybridge).

The study website, meeting flyers, media releases, direct mailers, and VTrans social media will be used to publicize all public workshops. WSP, in cooperation with VTrans, will seek out the involvement of community leaders, elected officials, and other stakeholders in the Vergennes PEL Study area. It is anticipated that these individuals and organizations will assist in understanding and addressing local concerns, including those of the environmental justice communities that could be affected by the study.

6.2 WORKSHOPS

Public workshops will be scheduled to gather input in support of and coincide with the completion of major Vergennes PEL Study milestones. Each workshop series will share the same information, but will be conducted separately to accommodate area communities, area businesses and residents to provide ample opportunity for stakeholder input. Workshops will be held to support the following task:

- Task 3, Transportation Alternatives Initial Screening
These workshops will be designed to obtain input on alternatives that will be considered in initial screening, as well as feedback on the proposed initial screening criteria. Feedback will be collected through live comments, online comment forms, and in-meeting polls.

6.3 SURVEY

In 2021, the study team used a survey to collect input from people who drive trucks on VT-22A. It was distributed using the contacts of 335 Vermont Truck and Bus Association. The survey content was used to inform Task 2 (Purpose and Need Statement) and Task 3 (Initial Screening) by providing information about how drivers travel the area and how they perceive potential changes. The survey received a total of 36 responses from across the industry, including details about their cargo, travel habits, and experiences along the corridor.

In 2023 as the study team prepared for the Task 4 (Alternatives Refinement) engagement it was decided that hosting a public survey would achievement better engagement than the three workshops. Surveys allow a far greater number and range of people to provide input.

The Summer 2023 survey was built in MetroQuest with sections that focused on information sharing about the project, opportunities to provide input on specific locations related to conceptual alignments (Task 4), as well as asking people to help the team understand preferences for various preferences related to Task 5 (Land Use Visioning). An accessible version of the survey is available upon request.

An additional survey may be used in Task 6 (Alternatives Evaluation and Recommendations) pending the results of the Task 4 survey and evaluation of which strategy would achieve better engagement.

Public facing surveys will be available for a minimum of 4 weeks. They will be advertised in the same way as public meetings and workshops. The Summer 2023 survey also used various local community events, including the Addison County Fair and Vergennes Day, to share information about the survey with a broad range of the population.

6.4 LAND USE VISIONING

Land use visioning will be conducted as part of Task 5 (Develop Integrated Transportation and Land Use Alternatives). Kick off meetings will be held with Planning Commissions in the all stakeholder communities to begin the process of developing a vision within each community. As part of this process, the team will conduct a brief discovery process that will allow for the identification of any key stakeholder groups that should be directly involved.

Visioning sessions will be held by route and include stakeholder municipalities to introduce the broader community to the study and provide an opportunity for them to communicate their vision for the future of the VEC. The format of these visioning sessions will be determined with input from the stakeholder municipalities and are anticipated to include both a group and breakout component to tackle key questions related to the development of a vision. The input gleaned from these sessions will be used to inform the development of each community's preferred land use scenario. The draft land use scenarios will be shared with each local planning commission to review and provide feedback. This feedback will be used to create a final land use scenario for each of the proposed route options.

6.5 STAKEHOLDER FOCUS GROUPS AND ONE ON ONE INTERVIEWS/ DISCUSSIONS:

Focus group meetings will be held to discuss specific Vergennes PEL Study considerations with affected and interested groups. Focus group meetings will be held in person, or in a hybrid format depending on

preferences of invitees. Residents, business, agricultural and environmental organizations and community-based groups will be targeted to provide specific insight to community concerns that may provide guidance on public involvement and study approaches. One-on-one interviews may be carried out to supplement input from focus groups for key stakeholders who were not able to participate.

An initial list of groups to approach for targeted outreach includes:

- Mobile home park residents on 1st, 2nd, and 3rd streets in Vergennes
- The Vergennes Partnership
- The Addison Chamber of Commerce
- The Addison County Economic Development Corporation
- Conservation Law Foundation (CLF)
- Vermont Natural Resource Council
- Vermont Public Interest Group (VPIRG)
- Vermont Chapter of AARP
- ACRPC Transportation Advisory Committee
- Local Motion
- Vermont Truck and Bus Association and other freight users within the area
- Addison County Farm Bureau
- Champlain Valley Farmer's Watershed Alliance
- Champlain Valley Crop & Soil Pasture Team
- Addison County Walk-Bike Council
- Champlain Valley Office of Economic Opportunity
- John Graham Housing and Services
- Addison County Community Trust (ACCT)
- The Open Door Clinic
- Addison County Parent Child Center

As part of the work of the Community Liaison, many one-on-one meetings with various community leaders and business owners will occur to help inform the project, build trust and seek consensus.

6.6 MUNICIPAL MEETINGS

Individual meetings with each of the seven communities in the study area will also be conducted through the following City Council and Selectboard meetings:

Meeting Type	Meeting Date
Vergennes City Council	2 nd and 4 th Tuesday of each month at 6:00pm
Panton Selectboard	2 nd and 4 th Tuesday of each month at 5:30pm
Ferrisburgh Selectboard	1 st and 3 rd Tuesday of each month at 6:30pm
Addison Selectboard	1 st or 2 nd Tuesday of each month at 7:00pm
Weybridge Selectboard	1 st Tuesday of each month at 7:00pm
New Haven Selectboard	1 st and 3 rd Tuesday of each month at 7:00pm
Waltham Selectboard	1 st Monday of each month at 7:00pm

To date, Selectboards/ City Councils were visited in Fall 2021 and Fall 2022. The study team encouraged Selectboards/ City Councils to reach out if they would like additional visits.

Task 4 (Land Use Visioning) involves engagement with municipal Planning Commissions.

6.7 EXISTING LOCAL EVENTS

Additional opportunities for outreach will be identified that may arise throughout the study, such as having kiosks at local gatherings (i.e.: Addison County Field Days), coordinating to provide materials for use at other community events (i.e.: Vergennes Day), and partnering with community-based organizations to share information and feedback opportunities. The Community Liaison plays a key role with staffing these events and seeking opportunities to attend existing events.

Local events provide a unique opportunity to reach different segments of the population, often those who would not attend public meetings or workshops, for example:

- Addison County Field Days/ Fair – people who work in agriculture, young families, young adults, low income, rural residents, longtime residents of the region
- Vergennes Day – wide cross-section of Vergennes residents and businesses

6.8 COMMUNITY LIAISON

In 2022, the study team identified a need for a community liaison to work directly within the community. In May 2023, VTTrans brought on a consultant to serve this role. The role is intended to provide outreach to businesses, municipalities, and community members to answer study questions, attend study events

and other planned outreach events (such as Vergennes Day and Addison County Fair Days). The Community Liaison will also create a periodic blog that will be published on the study website and distributed to the study's stakeholder distribution list.

7. Communication Tools

Public engagement is a powerful tool in the identification of study priorities and developing transportation strategies that are specific to the needs and realities of the seven communities and their residents and businesses. The following methods of outreach and information sharing will be employed to facilitate a robust approach to sharing information with and receiving input from the public and stakeholders on the Vergennes PEL Study.

- **Website:** A website will be developed for the Vergennes PEL Study, <https://www.vergennespel.com/>. This website will include information on the PEL process, study activities and progress, public participation opportunities, study documents, the Community Liaison blog post, and contact information. Study documents and videos will be available for download and review. The website will be kept up to date with information on the study and will provide a link to allow people to sign up for the mailing list and submit comments electronically.
- **Surveys:** Surveys will be developed and deployed when the study team identifies a need throughout the study process. Surveys will be used to elevate study awareness and to better understand views on transportation strategies and route preferences from the perspective of both community members and local businesses and organizations. The results will guide development of the study's proposed recommendations. The surveys will be web-based, and formatted paper versions of the survey will be available upon request.
- **Mailed and Emailed Information:** A stakeholder email list will be developed that includes elected officials, public agency contacts, stakeholders and community groups, and members of the public with an interest in the Vergennes PEL Study. The email g list will be used to distribute meeting announcements and information about the study. Direct mailers (mass mailers) will be used to distribute public meetings, workshops and public survey information to residents, businesses and P.O. boxes. The email list will be updated throughout the life of the study to include new contacts obtained from meetings and the study website.
- **Additional Outreach Materials & Communication Tools:** User-friendly informational materials on technical elements of the study and notice of opportunities for input will also be utilized and made widely available to the general public. These materials will be developed on an as-needed basis in coordination with the VTTrans for posting on the study website and/or for use in stakeholder/public meetings. The outreach materials could include a 1-2-page quarterly project newsletter focused on a different "item of interest" for each edition, presentations, fact sheets, press releases, door hangers, graphics, infographics, and poster/display boards. The study team will also look for opportunities to share study information through established methods of communication such as the ACRPC newsletter, and articles in the Addison County Independence newspaper.
- **Social Media Posting & Monitoring:** The study team will coordinate with VTTrans to push study information to [Facebook](#) and, [Twitter](#) ([VTTrans](#)) and with municipalities to push to their social media accounts (as available). These social media posts will include basic information on the Vergennes PEL

Study, provide links to the study website, as well as information about public participation opportunities, study contact information, and how people can submit comments or sign up for the study mailing list. Study information will also be pushed to other local resources such as town listservs and Front Porch Forum where possible.

A media log will be maintained by the WSP Team over the course of the study as an archive of news media articles about the Vergennes PEL Study. The media log will be shared quarterly with VTrans.

- Local Media Usage: The study team will coordinate with local media to communicate notices of opportunities for public input.

8. Reporting

8.1 DOCUMENTATION OF PUBLIC OUTREACH AND COMMENTS

As part of PEL Study process, public outreach efforts for the study will be tracked and included the PEL Report. Efforts to engage the public will be documented, including a list of public and stakeholder meetings, a summary of notices, flyers, media releases and other study information distributed to the public, and any other outreach efforts that occur. Attendance lists at meetings and workshops will be tracked and documented. Formal comments received will be cataloged in a comment log, which will be updated throughout the study and included in the PEL Report.

9. Public Involvement Schedule and Key Milestones

A schedule of outreach activities has been developed (Table 9-1 and Table 9-2) and will be considered a living document to be updated as appropriate throughout the duration of the study. The schedule outlines components of the outreach program for Tasks 1-8, along with associated timelines and responsibilities, and reflects the overarching strategy for broad engagement early and often throughout the study.

Table 9-1 Schedule of Outreach Activities Completed to Date (January 2024)

TASK	OUTREACH DELIVERABLE	TIMELINE
TASK 2A: Public and Stakeholder Engagement Plan	Study website live	August 2021
	Technical Committee Meeting	August 2021
	Policy Committee Meeting	August 2021
	Cooperating/Participating Agency Meeting	August 2021
	PIP/ACP approved	August 2021
	Informational mass-mailer developed and sent to study area communities	September 2021
TASK 2B: Purpose and Need Statement	Engagement with Vermont Truck and Bus Association (meeting and survey)	July/August 2021
	Initiate Cooperating/Participating Agency Coordination	October 2021
	Presentation at 6 municipal selectboard meetings (Ferrisburgh, Addison, Panton, Weybridge, New Haven, Waltham) and 1 city council meeting (Vergennes)	September/October 2021
	Focus group meetings (Economic, Environment, Mobility, Equity) with Vergennes mobile home park residents	October/November 2021
	Introductory Public Meeting	November 2021
	Technical Committee Meeting	February 2022
	Cooperating/Participating Agency Meeting	February 2022
	Policy Committee Meeting	March 2022
	Public Meeting	November 2022

TASK 3: Transportation Alternatives Initial Screening	Public Workshop Series	May 2022
	Technical Committee Meeting	July 2022
	Cooperating/Participating Agency Meeting	August 2022
	Presentation at 4 municipal selectboard meetings (Ferrisburgh, Addison, Panton, Waltham) and 1 city council meeting (Vergennes)	October/November 2022
	Technical Committee Meeting	October 2022
	Public Meeting	November 2022
	Technical Committee / Agency Partners Meeting	December 2022
TASK 4: Alternatives Refinement	Technical Committee / Agency Partners Meeting	June 2023
	Technical Committee / Agency Partners Meeting	December 2023
	Technical Committee / Agency Partners Meeting	December 2023
	Policy Committee	January 2024
TASK 5: Develop Integrated Transportation and Land Use Alternatives for the VEC	Kick off meetings with Planning Commissions	September/October/November 2023
	Land Use Visioning Workshops (in-person and virtual)	December 2023/January 2024
Items Common to TASK 4 and 5	Addison County Fair & Field Days	August 2023
	Vergennes Day	August 2023
	Public Survey	August/September 2023

Table 9-2 Expected Schedule of Outreach Activities to be Completed

Note: Schedule is preliminary and subject to change as the study progresses

TASK	OUTREACH DELIVERABLE	TIMELINE
TASK 5: Develop Integrated Transportation and Land Use Alternatives for the VEC	Vision presentations to Planning Commissions	Spring 2024
	Technical Committee / Agency Partners Meeting	June 2024
TASK 6: Alternatives Evaluation and Recommendations	Technical Committee Meeting / Agency Partners Meeting	March 2024
	Technical Committee / Agency Partners Meeting	June 2024
	Public Outreach	Summer 2024
	Policy Committee Meeting	September 2024
TASK 7: Implementation Plan	Technical Committee / Agency Partners Meeting	January 2025
TASK 8: Draft and Final Reports	Technical Committee / Agency Partners Meeting	April 2025
	Policy Committee Meeting	May 2025

10. Revision History

The PEL Public Involvement Plan is a “living document” in which revisions and updates will be issued, as determined by VTrans, throughout the PEL Study. Table 10-1 presents the revision history.

Table 10-1 Revision History

VERSION	DATE	NAME	DESCRIPTION
1	August 2021	WSP	Draft Public Involvement Plan for Technical Committee review
2	February 2024	WSP and VTrans	Updated to reflect new activities (public survey), addition of community liaison and revised schedule

VERGENNES PLANNING AND ENVIRONMENT LINKAGES (PEL) STUDY

Agency Coordination Plan

July 29, 2021 (Last Updated June 2024)



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Acronyms

ACP	Agency Coordination Plan
ACRPC.....	Addison County Regional Planning Commission
ADA	Americans with Disabilities Act
EIS	Environmental Impact Statement
FHWA	Federal Highway Administration
NEPA	National Environmental Policy Act
PEL	Planning and Environment Linkages
PIP	Public Involvement Plan
VDHP	Vermont Division for Historic Preservation
VTrans	Vermont Agency of Transportation

1. Introduction

1.1 PURPOSE OF AGENCY COORDINATION PLAN

The Vermont Agency of Transportation (VTrans), in cooperation with the Federal Highway Administration (FHWA), is preparing a Planning and Environment Linkages Study (Vergennes PEL Study) to evaluate transportation alternatives to reduce the impacts of large trucks on VT Route 22A in Downtown Vergennes, while also enhancing the quality of life and economic vitality for residents in the City and surrounding towns. The PEL study will build off previous planning efforts completed over the last twenty-five years that considered alternatives at different levels of detail. Two of the primary outcomes will be the preparation of a statement of purpose and need and the identification of a list of reasonable transportation alternatives that may move forward for evaluation in a future environmental review as required in the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA). NEPA compliance is required whenever a federal agency proposes an action, grants a permit, or agrees to fund or authorize any other entity to undertake an action that has the potential to affect environmental resources. Another important outcome will be coordination of reasonable transportation alternatives with local land use visioning; the result of which would be advanced through separate environmental reviews. The Vergennes PEL Study will also include an implementation plan to serve as a roadmap for implementation, including next steps for the future NEPA, local land use planning recommendations, and identification of project financing strategies.

Consistent with the provisions of both Title 23 United States Code (U.S.C.) Section 139(f)(4)(E) and 23 U.S.C. 168, VTrans intends to use information and decisions developed in the Vergennes PEL Study (such as the statement of purpose and need, environmental resource impacts that are potentially moderate or severe, and the elimination of unreasonable alternatives) to be carried forward into future environmental reviews under NEPA. Portions of the Vergennes PEL Study are intended to be adopted or incorporated by reference into the NEPA documentation for project(s) resulting from this study. While final conclusions for alternatives are made during the NEPA process, by following the PEL approach, the Vergennes PEL Study can narrow the range of alternatives by identifying those that are not feasible (i.e., those that have fatal flaws) or do not meet the purpose and need for the project. The alternatives development and screening process during this PEL process can also help identify recommended and feasible options, which can move forward to conceptual design ahead of initiating a NEPA review. Importantly, before VTrans and FHWA can eliminate alternatives as unreasonable during the PEL, they must obtain the concurrence of the federal agencies with jurisdiction over a permit or approval required for a project in the corridor, confirming that the alternative to be eliminated from consideration is not necessary for any permit or approval under any other federal law.

The environmental provisions in 23 U.S.C §139 require that lead agencies establish a plan for coordinating public and agency participation and comment on the environmental review process for a project. In advance of future environmental reviews, this Agency Coordination Plan has been developed to define the roles and guide coordination activities through the duration of the Vergennes PEL Study with interested, involved agencies that may be cooperating and participating agencies under NEPA in future environmental review(s). VTrans will use information developed in the Vergennes PEL Study to

inform the NEPA process for capital projects that are initiated subsequent to this study. Integrating transportation planning and environmental screening early leads to value-added projects that have undergone stakeholder and public review with a collaborative interagency approach. This method lends itself to early problem identification and solving, requiring less duplication of effort in the NEPA process and potentially accelerating project delivery and minimizing overall costs.

1.2 STUDY OVERVIEW

In May 2019, the VT 22A Truck Route Study was completed by the Addison County Regional Planning Commission (ACRPC) in partnership with VTrans in response to renewed interest in addressing the impact of trucks passing through VT 22A in Downtown Vergennes. It is the most recent study which evaluated several alternatives and recommends moving forward with a new bypass road on the west side of Vergennes with connections to VT 22A north and south of Downtown.

As the study evolved, the City of Vergennes recognized the potential opportunities a new road could provide and reframed the truck route alternative as the Vergennes Economic Corridor. VTrans recommended that a PEL Study be conducted to consider how transportation alternatives would support the land use and economic development visions of Vergennes and surrounding communities and evaluate alternatives including those explored in previous planning efforts and others that may emerge through a comprehensive planning process. The recommendation was supported by Vergennes and the six proximate municipalities.

PEL provides a collaborative and integrated approach to transportation decision making that considers benefits and impacts of proposed transportation system improvements to the environment, community, and economy during the transportation planning process. The Vergennes PEL Study includes robust public engagement to help inform the planning decisions to be made during the Study. When completed, the PEL Study will improve the efficiency of the NEPA environmental review process by supporting the adoption of purpose and need and a preliminary range of reasonable alternatives. The PEL Study will also support a more efficient environmental review by identifying potential environmental impacts that require detailed analyses in a future environmental review.

2. Lead/Cooperating/Participating Agencies

2.1 LIST OF AGENCIES, ROLES AND RESPONSIBILITIES

The goal of this Agency Coordination Plan is to provide a framework for facilitating federal and state agency involvement in the PEL process. This framework includes opportunities to obtain agency input regarding data collection and methodologies to screen alternatives and to inform agencies about the study's activities, progress, and key decision points. As part of the Vergennes PEL Study, VTrans intends to carry forward decisions concurred upon by the agencies into subsequent NEPA environmental reviews for projects in this corridor. VTrans seeks to obtain written or verbal agreement from agencies on the framework in this Agency Coordination Plan.

For projects potentially subject to NEPA, the lead agency is responsible for ensuring that the environmental review process is conducted properly and in accordance with all applicable environmental regulations. For potential roadway improvement projects in the Vergennes PEL Study corridor, the FHWA will serve as federal lead agency upon initiation of NEPA environmental review, with VTrans serving as the sponsoring agency and joint lead agency under 23 U.S.C. section 139. For the purposes of the Vergennes PEL Study, VTrans is the lead state agency with FHWA advising as the lead federal agency under NEPA for future environmental studies. VTrans, in cooperation with FHWA, each have responsibilities for this PEL study. VTrans will manage the PEL review and documentation process; prepare all study reports and other documents; and provide opportunities for likely NEPA cooperating and participating agency involvement and public involvement. FHWA will participate in the Vergennes PEL Study process and, if satisfied at the conclusion of the study, will provide its concurrence that information and data developed for the Vergennes PEL Study can be used in subsequent NEPA environmental reviews for projects in this corridor. For the Vergennes PEL Study, VTrans, in cooperation with FHWA, will invite agencies that may be likely cooperating or likely participating agencies under NEPA to participate in the PEL process.

According to Council on Environmental Quality (CEQ) regulations (40 CFR § 1508.1(e)) and FHWA regulations (23 CFR 771.111(d)), "Cooperating agency" means any federal agency, other than a lead agency, that has jurisdiction by law or special expertise with respect to any environmental impact involved in a proposed project or project alternative. A state or local agency of similar qualifications or a tribal government, when the effects are in areas of interest for the purpose of Section 106 under the National Historic Preservation Act with a federally recognized Native American tribe, may, by agreement with the lead agencies, also become a cooperating agency. CEQ regulations also state (40 CFR § 1501.8) that an agency may request cooperating agency status, if applicable. Cooperating agencies have the responsibility to:

- Provide input on defining the study purpose and need, the range of alternatives to be considered, and the methodologies and level of detail required in the alternatives analysis
- Identify issues that could substantially delay or prevent granting of permit/approval
- Participate in coordination meetings and joint field reviews
- Provide timely review and comments on pre-draft or pre-final environmental documents

- Prepare mitigation recommendations

As defined in 23 U.S.C. Section 139, “Participating agencies” are those federal, state, or local agencies or federally-recognized tribal governmental organizations with an interest in the study. The definition for determining participating agency status is broader than the standard for cooperating agency status. Therefore, cooperating agencies are, by definition, participating agencies, but not all participating agencies are cooperating agencies. Non-governmental organizations and private entities cannot serve as participating agencies. The role of participating agencies is to:

- Provide input on defining study purpose and need, the range of alternatives to be considered, and the methodologies and level of detail required in the alternatives analysis
- Participate in coordination meetings and joint field reviews, as appropriate
- As requested by FHWA, provide timely review and comments on certain pre-draft or pre-final environmental documents
- Provide timely comments on unresolved issues

Generally, cooperating agencies have a higher degree of authority, responsibility, and involvement in the environmental review process than participating agencies. Concurrence is required from likely cooperating agencies. Both likely participating and likely cooperating agencies are and will continue to be consulted throughout the Vergennes PEL Study process to update them on the status of the study and discuss areas of concern.

Table 2-1 lists the lead agencies as well as the agencies that have been invited to serve as likely cooperating or likely participating agencies for the Vergennes PEL Study, with their applicable area of jurisdiction or expertise. Any federal agency that is likely to be invited by the lead agency to participate in a future environmental review process for a project will be designated as a participating agency by the lead agency unless it declines in writing; other agencies must accept in writing. VTrans requires written documentation be provided as part of the PEL study when likely cooperating agencies choose not to participate in the PEL study.

Table 2-1 List of Invited Cooperating and Participating Agencies

AGENCY	ROLE	RESPONSIBILITIES
Federal Agencies		
Federal Highway Administration	Lead Agency	Manage environmental review process under NEPA; oversee PEL process, planning products and final PEL report; arbitrate and resolve issues
U.S. Army Corps of Engineers	Cooperating Agency	Coordination related to USACE NEPA and Clean Water Act Section 404 and Rivers and Harbors Act Section 10 permitting
U.S. Coast Guard	Cooperating Agency	Coordination related to USCG permitting
U.S. Environmental Protection Agency	Participating Agency	Coordination related to NEPA; Section 309 of the Clean Air Act; and Clean Water Act requirements (permitting and sole source aquifer)
U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service	Participating Agency	Coordination related to NEPA and Section 7 of the Endangered Species Act
U.S.D.A. - Natural Resource Conservation Service	Participating Agency	Coordination related to agricultural land
Federal Emergency Management Agency	Participating Agency	Coordination related to resilience and floodplain issues
Tribal Nations		
Stockbridge-Munsee Band of Mohican Indians	Participating Agency	Coordination related to archaeological resources; possible participation in Section 106 process
Penobscot Nation	Participating Agency	Coordination related to archaeological resources; possible participation in Section 106 process
Narragansett Nation	Participating Agency	Coordination related to archaeological resources; possible participation in Section 106 process
Cayuga Nation	Participating Agency	Coordination related to archaeological resources; possible participation in Section 106 process
Mashantucket Pequot Tribe	Participating Agency	Coordination related to archaeological resources; possible participation in Section 106 process
State Agencies		
Agency of Transportation	Lead Agency	Manage environmental review process; prepare PEL Study and Final PEL Report; provide opportunity for public and agency involvement; arbitrate and resolve issues
Agency of Natural Resources	Participating Agency	Various permits and reviews
Agency of Commerce and Community Development, Vermont Division for Historic Preservation	Participating Agency	Coordination related to Section 106 of the National Historic Preservation Act; possible participation in Section 106 process
Agency of Commerce and Community Development, Department of Housing and Community Development	Participating Agency	Coordination related to land use and planning
Agency of Agriculture, Food and Markets	Participating Agency	Coordination related to agricultural land
Agency of Administration, Buildings and General Services	Participating Agency	Coordination with Job Corps property
Local and Regional Agencies		
City of Vergennes	Participating Agency	Municipal coordination and participation in Policy Committee
Town of Addison	Participating Agency	Municipal coordination and participation in Policy Committee
Town of Ferrisburgh	Participating Agency	Municipal coordination and participation in Policy Committee

AGENCY	ROLE	RESPONSIBILITIES
Town of New Haven	Participating Agency	Municipal coordination and participation in Policy Committee
Town of Panton	Participating Agency	Municipal coordination and participation in Policy Committee
Town of Waltham	Participating Agency	Municipal coordination and participation in Policy Committee
Town of Weybridge	Participating Agency	Municipal coordination and participation in Policy Committee
Addison County Regional Planning Commission	Participating Agency	Regional coordination and participation in Policy Committee

2.2 AGENCY CONTACT INFORMATION

Table 2-2 lists the primary point of contact for each of the likely cooperating and participating agencies and for the likely Native American Tribal Governments identified for interagency coordination for the Vergennes PEL Study.

Table 2-2 Agency Contact Information

AGENCY	NAME	ADDRESS
Federal Highway Administration	Elizabeth Shipley	Elizabeth.Shipley@dot.gov
	Patrick Kirby	Patrick.Kirby@dot.gov
	Jacqueline DeMent	jacqueline.dement@dot.gov
U.S. Army Corps of Engineers	Michael Adams	michael.s.adams@nae02.usace.army.mil
U.S. Coast Guard	Gary Croot	gary.t.croot@uscg.mil
U.S. Environmental Protection Agency	Beth Alafat	alafat.beth@epa.gov
	Tim Timmermann	Timmermann.Timothy@epa.gov
	Alexandra Dwyer	Dwyer.Alexandra@epa.gov
U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service	Margaret (Meg) Harrington	Margaret_Harrington@fws.gov
U.S.D.A. - Natural Resource Conservation Service	Jason Fleury	Jason.Fleury@vt.usda.gov
Federal Emergency Management Agency	David Robbins	David.robbs@fema.dhs.gov
	Eric Kuns	Eric.Kuns@fema.dhs.gov
	Christian Paske	christian.paske@fema.dhs.gov
Stockbridge-Munsee Band of Mohican Indians	Tribal contact will be part of the ongoing consultation with FHWA, as part of the government to government consultation. FHWA staff will lead consultation with tribal nations.	
Penobscot Nation		
Narragansett Nation		
Cayuga Nation		
Mashantucket Pequot Tribe		
Agency of Transportation	Jesse Devlin	Jesse.Devlin@vermont.gov
	Matthew Arancio	Matthew.Arancio@vermont.gov
Agency of Natural Resources	Billy Coster	Billy.Coster@vermont.gov
Agency of Commerce and Community Development Vermont Division for Historic Preservation	Laura Trieschmann	Laura.Trieschmann@vermont.gov
	Scott Dillon	Scott.dillon@vermont.gov
	Yvonne Benney Basque	yvonne.basque@vermont.gov
Agency of Commerce and Community Development, Department of Housing and Community Development	Chris Cochran	Chris.Cochran@vermont.gov
	Gary Holloway	Gary.Holloway@vermont.gov
Agency of Agriculture, Food, and Markets	Ryan Patch Air Rockland-Miller	Ryan.patch@vermont.gov
		Ari.rockland-miller@vermont.gov
Buildings and General Services Vermont Agency of Administration	Eric Pembroke	Eric.Pembroke@vermont.gov

AGENCY	NAME	ADDRESS
City of Vergennes	Dickie Austin Ian Huizenga	aldermandickie@gmail.com huizengavcc@gmail.com
Town of Addison	Jeff Nelson	jnelson@gmavt.net
Town of Ferrisburgh	Clark Hinsdale	clark.hinsdale@FerrisburghVT.org
Town of New Haven	Mike Audy	maudy@greenmountainfeeds.com
Town of Panton	Mary Rudd	rudds@gmavt.net
Town of Waltham	Tim Glassberg	tim.glassberg@gmail.com
Town of Weybridge	Brenda Jaring Dan James	Clerk@townofweybridge.org Dan.James@MonumentFarms.com
Addison County Regional Planning Commission	Adam Lougee	alougee@acrpc.org

3. Agency Coordination

In anticipation of initiating future NEPA environmental reviews for projects in the Vergennes PEL Study corridor, VTrans, in cooperation with FHWA, will collaborate with likely cooperating and participating agencies in reviewing and refining the Vergennes PEL Study purpose and need, preliminary range of alternatives, and methodologies for documenting environmental conditions, and assessing impacts. While consensus is not required in the development of impact assessment methodologies, VTrans, in cooperation with FHWA, will consider the views of the agencies with relevant interests before making a decision on a particular methodology. After collaboration has taken place, VTrans, in cooperation with FHWA, will make the decision on the methodology and level of detail to be used.

The agencies will be notified of the availability of the key Vergennes PEL Study documents as described in Table 3-1 and given the opportunity to provide comment. Agency comments will be incorporated into the study documents, as appropriate. After the conclusion of the Vergennes PEL Study, VTrans, in cooperation with FHWA, expect to implement recommendations as funding becomes available.

3.1 AGENCY INVOLVEMENT ACTIVITIES

Regular coordination with FHWA, likely Cooperating Agencies, and likely Participating Agencies will occur through a combination of periodic interagency working group meetings and email correspondence at key milestones (see schedule, Table 3-1). Meetings are anticipated to be virtual.

Table 3-1 Schedule of Key Study Milestones

AGENCY MEETING / MILESTONE	DATE
Kick off – review of Agency Coordination Plan	Summer 2021
Data Collection	Fall 2021
Purpose and Need*	Winter 2021
Alternatives Screening*	Spring 2022
Initial Screening Tech Memo	Winter 2022
Secondary Screening	Spring 2023
Alternatives Refinement – Plans / Typical Sections	Spring 2023
Transportation and Environmental Impact Analysis	Winter 2023
Alternatives Evaluation Tech Memo	Spring/ Summer 2024

* Concurrence points

3.2 ADDITIONAL STATUTORY CONSULTATION AND REVIEW OBLIGATIONS

As the lead agency, FHWA follows a policy of managing the NEPA project development and decision-making process as an "umbrella" under which all applicable environmental laws, executive orders, and regulations are considered and addressed prior to the final project decision and document approval. As noted in Section 1.1 of this Agency Coordination Plan, before VTrans and FHWA can use the PEL approach to eliminate alternatives from detailed consideration under NEPA, they must obtain the concurrence of the federal agencies with jurisdiction over a permit or approval required for a project in

the corridor, confirming that the alternative to be eliminated from consideration is not necessary for any permit or approval under any other federal law. Examples of such permits and approvals include Clean Water Act permits issued by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers and U.S. Coast Guard bridge permits.

Additionally, some statutes contain requirements that may be applicable to projects in the corridor though the requirements are often met in tandem with completing environmental reviews under NEPA. For example, Section 106 of the National Historic Preservation Act requires federal agencies to consider the effects of their undertakings on historic properties that are listed or meet the eligibility criteria for listing in the National Register of Historic Places. Similarly, regardless of whether NEPA applies to a project, Section 4(f) of the U.S. Department of Transportation Act of 1966 requires consideration of park and recreation lands, wildlife and waterfowl refuges, and historic sites during transportation project development. As a part of the Vergennes PEL Study, VTrans, in cooperation with FHWA, will work with the Vermont Division for Historic Preservation (VDHP) to identify likely Section 106 consulting parties and will also send letters to federally-recognized Native American tribes to initiate Government-to-Government outreach. Tribal contact will be part of the ongoing consultation with FHWA, as part of the government to government consultation. Other agencies will not contact the tribal nations directly about this PEL Study.

As part of this PEL Study, and in cooperation with FHWA, VTrans will provide opportunities for coordination and comment to the relevant federal agencies and to official(s) with jurisdiction over any Section 4(f) resource that may be affected by potential projects in the Vergennes PEL Study corridor. Potential Section 4(f) historic sites will be identified through the Section 106 process, in coordination with VDHP.

3.3 PUBLIC AND STAKEHOLDER INVOLVEMENT ACTIVITIES

VTrans, in cooperation with FHWA, will seek out the involvement of community leaders, elected officials, and other stakeholders in the Vergennes PEL Study corridor. It is anticipated that these individuals and organizations will assist VTrans, in cooperation with FHWA, in understanding and addressing local concerns, including those of the environmental justice communities that could be affected by the study. The Vergennes PEL Public Involvement Plan (PIP) provides detailed descriptions of the stakeholder involvement activities that will be undertaken, including elected official briefings, public workshops, stakeholder meetings, Environmental Justice and Limited English Proficiency engagement, and various outreach methodologies and material (newsletters, flyers, presentations, etc.).

4. Revision History

Table 4-1 Revision History

VERSION	DATE	NAME	DESCRIPTION
1	July 29, 2021	WSP	Draft Agency Coordination Plan for Technical Committee Review
2	September 13, 2021	WSP	Updated contact for USCG and email address for EPA
3	October 25, 2021	WSP	Updated agency contacts
4	November 15, 2021	WSP	Added Buildings and General Services
5	February 12, 2022	WSP	Removed direct tribal contacts
6	April 4, 2023	WSP	Updated agency contacts
7	June 13, 2024	WSP	Updated agency contacts

Vergennes PEL Study Final Report

Appendix A Community Liaison Engagement Report

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Section 1

The PEL Study Community Liaison—Background, Role, and Responsibilities

In Spring 2022, the Vermont Agency of Transportation project leads saw the need to extend the Vergennes PEL Study’s public engagement reach with a locally based Community Liaison.

Following a Work Authorization Request process, the Agency of Transportation hired Middlebury resident Jim Gish to meet this need.

A long-time resident of Addison County, Jim served from 2016 to 2021 as Community Liaison for the landmark Middlebury Bridge & Rail Project, which brought Amtrak service to Addison County and revitalized the downtown infrastructure of Middlebury.

The role of the Vergennes PEL Study Community Liaison was designed to:

- Ensure that all community members fully understand the goals and process of the Study
- Ensure that all community voices are heard by the project team, and
- Build trust in the process and help move the project toward consensus

“Community” was defined as those who live and work in Panton, Waltham, Addison, New Haven, Weybridge, and Ferrisburgh as well as Vergennes.

Jim’s brief was “sustained engagement”—meeting regularly with residents, business owners, town leaders, and other community members for candid discussion and documentation of issues and concerns. And then sharing those issues and concerns with the PEL Study project team. In addition to this 1:1 level of engagement, he would report on project developments and address community questions in a regularly updated blog post.

Section 2

Community Engagement by the Numbers—Stakeholder and Team Meetings

This summary of Community Liaison Jim Gish’s direct engagement with stakeholders and with the PEL Study team between May 2023 and January 2025 illustrates the amount of time invested in the “sustained engagement” approach to this project:

- **90 Meetings** with Stakeholders (1:1, small group, large group)
- **200 Hours** meeting with stakeholders (the equivalent of 25 working days)
- **2,440 Miles** driven in Addison County to meet with stakeholders
- **110 Team Meetings** (project planning and review of stakeholder concerns)

Section 3

Pros and Cons of the Alternatives

This section of the Community Liaison appendix to the Vergennes PEL Study Final Report summarizes community concerns and feedback on each of the five alternatives under study.

The Orange Alternative

Community Directly Impacted

Vergennes

Orange Route Stakeholder Meetings

- Homeowners, MacDonough Drive and Comfort Hill
- Business owners, Comfort Hill Kennel
- Vergennes Economic Development Committee
- Vergennes municipal leadership

Orange Route Stakeholder Concerns

Stakeholders—particularly those who live, work, and shop in Vergennes—viewed the Orange Alternative as an unworkable solution, particularly given what they considered the challenges of engineering a truck route along MacDonough Drive and its intersection with VT 22A. Specific concerns include:

- Northbound trucks would have difficulty making a left-hand turn onto MacDonough Drive, which sits at the top of a steep hill (grade estimated at 14%) between the bridge over Otter Creek and the intersection with Macdonough Drive/South Water Street. Several stakeholders pointed out the numerous cases that have been documented over the years of trucks breaking down or becoming stuck on this hill, particularly during winter.
- The proposed route would not mitigate the impact of truck traffic on the downtown section of Main Street between Otter Creek and MacDonough Drive/South Water Street or on West Main Street's residential neighborhood between Commodore Way and Otter Creek.
- Stakeholders cited evidence that the land along Otter Creek on which MacDonough Drive is built is slipping into Otter Creek.
- Many stakeholders found unacceptable the potential taking of eight homes on MacDonough Drive and Comfort Hill that would be required to engineer the roadway.
- The Orange Alternative would not provide the region with a second bridge over Otter Creek, a benefit many see as necessary.
- Local residents questioned the impact of the Orange Alternative on Potash Brook—its wildlife and its 19th Century rail line—and on the historic Otter Creek Basin.

The Purple Alternative

Communities Directly Impacted

Addison, Weybridge, Waltham, New Haven

Purple Alternative Stakeholder Meetings

- Homeowners, VT 17, New Haven
- Selectboard and Planning Commission/Development Review Board chairs for Addison, Weybridge, Waltham, and New Haven
- Government Affairs Director, Vermont Truck and Bus Association
- Addison County Field Days, a week in August 2023

Purple Alternative Stakeholder Concerns

Stakeholders who live and work in the vicinity of VT 17 between Addison Four Corners/VT 22A on the west and New Haven Junction/US 7 on the east were generally critical of the Purple Alternative, highlighting the risks that VT 17's winding roadway and poor sight lines present to the relatively high volume of truck traffic on the road today. Stakeholders outside this area, however, often made the case for investing in improving an existing state highway, considering that to be a financially prudent alternative to building a new roadway. Specific concerns include:

- Local stakeholders pointed out the challenges of the intersections at either end of this 7.3-mile stretch of VT 17: Addison Four Corners, where traffic traveling to and from New York across the Lake Champlain Bridge meets 22A traffic, and New Haven Junction, with its complicated intersection of US 7, VT 17, and the western rail corridor.
- Stakeholders pointed out the risks of crossing or turning onto VT 17 from Maple Street/Hallock Road coming south out of Vergennes. This intersection has virtually no sight line to the east.
- Homeowners living on a New Haven stretch of VT 17 noted that they have to "listen" for oncoming traffic before exiting their driveway because of the poor sight lines.
- Local residents pointed out the relatively high volume of slow-moving farm machinery traveling up and down this section of VT 17.
- Traffic on VT 17 can back up for miles for a week in August during Addison County Field Days, which is located on VT 17 in New Haven.
- The Government Affairs director for the Vermont Truck and Bus Association pointed out trucks following the Purple Route would add about seven miles to their journey.

The Green Alternative

Communities Impacted

Panton, Waltham, Vergennes, Ferrisburgh

Green Alternative Stakeholder Meetings

- Homeowners, Church Street, Ferrisburgh
- Waltham Selectboard and Planning Commission/Development Review Board chairs
- Champlain Valley Christian School Governance Board, Church Street, Vergennes
- Homeowner, Hopkins Road, Panton
- Green Route Neighborhood Meeting—Ten Maple Street neighborhood homeowners
- Waltham and Panton Planning Commissions

Green Alternative Stakeholder Concerns

While the idea of a second bridge over Otter Creek appealed to many in the region, stakeholders were firmly opposed to the Green Alternative, citing its impact on their rural neighborhoods, local wildlife and wetlands, the Champlain Valley Christian School, the Church Street neighborhood, and the intersection of New Haven Road and US 7. Specific concerns include:

- Several residents pointed out the complications and risks of the Green Alternative eastern termination at the intersection of New Haven Road and US 7. Northbound US 7 traffic approaching the intersection must brake to navigate the steep downhill grade at Woodman Hill, and a high volume of cars makes the lefthand turn from US 7 onto New Haven Road to come into Vergennes.
- One stakeholder suggested that it would be difficult for heavily loaded trucks heading south on US 7 to stop at a new intersection with the Green Alternative and then try to gather momentum to climb Woodman Hill.
- The northeastern segment of the Green Alternative would pass between the Champlain Valley Christian School and the Champlain Valley Christian Reformed Church, which sits a quarter mile further up Church Street. CVCS students regularly walk back and forth between the school and the church, crossing open land that would become a truck route. The school uses a gym facility at the church for Phys Ed and stages plays and musical events in the church's sanctuary.
- Maple Street residents living adjacent to the proposed route worry about the safety of their children and note the proximity of wildlife crossings (fox, bear, deer) to the Green Route.
- Several residents noted that Hopkins Road and Maple Street are widely used for recreational purposes by locals and visitors: bicyclists (including summer tours), runners, seniors and others out for a walk and/or exercise, the Vergennes High School track team for practice runs, tourists at the Strong House Inn looking to explore "country life," etc.
- A common concern is the quality-of-life impact of a truck route on an area that is home to many long-time residents who value it for its quiet, rural setting and "neighborly" character.
- Church Street residents stress that the Green Alternative would change the character of their street, eliminating the property at 15 Church Street and bringing noise, dust, and more traffic to a quiet neighborhood that draws dog walkers and, in winter, cross-country skiers, from across the area.
- Residents questioned the wisdom of constructing a road through the Otter Creek floodplain, noting that it "flies in the face of our environmental attitudes." Local landowners

also pointed out that flooded areas along this section of Otter Creek have been expanding with recent rainstorm events.

The Pink Alternative

Communities Impacted

Vergennes, Panton, Ferrisburgh

Pink Alternative Stakeholder Meetings

- Downtown Vergennes business owners—Linda’s Apparel & Gifts, Kennedy Brothers, Malabar, Stone Block Antiques, 3 Squares Café, Black Sheep Bistro, Lu.Lu Ice Cream
- Vergennes Economic Development Committee
- Vergennes Partnership executive director
- Addison Housing Works executive director (AHW owns the Otter Creek Mobile Home Park)
- Northlands Job Corps executive director and management team
- Collins Aerospace facilities manager
- Bixby Memorial Free Library director
- Homeowner, MacDonough Drive
- Homeowners, Commodore Way, Vergennes
- Homeowner, West Main Street, Panton
- Dairy farmers/landowners, Ferrisburgh and Vergennes
- Business owner, Basin Harbor Resort, Ferrisburgh
- Business owners, Comfort Hill Kennel
- Road Managers, Ferrisburgh and Vergennes
- Panton and Ferrisburgh Selectboard and Planning Commission/Development Review Board chairs
- Vergennes Mayor, City Manager, and Policy Committee representatives
- Vergennes Rotary
- Vergennes Day 2023 (held on the town green)

Pink Alternative Stakeholder Concerns

The Pink Alternative’s proximity to the Otter Creek Mobile Home Park, Panton Road, and several private homes surfaced as issues with stakeholders. Specific concerns include:

- Stakeholders are concerned about the impact of the Pink Alternative on the Otter Creek Mobile Home Park, located off Panton Road in Vergennes on the south bank of Otter Creek. The conceptual plan for the Pink Alternative shows the roadway running just to the west of the mobile home park. Conversely, though, some stakeholders saw construction of the Pink Alternative as an opportunity to upgrade the park’s infrastructure or perhaps to relocate it altogether to state-owned land across the river.
- Stakeholders are concerned about the impact of a truck route crossing Panton Road, which is the main route between Vergennes and Panton and points west, including Basin Harbor Resort and the summer homes along Lake Champlain. It is also the route by which the 1,000 employees of Collins Aerospace daily enter and exit the facility. The Vergennes Area Rescue Squad, known locally as VARS, sits on Panton Road between Collins Aerospace and the Otter Creek Mobile Home Park.
- Stakeholders noted that the southern section of the Pink Alternative would begin among a cluster of houses on both sides of 22A, impacting this outlying Vergennes neighborhood

with the noise and fumes of trucks slowing to make the lefthand turn onto the Pink Alternative.

- Stakeholders pointed out that the northern terminus of the Pink Alternative is in approximately the same location as a planned new development of some 130 workforce housing units by local developer Peter Kahn.

In addition, there are concerns that are specific to individual situations:

- Ferrisburgh dairy farmers Ray and Donna Brands lease 200 acres of state-owned land north of Otter Creek that would be impacted by the Blue and Pink alternatives. Leases are with the VT Fish & Wildlife Dept and Building and General Services. The land is in rotation as cornfield and hayfield. While the Pink and Blue alternatives would not eliminate all of the leased land, based on the current route maps, they would eliminate the most productive 40-acre parcel and an 8-acre parcel where the western edge of state-owned land meets Botsford Road.
- Vergennes resident Chris Lapierre and his wife live at 822 MacDonough Drive, a two-acre plot that abuts the western edge of Northlands Job Corps and is the only private property within the state-owned land north of Otter Creek. The Lapierres bought the property in 2009, razed the then-existing building, and in the years since have built their home and a 3500 sq ft barn. The Lapierres are concerned about the impact of the Pink and Blue alternatives on their quality of life and property value. Both routes would pass through the nearer of two crop fields just to the west of their property and the woodlands immediately north of their property before bending eastward.
- The VanderWey farm is an 800-acre dairy farm located on Botsford Road in Ferrisburgh just north of the Vergennes-Ferrisburgh town line. VanderWey land includes 50+ acres in Vergennes just north of Comfort Hill Kennel and stretching east from Botsford Road to just shy of VT 22A north of the Vergennes Police Station. The Blue and Pink alternatives would run right through this land, which is alternately used to produce feed corn and hay and is conserved with the Vermont Land Trust.
- Bill and Lynette Poquette own Comfort Hill Kennel, which operates 365 days a year with 25 employees. During the summer months, July-September, there are approximately 140 dogs at the kennel daily. From a traffic perspective, that means nearly 300 daily car trips up and down Comfort Hill in addition to normal traffic. The Pink and Blue alternatives would abut the property on the north. The Poquettes are not opposed to the Pink/Blue alternatives but, like many, ask why the state would invest in a new roadway when VT 17 already exists to take the truck traffic.
- The Pink Alternative would depart VT 22A heading northbound through the currently unused western section of Prospect Cemetery in Vergennes. The cemetery is managed by the Prospect Cemetery Association, whose Treasurer is Mel Hawley. A former mayor of Vergennes, Hawley's home, which overlooks Otter Creek, would be taken by the Pink Alternative.

The Blue Alternative

Communities Impacted

Vergennes, Panton, Ferrisburgh

Blue Alternative Stakeholder Meetings

The same stakeholders as for the Pink Alternative plus:

- Owners of the Bailey Farm on VT 22A, Panton
- Owners of La Garagista Winery, Panton

Blue Alternative Stakeholder Concerns

In addition to the issues discussed under the Pink Alternative above, the Blue Alternative had one notable stakeholder concern regarding its potential impact on the award-winning La Garagista Winery, as discussed below:

- The northbound Blue Alternative in its conceptual design would depart VT 22A and pass directly through the 125-acre Bailey Farm, a location noted by many for its frequently photographed viewshed looking west to the Adirondacks.
- Unlike most of Addison County, whose soil is heavily clay, the soil on the Bailey Farm is exceptionally rich, leading the owners to plant a four-acre vineyard, with another six acres set aside for future development.
- The owners then partnered with two vintners/restaurateurs/authors located in Barnard VT who took over management of the vineyard and launched what has become an award-winning winery under the brand La Garagista. The vintners see themselves as pioneers in viticulture in Vermont as climate change creates opportunities for new varieties to be grown in the state.
- If the Blue Alternative were to follow its current conceptual route, the vineyard and the Bailey Farm buildings would become roadway.

Section 4

Vergennes—An Economic Overview

For 225 years, Vergennes has served as the commercial center for the northern Addison County communities of Ferrisburgh, Panton, Waltham, and New Haven.

Today, three distinct groups drive the Vergennes economy:

- 1) Residents of Vergennes and the four adjacent communities
- 2) Those who work in Vergennes but do not live locally, and
- 3) Summer residents, visitors, and tourists.

Local Residents

For the 10,000 residents of Vergennes and its surrounding towns, Main Street is a place to dine at the city's restaurants, to attend cultural events at the Vergennes Opera House and Bixby Memorial Free Library, and to take care of business at one of the four downtown banks and the Vergennes Post Office.

Locals buy groceries, clothes, furniture, and gifts in downtown stores. They send their children to school in Vergennes, take their pets to the Vergennes Animal Hospital and themselves to Little City Family Practice, and take care of their plumbing and heating needs at Main Street businesses.

Looking Ahead. In general, many in Vergennes see its community as an affordable housing option for those who work in Chittenden County or in Middlebury but are priced out of these two housing markets. The number of residents for whom Vergennes is their goods and services go-to is expected to grow significantly in the years ahead. For example, Vergennes Grand, a senior living community on North Street, will open in Spring 2025 with space for 88 residents. Local developers are investing in new housing options in the downtown area. Vergennes town leaders are looking to respond to this demand by upgrading and extending town sewer infrastructure to support existing and planned growth.

Commuters

Bolstering this continuous flow of local citizens into downtown is the daily influx of those who work in Vergennes.

A mainstay of Vergennes since the 1940s, Collins Aerospace—a subsidiary of defense contractor RTX—is the largest employer. Some 960 people work a 7 AM – 3:30 PM shift at the Panton Road facility. Most of these employees drive to work from out of the area, many commuting from New York via VT 22A.

In addition, Northlands Job Corps, located just across the Otter Creek on 66 acres of state-owned land leased to the Department of Labor, employs a staff of 120 individuals. Most of these also commute from outside the area.

Many of these commuters eat, shop, and run errands daily in downtown Vergennes.

Summer Residents, Visitors, and Tourists

A critical component of the Vergennes economy is the “summer people”—those who own second homes along Lake Champlain in Panton and Ferrisburgh, those who spend a week or more at Basin

Harbor Resort in West Ferrisburgh, and those who spend a day or two in the area, for example, bicycle tours staying overnight at the historic Strong House Inn on West Main Street. These visitors are key to the financial success of Main Street stores as well as the downtown restaurants.

The Challenges of Navigating Main Street Vergennes

All this activity takes place day in and day out along the 2.4-mile stretch of Vergennes's Main Street—Vermont State Route 22A—running between the intersection of Panton Road on the east and VT 22A's termination point at US 7 on the west.

While Main Street is the thoroughfare on which these stakeholder groups depend, it is also—as has been well documented—the route by which some 800 trucks daily travel northbound and southbound through downtown, transporting goods between the New York City/Albany metro areas to the south and Chittenden County and the Port of Montreal to the north.

Local residents and commuters, based on extensive community outreach throughout the course of the Vergennes PEL Study, consistently note that this continuously high volume of truck traffic negatively impacts their downtown experience in several ways:

- **Parking**—Poor visibility backing out of diagonal parking in front of Main Street businesses.
- **Noise**—The continuous passage of trucks in front of the narrow brick storefronts that line Main Street makes it difficult to dine outside at the area restaurants and even to conduct conversations on the street.
- **Congestion**—Rush hour backs traffic up between the Main Street bridge over Otter Creek and the traffic light at Monkton Road, creating a bottleneck downtown, and at the intersection of Panton Road and West Main Street/22A.
- **Trucks using alternate routes**—To avoid the state truck-weighing facility on US 7 or because they are following faulty GPS directions, trucks often end up on Green Street trying to turn onto Main Street, blocking traffic in the process.
- **Pedestrian and Bike Safety**—The constant truck traffic makes cycling on Main Street a challenge for the many bike tours that bring summer revenue into the Vergennes area. Crossing Main Street, even with recent signaling improvements, can be a challenge, and the wait time at the key Main Street-Green Street intersection encourages pedestrians to cross against the light.

A Solution To Preserve Economic Vitality

While the downtown business community voices concern that an alternate truck route may divert customers as well as truck traffic, the general consensus of the Vergennes Partnership and its members is that, given a robust marketing and signage program, removing trucks from downtown, as in Morrisville, would benefit the downtown businesses by encouraging outside seating at restaurants, making the Town Green a more inviting place to attend community events like Vergennes Day, and reducing the challenges discussed above that negatively impact the downtown shopping and dining experience.

Section 5

Final Thoughts

Section 3 of the Community Liaison Appendix documents stakeholder concerns and feedback for each of the five alternative routes selected for evaluation in the final phase of the Vergennes PEL Study. In this final section I share some of my own observations on the process and what we learned.

- **General Roadway Concerns.** Many stakeholders, while acknowledging the negative impact of truck traffic on downtown Vergennes, believe that the entire stretch of VT 22A between Fair Haven/US 4 and Ferrisburgh/US 7 is an unsafe roadway unsuited to the volume of truck traffic it currently carries. Similar concerns surfaced when the conversation turned to the 7.3-mile section of VT 17 running between Addison Four Corners and New Haven Junction.
- **Bridge Resiliency.** While not acknowledged in the PEL Study's Purpose and Need Statement, bridge resiliency emerged as a consistent theme and potential benefit in discussions around the region. The Vergennes Fire Department and the Vergennes Area Rescue Squad are located on opposite sides of Otter Creek and rely on the single 90-year-old bridge sitting between the two. If the bridge were out of service, the 1.5-mile trip from the Vergennes Fire Department to Collins Aerospace, for example, would require an 18-mile detour to cross the nearest bridge over Otter Creek on VT 17.
- **The Panton Decision in Context.** Throughout the Study, Panton appeared to be the lone critic of the Pink Alternative, which generally was viewed as the most sensible of the proposed alternative routes by representatives of the other participating communities. While Panton's representative on the Policy Committee did not specifically endorse the two western routes, she did vote to move the project forward into NEPA for further study. Some context on Panton's decision is helpful. It became clear through many hours of discussion with the Panton Planning Commission and the town's municipal officials that concern about the western routes, while reflecting Panton's desire to preserve its rural heritage and its concerns about the noise and other impacts of an elevated bridge over Otter Creek, is also rooted in legacy issues between Vergennes and Panton that undermined Panton's trust in the process and faith in the goodwill of Vergennes municipal officials. One of the benefits of the state's investment in the Vergennes PEL Study is that the process has helped build trust and common ground between these two neighboring communities.
- **The Value of Sustained Engagement.** Public meetings, while an integral part of the process, have somewhat limited value. There is a formal divide between presenter and attendee that can be difficult to bridge, and those who show up often have a particular axe to grind. By contrast, a Community Liaison meets stakeholders where they are—at home, in the workplace, on email—for conversations that are not hampered by time or others' agendas. For some key stakeholders, one or two meetings may suffice; for others, it may take 10 or more meetings to gain trust, credibility, and common ground. Once these types of meetings get underway, word spreads, opening doors throughout the community as each stakeholder suggests others whose voices should be heard. In one PEL Study example, meeting with a Ferrisburgh dairy farmer led to introductions to a key MacDonough Drive homeowner, a second Ferrisburgh dairy farmer, and the owners of Comfort Hill Kennel.