

Public Meeting Summary

Subject	Vergennes PEL Study Public Meeting, focusing on the Purpose and Need statement
Date and Time	November 4, 2021 6:30 p.m. – 8:00 p.m.
Location	The Vergennes Opera House 120 Main Street Vergennes, VT Also held via Zoom webinar
Presenters and facilitators	Joe Segale, VTrans Steve Chiaramonte, WSP Bryan Pounds, WSP
Team Attendees	Mike Winslow, ACRPC Adam Lougee, ACRPC Amy Bell, VTrans Jacquie DeMent, VTrans Nick Charyk, WSP Ken Robie, DuBois & King Katharine Otto, VTrans (Remote) Laura Toole, WSP (Remote) Delia Makhetha, WSP (Remote) Grant Olear, WSP (Remote)

Number of attendees: approximately 40 in person and 76 online

Meeting Summary

Joe Segale, Director of Policy, Planning and Research Bureau from the Vermont Agency of Transportation (VTrans), welcomed attendees and presented on past Vergennes studies and explained the goals of this meeting – to help develop a Purpose and Need Statement for the PEL Study.

Steve Chiaramonte, Transportation Planning Lead from WSP, provided a corridor profile, updated traffic data and themes the study is looking at, including Equity, Mobility, Environment and Economic.

Bryan Pounds, Project Manager from WSP, presented the previous (2019) Purpose and Need Statement. This statement is a starting point for the new Purpose and Need Statement the study is developing. Bryan also explained what a PEL Study is, the benefits of a PEL Study and the planned PEL Study project outcomes. He reviewed the public outreach activities to date and the planned public outreach. The team reviewed the study schedule, reviewed again the former Purpose and Need Statement (2019), and then wrapped up the presentation.

The presentation can be found on the project website: <https://vergennespel.com/media/ygejjg03/final-vergennes-public-meeting-presentation.pdf> Following the presentation, the Question & Answer session was open for attendees in the room and attendees participating virtually to provide feedback and ask questions.

Meeting Themes

Mobility

- Traffic volumes have been impacted by COVID, but the expectation is that they will increase again. Overall vehicular traffic has decreased, but truck traffic has remained relatively constant.
- Vergennes is not an origin point, or a destination point for most truck travel.
- All freight mobility options (including rail and water transport) are in consideration for alternative development.
- Study will be looking at all traffic and modes of travel through Vergennes, not just truck traffic, but focus is to reduce truck traffic volumes.
- Currently there is only one access bridge, Otter Creek, for emergency services in Vergennes.

Economic

- The impact of viable alternatives on population growth for area towns.
- Land use visioning will be driven by communities to determine the needs of the area.
- Economic vitality of Vergennes is a concern and considering economic development is important.

Equity

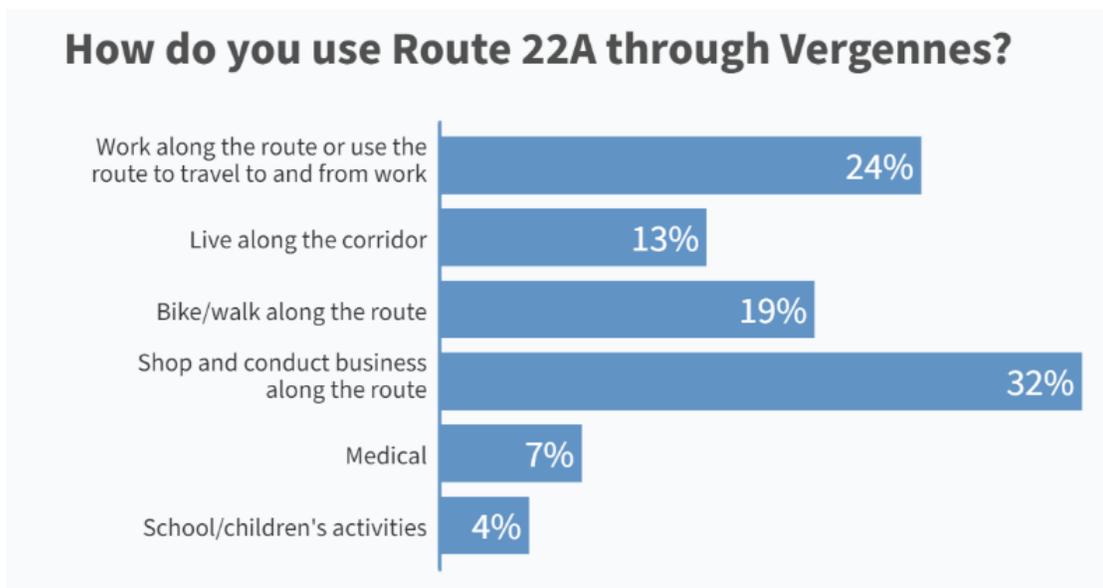
- PEL Study is looking at all previously considered alternatives as well as new alternatives and taking community input throughout the PEL Study process.

Results from the interactive polls during the meeting

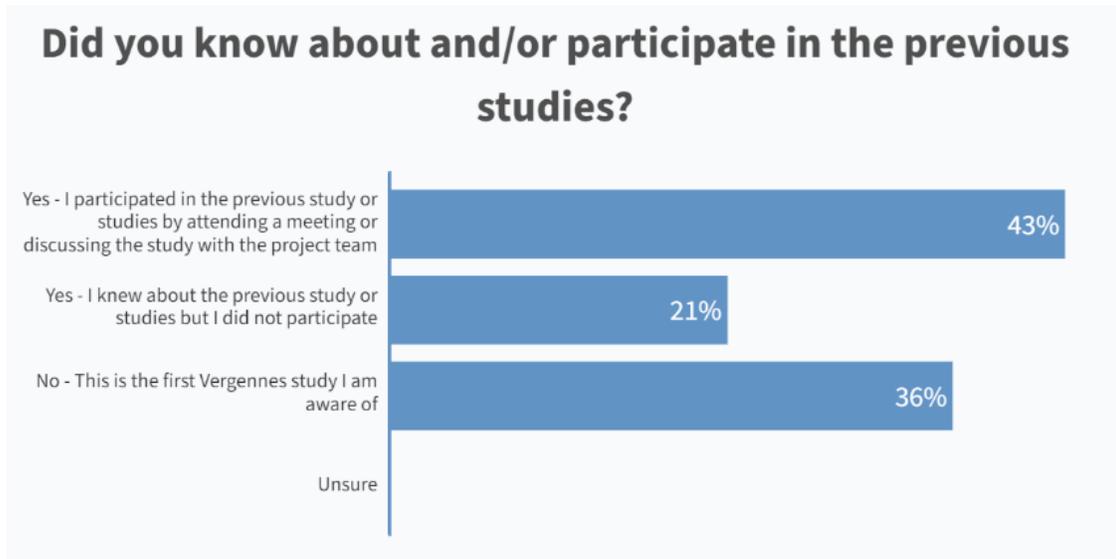
1. When you think of Vergennes what word comes to mind? (16 responses received, word cloud below)



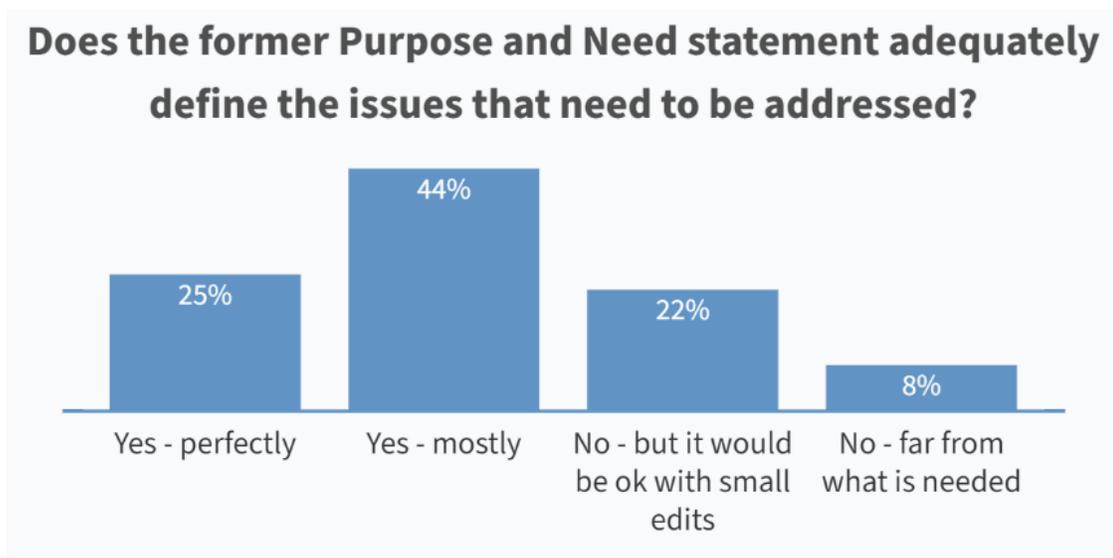
2. How do you use Route 22A through Vergennes? (112 responses, percentages below in graphic)



- Did you know about and/or participate in the previous studies? (42 responses, percentages below in graphic)



- Does the former Purpose and Need Statement adequately define the issues that need to be addressed? (36 responses, percentages below in graphic)



5. Does the former Purpose and Need Statement adequately define the issues that need to be addressed? (36 responses, listed below)
- “IF a truck bypass is actually needed, since 86% of the trucks surveyed in 2021 indicated at RT 7 by pass preference, with only ten minutes added to the trip, the rt 17 bypass to rt 7 would seem to make the most sense.”
 - “Expedited implementation of a solution”
 - “A path forward that makes logistical and economical sense.”
 - “A plan! Community buy-in.”
 - “Viable options”
 - “Better traffic flow through Vergennes”
 - “Mel Hawley recuse himself”
 - “I would like to see added to purpose and needs – Maintaining high opportunity for economic growth in line with Smart Growth.”
 - “I do not want to see a route that runs through my backyard or causes me to be displaced from my home.”
 - “I would like to see this issue put to rest and Vergennes not become a ghost city.”
 - “The results of the previous study be carried forward to build the bypass.”
 - “Specific timelines”
 - “Diverting trucks without negative downtown business flow”
 - “Final plan to move forward on the Vergennes Economic Corridor”
 - “A truck bypass be built!”
 - “Solution to the truck problem in Vergennes.”
 - “A data supported solution”
 - “Hones costs”
 - “Viable alternatives to truck through Vergennes”
 - “Confirmed funding to solve the issue”
 - “Real options that could be funded and implemented”
 - “A viable path forward”
 - “Specifically, what might be done to preserve economic vitality of downtown”
 - “Rail alternatives”
 - “Clear option and real costs”
 - “Understanding of opportunities for housing development and population growth”
 - “Where exactly in relationship to my home with this new road be?”
 - “What is he asking???”
 - “A bigger vision for what this undertaking could achieve beyond just truck traffic.”
 - Trucks slow down before getting to Vergennes. Police presence on 22A”
 - “Solid plan for a truck bypass.”

- “A clear and achievable PLAN for getting it completed”
- “Schedule for completion”

Question & Answer (A transcribed summary, not direct quotes)

- Vergennes population has decreased by 6% since 2000 and neighbouring towns also saw decreases in population. What opportunities will be in the Purpose and Need Statement for population growth and housing development?

The PEL Study will be working with the community on land use visioning to identify what the community wants to see. If there will be a new road, the Study will work with the community to drive the vision of a new roadway.

- Has the NY state barge canal been considered to transport cargo/freight?

Alternatives that are being considered are not just for roadways and vehicles. Rail and water are also being considered as potential alternatives.

- Main concern is the Otter Creek bridge. This is the only access point for emergency services.

- The traffic light downtown is not consistent for motorists.

VTrans will pass along this information to the traffic signal engineers to check out the signal system. They will see if this system is managed by VAOT.

- Vergennes resident expressed that he does not like the bump-outs along Main Street.

- If there is a bypass, commuters coming from the south of Vergennes could use that route on their daily commute. When considering a bypass, the best route will be the one that is least intrusive for residents.

- Define truck crashes, truck to truck or other vehicles cutting out in front of a truck?

It is any accident that involves a vehicle that is classified as a Class 4 or above. If any one of the vehicles is classified as a truck, the accident will be classified as a truck crash.

- Is there a decline in traffic volumes due to COVID shutting everything down for a time?

Traffic volumes were in decline and when COVID hit, it impacted traffic everywhere. When we did our traffic counts, the expectation was that by 2021, we would start to see traffic normalize. The normalized volume is still lower

than in the past. However, the overall vehicle volumes have declined compared to truck volumes.

- Is the decline in truck and traffic volumes a temporary blip due to the pandemic as opposed to a longer-term trend?

We are seeing the way people purchase goods is changing and will continue to change. People are buying more and more things online, which requires freight commodity flows through trucks. It would be surprising to see truck traffic decline substantially based on the way we are consuming goods.

- With the news of Vergennes having approximately 400 acres belonging to Panton and Ferrisburgh, what impact will that play in the efforts to create alternative routes, if the acres are returned to the towns?

The Vergennes PEL study will evaluate alternatives to address truck traffic issues in downtown Vergennes. While it is not the intention of the study to determine municipal jurisdiction, the team is aware of this and will continue to monitor.

- Please describe some specific ways in which a plan might support the continued movement of non-truck travel through downtown.

The mobility theme is applicable to all traffic, not just trucks. We will be looking at mobility throughout the study and it will be part of the alternative analysis.

- Are we considering that when these new potential solution(s) roll out that autonomous driving will potentially be the norm?

Autonomous vehicles will be considered in the Study and the VTrans long-range planning will be used to help forecast in the Study. It is important to note that even automated vehicles need roads to travel on.

- Have studies been done previously on speeding along 22A? Would more police enforcement along the route reduce truck traffic and have trucks find alternative routes on their own?

There have been no recent studies on speeding along 22A.

- Is there a plan to do an inventory on the types of trucks passing through Vergennes?

For the purpose of this Study, we considered tractor trailers and smaller box-style trucks. We didn't consider every possible truck, but these two main classes because they have different needs. The smaller trucks are more likely to be

making deliveries, whereas your larger tractor trailers are more likely to be passing through.

- Nearly 25% of attendees feel the Purpose and Need Statement needs to be edited. What edits can be suggested and how will suggested edits be captured?

All edits and suggestions you provide will be considered. Please share your thoughts on the Purpose & Need Statement and what you believe should be kept and what needs to be changed. We are recording this meeting and capturing all questions and comments. You are welcome to fill out a comment card and leave that for us. People are also welcomed to leave comments through the online comment form. When visiting the website people can visit the Contact Us page and use the form to leave a comment for the Study team. This comment form will be available to the public throughout the Study process.

- Is the level of truck traffic passing through Vergennes unique compared to the rest of the state?

Vergennes is unique. Vergennes carries the burden of trucks between Northern Vermont and New York and 22A is the most direct route. We do see that truck traffic trends have been consistent since the early 2000s.

- The Morristown bypass or Route 100 through downtown Morristown was put in place some years back. Are they seeing less trucks and vehicles through downtown since the by-pass was instated?

We don't have the figures on hand. After the last Vergennes study, there was a small group from Vergennes that met with the Morristown Town Manager and Planner and learned about the challenges and successes of the 'Morristown truck route'. Morristown is working to make sure the downtown area is not hurt by the bypass route, and they seem to be successful. Downtown Morristown took the opportunity to create a more attractive environment. When compiling the Vergennes PEL Study report we will include the Morristown numbers in the report for comparison.

- Heard from Morristown town officials that the outcome has been 100% positive for the town. Was the PEL process used for Morristown?

No, that effort was prior to the existence of the PEL process.

- Why not just close Route 22A north of Route 4? Route 7 has already been upgraded and Route 22A is a mess being torn up by trucks. As an aside, in a 2021 survey, truckers responded they would use Route 7 anyways.

Truck prohibitions are hard to legislate. The other issue is prohibition moves the issue somewhere else without solving it. Thinking about all alternatives as part of the Study, if a traffic shift is a preferred alternative, we would be looking at ways to allow Route 7 or 17 to handle the truck traffic volume.

- How do you anticipate the Legislature's 90% renewable by 2050 requirements will impact highway traffic including trucks?

It is an important consideration when looking at the alternatives. This will be considered with all VTrans efforts.

- There is no police presence along 22A and trucks speed down the roadway.
- If you put in a bypass, even cars will take the bypass. Look at Route 7 in Middlebury, people are no longer going through the downtown.
- Will the new federal infrastructure plan help pay for this project instead of the state paying the cost, which will raise taxes?

At the time of the public meeting the infrastructure bill had not yet passed. Upon passage, it would bring additional federal dollars to Vermont. Any money that comes in will go through the normal process to access funding. When the PEL Study process is complete, the project will have to compete with the needs across the state. If there is additional money, then there will be more funding for more projects. VTrans has updated the project selection and prioritization process, so there is now a pathway for projects focusing on economic vitality, resilience, safety, mobility, and access to get on the Capital Program. Whatever comes out of this PEL Study has a chance to be competitive. It doesn't matter how competitive it is if there isn't any funding. The PEL Study is focused on the federal environmental review process, so the outcome may be eligible for federal aid.

- When looking at traffic patterns in Morristown, can you look at what measures they took to maintain non-truck traffic coming through the downtown? We want to maintain economic development. What measures like way-finding signs are in place to help keep traffic coming through the downtown?

- Much of the Purpose and Need Statement is about minimizing; can an addition to the Purpose and Need Statement look at maximizing economic opportunities?
- What types of cargo are tractor trailers carrying?

The Vermont Freight Plan is looking at that, and we will get a picture of what types of goods are being moved. However, specificity is a challenge because the data is in groups. With that being said, we won't know the specific goods along 22A. However, we have heard today that fuel trucks are an issue, and we will be able to see that data. This Study will benefit from the State's ongoing [Freight Plan](#).

- Is there any concern that creating a truck route will cause Vergennes to be a ghost town?

Yes, there are economic vitality concerns for Vergennes.

- How do we ensure that Google maps and other apps will direct cars to the downtown area and truck via a truck route?

Most mapping companies are going to direct people to the fastest distance route. There are truck specific apps for preferred truck routes. Convincing Google and other apps to direct people to a downtown area is a tough sell. However, creating a destination is the most important means to keep people visiting.

- When can we realistically expect an alternative truck route to be implemented?

Realistically speaking, after this process, it is a 5-10-year timeframe. VTTrans is working hard to clear out legacy projects to free up capacity for new projects, while also working to not overcommit. This PEL Study process is important in determining if this is a viable project and will help move it forward. This process can help us identify important land use and transportation solutions to the issues identified. If the project advances to the Capital Program, then the state will be committed to it, and it will take whatever time it takes to get it done.

- Is there any concern that tourists will take an alternate route and not travel through Vergennes?

Businesses along the route are concerned. It comes back to economic vitality. The PEL Study will consider the economic factors if a bypass is being considered.

- What about the economic vitality of the surrounding areas? A bypass around Vergennes can help neighbours to the south getting to their work and destinations north.

The study team is not only looking at Vergennes, but we are also reaching out to other potentially affected municipalities and stakeholders for their insight and feedback.

- The 2019 plan made it a priority that it was longer for non-truck traffic to use the alternate route. Will that be the same this time?

It is possible to control access points to the alternate route and directionality to make it more difficult for non-truck traffic to use an alternate route. We need to look at what the final Purpose and Need Statement includes, and then address the needs as part of the PEL Study.

- Can you ensure the truck bypass is longer and slightly slower, so cars travel through the downtown?

It will be taken into consideration in the Study.

- Upon completion of the new road, if it is still faster to use Main Street how will that be prohibited?

If a bypass is considered as part of the short-listed alternatives in the Study, it will need to consider the viability of truck traffic utilizing it.

- Panton Road resident expressed concern that the by-pass would take her property and displace her family and up to seventy other families.

The study team appreciates the feedback, and we will be talking to the community as part of the study. We are currently conducting focus groups and we recently held an equity focus group to speak with community leaders, including those representing the community mentioned. The study team is here to listen and address the concerns that arise throughout the duration of the study.

Other questions and comments were submitted online and on paper, and a summary of these will be provided at a later date.