

# Economic Focus Group Summary

<b>Subject</b>	Economic Focus Group
<b>Date and Time</b>	November 19, 2021 9:00 a.m. – 11:00 a.m.
<b>Location</b>	Zoom meeting
<b>Presenters &amp; staff</b>	Lawrence Pesesky, WSP Joe Segale, VTrans Katharine Otto, VTrans Mike Winslow, ACRPC Ken Robie, Dubois&King Bryan Pounds, WSP Laura Toole, WSP
<b>Focus Group Participants</b>	Dana Handley, Project and Grant Manager, Addison County Economic Development Corporation Charlene Goodell, Owner of Blue Lily Clothing Company and Stone Emporium Fred Kenney, Executive Director, Addison County Economic Development Corporation Julie Basol, President, Vergennes Partnership Jenn Russel, Vergennes Partnership Joan Goldstein, Vermont Commissioner of Economic Development Katharine Beadreau, Director of Financial Futures at CBOEO Laura Mack, Owner of Lulu Ice Stephanie Davidson, CBOEO

## Introductions

Joe Segale, Director of Planning and Research from the Vermont Agency of Transportation (VTrans), welcomed participants and highlighted the Study’s goal to include economic development and economic interests in the Purpose and Need development in the Study.

Larry Peseskey, WSP facilitator, thanked everyone for participating and asked participants to introduce themselves.

## Presentation

Laura asked participants if they are familiar with the previous studies.

No one has been previously involved in the Vergennes Studies.

Laura gave a short presentation on the previous study and explained the work of a PEL Study.

Previous alternatives that were considered were referenced in the presentation, but it was explained that all alternatives will be considered.

- One participant asked where the starting point for by-pass alternative begins and ends?
  - The Study Team explained the route starts near the cemetery and ends near the railroad crossing between the police station and the transformer. This is very conceptual at this point. We need to look to see what the best alternatives are.
  - The Study Team noted that a “do nothing” alternative will be considered

### Discussion

#### **To what extent do you believe Route 22A effects economic activity in Vergennes and nearby communities?**

- Have been hearing about this for a while and it comes up again. When participant talks to many people, she hears both sides. Some say it will be an opportunity for additional housing, another will say that it will attract stores like Dollar General. Who controls the economic opportunities along the road?
  - The Study Team explained that there is the Act 250 land use review process which will be part of the process. Also, there will be land use visioning that will be conducted as part of the Study public outreach. Land use planning allows the towns and municipalities to decide on zoning they will need to do based on the alternatives that may be selected. We are working to find an integrated transportation, land-use scenario.
- Participant shared that her experience with the Circ highway through Williston, Essex, and Colchester there was a lot of concern about too many access points and poorly zoned. It hasn't turned out that way and most of the road is beautiful. There is access around Main Street with some development and it has turned out OK. In general, the design of the limited access highway has worked well.
- The Study Team followed up to ask what is going on currently that is driving discussion about the Study?

- There are those that deal with the trucks going up the hill each day by the bridge. There is also issues with air brakes and trucks driving through all day. Other say it is a quaint town and if a by-pass is built, travelers going to and returning from the north are concerned the Town will be forgotten.
- There is concern that an alternate route will take business away from the downtown.
- Local business owner explained that a lot of business is someone who stops in traveling to Burlington and then 95% of the time same people stop in on their way back through the area. It is a good stopping point for people. Trucks are not positive for business, but major concern is losing people who find it as a “discovery stop” and then won’t stop in moving forward.
- When doing a Needs Assessment, heard from businesses that truck traffic is loud. From an anti-poverty perspective, the less noise the better.
- Morrisville downtown has changed for the positive after they had a by-pass put in place. The quality of their downtown is now better.
- Traffic backups resulting in people not wanting to stop in shops downtown. Also backing out of parking is difficult. Concerned people will by-pass Vergennes to avoid delays on Main Street.
- Vehicles coming up over the bridge are backed up when trucks must stop at the light. If you are parked in front of businesses on Main Street, it is difficult to backout with the backed-up traffic.
- The Study Team asked if anyone can think of other examples of towns with a by-pass built around? How did it affect the village downtown?
  - Newport City Vermont is a designated downtown. Previously had heavy truck traffic, years ago trucks were detoured to a different existing route and it made a significant difference. And as a designated downtown the City is developing ways to attract people to the downtown but not truck traffic.
  - Negative consequence of Morrisville by-pass is Hyde Park. People are by-passing Hyde Park because of the convenience of the bypass.
  - Bennington also had a bypass but unaware of the positive or negative consequences of the bypass. Can check with colleagues in the Bennington area.

- Route 7 use to go into Vergennes and then follow Route 22A between New Haven Road. There were land use concerns at the time in Ferrisburgh. How do we manage the land use in a way that doesn't hurt downtown Vergennes?

**How might any of the alternatives that have been considered to address Route 22A truck traffic change economic activity in Vergennes and nearby communities? Where might the activity change and what economic sectors might be affected?**

- Participant asked what strategies can be used to encourage trucks to stay on 87? This route seems like a way to balance needs – remove trucks but keep motorists coming through.
  - Part of the Study Team's early outreach was to conduct a survey with the Vermont Truck Association. We learned they are plugging their destination into the GPS and it is taking them through downtown Vergennes. Trucks want to take the shortest route. Trucks that could use in the interstate routes are probably already doing so if it is the shortest route. One way to discourage truck trips is through a physical change to the cross section of the road. Trucks are still going to want to take the shortest path.
  - Is a truck prohibition or weight limits on the roadway possible?
    - Trucks don't want to be on a challenging route. In terms of truck prohibitions, it is challenging to accomplish this. Given that the Otter Creek bridge is the only way across, adding a weight limit would be challenging.
  - Participant suggested signage for trucks to have to stay on Route 17 when coming off the West Addison/NY Bridge
  - Participant lives on Route 15 and the truck noise is great. Not all trucks are noisy, the dump trucks are problematic. New technology can make a big difference
  - Newport City VT-105 has a VT signed designated truck route around it
- To what extent are truck the problem vs. noise vs. something else?
  - All the above including vibration – not just noise. Even if the trucks are electric, they are large machines and will cause vibration
    - The Study Team noted that the Team wrapped up the noise and vibration data collect, and analysis is underway to support the study.

Collected at two locations, the Vergennes Opera House and local Bistro.

- Another way to mitigate trucks that was seen in Pennsylvania was having the local parks service provide a national park designation to part of the area. Then the Parks Service was able to ban truck traffic.
- Colins aerospace shared that they have 900 employees. Since COVID they have a successful hybrid work environment with roughly 500 employees in the office. Most employees come in around 7 AM and out by 3:30 PM. Employees come from Burlington area, Middlebury area, NY, and Monkton Ridge Road area. Office is so close to downtown, not sure if there would be any major impact to the staff if an alternative is implemented.
  - The Study Team asked the Colins representative if a new bypass would cause more traffic to travel Pantown Road. Curious if Colins would agree
    - Colins representative does not believe
  - The Study Team asked the Colins representative about daily truck traffic to the plant.
    - Colins representative explained that there are daily drop-off and pick-ups with UPS and FedEx. Mostly box trucks. On occasion there is a tractor trailer, but it is not daily.
- Does the group have a perspective on the agricultural aspect of the local economy?
  - ACEDC can connect Team with the agricultural industry but believe they will have similar concerns.
- Is zoning for land use something that will happen as part of this process?
  - The Study Team noted that land use vision and recommendations to the Towns on how to implement is part of the PEL process. The PEL Study will not implement, that will be up to the towns.

**What local and regional economic development priorities could benefit from a 22A project? What economic development priorities could be hurt by a 22A project?**

- Talked to about 35 services providers as part of a Needs Assessment and the number one need in the area is affordable housing. If this can help with that issue, it would be great.

- A lot of questions about what will happen to the trailer park. What can be said about that?
  - The Otter Creek trailer park is a big concern for the Project Team. We will be reaching out to them as we conduct upcoming workshops to get their thoughts and idea. We would like to bring the conversation to them. Important to reiterate that all alternates are only concepts, there is nothing confirmed at this time.
- Are there opportunities for tourism as part of a 22A project?
  - There are possible opportunities for Basin Harbor if a bypass is created. It is currently a hassle to get there from Route 7 and 22A.
  - Access would also be easier to Kingsland Bay State Park
- The Study Team asked CBOEO if they could share the Needs Assessment they have compiled.
  - Will need to confirm with CBOEO Executive Director but it should not be a problem. Can send to Katharine Otto.
- Participant asked if a road is built, how much land is owned by the State. How many property owners will be affected? Is there hope for cohesiveness?
  - Question is too far down the line. After land use visioning, there will be some level of conceptual design (not full-blown preliminary design because it needs to go through the NEPA process).
- The Study Team noted the extension of water/sewer lines came up at a Select Board meeting. Knowing that access to water and sewer impacts businesses and housing. The Study Team asked if there was any input from the participants.
- The Study Team asked if there is seasonal influx of tourists in Vergennes? How does it change over the course of the year?
  - Summer is busy and huge influx of tourists. What we see is new customers vs old customers. Halloween until spring is 95% local and the remainder is new customers. Summer is the exact opposite.
  - Bike traffic downtown, especially since the pandemic, has doubled, if not more. Many more biking tour groups park in Vergennes as a stopping point between Middlebury and Basin Harbor/Panton area. These groups stop to shop and eat in Vergennes.

- Downtown makes their living from Independence Day to Indigenous People's Day.
- For customers traveling through they are surprised by the quaint town, but people are stopping through on their way to a destination.
- Participant asked if businesses outside of Vergennes will be included in this process.
  - The Study Team noted that the focus group was broadly announced and there have been Selectboard meetings and a public meeting. Additional outreach will be conducted through the Study area.
- Participant reminded the team to consider the manufacturing section when having these discussions.