

Mobility Focus Group Summary

Subject	Mobility Focus Group
Date and Time	October 28, 2021 10:00 a.m. – 12:00 p.m.
Location	Zoom meeting
Presenters & staff	Joe Segale, VTrans Katharine Otto, VTrans Mike Winslow, ACRPC Ken Robie, Dubois & King Bryan Pounds, WSP Laura Toole, WSP Delia Makhetha, WSP
Focus Group Participants	Christopher Parker, Executive Director of VT Rail Action Network Cory Lozier, Lieutenant with Vermont State Police stationed in New Haven Jim Larrow, Supervisor at Vergennes Public Works Karen Yacos, Executive Director of Local Motion Mary Crogan, Community Relations Manager for Tri-Valley Transit (TVT) John Bull, Town of Ferrisburgh Reilly Laberge, Town of Ferrisburgh

Introductions

Joe Segale, Policy, Planning and Research Bureau Director from the Vermont Agency of Transportation (VTrans), welcomed participants. Katharine Otto, Planning Coordinator and Assistant Project Manager welcomed participants and highlighted the need to understand mobility from all impacted populations. Mike Winslow, Transportation Planner for Addison County Regional Planning Commission, and local contact for the project welcomed participants.

Laura Toole, WSP facilitator, thanked everyone for participating and asked participants to introduce themselves.

Presentation

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

None of the attendees participated in the prior studies. One participant had heard of the study second hand. Another participant heard about the previous study in the news. One participant was asked to be on the 1995 committee (removed themselves after the participant felt the process wasn't productive).

- Laura gave a short presentation on the previous studies and explained the work of a PEL Study. The alternatives developed in previous studies were reviewed briefly in the presentation, and it was explained that these alternatives are a starting point. A participant asked if the western realignment is still a viable consideration?
 - The Study team reported that it is still feasible. However, that doesn't mean it will be put in place. All options will be considered when creating the list of possible alternatives.

Discussion

Participants were asked; how the study are has changed since the last study in 2019. Are there changes in the area that would affect how the team looks at alternatives?

- Transportation has transitioned to more trucks and less trains since COVID.
- Route 7 traffic in Ferrisburgh has increased.
 - Study team noted that since COVID we are seeing more direct to home shipping trends that the team believes will not change. The Study team anticipates that there will be increasing demand for delivery vehicles.
- The Walk-Bike Council is working with the towns of Vergennes, Ferrisburgh, New Haven and others on a bike loop that connects area towns. This route does come into downtown Vergennes and then heads east. There have been a number of issues on sidewalks and bike/walk access to schools.
 - The Study team asked, what are the impacts to schools?
 - Need to increasing bicycle and walking options and getting people out of cars. Anything that the project can do to reduce the heavy vehicle travel would be good.
- A participant asked, where are the trucks coming from and going to?

- Study team reported that most of the truck traffic is thru traffic. Study team conducted a truck survey from the Truck and Bus Association. The team received 36 responses, and they provided insight. They reported that trucks are traveling through Vergennes because it is the shortest and fastest route.
- A participant asked, how is the Study looking at the improvements of rail lines and how does that impact the project? One alternative to consider is developing a railroad alternative so it is competitive, in a way in which it isn't now. The issue of trucks and railroads is a question of providing service and the consequence of rail not being competitive is the trucks through Vergennes. In terms of the railroad, the big issue is railroads are cutting costs which is cutting service. Much of the rail traffic was fuel, and now that is being trucks when rail isn't going to the Port of Albany. A radical step would be for VTTrans to purchase rights for the rail system directly into the Port of Albany, so that VTTrans is not reliant on Canadian Pacific Railroad. The State took a radical step 50 years ago to buy the Vermont Rail System. The participant believes the largest share of truck traffic is freight, which tends to move overnight much of it from the South of Albany up to Burlington. We could move that truck freight to train. That is a question of competition. Can we provide a service and at a cost that would move freight from trucks? I don't see many of these things in the alternatives.
 - The Study team noted that precision scheduling has focused on:
 - the most profitable routes and increase on returns.
 - Shifting commodities to trucks when a schedule needs to be met.
 - Looking at all potential alternatives. Part of the PEL Study effort is to rethink what has been done in the past but also make sure we have not missed any opportunities.

Participants were asked; considering bicycle and pedestrians, what kind of impacts do we need to keep in mind throughout the Study and in the process of developing future alternatives in downtown Vergennes and throughout the study area?

- People cycle in Vergennes because Route 7 is challenging. 22A is a safer long-distance route. Trucks make this route difficult but there are few options for long distance routes. From a regional standpoint, 22A has the potential to become a long-distance route. If the truck traffic is thru traffic, then let's try to move it to trains. What are the mechanisms to get trucks to use Route 7? Long-distance meaning commuting between communities on bicycles like e-bikes.

- It would be great for the Study to look at current and future levels of stress on the roadway using the LTS methodology on evaluating impacts to bicycles. Existing roads are not good in terms of stress along the roadway for bicycles and this should be considered for new alignments.
 - The Study team asked was the Triangle methodology the same the state uses?
 - Consultant introduced the model and ACRPC will let the team know which model was used
- Ferrisburgh and Panton have larger bicycle routes than Vergennes. Cars have to drive defensively through Vergennes, bicyclists are not stopping for signs and are riding three to four bikes wide. We need to make sure we consider the safety of motorists and help bicyclists ride safely.
- The State is making investments in recreation economic projects. E-bikes are spurring more recreation vacationing. The Vergennes route connects to some of the safest and most beautiful routes in the state with Massachusetts, New York and Canada. Area roads are not set up for cyclists and sometimes cyclists will ride a couple riders across to help cyclists stay safe. Our roadways are set up for cars and trucks and not for people who are moving outside of cars. Rail trails are making the routes safer. The biking community tries to educate people because it is difficult when people don't share the road well.

Participants were asked; What is the vehicular experience along the corridor?

- There has been an increase in traffic over 30+ years. In the past, have been able to paint cross walks and traffic lines during the day, but that isn't possible now. Regular vehicles go with the flow of the trucks. Trucks seem to be more courteous than passenger vehicles.
 - The Study team asked if there are points of congestion
 - Mornings from 7-8:30 and afternoons from 3-5:30 near the Otter Creek bridge through to Monkton Road. No different than other area towns. The problem is the steep-grade hill in the center of Town during the winter. It is not always trucks that get stuck but it is also cars and delivery trucks.
 - The Study team asked if there are intersections of concern.
 - In the past couple of years there is difficulty at the 4-way intersection of Macdonough Drive, Water Street and Main Street. It is visually

hard to see oncoming traffic on 22A from Macdonough Drive or Water Street. There is talk of a traffic light, but not a good idea because stopping traffic during the winter months cause trucks and cars to be stuck on the hill.

- The Study team asked if parking movement is an issue along 22A, mostly in downtown Vergennes?
 - Absolutely, on the southside of Main Street it is angled parking which is hard for people to back out of into oncoming traffic.
- The Study team asked if there was any consideration for back-in angle parking
 - There was discussion and there was not much support. ACRPC can provide more info.

Participants were asked if congestion impacts public transit.

- There are congestion issues for the public transportation system in Vergennes. The main stop is in front of the Opera House and there is a convergence of truck, passenger, vehicle, public transit, bicyclists, and pedestrians. It is hard for buses to be visible. The Bus shelter on Green Street is so dirty due to the air pollution from trucks and other vehicles.
 - The Study team asked if there are any other issues in the transit system from a public transit perspective?
 - More than half of the public transit riders have no other option – they need the public transit. We have stops near the Opera House, Green Street and near the John Graham Shelter. There is a need to improve public transit visibility, speed of traffic is too fast, and it is difficult for buses to pull back out into traffic.
 - The Study team asked if the buses are pulling out of the lane or trying to stop within the lane to prevent vehicles from pulling around them?
 - When we are opposite John Graham Shelter, the only place to pull over is in the travel lane because there is no space. For the more active stop at the Opera House, there is a safe pull off. The challenge is blending back into traffic.

- The Study team asked if the buses have found buses are changing/adapting their routes to avoid certain areas in Vergennes?
 - Years ago, there was a stop behind the Green near the post office. Due to increased ridership, we are using bigger buses and we can no longer fit the buses in that area. The Opera House is a great stop and easy to pull out except when people are not obeying traffic signs.
- The Study team asked if any of the alternatives are put in the place, would they lead to additional bus routes, or change bus routes?
 - There is no public transit service currently along Route 17 or 22A going into the Shoreham/Orwell area. Shoreham/Orwell is on the planning list, but there is not a large demand currently.
- If there is a by-pass would the busses use the by-pass or keep the original route?
 - Public transit does not want to change transit footprints because that is where the demand is. If the bus route is moved to a freight line, then transit would be missing the places where people need to travel.

The study team asked about pedestrian activity and the pedestrian experience in downtown Vergennes.

- The town received a grant for beacon lights at major crosswalks. These beacon lights are not helpful; traffic is not stopping for the beacon lights. Bulb outs are a big help for pedestrians to get out and be seen by the traffic, however these are not helpful in the winter. Vergennes had an incident over the past weekend where a pedestrian was hit by a vehicle and is now in the hospital. We know that walking, biking, running activities are increasing. There is pressure on the town to keep sidewalks in better condition and replace sidewalks as needed. People are excited to get out and walk, run, or bike. There are crosswalks at each major intersection but unless there is police presence, there are motorists on the phone not paying attention.
- There are challenges with connections for pedestrians in Vergennes, not specifically on Main Street. Throughout the county, in terms of complete streets, traffic calming is impactful, not just signage but perceived constriction of the roadway. Any of these perceived constrictions can help to slow motorists.
- Bulb outs are traffic calming devices. The more traffic calming devices the better. The professional truck drivers are paying more attention than the distracted drivers who

are usually in passenger vehicles. Distracted driving is a growing problem. If people perceive that they can rush through town, they will. Created congestion points force people to pay attention.

- The bulb outs in Vergennes have made it more dangerous for bicyclists because they must maneuver around the bulb outs and with traffic. There are traffic calming designs that can benefit cyclists and pedestrians but that needs to be initiated in the planning phase.

The study team asked if there is anything about truck traffic and mobility that the group has additional comments on?

- We are looking toward the future with automated trucks and that needs to be considered as part of the Study
- Electric trucks will only make traffic quieter, and automated trucks will cause an uptick in truck traffic.

The study team asked if trucks or buses have had any difficulties navigating bulb outs based on the space available?

- A bulb out was installed in front of the stop and the Town and bus company had to work together to relocate a handicap spot so that there was room for the bus to navigate the bus stop.
- Depending on the time of day, the big 18-wheeler trucks are having to drive over the bulb outs, and these trucks have taken down the pedestrian crosswalk signs. The crosswalks signs were installed in the bulb outs to make it better for pedestrians, but the trucks are driving over the bulb outs and the signs have had to be replaced

The study team asked what are the known crash locations in the area that we need to be aware of?

- Route 7 is a problem area. Traffic is up, accidents are up, and fatal accidents are up statewide. Distracted driving is a major problem.

The study team explained that there is only one crossing over Otter Creek. The next closest crossing is seven miles away in New Haven. One of the alternatives being considered

would build a new bridge over Otter Creek. How would a new bridge impact road management, emergency services or mobility?

- Not sure if a new bridge would speed up access to West Ferrisburgh. As far as emergency services, it would be beneficial if one bridge was blocked off.
- Study team should touch base with emergency responders.

The study team asked if participants had any questions or comments they want to share?

- What are the next steps in the process?
 - There is an upcoming Public Meeting scheduled for November 4. The meeting will be a hybrid meeting offering an in-person and virtual option for participants. This meeting is part of the process to develop the Purpose and Need Statement. The project schedule on the website outlines other upcoming activities such as workshops. The project will continue over a couple of years to allow for good public participation. The PEL Study is working with state and federal partners to get more buy-in.