

# Environment Focus Group Summary

<b>Subject</b>	Environment Focus Group
<b>Date and Time</b>	November 18, 2021 3:00 p.m. – 5:00 p.m.
<b>Location</b>	Zoom meeting
<b>Presenters &amp; staff</b>	Stephanie Camay, 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>	Brian Shupe, Dale Azaria, Craig Heindel Billy Coster,  Monica White, Commissioner of Department of Aging, Disabilities and Assisted Living Ingrid Pixley, Counseling Services of Addison County

## Introductions

Joe Segale, Director of Planning and Research from the Vermont Agency of Transportation (VTrans), welcomed participants and highlighted the need to consider environment and environmental concerns and emphasize that environment is a Study consideration.

Stephanie Camay, WSP discussion facilitator, thanked everyone for participating and asked participants to introduce themselves.

## Presentation

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

One participant is familiar based on previous conversations with VTrans.

One participant is on the Vergennes PEL Study Policy Committee.

Others are not familiar with the current or previous studies.

Laura gave a short presentation on the previous study and explained the work of a PEL Study. PEL Study sets the project up for the NEPA environmental review process. Previous alternatives that were considered were referenced in the presentation, but it was explained that all alternatives will be considered.

Presentation outlined Environment considerations that need to be reviewed and incorporated as part of the PEL Study. Participants were asked if there are other considerations that need to be included? Also asked participants to identify top two considerations. Participants identified the following:

- Greenhouse gas emissions
- Biological resources should be more specific. A lot can fall under this bullet, including terrestrial and aquatic wildlife.
- River crossings should also be more specific. There is a lot to consider like service waters, river corridors and habitat connectivity functions. There is a large set of impacts.
- Significant public investment in land conservation in lands to the north, south and west. This is often done with federal funds making the land protected even by possible eminent domain for transportation projects. Also, many Act 250 permits in the area that needs to be considered.
- For cultural resources separate into pre-European settlers and European settlers. There is a strong First Nation constituency in the Champlain Valley. This should be covered under NEPA.
  - The Study Team asked the group to think about Act 250 concerns that may come up through the process that may not come up during NEPA.
- Act 250 permit requirements should be used at this stage of the project
  - The Study Team noted that the Study will look at all regulatory requirements. If there is something that is not standard or normal, or might be location specific, please feel free to share with us.
- Flood plain and river corridor considerations can be looked at separately from stream alteration considerations; This is the work that happens within the river as oppose to the river structure, and associated river function and navigability.

## Discussion

**Participants were asked; What are the current perceived impacts that trucks have on the environment?**

- The Study Team noted that current noise and vibration data is being collected at the Opera House and near the Librarian Bistro in Vergennes.
- Particulate matter including soot and tail pipe emissions and the subsequent impact the emissions have on people in town.
- Noise is a factor which impacts the environment in Vergennes.

**Participants were asked; what are the regionally significant environmental resources or concerns in the study area?**

- Surface water, streams and rivers and associated flood plains and river corridors, and wetlands. Also, there is significant public investment in conservation land in the area.
- Answers depends on the resources impacted like habitat, wetlands, or farmland. A category of concern that include secondary impacts is what land-use patterns may develop as the result of a by-pass? This will depend on how access and land use is managed in the impacted towns. Will the project just move a problem and create congestion elsewhere?
- Is this envisioned as a limited access stretch of highway or a highway that provides curb cuts – or has this not been determined yet?
  - The PEL Study Team explained that there will be extensive land use planning as part of the Study. When alternatives are identified, the team will work with the public to determine what they town wants to see and give the Town(s) tools to move in that direction. The Study will be looking at secondary impacts. Also designing an alternative that supports what the Town(s) are trying to accomplish is important. The idea of an economic corridor came up at the end of the 2019 Study when they City wanted to see how they could maintain economic vitality.
- Secondary impacts are really important. One participant would like the Study to look at the areas impacted by any possible alternate route. Since the alternate route(s) will not likely be in Vergennes, these other towns need to be considered. For example, in Ferrisburgh there are wildlife corridors and concerns about farm fragmentation and farm access and infrastructure, as well as staying away from or addressing impacts on conserved lands.
  - The PEL Study Team clarifies that the Study will look at neighboring and potentially impacted towns. We are in the Purpose and Need stage and it will set

the stage for the remainder of the study. The Purpose and Need will inform all considerations including the development of criteria and possible alternatives.

- The PEL Study Team followed up to ask where are the documented areas where priorities are for the towns in terms of land corridors and wildlife corridors?
  - Recommend reviewing current town plans which should contain the high-priority places. For wildlife and endangered species recommend having a conversation with the Vermont Agency of Natural Resources.
  - The Vermont Agency of Natural Resources Fish and Wildlife Department would be willing to discuss with the PEL Study Team resources of concern in the area.
- To look at farmland preservation and conservation a participant recommended communicating with the major land conservation organizations that can identify large farms that are in the early stage of conservation. Vermont Land Trust is resource that could help. Ferrisburgh has one of the largest conserved farmlands in the state of Vermont and the Team will need to be aware of the conservation lands. A participant recommended that ACRPC should be able to assist with more information on conserved farmland.
- The Agency of Natural Resources has conserved lands on the Natural Resource Atlas which is publicly available. Vermont Land Trust may maintain a better database of the conserved parcels.
- If there is going to be a new roadway the Team needs to consider that they roadway will create a lot of impervious surface and high levels of phosphorous that main drain into the area water sources, so there should be a high-level of attention to storm water management.
- Was rail looked at as an alternative?
  - The feasibility of rail will be looked at. It was generally looked at in 2019. Rail continues to come up and VTTrans is in the process of finalizing the Freight Plan which will help reinforce the work being done as part of the project.
- The Otter Creek area ties a lot of wildlife area together. So, it will be important to pay attention to those ecological functions during the planning process.

**Participants were asked; regarding the pre-European and European cultural resources, are there particular areas where the pre-European sits that the Team should be aware of?**

- No areas immediately come to mind, but the Team will need to coordinate with the State Historic Preservation Office. The Champlain Valley was a prominent and active area prior to European settlement.

**Participants were asked; can you describe current agricultural access? Are there any current land use/disconnection issues?**

- There are very large farms in all directions around Vergennes and many of those farms use contractors for their cropping, seeding and manure spreading. These contractors are used throughout the county and operate very large trucks and tractors that use the main roads. Getting these out of downtown Vergennes will be great but the aspect of road structure related to farms, needs to be considered carefully. This includes safety and sight distance if sideroads will connect to a new main road so that is safe for motorists and farming vehicles. To use
- The PEL Study Team followed up to ask what extent those trucks are similar different in comparison to a normal 14-wheeler. Are they oversize or overweight? Is Route 22A a primary road for their travel?
  - Overweight, oversize and often don't use the standard over-width warning flashing lead vehicles or signals. They travel on Route 22A, Route 7, sideroads. They aren't going long distances, but they are using the main roadways.
- The State has invested heavily in agricultural economic conservation and it is thriving and expected to continue thriving in the future.
- Otter Creek corridor provides unique habitat connectivity features. It is a bit of an oasis in an agricultural area along the bank of the river for terrestrial, aquatic, and avian species.
- A lot of the farmland conservation has been done with NRCS-USDA dollars and with this funding, the use of eminent domain for the state is often difficult to achieve. If the easement doesn't allow for the activity and eminent domain isn't an option, it will need to be considered.

**Participants were asked; are there any current land use/disconnection issues? Including changes in land use and future or anticipated land use changes in the area.**

- A participant believes there is a state designated downtown area in Vergennes. The Team will need to make sure the transportation investments are in line with those designations.

The Study Team recently held a public meeting on November 4 at the Vergennes Opera House and virtually via Zoom. The event was well attended, with roughly 40 people in-person and over 70 attendees online. The meeting introduced the Study and Purpose and Need development. The presentation and the recording are available on the project website. There will also be a written meeting summary. In addition, the public meeting the team met with area Selectboards and Vergennes City Council.

Participant asked for summary of Selectboard and City Council meetings as well as the Public Meeting.

- Selectboard meetings were documented by the respective Selectboards and are typically available through the Town website.
- The Study Team recommended participants review the Purpose and Need Memorandum that is currently being developed. This will provide a more comprehensive look at what is been reviewed and discussed with big picture themes.
- The Project has an email list. Updates will be sent out as the project progresses. Everyone from the focus groups will be added to the email distribution list.

A participant noted that the first step in the process is developing the Purpose and Need Statement. However, this group concentrated on only one of the alternate routes option that cuts around Vergennes and its impacts. In prior study there was consideration for upgrading existing routes, which would have a different set of issues and impacts. If we talk about different alternatives, how do we identify different impacts?

- The Study Team asked the group to expand the discussion to include other alternatives.
- Participant noted that Route 17 has existing crossings that would be improved but not cut off and would have less of a splintering impact on farm operations because it's an existing route and expect less of an increase in impervious surface.
- Another participant noted that a variety of alternates were discussed and noted that all broad scope alternatives will be impacted by all the environmental

concerns we have already mentioned. We have a comprehensive list of environmental concerns; however, any alternative will have different impacts related to the environmental concerns that the Team will need to explore.

Participants noted the final image on the Thank You screen shows how trees have been logged away due to a less than thoughtful bridge design over a river. Would prefer to see trees continuing under the bridge to preserve wildlife and nature.

The Study Team asked about forestry related to the area. Are there areas that we need to be aware of the forestry activities?

- Participant recommended talking with County Forrester and Conservation Planners in the Environmental Agency. They can help identify large forest blocks to avoid or to work with designers on mitigating forest impacts.
- Participant recommended nature conservancy could help identify
- Participant provided link to BioFinder, a map portal that supports Vermont Conservation Design. This shows key forested areas statewide that the state has identified for protection.
- Participant asked that as the team works towards the alternatives the Agency of Natural Resources can help connect to scientists and others to look at specific areas and design concepts.
- Participant noted there is a consulting ecologist, Mark Lapin, who is active in the Champlain Valley. He can help identify areas that are not on the BioFinder.
- Participant noted that Alan Karnatz of Vermont Land Trust related to land conservation and easement.
- Participant noted that Tyler Miller, the Vermont Land Trust Stewardship and helps manage how conserved land is being used.