

Transportation Study Update

Stretching Transportation Dollars in Vermont: Finding New Money and Rethinking the Money We Have

The Southeast Vermont LWV Unit held a forum on Thursday, December 15, 2011, televised by BCTV and co-sponsored by the American Association of University Women Brattleboro Chapter.

Participants included: State Representative Mollie Burke; Chris Cole, Director of Policy, Planning and Intermodal Development for the Vermont Department of Transportation; and Matt Mann, Senior Planner with the Windham Regional Commission. Leaguer Janet Cramer moderated the meeting.

Cole announced that Governor Shumlin had released the new comprehensive energy plan that day. The plan calls for the State to obtain 90% of its energy from renewable sources by 2050. Transportation figures prominently in the Plan: the Plan projects that 25% of all vehicles in Vermont will run on renewables; public transit trips will increase to 8.7 million annually; and the number of park and ride spaces will triple by 2030.

Clearly all these projected shifts will have an impact on funding transportation in the future, Cole said. Transportation funding currently comes primarily from a purchase tax, a use tax and a gas tax. If the comprehensive plan is successful, the state will see a significant reduction in revenues from the gas tax and fees. Therefore the State needs to begin the planning process to identify a different revenue stream. One option under consideration is a "vehicle miles traveled" fee, a demand based system that would be collected when vehicles are inspected. Such an initiative would have to be coordinated with the federal government and other states. The State would still have to look for ways to generate money from the tourists that visit Vermont.

Current funding was reallocated by the demands of Hurricane Irene. Five million dollars was taken out of the 2012 budget to address Irene-related damage not covered by FEMA or other federal funds. Rail projects and snow plowing are covered totally by State (and local) monies. Cole stated that the State will seek more flexibility from the Federal government in how the State matches Federal transit dollars in the future. The Federal government has already condensed sixteen separate transit categories into six and that gives us more flexibility for implementing intermodal systems.

Matt Mann stated that we won't see much expansion of our existing infrastructure but that we need to look at how we can maintain the existing infrastructure in a sustainable way. One way to do this is to get heavy trucks off town highways which means raising the weight limit on interstates to 9,000 pounds, lessening maintenance costs for the State and towns. Towns will also need to make more use of zoning bylaws to encourage people to move into town, reducing wear and tear on our highways; assess existing bridges to determine if they should be maintained or rebuilt based on use; and increase vehicle miles traveled by alternative modes of travel. One option would be to widen shoulders to accommodate bicycles, etc. Other states are going in the opposite direction. For example, West Virginia is reducing the shoulder on roads and highways as a cost cutting measure.

Finally he stated that Vermont has stretched federal dollars as far as they can be stretched to provide public transit. Vermont is second only to California in public transportation from federal dollars.

Mollie Burke, who has served on the House Transportation Committee for three years, views transit as an environmental issue. She sees a sea change in the legislature this past year with increased emphasis on public transit and bikes. She was pleased that the State now has a vision to work with due to the new Comprehensive Energy Plan. Burke mentioned the UVM Transportation Research Center (TRC), which conducts and funds innovative and interdisciplinary research, education and outreach on sustainable transportation system solutions.

Panelists were asked about transportation revenues that are currently diverted into the Education Fund, the Fish and Wildlife Fund and Department of Forests, Parks and Recreation, as well as to non-VTrans state government functions. Mann questioned how the State would provide adequate funding to these other agencies if the money came back to transportation. He does think that the money is slowly getting back into the transit budget. He also stated that the Windham Regional Commission supports an increase in the gas tax but not until the transportation budget is fully funded. Burke stated that she believes the transportation budget should be made whole. Cole expressed concern that property taxes would go up if transit dollars were to be diverted from these other state agencies.

Burke also wants the State to explore using school buses for other purposes when not transporting school children. The Windham Regional Commission and Youth Services are currently collaborating on such a project. Cole stated that federal regulations prohibit the use of federal tax dollars for school buses, primarily because of the involvement of privately owned and operated school bus services. Burlington decided to use city buses several years ago and gives subsidies to children to travel to school. A number of colleges in the state pay for students to ride public transit now.

A question was raised about public/private transit partnerships in Vermont. Concern was expressed about privatization of public services. Currently railroad companies are partnering with local businesses and VTrans in developing sidings so that businesses can then ship goods in a more sustainable manner. Each partner pays one-third of the cost for the new sidings. Mann also mentioned recent legislation that allows a percentage of the fees on new motor vehicle sales be used as a revenue stream to support bonds for transportation infrastructure projects.

Cole spoke about taxing commercial motor vehicles on a national level through NAFTA and RIFTA registration fees which is shared where trucks travel. The next step would be to figure out how to charge passenger vehicles as well. He remarked that people drive less when they realize they will be taxed for doing so.

Cole does not expect that the State will receive more than it is getting now from the federal government. He stated that funding is half of the puzzle; the other half is how to use it. In the aftermath of Hurricane Irene, the State was able to build infrastructure in a short time because it didn't go through the normal process with projects completed in two months that would normally take ten years. There was a sense of urgency to get the State fully functional in time for the foliage season. Now the VTrans Innovation Council is working to systematically build into the system mechanisms to shorten the time to design and construct transit projects. For example, this fall the State decided to not build a temporary bridge in the Northeast Kingdom but rather to just build its replacement. Since the road was also closed while construction was underway the State saved \$1.2 million by speeding up the process and needing fewer traffic personnel. On the down side, people were inconvenienced.

Mann said we should look for more cost effective projects without cutting corners. He felt a lot of money could be saved in the permitting process. He also wants to see the railroads used in multimodal ways to get goods from A to B. Burke said that we need to be really careful about waiving bureaucracy and be sure to have the Agency for Natural Resources on site to monitor environmental impacts.

Other states look at us for our use of highway money for public transit, Cole said. Eight years ago Vermont invested in commuter services such as park and ride lots that allow us to commute in a more affordable fashion. Also Vermont was the first state to establish "design standards" so that we don't have to use federal standards. Mann talked about how VTrans sought public involvement by reaching out to Putney Road abutters before going into construction. By involving the public early, the State shortened the time needed for implementation and reduced costs.