

Partnering with Municipalities on Transportation Efficiency

Case Studies in Combining School Busing & Public Transit

Ludlow Municipal Transit (Frank Heald, Ludlow Town Manager)

Frank discussed how Ludlow transformed its school bus system into one available to the public. After the passage of Act 60, it appeared financially impossible to continue to provide school bus service. So Ludlow's school buses were painted (initially green over the yellow, and now "safety" green), the word "school" removed, and Ludlow Municipal Transit was born. The system, thirteen years later, is a community-oriented way to provide transportation needs.

Service

The system routes follows a hub and spoke pattern primarily based on the routes needed to get kids to school. The buses are used for school needs, such as field trips and organized sports transportation, but also provide rides to the Dean Center (a shopping center in Springfield) and other destinations. In terms of the split between school and non-school travel, other than special needs transportation, most patrons are school children. Bus service is year-round but more limited in the summer.

Combining Kids & Adults

- Preschool pick-up and take-home is available, but this is a small group of kids and an aide is available. First and second graders ride unescorted - kids take care of each other.
- There was initial concern about adults riding with kids. The Town overcame the issue of parental comfort when they realized this system was their only option. Frank invited people to visit other transit systems nearby where children and adults ride together on a daily basis.
- There are few discipline problems among kids since they know the Police Chief is the final enforcer of behavior on the bus.

Funding

The system operates entirely on local funding via a general fund line item in the budget. (The Town has a \$1.6 billion grand list – a vast majority of that is non-residential.) The overall municipal transit budget is about \$250,000 annually. Operating accounts for a little over \$200,000 per year. The school districts provide only about \$5,000 per year. The town decided that applying for Federal Transit Administration funding wasn't worth the hassle.

State education folks didn't accept the Ludlow system at first. And now, the new education law (Act 46) looks like it will require districts to provide busing, possibly jeopardizing the Ludlow model.

Ludlow still contributes municipal funding to the Current (operated by Southeast Vermont Transit).

Equipment & Staffing

The Town maintains school bus standards in terms of equipment. There are four full-size buses and two smaller ones. Three or four buses have wheelchair lifts.

In addition to having CDLs, most drivers have school bus certification. There is no additional formal training (e.g. for dealing with older adults). However, Frank said this experience is probably gained on-the-job and the drivers already have experience working with children who have disabilities. One driver is also a skilled mechanic. One driver is full-time and the rest are part-time.

Challenges & Replicability

- Would a town interested in doing this have to abandon either their school busing or public transit?
- The Ludlow system was a creature of happenstance because operating a traditional school bus system would have been crippling financially.
- School kids use public transit in some other areas, and this is common in many cities in the US and across Europe.
- Ross commented about the sweet spot of the right demographics, needs, and lack of service. He asked if other agencies or regions have asked Ludlow about this kind of service. Frank said he might have talked about it to Vermont Public Transit Association once or twice over the past 18 years. He's received phone calls about it, but this type of service remains unknown to many.

Tripper Service (Randy Schoonmaker, CEO of Southeast Vermont Transit)

(see Randy's attached presentation)

Randy Schoonmaker presented his public transit "tripper service." Tripper service is mass transit service modified to accommodate the needs of school students and personnel. Several towns used to use school buses to send secondary school students to schools in Brattleboro. Now, these towns put their kids on SEVT, saving \$100K each annually. Each district contributes \$4K annually to SEVT.

The FTA requires that school bus funding recipients use operations exclusively for the transportation of students. Buses used for tripper service must be clearly marked as open to the public. Reviewing rules and litigation, there are many cases of private operators filing lawsuits over tripper operations (e.g., if buses have the words "School Bus" on the side).

Randy was asked how declining school enrollment affects his service and whether there is pressure to pick up non-traditional students.

He said a lot of student riders prefer the comfort of regular transit buses.

Service changes are communicated by social media, but schools also relay the information.

Not all the buses have wheelchair lifts.

It's not clear yet how Act 46 will impact SEVT's tripper service. SEVT plans to continue running routes unless they become unused.

Van said Randy has a good knack for identifying special opportunities and asked if new ones are on the way. Randy said the Connecticut River Transit/The Current and MOOver consolidated operations in the past several years (forming SEVT), and former CRT routes might offer opportunities for revamping certain services.

Partnering with Community Volunteers (e.g. Energy Committees and Bike/Ped Committees) on Transportation Efficiency

Transportation Check-ins from Community Volunteers

Brattleboro Climate Protection (Paul Cameron)

- Trying to get a vanpool started
- Working with 10 businesses on Smart Commute
- eBike push – already an impressive e-cargo bike community in town
- Advocating for more passenger rail service
- Working on improving biking and pedestrian infrastructure

Cavendish Energy Committee (Mary Ormrod)

- Challenge: two villages separated by state highway
- Taking first baby steps toward a bike path to connect the two villages. Expensive.

Hartland Energy Committee (Karl Kemnitzer)

- Working on Smart Commute program, promoting Go! Vermont and other projects such as promoting bikes on Amtrak.
- Most of the issues are bigger than a town energy committee.
- Finding it difficult to implement pre-made, non-community specific programs.
- Hoping to engage in more active transportation programs - smaller scale, more locally-relevant projects.

Middlebury Energy Committee (Howard WidELITZ)

- Organizes Walk & Roll to School once a month throughout the school year.
- Saw significant increase in bikers to school - get them started young.
- Conducted a community survey. Nothing surprising – residents are looking for safer, better infrastructure and expanded bus service. Service now is limited.
- Beacon lights at cross-walks. Across Route 7 to improve bike/walk safety.

Montpelier, VT (Laura Biren)

- Big gap between volunteer committees and planning department - how to better link them together?
- Big commuter town

Richmond Trails Committee (Ian Stokes)

- Mission is transportation and recreation. Richmond is 12 mi from Burlington and 30 mi from Montpelier. LINK bus is successful.
- Park & Ride: trails committee has gotten involved with LINK bus. Accessing by foot and bicycle, working to improve opportunities for greater safety and security along Route 2.
- Cross VT Trail: there is a section of Class IV road. Re-using Class IV roads for mixed mode travel. Allowing improved action by foot, bicycle, etc.

Weybridge Energy Committee (Nadine Barnicle)

- Committee surveyed community and discovered that transportation was a priority.
- #1 concern: bike/ped infrastructure; #2--Dial-a-Ride; 3# need a park & ride.
- Committee initially went to the Go! Vermont website but found people needed a bridge between that information and behavior change.
- Committee's new grassroots model is a Human Centered Design project: designed a trip diary project for a low carbon diet where small groups in the community set goals and convene to discuss progress – mini support group!
- Weybridge School likely to try model in the fall with support from energy committee. VEEP will be involved.
- Goal is to build grassroots power so that residents identify and advocate for infrastructure and policies they need after experience low carbon trip planning.
- Model being shared among other town committees in the region.
- The county has a new Bike Ped Council.

**Working on Transportation at the local level:
Successes and Challenges**

- Some communities challenged by disconnect and lack of communication between municipal departments/staff and community volunteers.
- Others have very good working relationships between the two groups – e.g. Hanover, New Hampshire bike-ped committee works closely with town's Dept. of Public Works, focusing efforts on infrastructure that DPW is already planning work on.
- Choose the right scale to promote transportation efficiency (bike paths, EV charging stations, transit, etc.) We're all over the place as to scale.
- More and more energy committees are getting involved in transportation, however, a challenge is that still many focus on home energy efficiency.
- Become a transportation detective. A particular individual can make a big difference.

- Municipal Park & Rides: there is often confusion at the local level and goals of energy/bike-ped folks not part of planning.
- Vital Communities testing whether their business Smart Commute model can work at the municipal level.
- Interest in the Middlebury area for a regional steering committee with a representative from each region.
- Local Motion and VEEP working together around “Bike Smart for Kids” and climate change. Can other programs that work with kids (like Safe Routes to School) be engaged in this conversation?
- Is this fall’s “Way to Go!” Smart Trip Challenge a way to engage us ALL?

What do energy committees need from VTEN to work more effectively on transportation in their towns?

- TRAINING for volunteers and others for transferring lessons learned in schools to folks out in the community (like the recycling model a couple decades ago).
- SKILLS BUILDING & TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE - develop presentations and resources at the regional level to assist municipalities
- ABC’s of Transportation: What are the issues, what are good practices, what resources and funding are available? How to’s.
- Energy Committees have difficulties prioritizing. Where to start?!

Vermont Energy & Climate Action Network (VECAN):

A key to better connecting transportation professionals and community volunteers

VECAN’s mission is to start, support and strengthen town energy committees.

- Serves as an information resource and clearinghouse,
- provides direct technical assistance and education, and
- facilitate networking among communities and resource providers.

Next Steps

- Regional transportation sessions with energy/bike-ped committees, regional planning commissions, and local VTEN folks
- Provide toolkit to support local advocates via VTEN website (specifically geared toward local volunteers who need resources, want to engage their communities, and need to prioritize)
- VTEN to coordinate with VECAN on transportation basics for annual VECAN conference.
- VTEN and VECAN to support connections at a regional level.
- We’ll keep these conversations between energy and transportation folks going!