**Background**

The Town of Royalton and Vital Communities administered the first Smart Commute Royalton survey in spring 2015. The survey collected data on 98 Royalton residents’ driving habits, barriers to accessing transportation options (e.g., Stagecoach), and interest in potential new projects that would help residents drive less. The survey responses reveal low-cost, immediate promotional activities the Town could use to encourage non-drive alone travel, as well as more long-term infrastructure changes.

**Demographics**

77% of survey respondents were aged 35 and over, including 8.8% that identified as 65 or over (compared to 10.8% in the 2010 Census). 84.7% of respondents were employed, 13.3% identified as retired, and only seven individuals (7.1%) said that they are students. These statistics generally reflect the working population as found in the 2010 Census, though only one Vermont Law School student took the survey. Vital Communities, however, surveyed Vermont Law School students on several previous occasions and has data from those efforts to inform our work here.

The three most-cited areas of residence were:

1. South Royalton Village – 20 respondents
2. Back River Road/Royalton Hill/Royalton Turnpike – 19 respondents
3. Route 14 toward Bethel/Exit 3 – 11 respondents

**Current Commuting Habits**

The vast majority of survey respondents are employed, but this report will provide recommendations for student travel options as well. When asked how they completed their most recent work trip, residents said:

- 62.2% drove alone
- 19.5% dropped off kids and then drove alone
- 3.6% biked or walked
- 9.8% carpooled
- 6.1% telecommuted
- 6.1% took a bus

The most commonly cited town of employment was Royalton (30.9%). Not surprisingly, the next three were Lebanon, NH (16.5%), Hanover, NH (10.3%), and Randolph, VT (11.3%). Nearly 10% work in White River Junction. There currently exists long-distance commuter bus service on Stagecoach’s 89er route to several major destinations, including Dartmouth College, Dartmouth-Hitchcock, and the VA Hospital. However, bus travel to other areas in White River Junction and neighboring New Hampshire towns requires sometimes lengthy transfers onto Advance Transit’s fixed route system. No in-town transit service currently exists, but Stagecoach does provide service from I-89 north to the Law School.
**Recommendations**

**Short-Term Promotional Projects**

1. **Promote Go! Vermont on the Royalton community discussion list**

Go! Vermont, the Agency of Transportation’s carpool and vanpool matching service, is a free resource that nearly 70% of survey respondents do not know exists. Furthermore, 20.2% of survey respondents indicated that their preferred method of meeting carpool partners is through a website, which outnumbered monthly prize drawings and increased gas prices among other motivators.

*Sample language to promote Go! Vermont:*

Thanks to everyone in town who took our transportation survey this spring. Your answers revealed some promising new projects for our town.

For starters, many residents said that their preferred method to meet a potential carpool partner is through a website, and over 70% were not aware that one already exists! If you haven’t tried Go! Vermont ([www.connectingcommuters.org](http://www.connectingcommuters.org)), Vermont’s carpool and vanpool matching website, give it a try! You can use it for regular commuting, one-time trips, and even to coordinate ridesharing to a conference, party, or other large event. When you sign up with Go! Vermont, you’ll also be eligible for a guaranteed ride home benefit if you miss a carpool or bus ride due to an emergency.

2. **Educate residents about the guaranteed ride home program**

Fear of being stranded in the event of an emergency is consistently cited as one of the top barriers to trying a new commute. Given the general lack of familiarity with the Go! Vermont program, people are probably unfamiliar with its guaranteed ride home program. The guaranteed ride home program provides a $70 reimbursement of a rental car or carshare (e.g. ZipCar) in the event that someone cannot carpool as planned.

*Sample language to promote the guaranteed ride home program:*

One common barrier to trying to carpool is the fear of needing a car in the case of an emergency. Knowing that even the best-laid plans can change unexpectedly, Go! Vermont created Guaranteed Ride Home, a benefit for registered carpoolers who rideshare at least two days per week. If you face an unforeseen change of plans such as a work-related or family emergency that prevents you from traveling via your carpool, the program reimburses travel fees up to $70. You can use this benefit up to six times each year.

*Here’s how it works:*

1. Register your carpool at [www.connectingcommuters.org](http://www.connectingcommuters.org).
2. In the event that you cannot get home via your carpool due to an emergency, hire a taxi or rent a vehicle.


4. You will be reimbursed up to $70 within approximately two weeks of submitting your claim.

Eligible Guaranteed Ride Home requests include, but are not limited to:

- Personal or family emergency
- Sudden illness of carpool driver or yourself
- Carpool driver has an emergency
- Mechanical breakdown of carpool vehicle
- Unexpected emergency overtime

Non-eligible requests include, but are not limited to:

- Prearranged appointments or classes
- Scheduled overtime
- Personal errands

### 3. Promote Stagecoach

All but four survey respondents had heard of Stagecoach, yet 27.1% of respondents said they need more information about the service. Promoting the service could increase the total number of residents who use the system and the frequency of their use.

**Sample language to promote Stagecoach:**

Energy tip of the week: have you wanted to try Stagecoach, but don’t know the schedules or stops? Stagecoach-rides.org/89er contains an easy-to-read schedule with all the stops in the Upper Valley. Going someplace in the Upper Valley besides one of Stagecoach’s stops? Google Transit is a great way to plan trips across multiple providers. Just plug in your start and end places at transit.google.com.

**Community Events**

Vital Communities and Stagecoach will provide promotional materials to market bus services at events such as Old Home Days.

### 4. Help Stagecoach Recruit Volunteer Drivers

In addition to working with Stagecoach on bus improvements (see the section on long-term projects), Royalton could be helpful in recruiting volunteer drivers. Below is an email text to start the process.

**SUBJECT: VOLUNTEER DRIVERS NEEDED**
Many people in our community have no transportation of their own. Become a Volunteer Driver with Stagecoach Transportation Services to drive people to medical appointments, to buy food, and to access other critical services. As a Volunteer Driver, you will connect friends, support independence and promote healthy living. If you have a good driving record, clean background checks, and want to help your neighbors, we need you! Even a few hours a month is helpful.

As a Volunteer Driver for Stagecoach you’ll receive many benefits in return:

- Reimbursement at the federal mileage rate for all miles driven (non-taxable)
- Additional liability insurance coverage over and above your vehicle insurance
- Medical insurance coverage if you are accidentally injured outside of your vehicle
- Access to free driver training courses and potential vehicle insurance discounts

Most importantly, you will experience the joy of helping others!

To learn more about this opportunity please contact Stagecoach Program Manager, Kelly Wheatley, at kwheatley@stagecoach-rides.org or 802-728-3773.

5. **Examine Forming Private “School-Pools” at the South Royalton School**

Nearly one-quarter of survey respondents said that they dropped off their kids at school before driving to work. There likely exists a major opportunity to reduce vehicle miles by forming carpools among parents and students. Go! Vermont has the ability to create private, secure online carpool systems with public schools across the state. The system would give parents an easy way to schedule driving responsibilities and plan routes. Contact Ross MacDonald at the Agency of Transportation for more information: ross.macdonald@state.vt.us.

**Longer-Term Projects**

6. **Work with Stagecoach on 89er Route Improvements**

Stagecoach is currently in the process of assessing potential improvements to all commuter routes. During the summer of 2015, the company assessed the River Route, which serves communities on I-91. It expects to implement those improvements in fall 2015. Following that process, Stagecoach will examine changes that could benefit the 89er. While it is too early to tell exactly what changes will be made, early discussions have focused on two major changes:

1. Instead of running buses empty from the Upper Valley back to the northern most point of the route (Randolph), the company will pick up passengers travelling north on I-89.
2. The schedule will be adjusted to better meet the needs of VA employees and include more stops in White River Junction and Wilder.
A frequently cited improvement in the Smart Commute Royalton survey is a Stagecoach 89er Route stop in the village of South Royalton. Indeed, nearly 30% of respondents said they would consider riding the bus if it stopped closer to home.

Promoting these changes now would be premature. However, Stagecoach would benefit from having a community partner that can help solicit public participation in this effort. Stay tuned.

7. Explore an In-town Shuttle Service

Our previous work with Vermont Law School revealed a tremendous opportunity to reduce parking constraints and short vehicle trips through the implementation of an in-town shuttle service, possibly with an extension up to Tunbridge on Route 110. Stagecoach has implemented in-town shuttle services in Randolph and is in the process of building one in Bradford. The Town of Royalton, Vermont Law School, and, if applicable, the Town of Tunbridge should consider partnering to design and secure local match for this effort.

8. Bicycle and Pedestrian Safety Improvements

Like other communities in the region, Royalton was planned and developed to facilitate automobile travel. While biking or walking is safe on some roads, many of the major arteries are dangerous. Route 14 has wide shoulders in some places and no shoulders in others, and speed limits go up to 50 mph on Routes 14 and 110. Windsor Road, already frequented by many walkers and cyclists, is perhaps the safest of the major roads due to lower speed limits and lighter traffic volumes.

When asked what active transportation improvements they most wanted, survey respondents ranked separated bike paths as their top priority. At first glance, building separated bike paths on Route 110 toward Tunbridge seems feasible. The right-of-way and shoulder space on Route 14, however is quite constrained. We recommend that the Town work with Tunbridge to investigate bike lanes on Route 110 and speak with the Town of Sharon about a potential partnership to examine what is physically possible to accomplish on Route 14.

A fairly straightforward, discrete pedestrian safety project could be pursued at the intersection of Routes 14 and 110. A number of residences, primarily student housing, are located along Route 14 and behind the gas station at its intersection with Route 110. This intersection could be made much safer through the installation of short sidewalks on Route 14, a painted crosswalk across Route 14, and a flashing pedestrian signal. A local example of a flashing beacon may be found on West Wheelock St. in Hanover as one approaches Dartmouth College.

Funding Opportunities

1. Strong Communities, Better Connections Grant

The Agency of Commerce and Community Development (ACCD) and Vermont Agency of Transportation (VTrans) have partnered to offer a new grant program called Strong Communities, Better Connections. The program funds planning projects that link land use and transportation
and can lead directly to implementation. Projects should fulfill the Livability Principles adopted at the federal level by HUD, EPA, and DOT. $200,000 will likely become available in early 2016, and the state will likely fund 4-5 projects. The grant requires a 10% local or municipal match and will be funded 10% through ACCD and 80% through VTRANS.

Projects Funded in Round One:

- Multi-town Mad River Valley bicycle and pedestrian facilities plan,
- Study to examine biking and walking connections between downtown Vergennes and the Basin Harbor area,
- West Rutland/Rutland Town Smart Growth Plan.

Noting that two of the three successful projects thus far involved multiple towns, Royalton might consider doing a more in-depth study of biking and walking connections with Sharon.

2. Go! Vermont Mini-Grant

The Town of Royalton can qualify for another $500 mini-grant for promoting the Go! Vermont program, including its carpool matching service and vanpool program. Vital Communities and Town staff should record ways that this project has promoted the Go! Vermont program, including its carpool matching site, vanpool program, and other offerings. A final report to VTrans is due six months after the letter of intent, and Vital Communities is happy to write this report on the Town’s behalf.

Contact information:

Ross MacDonald, Vermont Agency of Transportation
ross.macdonald@state.vt.us
802-828-5577

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1 For more information on the federal Livability Principles, visit http://www.sustainablecommunities.gov/aboutUs.html.