

Smart Commute UpperValley

Working to Reduce Reliance on Driving Alone



Smart Commute Sharon

August 2015

Smart Commute Sharon Plan

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Report Contact:

Aaron Brown, Transportation Program Manager

Vital Communities

195 North Main Street

White River Junction, Vermont 05001

aaron@vitalcommunities.org

802-291-9100



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Background

The Town of Sharon and Vital Communities administered the first Smart Commute Sharon survey in spring 2015. The survey collected data on 82 Sharon residents' driving habits, barriers to accessing transportation options (e.g., Stagecoach), and 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

69.3% of survey respondents were aged 45 and over, including 16.9% that identified as 65 or over (compared to 18.34% in the 2010 Census). 85.2% of respondents were employed, 8.6% identified as retired, and only two individuals (2.5%) said that they are students. These statistics generally reflect the working population as found in the 2010 Census, but the percentage of older survey takers is slightly higher than the 12.4% reported in the Census. The survey did not get a representative sample of youth under the age of 19, who number 16.4% in the Census.

Current Commuting Habits

The vast majority of survey respondents are employed, and this report will focus largely on strategies that can address commuting needs. When asked how they completed their most recent work trip, residents said:

- 67.2% drove alone
- 25.9% dropped off kids and then drove alone
- 0% biked or walked
- 10.3% carpooled
- 6.9% telecommuted
- 3.5% took a bus

The residential patterns found in the survey suggest that Sharon residents are widely dispersed, with concentrations on Howe Hill/Moore Roads, Faybrook Road, Beaver Meadow Road, and Route 14. Not surprisingly, the most commonly cited workplace destinations were Lebanon, NH (19.1%), Hanover, NH (13.2%), and White River Junction, VT (10.3%). However, 10.3% of respondents also reported working in Sharon. 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.

Recommendations

Short-Term Promotional Projects

1. Promote Go! Vermont on the Sharon community discussion list.

Go! Vermont, the Agency of Transportation's carpool and vanpool matching service, is a free resource that over 70% of survey respondents do not know exists. Furthermore, 18.2% 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.
2. In the event that you cannot get home via your carpool due to an emergency, hire a taxi or rent a vehicle.

3. Mail the original receipt(s), a brief description of the situation, and two forms available at <http://www.connectingcommuters.org/guaranteed-ride-home-benefit/> to Go! Vermont/GRH, One National Life Drive, Montpelier, VT 05633-5001.
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 three 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), the Sharon Energy Committee 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](tel:802-728-3773).

5. Examine Forming Private “School-Pools” at Sharon Elementary

Over 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 and Volunteer Driver Recruitment

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.

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. Create a Bicycle-Pedestrian Priorities Plan

Like other communities in the region, Sharon 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 132 winds up a curvy hill with little or no shoulder space going toward Strafford, and Howe Hill Road is much the same on the road to Pomfret. Route 14 has wide shoulders in some places and no shoulders in others. River 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 transportation improvements they most wanted, survey respondents ranked separated bike paths as their top priority. While the Town completed a scoping study on bicycle and pedestrian improvements in 2006, nearly a decade has passed with little change. The Town should work with the public to prioritize projects found in the scoping study and access funds through the Agency of Transportation's Bicycle and Pedestrian Facilities program. As one survey respondent put it "Route 132 and River Road a part of two national bike routes (Green Mountain Loop and Northern Tier) maintained by Adventure Cycling. We should add bike lanes to these roads!"

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.¹ \$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, Sharon might consider doing a more in-depth study of biking and walking connections with Royalton.

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

2. Go! Vermont Mini-Grant

The Town of Sharon 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

Smart Commute Sharon

Work Plan for Vital Communities and Sharon Energy Committee

SUMMER/FALL 2015

Promote Existing Transportation Resources

ACTION	DETAILS	WHO IS INVOLVED??
Follow up with residents who took survey (e-mail respondents directly) Post to the community discussion list	Summary of results, and say what people can expect to see in the future, info about Stagecoach, Google Transit, and Go! Vermont.	VC, Sharon Energy Committee
Weekly transportation blasts “Getting Around Sharon” via: - Sharon Community Discussion List - Sharon Elementary School newsletter	On the following topics (one each Tuesday through September, to be repeated in October and in the Winter): September 1 – What is Go! Vermont September 8 – Go! Vermont’s emergency ride home program September 15 – Intro to the Stagecoach bus September 22 – Using Google Transit for planning bus routes September 29 – Promote Park & Ride October 6 – Call for volunteer drivers TBD – Bicycle racks on Amtrak	VC, Sharon Energy Committee
Print materials or other promotion/outreach (posters, bus schedules, etc.)	Town Hall, library, post office, school and Rec. Center, town bulletin board, downtown businesses (Sharon Trading Post)	VC
Word of mouth outreach to friends, family, networks using e-mail, Facebook, chats at the store, etc.	Tell your friends and the people you know about the transportation work you’re doing! Upper Valley residents rely on word of mouth for information about their community!	Everyone
Advertise Stagecoach at the park & ride shelter	-Display large laminated bus schedule	VC

Pursue Funding Opportunities

ACTION	DETAILS
Attend ACCD/VTrans pre-application meetings for towns.	Check VTrans planning website (vtransplanning.vermont.gov/programs/scbc) to find out information and timeline for the 2016 Grant Application specifics.

Apply for Go! Vermont \$500 mini grant	Town is eligible by promoting Go! Vermont <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Send letter of intent to Ross MacDonald at Go! Vermont - Send report on activities six months afterwards
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WINTER 2015/16 to SPRING 2016

Work with Stagecoach, Prioritize Bicycle Improvements

ACTION	DETAILS	Yes/No/Who responsible?
Recruit volunteer drivers for Stagecoach	Use listserv and other outreach channels to recruit volunteer drivers	VC, Stagecoach, Sharon Energy Committee
Work with Stagecoach to identify potential route improvements	TBD	VC, Stagecoach, Sharon Energy Committee
Plan and implement community forums to get feedback on bicycle and pedestrian safety priorities		VC, Sharon Energy Committee, Two Rivers Ottauquechee Regional Commission (?)

2016

Re-survey Sharon Residents Summer 2016

Promote Spring Way to Go! May 2016

Infrastructure Improvements, TBD