

Testimony before the House Transportation Committee

Given by Peter Johnke, Deputy Director & Public Transit Advocate, Vermont Center For Independent Living, a member organization of Transportation for Vermonters.

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Thank you for this opportunity to bring you a public transit users' perspective. I'm Peter Johnke, Deputy Director & Public Transit Advocate at the Vermont Center for Independent Living, a member organization of Transportation for Vermonters. I also serve on the Public Transit Advisory Council, the Central Vermont Transportation for All Advisory Committee and am the Chair of the Legislative and Advocacy Transportation Subcommittee for the National Council for Independent Living, a national organization representing Independent Living Centers and State Independent Living Councils across the country.

I am a carless traveler. For or those of us who are carless, either because we are unable to drive (like myself), too poor to afford a car, or are in a very conscious way reducing green house gases, the more options we have the more likely we can get where we want to go, and when. This is particularly true for those of us who live in small rural communities with no public transit services.

I live in East Calais and work in Montpelier. In the winter (through mud season), my commute usually looks like this:

I ride share with my neighbor who drops me off at the Wayside Restaurant. I have about a 15-minute wait for the City Commuter that takes me to the Montpelier Transit Center and I walk the last third of a mile to the VCIL office. The reverse of that going home. If the Micro-transit MYRide service could be expanded with more vehicles, the trip would be more efficient with less waiting.

In the summer I have the option of using my e-bike. I use my e-bike for commuting and shopping, rarely for recreation. I ride the bike from my home to the East Calais Post Office, where I catch the Route 14/15 Commuter, and use the bike rack on the bus. That takes me right into Montpelier and I get dropped off across the street from my office (very efficient). This route is rather early for me, having to leave my house at 6:40am. Pre-pandemic there was a later bus that I used regularly, but that second run was dropped, due to cost or poor performance. If I tried to commute with only one mode of transportation it would be much more difficult or impossible, Therefore, it's very important to make sure different modes of transit are interconnected.

I've figured out commuting, but doing something spontaneously, is simply not possible. It's the end of a work day, and a bunch of co-workers want to go out for a drink. I can't go, I'd have no way to get home. This is why I always say, the more options, the better. Funding must be available explore creative options. Educational programs to help people connect different modes and learn new skills. Asking someone for a ride (even just to go shopping), is a skill that is learned. For most people it's not something that comes easily. You have to be willing to ask lots of people and take "sorry, I can't help", in stride. It was very sad that the Hitching Post Vermont Program ceased operations (as of December 1, 2022). The East Calais Community Trust is reopening the East Calais store, with a café that would have been ideal as a hitching post location – and another option for transit.

Even though, Vermont spends more money per capita for rural transportation, than any other state, if we are to meet our climate goals, public transportation must be expanded, to include evening and Sunday service. I believe ridership would also increase by providing the funding to continue 'fare free' service. My fear is that overall ridership will decrease when fares are reinstated.

Micro-transit is just one public transportation option. We have learned a lot from the MyRide pilot project in Montpelier. One important lesson is that it doesn't work for everyone. With a fixed route service, no action or planning is needed. You go to the bus stop and a bus will come. For people with chronic pain and/or fatigue, variations of even 10-15 minutes, can make a trip unbearable. So, while I'm looking forward to seeing how the other micro-transit pilot projects work, there have to be other options.

With a little time and planning, I can get just about anywhere I need to go. I learned this over the past 30 years that I have been in Vermont. The Go Vermont Program has improved over the years and it's a little easier to find car pool or ride sharing options, but my experience has been that I have to ask people for rides. Years ago, I was in Seattle, WA for a transportation conference and was introduced to another person from Vermont. It turned out (at that time) they lived 10 minutes from me. We started ride sharing. So now whenever I meet someone new, I always ask, "Where do you live?"

My dream would be that people registered with Go Vermont, would have an 'Uber' like app on their phones. So that I could enter where I want to go and a driver going in the same direction could give me a ride. That would truly be "My Ride"

Thank you.