

## Transportation For Vermonters Testimony

My name is Sophia Donforth, and I'm the director of the Vermont Energy Education Program. We support teachers across the state in teaching about energy use and climate change, and we work with youth not just to understand how our energy use impacts the climate, but also on how our choices make a difference. Because young people are in school at this time of day, I'm here to share what VEEP has learned from working with students across the K-12 spectrum on transportation issues in their communities.

Here are some important take-aways that we've heard from young folks:

- (1) Alternatives to cars need to be easy, accessible, affordable and reliable, or people won't use them.
- (2) We need safe routes to school. No one is going to walk or bike if there isn't a safe way to do it, and many of us will need to make biking or walking part of our commute if we're going to share rides either by car or bus.
- (3) Electric vehicles are an important part of greener transportation in our rural state, but they aren't a solution for everyone: if you're too young to drive, or have health conditions that make it unsafe, or if EV's are still too expensive with incentives, you still deserve to get around as independently as possible. We need solutions besides EV's.
- (4) We need buses that run more often and later in the day, and that connect us to the places we need to go. Bus routes keep shutting down because of low ridership, but few people can ride the bus because it's difficult to use or limited in where it goes.

I think it's important that we cite the data from [VT Afterschool's report](#) on the State Youth Advisory Group on Universal Afterschool, which noted lack of adequate transportation as the number one barrier to youth accessing afterschool programming, citing the need for late buses and multiple runs if youth were to actually take advantage of them. These programs are critical for keeping youth safe, inspiring learning and supporting working families, and youth are self-reporting that transportation is the largest barrier to their participation.

We know young people need more transportation options because of our work. VEEP runs the Youth Climate Leadership Academy each year, which supports teams of highschoolers in completing a project to increase energy efficiency and climate resilience in their school or community. We talk about where teams can have the most impact and leverage. While participants are quick to grasp that one of the largest sources of carbon emissions is transportation, few projects wind up tackling transportation because there are so few options in many of our towns. This is an area where we could harness youth energy if we had state investment in a more robust and equitable transportation system.

Part of increasing people's use of active and public transportation is education—helping people know what is available, and helping them grow comfortable using it. VEEP is currently building a “travel training” program to help young folks become confident bus riders, but we're already running into challenges as we seek schools and transit systems where we can pilot this. With the growing shift away from fixed routes to an “on-demand” system, we're seeing equity issues

popping up left and right. A bus system that requires an app, and therefore a smartphone to sign up is not truly accessible. With the likely return of fares on public transit this summer, we need to consider whether students have access to the necessary payment technology as well. VEEP is working to train youth to be comfortable on public transit and thereby increase demand for those routes, but in many places in our state, there isn't much of a transit system to tap into. Vermont needs to invest in one, or we are locking ourselves into a car-dependent future AND leaving behind those who can't drive. This is an emissions issue, and a dignity and independence issue.

I know this one firsthand as the parent of two young children. While we've chosen to live in downtown Burlington, within biking distance of our children's schools and my husband's work, the Vermont winter still means that there are days when biking our kids to school is unsafe due to windchill or slippery and narrow roads. But despite a bus stop 2 blocks from our home, we can't rely on the bus to get us to preschool dropoff or pickup, nor to work on time, without waking up nearly an hour earlier and waiting in the cold for a prolonged period with a preschooler. As I have an alternative, I drive. But not everyone does. Missing preschool pickup isn't an option. Being late for work isn't an option. Holding down a job and parenting a small child requires reliable transportation, and we are not providing many good options for people without a personal vehicle. I'd like us to set up a system where that wasn't needed.

I will close with a reminder that what helps some of us, helps all of us. Policies that help youth increase access often also address issues experienced by seniors in our communities. Getting people to use active transportation or public transit systems is a great way to reduce our carbon emissions, improve public health and simultaneously improve independence and quality of life for many who don't or can't drive. It will also increase quality of life for those of us who have long depended on our cars. Moving towards a transportation system for Vermont that is focused on the greatest possible access for PEOPLE rather than cars will help all of us from both climate and equity perspectives. Please start thinking of transportation as a matter of climate responsibility and community equity and listen to the voices of those who don't often get a seat at the table. Kids can already tell us "if it's not easy, people won't do it". So let's make it easy!

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