

## **Two Rivers-Ottauquechee Regional Commission Transportation Priorities**

Thank you for the opportunity to provide comments to the House Committee as it begins its work on the reauthorization of the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act (IIJA).

Reauthorizing the nation's surface transportation legislation is crucially important to provide long-term funding security for our transportation system and mitigate the threat of a damaging funding rescission.

On behalf of the Two Rivers-Ottauquechee Regional Commission, we offer the following regional transportation perspective the House Committee's consideration.

### **1. Funding for Public Transit**

Public transit services in Vermont are unique and prove that public transit can work in a rural State. In the TRORC region, we are fortunate to have Advance Transit (a bi-state public transit agency with New Hampshire utilizing 5311 program funds) and Tri-Valley Transit (covers Addison, Orange and Northern Windsor and is a 5310 program provider). Living in the Upper Valley where the significant employment center in the region is Dartmouth College in Hanover, NH and Dartmouth Hitchcock Medical Center in Lebanon, NH, public transit plays an important role in both states. The IIJA provided significant funding for electric vehicle (EV) transit, primarily through the Low-No Emission Program and the Grants for Buses and Bus Facilities Program. This funding is allocated to transit agencies to help them transition to low- or zero-emission buses and purchase associated infrastructure. Both Advance Transit and Tri-Valley Transit have recently been recipients of the Federal Transit Administration's Electric Vehicle Low-No Emissions Program planning for 1-2 EV vehicles to replace existing diesel fleet buses. We request continued support for capital grants to replace aging fleet as this ties closely with operating funding stability. Current awards are continuing with FTA reassuring contracts will be honored. The next issue is working with the vendor and there are rumors of backlog of ordering fleets.

With Tri-Valley Transit being a Medicaid transportation provider, Non-Emergency Medical Transportation (NEMT) funding is critical. It is also critical to keep improving Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Service (CMS) rules that promote braiding NEMT with transit services and funding. By permitting braiding of funding, this can stretch the project dollars and maximize the impact of services.

### **2. Funding for Bridges and Culverts**

Through the IIJA in 2022, it was slated to provide Vermont with \$225,000,000.00 in the Bridge Formula Program for federal fiscal years 2022 through 2026. IIJA also established a General Fund Bridge Program that includes a provision which makes a portion of the

funding eligible for 100% federal monies for off system bridges. Off-system bridges are typically not eligible for federal funding – in Vermont, these are typically roads that are owned and maintained by municipalities. VTrans summarized in 2022 to the Vermont Legislature that under the General Fund Bridge Program, there are 34 bridge projects in 31 communities around the state that would see the town match of the construction phase of the projects reduced to 0%. This is estimated to save these communities a total of approximately \$8 million dollars in town match.

VTrans and the towns through the RPCs were anticipating the influx of funding to address bridge deficiencies in the State at a higher rate than previously. VTrans had been struggling with funding that would address only 67% of statewide asset needs. A series of unfortunate developments have derailed the anticipated IJA funding benefits:

- The world was slowly coming out of Covid.
- The beginning of the Ukraine/Russia war impacted the construction industry with inflation of construction materials and combined with post Covid impacts – the shortage of laborers. The inflation impact to bridge and roadway construction in Vermont suddenly eclipsed the anticipated IJA funding.
- In addition, the flooding impacts of 2023 and 2024 compressed the bridge construction situation with priorities focusing on flood repairs and recovery. Although FEMA funding was obligated to Vermont, towns still struggled to repair. In 2019, VTrans had revised the Town Road and Bridge Standards that incorporated the Clean Water Act – Municipal Roads General Permit Best Management Practices. This new “Codes and Standards” had promised Towns that FEMA would recognize this new version when the next disaster hit and thus assist with flood repairs to be more resilient. One key piece of Codes and Standards is that Vermont requires any culvert or bridge over 36” to review the hydraulics design to meet the State of Vermont Hydraulic Manual in order for the ANR Stream Alteration Permit to be issued. This especially is challenging when FEMA questions the justification of the new structure design whether it’s through the FEMA Public Assistance program or through the FEMA Hazard Mitigation Grant Program (HMGP). The HMGP application requires a project to meet Benefit-Cost Analysis (BCA) to justify the funding. Every bridge/culvert in Vermont may struggle to meet BCA just because the State of Vermont's Hydraulic Manual requires Hydrology & Hydraulic studies and the resulting recommended new sizing is significantly larger than the existing size. The larger size comes with a much more significant price tag that impacts BCA - however regardless of that, towns are still required to put in the new structure size in order to meet the ANR Stream Alteration Permit to be issued.

Towns are struggling to upkeep bridge maintenance and repairs – there are too many to rely on just getting selected into the VTrans Town Highway Bridge Program.

This does not even cover the gap of addressing short structures (large box culverts) that

have increased in size and costs. The current funding stream is using State funds for VTrans District Structures grants – only recently increased from \$175,000 to \$200,000 (80%/20% match). Concrete box culvert construction is averaging at least \$300,000 now.

We continue to support the efforts continuing the Bridge Formula Program and the General Fund Bridge Program. We request the funding levels must continue at the very least the current levels if not more. (See VTrans attachments from Feb. 2022).

### **3. Funding for Bike Ped Infrastructure**

Municipalities have interest in improving bicycle and pedestrian infrastructure in the region. Most towns apply for the VTrans Bike Ped/Transportation Alternatives Grant program and then embark on an arduous project development schedule. Municipalities are really unprepared for the cost of design engineering, permitting and constructing a new sidewalk. The VTrans Bike Ped/Transportation Alternatives Grant Program has consistently been oversubscribed in Vermont despite the arduous process. Vermont typically allocates approximately \$3 million in grant funding. From when municipalities apply for grant funding that includes design engineering, permitting and construction to when the project finally is authorized to be constructed, most project budgets end up in a deficit due to inflation beyond good faith planning efforts (even with a generous contingency built in). We support additional funding towards the grant opportunities to continue making Vermont communities walkable.

### **4. Municipal Capacity / Staff Turnover**

Since Covid, there has been increasing municipal staff turnover administratively and in the highway department. This has created drastic continuity situations in towns where the long time Town Clerk/Town Administrator/gatekeeper of town information and operations or long time Road Foreman no longer resides. Depending on the town, they may coordinate with TRORC and there is some awareness of ongoing transportation projects. If they are lucky and have coordinated with TRORC, we have been able to provide historical information about grant projects to new staff during their onboarding and guide them on successful implementation. It is frustrating to see Towns lose grant money on projects that have fallen through the cracks. We have done our best to dig into our archive files and assist towns however we can during staffing transitions. We see this trend continue in the next decade as the last batch of career road foreman begin their retirement. We believe TRORC can provide a valuable service to towns moving forward to continue managing projects so they don't slip through the cracks again.