



A report by the University of Vermont Transportation Research Center

# Voices of Vermonters: Vermont's Transportation Future

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# Voices of Vermonters

## Vermont's Transportation Future

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Attendees at a group interview at the Montshire Museum in Norwich, Vermont.

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## INTRODUCTION

This report summarizes findings from a series of interviews conducted with Vermonters about the state's expected and desired transportation future. The information from these interviews was used, in addition to a number of other sources, to inform the development of four scenarios about Vermont's transportation future. The interviews were conducted between January and March 2007.

Fifty-two Vermonters participated in the interviews for this report. Their comments were taped generating 186 pages of transcripts for analysis.

The goal of the research was to try and identify common themes, or narratives that guide how Vermonters think about the transportation future. The conversations were future oriented with a planning horizon of twenty-five years. The researchers attempted to explore participant's vision for the future and the role of state government in achieving that vision. Interviewees were also asked about the "drivers" influencing Vermont's transportation future. This information was then used to inform the development of four scenarios for the Vermont Agency of Transportation's Long Range Transportation Business Plan. Those four scenarios are *Base Line*, *Environmental Change*, *Energy Crunch* and *Hot Spot Growth* and are explained in a separate report (Working Paper #6) which is to be posted at [www.rsginc.com/vtplan/vermontplan/index.htm](http://www.rsginc.com/vtplan/vermontplan/index.htm).

## INTERVIEWS

The researchers conducted six group interviews and five individual interviews. The five individual interviewees were chosen as Vermonters with broad experience in transportation policy and selected in consultation with VTrans. Attendees at the six group interviews were chosen in consultation with VTrans and three regional planning commissions. Three regional focus groups were conducted in partnership with regional planning commissions in Bennington, Franklin and Windsor counties. The researchers coordinated three additional group interviews focusing on environmental and energy issues, on large business and freight transportation and on human services and passenger transportation. One researcher attended and conducted all the group and individual interviews. The list of questions and interviewees is attached.

The regional planning commissions were invaluable in the process of selecting interviewees and coordinating the group interviews, particularly transportation planners Chuck Wise, Bill Rose and Jim Sullivan. We'd also like to thank all of the Vermonters who gave up an afternoon or a morning to sit down and tell us what they think about Vermont's transportation future.

Interviews were taped and the comments transcribed generating 186 pages of data for analysis. Qualitative research techniques were used to understand and provide structure to the comments. The researchers analyzed the interviewee's comments to identify central ideas and themes which emerged inductively through the research process. Themes were

not predetermined at the outset. The researchers coded the data looking for common thought elements that could be collected into categories.

There are four appendices attached to this report which provide a list of interviewees, interview questions, code descriptions and the comments from interviewees.



**Attendees at a group interview in Montpelier.**

## FINDINGS

The following discussion describes findings from the analysis of the interviews. The analysis is based on grouping codes into larger categories. The tables include a “Codes Displayed” column which refers to the number of times a certain code is displayed in the data. Percentages refer to percents of the category under discussion.

### Transportation Modes

Public transportation was the most frequently raised and emphasized mode of transportation discussed by the Vermonters in these interviews. Interviewees saw public transportation as a critical mode when thinking about Vermont’s transportation future, raising it 40 percent of the time any transportation mode was discussed. Public transportation was followed by rail service, road infrastructure and non-motorized transportation (biking and walking).

**Table 1.** Number of times different transportation modes are mentioned.

<b>MODES</b>	<b>Codes Displayed</b>	<b>Percent Total</b>
Public transit	70	40%
Rail service	40	23%
Road infrastructure	29	17%
Non-motorized transport	27	16%
Air service	7	4%
Total	173	100%

### Vermonters on Public Transportation

*I'd like to see a public transportation system where you need to go to someplace that's not within walking distance and within 5 minutes you can be on a bus to your destination. That's my vision for public transportation.*

*There also needs to be a public transit piece and we've kind of dabbled at that and supported it sort of, but especially as we become more sensitive to gas prices and global warming, climate change issues. I think that there is the potential of building a base of people who use and depend upon public transit.*

### Rail Service

*My first response to your comment was the rail system and we keep giving the rail system up for recreational use and I think it becomes – people fall in love with it and so it's a great thing -- but we've now lost and are losing our potential for future rail traffic and that could be a savior if we ever get into public transit.*

*I think my vision touches on a number of things mentioned. I think that they should consider the railroads as part of our transportation corridors to be protected. And I think that when that can be combined with the highways, I think we should do so.*

### **Road Infrastructure**

*And, of course, I'd like to see our roads well maintained so that those times when you do need to use a car, and most of the time you're still going to have to – the roads are in good condition and safe.*

### **Non-Motorized Transportation**

*We all know about the epidemic of obesity. Global warming is now daily on the headlines, which is a wonderful thing in some respects but scary and we have to as a society, shift the attitude we have. Bicycling and walking have to become no longer fringe activities. They have to be viewed as normal, commonplace means of activities.*

### **Air Service**

*Air transportation – yeah, it's expensive, but it's still going to be important. It provides that quick and immediate personal access to a lot of businesses. So I think that airports are going to be very important for economic growth.*



**Attendees at a group interview at the Bennington town offices in Bennington.**

## **Influences on the Future**

Interviewees were asked about the major drivers that could influence Vermont's transportation future. For drivers, environmental issues were the most frequently raised, followed by technology, tourism, energy issues and Vermont's aging population.

**Table 2.** "Drivers" that could influence Vermont's transportation future.

<b>DRIVERS</b>	<b>Codes Displayed</b>	<b>Percent Total</b>
Environment	55	26%
Technology	50	24%
Tourism	39	19%
Fuel prices and Supply	32	15%
Aging Population	32	15%
<b>Total</b>	<b>208</b>	<b>100%</b>

There were three primary categories within environmental issues, including climate change impacts, land use patterns and development and other related environmental issues such as air quality and storm water pollution. The primary thought element in the technology category was telecommuting and the different types of impact this might have on Vermont's transportation future. Fuel prices and supply drivers concerned issues around the costs and availability of gasoline in the future. And, interviewees raised Vermont's aging population as a potential driver about 15 percent of the time.

### **Environment & Transportation**

*I guess I would look at it from the climate change perspective again since vehicle traffic is responsible for more than half of Vermont's current global warming conditions. It is a huge and difficult area to address I guess if we're serious about having Vermont be a leader to - in reducing our climate emissions we've got to do something about transportation in this state. And in a state like Vermont that's not an easy task.*

### **Technology**

*Well, when you talk about technology, it's obviously - people will be able to transport themselves digitally as opposed to actually going to meetings and we may be able to build on that. To decrease our need to travel in person. But it will also mean that folks can live in Vermont that may not be able to in the past, but now can commute digitally so that may actually drive us to more modes than we have in the State.*

*We have this unique rural landscape and if we can somehow make sure that broadband is everywhere it will allow us to develop our economy in a way that minimizes travel in the traditional sense. It allows us to travel electronically.*

### **Tourism**

*Well, we've got a magnificent State and a magnificent countryside and a great brand. So, people will – as long as we don't diminish the brand identity, we've got a product that people want and they will come here. And they will want to be coming here. We just need to do – to make sure that the communication system and the transportation system is keeping with the brand. Because you can ruin it. It will take strategic planning and very thoughtful planning to make sure that we expose the benefits of the State to people, but we don't break the brand.*

### **Fuel prices and supply**

*I think we're going to be using a lot less oil – energy in particular in the coming decade or two either because of voluntary measures we take on to drastically reduce our emissions of global warming gasses or because the geology just doesn't allow the world to pump as much when it gets expensive. So I think any transportation plan needs to be set up around the very distinct possibility of a great drop in the use of oil in transportation.*

### **Aging**

*You're going to have a lot of people who are going to be unable to drive in a pretty short time span. And if you're going to continue to have a policy of aging in place then you're going to have to begin to address those needs. But one of the other things is it's not just that people who are unable to drive and are needy because they need medical care, this is also a generation who is expected to be relatively active as well – and they want to go out and they want to socialize and they don't want to be isolated and one of the ways that people can avoid isolation is to have transportation.*



**Attendees at group interview on business related transportation issues.**

## NARRATIVES

In this analysis, we identify the core narratives, or frames that characterize the data. A frame is a central organizing idea for making sense of relevant events (Gamson, 1989, 1992). Frames are not the “objective structure” of the material, but one way to view, discover and to look at how the world is being interpreted. A frame has three essential elements; a central organizing idea that makes sense of relevant events, a range of policy positions, and condensing symbols or metaphors. The individual codes are made up of thought elements. Frames are a number of codes combined together, bound with a common narrative or story.

In the following analysis, some identified frames are discussed. The frames are described with a short narrative and the codes that combine together to form them.

### Fix it First

The *fix it first* frame suggests maintaining the existing systems before building anything new. Vermonters displaying this frame believe that the existing road system works well but needs continued investment. It is cheaper to invest in preventative maintenance than after something breaks down. They further believe the future will look a lot like today with Vermonters continuing to be dependent on their cars. Transportation policy should invest in what we have and make sure it works well. Fixing what we have is the most prudent, sensible approach.

Vermonters articulating the *fix it first* frame suggest that cars will continue to be the primary way people get around in Vermont. With its emphasis on maintenance first, this frame registers with environmentalists concerned about new roads, downtown boosters and those concerned about sprawl by minimizing new transportation infrastructure that enables dispersed settlement patterns. In addition, the emphasis on maintenance first resonates with Vermont values of conservation and preservation. This frame has a status quo orientation, suggesting that the future will look a lot like today.

**Table 3.** Codes that are grouped together into the *fix it first* frame.

<b>Fix it First</b>	<b>Codes Displayed</b>
Cars and Trucks -- Vermont very dependent	36
Fix it first	73
Important - Environment - General	16
Important - Road infrastructure	22
Important - Transportation General	15
Important - Police and safety issues	10
Total	172

This frame suggests a policy approach, i.e. investing in the existing system before making new investments. Because the phrase *fix it first* is used today in the policy debate, this frame was fairly easy to identify. In fact the term “fix it first” or something very similar appeared 73 times in the interviews.

The display of this frame is consistent with the 2006 public opinion survey conducted by VTrans which found that the top two items survey respondents wanted more money spent on were “bridge repairs and replacement” and “summer highway road repair and repaving.” Forty-four percent of respondents suggested that the state should concentrate on “maintaining existing roadways rather than building new ones” (2006 Survey, ES-1, 2 [www.aot.state.vt.us/Documents/VL RTPReport.pdf](http://www.aot.state.vt.us/Documents/VL RTPReport.pdf)).

In a series of public meetings in 1998, maintenance first and increased investment in public transportation were the top two issues raised by attendees (1998 Transportation Public Forums Final Report).



Attendees at a group interview at the Agency of Transportation in Montpelier.

### **Fix it First**

*This notion about fixing it first is really important and it in fact is in the Vermont tradition. We don't normally throw things away that are still useful. And what in effect we've done over the last many years with our transportation system is ignored – we've been bad stewards. We've just haven't taken care of what we have. We've been so focused on these big, huge – sexier projects.*

*There's just such a crying need for making sure that this old infrastructure that we have in a small State like Vermont is really maintained.*

*We should use as efficiently as possible our existing infrastructure and not build out new roads to areas that are sprawling, not have to build new infrastructure to serve new areas and focus more on maintaining and improving that infrastructure that already exists.*

*The car is still going to be the primary mode of transportation in a rural area like Vermont.*

### **Energy Collapse**

The *energy collapse* frame suggests that factors outside of Vermont and outside of our control will have a major impact on the state's transportation future. Interviewees displaying this frame believe that the world is getting warmer and CO2 from vehicle emissions is a major contributor. Those articulating the *energy collapse* frame believe that the nation and Vermont will have to reduce our car-caused CO2 emissions. Furthermore, oil reserves have peaked or are close to peaking and our future includes a world without cheap oil.

Interviewees articulating *energy collapse* believe there is an opportunity to change if the state and nation can change direction on transportation investments and policy. While automobiles will still exist they will run largely on different fuels than gasoline. In the *energy collapse* frame, land use planning is crucial to limit sprawl. Policies need to promote alternatives to the car. This frame also includes the two environmental categories related to climate change and sprawl.

**Table 4.** Codes that are grouped together into the *energy collapse* frame.

<b>Energy Collapse</b>	<b>Codes Displayed</b>
Important - Environment - Climate change	23
Important - Environment - Sprawl	16
Important - Fuel prices and Supply	32
Opportunity - Time for change	72
Cars - Alt fueled vehicles	29
Cars - Promote alternatives	21
<b>Total</b>	<b>193</b>

### **Energy Collapse**

*The almost entire reliance on single-occupancy vehicles in time of peak oil and climate change is going to be critical for us and it's having VTrans get behind these*

*alternative modes of transportation because that's not going to be 20 years from now a realistic way of commuting or traveling and that, tossed together with land use patterns and affordability of homes. And so I think that's going to be the crunching issue because we're not going to be able to do that 20 years from now. The price of gas – whatever it's going to be – is not going to allow it.*

*I believe that we sell our fuels too cheaply because that is why we still have people using cars rather than public transportation.*

*I think any transportation plan needs to be set up around the very distinct possibility of a great drop in the use of oil in transportation.*

*I think getting in a car and driving somewhere is convenient and easy because that's where we have chosen to spend our money in the past making sure there are the roads that make it convenient and easy to get in a car and drive somewhere. If it were convenient and easy to get on a bus to go pick up my kid after school I would do that. If it were convenient and easy to get on a bike path and bike across town to go to my meeting, I would do that.*

*We're going to have to do things differently and start investing now in those long-term pieces of a transportation system that needs to be in place because we need to be ready in 25 years for the changes.*

## OPPORTUNITIES AND OBSTACLES

Vermonters identified a number of opportunities and obstacles to achieving their desired transportation future.

### Opportunities

The codes discussed in this category were positive and optimistic about Vermont's transportation future. The most prominently displayed *opportunity* identified was the concept that there is an opportunity for change now because of fuel prices, climate change and budget issues among other reasons. Vermonters also expressed optimism that the states small size, particular "Vermont" characteristics, combined with a good education and communications efforts could lead to developing a transportation future that they agreed with. Interviewees also stated that giving people options to the automobile would increase the use of those options. The following table identifies possible *opportunities* identified by Vermonters available to achieve a desirable transportation future

**Table 5.** Possible *opportunities* identified by Vermonters.

<b>OPPORTUNITY</b>	<b>Codes Displayed</b>	<b>Percent Total</b>
Time for change	72	51%
Vermont Characteristics	36	26%
Education and communications	20	14%
Give people options	12	9%
TOTAL	140	100%

#### Time for Change

*The other thing I would say is we have an opportunity to make things happen and it's so hard I think that in a political process – it's so easy to say no because you're so concerned that it might not be the right solution and it's so hard sometimes to say no. But there is always the opportunity to just make things happen – you know, to just leap forward and do it. And sometimes you make that wrong decision, but it's that – transportation is going to have to – you know, in the future make a lot of things happen.*

*There's no service the government provides that's perfect. But we can make targeted investments and we can recognize that in the State of Vermont the Emperor has no clothes. We don't have funding necessary to sustain our current system. And as soon as somebody recognizes that and publicly will state that then we can start building a plan that is actually achievable.*

### Give people options

*The way that transportation industry designs its projects will have a big impact on whether or not people choose to use different modes of transportation like a bicycle or just walk on the sidewalks. If you don't provide that option because the design is not conducive to that, then you lose that opportunity for folks to make that choice – to save energy, to save...to make an effort, to have less of an impact on the environment.*

*I would like to see a transportation system that not just focuses on roads and bridges but focuses on opportunities for making alternative modes and I think it's really important for instance to recognize that public transit really depends on having walkable communities as well.*

### Vermont Characteristics

*I think the big opportunity is that there has been some significant revitalization in downtown and there has been a 15-year strategy to try to re-invest in those centers of activity and that that's starting to pay off with a critical mass of folks locating down near employers, people who have...folks who have point to point commuters that have...and I think because of that, we have a chance to try again to integrate some of these modes of transportation.*

### **Obstacles**

Interviewee comments displaying an *obstacle* frames were less optimistic about Vermont's ability to achieve a desired transportation future. Comments displaying an *obstacle* frame were pessimistic and sometimes negative. Interviewees frequently expressed concern that the state's size, the way decisions are made and federal and state funding mechanisms and laws would continue to present major *obstacles*. The table below indicates possible *obstacles* identified by interviewees that could make it difficult to achieve a desirable transportation future.

**Table 6.** Possible *obstacles* identified by Vermonters.

<b>OBSTACLES</b>	<b>Codes Displayed</b>	<b>Percent Total</b>
Decision-making process	89	52%
Federal and state funding and laws	66	39%
Small Rural state	15	9%
TOTAL	170	100%

## **Decision-Making Process**

*I think the political process is perhaps the biggest obstacle in the sense that's it's already been talked about. You know the varying views of what Vermont is, what Vermont should be, what Vermont will be, the attitude towards business or against business, keeping it as it is as opposed to how are we going to grow and support ourselves. I think we've got to create some consensus about the vision of Vermont overall – not just in the transportation area, but as to do we want to create as a State here because we clearly bump into all these other roadblocks and then take forever to get something done.*

*We're not spending enough. Yet no one has the political will to actually put forth revenue increases, taxes – to actually put the money in the system that it needs.*

*The real need in Vermont with a statewide 25-year business transportation plan is leadership. I mean that's the real critical element that is missing from Vermont transportation, politically as well as policy – is leadership, either within the Executive Branch or the Legislative Branch.*

*The role of making decisions about future of transportation in our regions has resulted in pretty much a plan for the status quo... there's something wrong with the way we're making decisions.*

## **Federal and state funding and laws**

*There's not enough flexibility with the Federal funds that come in to use them for public transportation operating and we cannot build public transportation as a viable alternative to this single occupancy vehicle unless we change the method for how we pay for the local share. The local share under Federal regulations means non-Federal dollars and trying to build the system on the property tax in Vermont is not going to be achievable.*

## **Vermont Characteristics**

*I think transportation policy in the recent past has largely been reactive and unconnected to other concerns or issues and maybe what we need to do in Vermont is set some over-riding kind of goals for the State of Vermont that are related to health and healthcare and cost of healthcare and building communities and whatever we decide they are and then use transportation policy as one way to proactively drive things where we want them to lead.*

## CONCLUSION

This report summarizes findings from a series of interviews conducted with Vermonters about the state's expected and desired transportation future. The information from these interviews was used, in addition to a number of other sources, to inform the development of four scenarios about Vermont's transportation future. Those four scenarios are ***Base Line, Environmental Change, Energy Crunch*** and ***Hot Spot Growth*** and are explained in detail in Working Paper #6 prepared by Resource Systems Group for the Vermont Agency of Transportation's Long Range Transportation Business Plan.

This work was conducted on behalf of the VTrans LRTBP and in collaboration with the University Transportation Center at the University of Vermont and the Snelling Center for Government.

Findings indicate that Vermonters interviewed believe public transportation is a critical transportation mode to emphasize as the state develops its long range transportation plan. One narrative that emerged from Vermonters' views of the state's transportation future emphasized a transportation policy incorporating a ***fix it first*** approach. A second narrative that emerged, ***energy collapse***, sees energy and climate change issues as having a major impact on Vermont's transportation future.



**Attendees at St. Albans group interview at the St. Albans RPC offices.**

Vermonters interviewed saw environmental issues, technology, tourism, fuel prices and supply and the state's aging population as having major influences on the state's transportation future.

**APPENDICES**

**APPENDIX A: INTERVIEWEES**

**APPENDIX B: INTERVIEW QUESTIONS**

**APPENDIX C: CODE DESCRIPTIONS**

**APPENDIX D: ALL COMMENTS BY CODE**