



**APPROVED MINUTES**  
**WRC Transportation Committee**  
**December 9<sup>th</sup>, 2024**  
**4:00 p.m.**

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*Members Present:* Stephan Chait, Chair, Nick Morgan, James Bressor, Rick Cowan, Erik Moses

*Absent:* Georgianne Mora, Andy Coyne

*Staff present:* Colin Bratton

*Guests:* Abe Koffman (VTrans), Rep. Mollie Burke

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Meeting convened at 4:02 p.m.

**Changes to Agenda:** The order of the agenda will be changed to allow for the Rail Plan Discussion prior to the covered bridge maintenance agenda item.

**Minutes:** Approval of minutes from 9/21 and 10/23. Motion by Commissioner Morgan, 2nd from Commissioner Cowan. Minutes approved unanimously.

**Review of Class 4 Town Highway and Legal Town Trails Policies in draft Windham Regional Plan:**

The management of Class 4 Town Highways and Legal Town Trails is an ongoing issue in many towns across Vermont. Municipalities are not responsible for the maintenance or upgrading of Class 4 Town Highways and Legal Trails, consistent with state statute 19 V.S.A. § 302, however towns receive regular requests for maintenance on Class 4 town highways and Legal Town Trails from landowners. Many towns lack clear municipal policy on the issue and this has been a source of conflict in some instances.

With this in mind, the committee reviewed an updated version of policies #30 & #31 from the transportation section of the draft Windham Regional Plan. Concerns had been raised previously that there was some ambiguity in the wording of the existing document and that the policy needed to be updated to state more clearly that it is the position of the Windham Regional Commission, consistent with state law, that towns are not responsible for the maintenance or upgrade of Class 4 Town Highways and Legal Town Trails, and furthermore that the Regional Commission supports efforts to limit further development on unmaintained right of ways in order to preserve their use for outdoor recreation and avoid fragmentation of the region's remaining large forest blocks.

The Committee reviewed the updated versions of policies #30 & #31. The committee generally approved of the updated version, however commissioners will be given further time to review the policy and suggest any further edits or additions before the December 20th deadline.

**Vermont Rail Plan Update:** The Committee discussed the ongoing update to the Vermont Rail Plan. Last updated in 2021, the Vermont Agency of Transportation is in the beginning stages of revising the existing rail plan. This document outlines statewide goals and priorities for passenger rail in Vermont and will be used to inform future funding decisions.

There are several ongoing passenger rail initiatives relevant to the Windham Region and Southeastern Vermont. In particular, expanded service on the Amtrak Vermonter Line that currently serves the Connecticut River Valley. Currently, the Vermonter makes one stop each way in both Brattleboro and Bellows Falls, continuing north to White River Junction, Montpelier and eventually Essex Junction, with southbound service through Western Massachusetts, Connecticut and ultimately New York City. The limit of one daily round trips limits the utility of the Vermonter rail line as a regional transportation resource. Data shows that most rail travelers to and from Brattleboro are originating or travelling to larger, more distant metropolitan areas served by the line, the Brattleboro-NYC connection one of the busiest stops on the entire route. However, relatively few passengers are utilizing the service to travel between Brattleboro and Bellows Falls, or other important regional centers such as Greenfield, MA, Claremont, NH and White River Junction. It is the position of the Windham Regional Commission to support further expansion of passenger rail service in the Connecticut River Valley in order to promote regional mobility and sustainable transportation options.

VTrans was awarded funding in 2023 from the Federal Rail Administration to explore the feasibility of expanded service on the Vermonter, as well as feasibility of a connection to Bennington County for the Ethan Allen service, as well as the long-standing Burlington-Montreal international train. This is in addition to the recent expansion of the 'Valley Flyer' service in Western Massachusetts. Originally a pilot program that has now been made permanent, this service adds two daily round trips between Greenfield and Northampton, Massachusetts, bringing the total daily round trips in Western Massachusetts to three.

Expanded daily service in the Vermonter corridor was ranked below other statewide rail initiatives in priority in the 2021 version of the Vermont Rail Plan. This has potential consequences for future decisions about funding and it is important that expanded service on the Vermonter line be given adequate consideration by VTrans in this edition of the Rail Plan. The Committee resolved to consider next steps and a formal letter of support to VTrans at a future meeting, once we have received a clearer time line and draft list of rail initiatives from the State.

**Covered Bridge Maintenance:** The Committee ongoing challenges with repetitive damages to covered bridges. This is a statewide issue that has received some significant attention in the media. Although towns have adopted weight and height limits for covered bridges and clearly signed those policies in the approach to the bridge, repetitive damages to these culturally and historically important structures remains an ongoing problem for Windham Region towns and the cost of repeated repairs has negatively impacted some town highway budgets. The Green River covered bridge in Guilford, the Williamsville Covered bridge in Newfane and the West Dummerston covered bridge are some examples of covered bridges that have been damaged by drivers ignoring posted height, weight, and/or speed limits.

The Agency of Transportation currently has no official recommendations on strategies to reduce damages to covered bridge structures beyond the existing restrictions. An informal conversation between WRC staff and Vermont Local Roads did note that some towns across the state have installed security cameras to help identify offenders, physical height markers on the covered bridge approach, similar to what is sometimes seen before railroad bridges, or have focused police coverage specifically

on covered bridges. There are concerns about the feasibility of replicating this, particularly concerned with limited police coverage in rural communities and maintain the historic character of these culturally important structures. Additionally, GPS routing in rural areas remains a challenge. Many violations for height and weight limits are due to improper GPS routing, in addition to ongoing challenges with drivers getting stuck on impassable, unmaintained roads and increased traffic volumes on unpaved Class 3 town highways leading to increased local road maintenance expenses.

Violations on covered bridges are currently covered by the same violations and penalties outlined in Vermont Title 23 Chapter 13. However, it was noted that the Vermont Legislature passed an enabling statute, specifically for the town of Lyndon, Title 24 V.S.A. ch. 126, § 14, which allowed the town of Lyndon to levy fines of up to \$10,000 for negligent damage to municipal covered bridges. There is some hope that this could be expanded to include all municipalities across Vermont. The committee will revisit this topic at a future meeting.

**Update to Agency of Transportation Roadway Design and Multimodal Guidance:** The Vermont Agency of Transportation is in the process of updating its Roadway Design and Multimodal Guidance specifications. This is the first such update since 1997 and will impact standards highway treatments on state highways, in particular in context sensitive locations such as designated downtowns and villages. Furthermore, this will potentially update state rules and regulations related to allowable treatments on town highways, consistent with the recently updated version of the Manual Uniform of Traffic Control Devices (MUTCD). This includes but is not limited to: changes to standard signage, striping, road treatments, traffic calming measures as well as bicycle and pedestrian infrastructure.

The Agency is in the beginning stages of an update process expected to continue into 2025. A draft summary of changes is expected to be released sometime late winter to early spring of this coming year. There are number of ongoing local concerns related to state highways, in particular weight limits, oversize vehicles, speeding, and lack of bicycle and pedestrian infrastructure, in particular in village centers. Additionally, Agency of Transportation requirements for reclassification of state highways as Class 1 town highways and the municipal assumption of maintenance responsibility when towns seek to construct basic traffic calming or bicycle and/or pedestrian infrastructure remains an ongoing concern.

The committee will revisit this issue pending more information from the Agency of Transportation in early 2025 and will consider a formal memo to VTrans outlining local concerns and recommendations on the management of state highways in Vermont.

**Next Meeting Scheduled:** 4:00pm January 13<sup>th</sup>, 2025.

Meeting adjourned approximately 5:25 p.m.

*Respectfully submitted, Colin Bratton, Staff*