

Public hearings last autumn were conducted in Chester (11/9), Island Pond (11/10), Brandon (11/15), Randolph (11/16), South Burlington (11/18), East Dorset (12/1) and ST Albans (12/9). Most sessions were lively, focused on recurring issues and new ones. Adherents for safer bicycling conditions were out in force at hearings when they discovered where they were scheduled. Their interest is systemic: improved highway safety and access for pedestrians, bicyclists and automobile operators. The concept is consonant with the Complete Streets Initiative that kicked off several years ago in Falls Church, Va., part of the Washington, D.C. metropolitan area. Complete Streets advocates were numerous and energetic. Advocates for better riding conditions and facilities sent more than a hundred emails to the board. A number of people at hearings questioned whether that approach is adaptable to or affordable in Vermont.

Chester

In southeastern Vermont, there seemed to be a tie for top issue. Local officials, while expressing anxiety about the simultaneous closing and reconstruction of two village bridges here, also praised efforts by the Agency of Transportation to cushion the impact as much as possible. The economic challenge, they said, was to figure how to get people into the village. Hearing officer/board member Robin Stern of Brattleboro noted the absence of discontent, which is not always the case for communities in such straits. Then, several Windham County regional commissioners and planners praised cooperation in Brattleboro aimed at easing the transition of bicycles on busy Route 5 from road shoulders to the 'middle' lane between same-direction traffic. The left lane goes straight and the right lane straight or right, with the bike lane in between.

Brandon

People at this west-central Vermont hearing, run by now retired board chairman John T. Booth of Essex Junction, expressed pretty hard-hitting concerns. Stu Johnson, a Cornwall road commissioner, was critical of state maintenance and construction choices. The scope of projects is an economic problem, he said. With all of the work that needs doing, the state can't afford the expensive fixes. He said Route 7 projects in Brandon were overdesigned and too costly. He said road commissioner colleagues also agreed that Chittenden County should be a stand-alone maintenance district. The northern county has problems that dwarf most of those in less urban areas, he said. District 5 resources should go there. Problems in Addison County can't compete, despite district efforts to be even-handed. The only way his colleagues think their problems will get real attention is to have access to money for road/bridge repair that is separate from those to the north. That distribution also makes them question project scale. He said every area has to conquer inefficiency, but somehow, some road work still gets done. A Brandon resident said a double-arched stone bridge in the village requires immediate attention. Instead, it was bundled with Segment 6 of the Route 7 upgrade which, he said, won't start until 2012.

Randolph

With board member Wesley J. Hrydziewsko of Windsor as hearing officer, this session drew a lively audience. The hearing drew a number of bicycle adherents, and followed the pattern displayed in Chester. Concise, clear comments focused on benefits of exercise and clean air on one hand, and preparing on the other for mobility change as petroleum extraction gets ever more expensive. Foremost on the minds of Tuthill Doane and other Braintree emergency responders and residents was a crossing over the New England Central Railroad track leading to and from Route 12-A. It is the only entrance and exit for residents of a 95-unit Vermont Housing Authority holding. A third of the town's population lives there, officials said, and a 140-site commercial campground sits behind the housing, next to the Third Branch of the White River. People worried that a train/auto collision could block the drive and perhaps strand residents behind a barrier created by a derailed train – a perilous thought in regard to fire or flood. A month later, Wes went to the site to meet the responders and area legislators. Tut wondered whether the Agency of Transportation might be able to raise the track bed enough to allow vehicles and pedestrians to pass underneath. We're not engineers, several people said. The group decided to bring the issue to the Legislature.

Island Pond (Brighton)

With board member Arthur Sanborn of Kirby as hearing officer, discussion focused on maintenance of town culverts, streets and bridges. Many are weight-limited because of condition, said Brighton Selectman and Road Commissioner Gerry Goupee. Money for repair is at a premium. When a structure or street is damaged to the point that weight-carrying capacity is reduced or it needs to be closed, he said, drivers will find another way to get where they want to go. That can push traffic onto other streets and bridges with problems that are not as severe. The rate of deterioration on these facilities accelerates. The result is that more pressure is put on remaining alternatives or that people lose access to certain areas. In this scenario, one transportation advisor said, things always get worse. Another participant suggested that other areas of the country spend more state money on local projects, rather than use federal funds that might require more construction than residents believed is warranted. The catch there, he said, is that a town has to find the money somewhere.

South Burlington

With board member and now Chairman Moe Germain of Colchester as hearing officer, there was a lot going on. Bicycles and public transportation weaknesses were hot topics. People were quick to tie environmental issues to automobiles, saying that a bicycle-centric community can only improve air quality. The largest 2010 turnout included people vocal about road maintenance in the greater Burlington area, and public transportation (often late, not enough frequency or community reach). An area woman who said she no longer drives decided to call the board office. She said she still desires to travel but Vermont doesn't make it easy. Bring Amtrak up the old Rutland Railroad track along the western border, she suggested, then build the connection to Albany through Bennington. If that can't happen in time to ease her mobility challenges, she

requested that pressure be put on commercial bus lines operating in Vermont to expand networks to include more bus/train connections. A sizable group did the equivalent of a round-table focus on benefits, including better health, that result from integration of bicycle touring, bed & breakfast outlets, restaurants and public transportation. Many areas of Vermont are working on similar models, based on the state's scenic byways program. A lot of food for thought, one attendee noted when the meeting ended.

East Dorset

Here, perhaps the best approach to sharing the road was outlined. On the chill night of December 1, featuring a mid-mighty wind and torrential rain, four Bennington County stalwarts managed to reach the town office on a side street east of Route 7. They offered that improving safety, mobility and access for pedestrians, bicyclers and operators of automobiles requires a concerted, combined effort. Standard shoulders on main roads, regular road striping, education for all users on road rules and etiquette, these folks stressed, need to be part of the package. Standards of behavior, construction and maintenance all matter, they said. Happy to have achieved their objective, they returned to the wet, dark night. By the way, on the other side of Route 7 from the town office is a place where mighty fine pizza can be had for a decent price.

ST Albans

Vice Chairwoman Joan Hungerford, whose board term ended with the December hearing, ran the meeting in ST Albans on an evening when drivers were wrestling with a steady snowfall. Several people discussed an issue familiar to Franklin County residents. Route 78 is one of the few east/west links in northern Vermont. The portion from Swanton to the fairly new Missisquoi Bay bridge road endures frequent crashes. Shoulder sections often are under water. The truck route frequently is jammed with vehicles. Residents suggested that the state could put up portable message boards or color-coded signs, to notify travelers on both ends of snarls. Another water issue: a county resident made a plea for a common format for project applications likely to have an impact on public water. Then conversation veered toward other issues: stepping up the pace for installation of automobile charging stations, construction of more bicycle facilities in a region where, in 2006, Route 2 through the islands was designated by the Transportation Board as a Vermont scenic byway. Grand Isle County welcomes bicycle-riding tourists. They eat in roadside restaurants and stay in local motels, campgrounds or bed and breakfast inns.

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