Statutory Authorization: 24 V.S.A., §4414(4); 24 V.S.A., Chapter 126
Type: NONREGULATORY AND REGULATORY
Related Topic Areas: Bicycle & Pedestrian Facilities, Land Use & Development Regulations; Parking; Rail & Airports; Transportation Demand Management

Public Transportation (Transit) 23

Overview

Because of Vermont's rural nature and dispersed settlement pattern, the provision and use of public transportation has been and always will be challenging. However, we can capitalize on Vermont's traditional village and town centers, as well as efforts to concentrate density in growth centers, to further the success of transit. Municipalities can support such initiatives by making targeted investments in infrastructure that supports transit and walkable communities and adopt local regulations that require new development design to do the same.

Public transportation in Vermont consists of a variety of services, including fixed routes within larger communities and between them, as well as demand responsive service, subscription service, vanpools, and rideshare/ridematch. These serve both commuters and people who have no other alternative to meet their mobility needs. There are currently fourteen local/regional transit providers in the state, plus multiple public transportation programs such as human service agencies, Medicaid/Reach Up, Job Access/Reverse Commute, and other general public services that provide transportation for their clients. School bus service can also be considered transit—the most common form of transit we have in Vermont. In addition, there is intercity and interstate bus service (Vermont Transit) and train service (Amtrak).

In general there are three elements—aside from planning and providing transit services—that affect the use of public transportation: land use patterns, parking, and the transit infrastructure. The first two are largely under the control of local officials, and municipalities can also play a role in the third.

While the private automobile continues to be the transportation of choice for most Americans, rising costs and an aging population have many people looking for alternatives. The traditional downtown bus or train station allows many people to walk from their homes or businesses and is an important center of activity in a community's network of public spaces.

Public Transportation (Transit) Definition

Passenger transportation services, usually local in scope, that are available to any person who pays a prescribed fare. It usually operates on established schedules along designated routes with specific stops and is designed to move a relatively large number of people. Transit vehicles include light, heavy, and commuter rail, bus, trolley, and automated guideway, but in this paper, bus is considered the common mode. Transit can also have flex-routes and be demand responsive. While vanpools can be considered a form of transit, these are discussed in the topic paper, Transportation Demand Management.

Land Use

Where bus or other commuter lines exist or are planned, municipalities can adopt provisions in local land use regulations to encourage ridership and adopt design standards to encourage transit-friendly development. And they can use development impact fees to help finance municipal transit infrastructure.

When creating land use districts in a zoning bylaw or planning public facilities to attract new development (such as sewer and water systems), consideration should be given to

creating development in patterns and locations (such as along major transit routes) where people can be close to bus stops and transit centers. This will maximize transportation choices for those living and working in the new development areas. This is especially important for the more public-transit-dependent population, such as the elderly and low-income and disabled persons.

Regulations for development review, such as site plan and design review, need to differentiate between transit stops and transit centers. The former generate little automobile traffic and parking demand, but they do attract pedestrian use, while the latter generate traffic and parking demand independent of the adjacent land uses.

Any development review provisions including design guidelines should encourage, where possible, what is known as the *ABCs of public transportation*: active, walkable streets, building density and location, and careful integration of transit. The challenge is to identify those elements that would be feasible and successful from a market perspective. Regulations can then support these elements and facilitate their implementation. Some communities establish transit overlay zones, where higher densities are encouraged within one-quarter to one-half mile from transit stops.

A. Active, walkable streets and transit are best supported by a mix of land uses. Regulations should specify clearly that permitted uses may be mixed on single properties and buildings. Employees will use transit more if the following uses are located near their jobs: banking services, child-care facilities, retail stores, eating establishments, recreational opportunities, and personal services (such as dry cleaners, beauty parlors, bookstores, and health clubs). Land uses that are known to support transit use in residential areas include neighborhood grocery stores, eating establishments, drugstores, banking services, and personal services. Uses that do not generate pedestrian activity should be discouraged in ground-floor locations. (See topic paper, Bicycle & Pedestrian Facilities, for more information.)

B. Building location, configuration, and density, as well as site access and circulation (both vehicular and pedestrian), can be addressed through design standards in site plan, subdivision, or design review regulations for developers to foster site designs that provide access to public transportation and encourage pedestrian activity. There should be provisions for clustering, orienting buildings and main entrances to streets with bus facilities, and providing pedestrian and bus-stop amenities.

Another approach for municipal bylaws is to provide incentives for developers to build in a transit-friendly manner. Such incentives may be financial or take the form of a public investment toward the transit infrastructure. They may also include development bonuses (allowing them to increase development intensities) or less restrictive parking requirements in exchange for transit amenities. Relaxing parking requirements results in a win-win situation for the town and developer, allowing more land for development (lowering the per unit cost for the developer and providing more compact development and limited parking to support transit use).

C. Careful integration of transit into the development review process is important. Public transportation should be incorporated into development early in the planning and design phases, which include transit provider input, not just an add-on. Local regulations can help address a careful integration of transit. It is essential that local officials work with the local transit operators when developing the regulations, as well as

Smart Growth Bylaws That Support Transit

Regulatory provisions incorporating the following concepts help make development more compatible with public transportation service:

- Incorporate mixed, compatible land uses into all nonrural districts, allowing the combining of complementary office, service, residential, and retail uses.
- Allow compatible retail uses within residential areas.
- Discourage auto-oriented uses (gas stations, drive-through banks, and so on) in areas adjacent to bus stops.
- Increase employment densities in activity centers (bus service works best in areas with employment densities of over sixty employees per acre).
- Increase residential densities along bus routes and bus stops, setting minimum densities as well as the maximum density.
- Allow duplexes and townhouses in single-family zones.
- Provide sidewalks and other pedestrian amenities along streets with bus stops and streets leading to bus stops, making sure that pedestrian access is ADA compliant (when designing and installing sidewalks, work with your transit providers so that the height of the walk and the curb matches that of the lift).
- Provide lighting to improve pedestrian safety and security.
- Allow accessory uses, such as home-based businesses, live/work studios, and accessory dwelling units.
- Require allowances for future development (such as street extensions).
- Require or provide incentives for a certain percentage of affordable residential units.
- Replace vehicle mitigation measures with a general impact fee that could be used for multimodal improvements.
- Revise level of service standards to allow for lower levels of traffic flow to be acceptable.

during subdivision and site plan review. Considering transit access and pedestrian flows from the beginning of the development process facilitates their inclusion in the development plan and implementation. When transit providers are not at the table from the beginning, details relating to public transportation access are usually overlooked and become difficult to implement retroactively. Providing regulatory incentive for coordination may be an effective way to bring all parties to the table.

Parking

Statute 24 V.S.A., Section 4414(4), enables the municipality to require less parking than the local regulations normally require if there is public transit available. How parking is handled can make a big difference in creating transit-compatible development. If other transit supportive measures are in place, parking supply should be minimized to discourage vehicle use while encouraging the other modes, including transit. (See topic paper, Parking, for more information.)

Again, it is important to work with the local transit operator before developing parking requirements, to help determine the potential for public transportation service. In general, prominent surface parking should be discouraged in transit areas, especially in core downtown districts, and shared parking should be encouraged in mixed-use districts to help reduce parking demand. Parking should be configured so that it does not dominate, for example situating it behind buildings instead of alongside roads and sidewalks.

Role of Municipal Officials

It is important that municipal officials not only work with the transit operator in establishing transit-friendly regulations, but that they help provide public support for the transit system as well.

Development Review Standards that Support Transit

Specific development guidelines that encourage multimodal transportation include:

- Requiring sidewalks that connect buildings, parking, and transit
- Discouraging pedestrian barriers (such as fences, shrubbery, hedges) between adjacent developments and requiring vehicular and pedestrian connections between developments
- Prohibiting cul-de-sacs or dead-end streets
- Establishing maximum block size perimeter (pedestrian-scaled blocks are typically 200 to 400 feet wide and/or long)
- Requiring bicycle lanes and multiuse pathways
- Requiring the provision of bus stops with weather-protected shelters and other amenities, such as adequate lighting and bike racks
- Requiring that primary building entrances open onto public streets with clear connections to sidewalks
- Requiring windows and doors at the ground-floor level (often a certain percentage of glass is specified)

Transit Infrastructure

Local funding is critical. Transit, as with other forms of transportation, is a heavily subsidized mode of transportation. Even so, the lack of sufficient local funds is one of the biggest barriers to the success of transit. Communities can provide financial support for both transit-related capital improvements and operating costs through impact fees, their capital program, a special townwide assessment, or establishing a TIF district (allowing revenue bonds to be issued against the future increases in property taxes within the district).

Considerations

Traditionally, people in Vermont and other largely rural places have not accepted transit as a legitimate alternate form of transportation. They are accustomed to the convenience of the private automobile, and there can be a stigma associated with use of transit on a regular basis (it is often considered a "lower class" method of travel). This attitude is changing with the popularity of intercity commuter buses and vanpools, which are a convenient and cost-effective way for many to get to work.

Transit, like other forms of transportation in Vermont, is heavily subsidized with federal and state funds. Local funding is dependent on property taxes, so many towns are not successful in raising enough funding to support a comprehensive transit system. Providing frequent and reliable service is important for sustaining ridership, and this cannot be done without sufficient funds. Support from municipalities for transit service is essential.

Town boards are often reluctant to reduce the number of required parking spaces for new development, out of concern that there will not be adequate parking, which could trans-

Provisions for Alternative Transportation Modes

Example: ***Brattleboro Zoning Ordinance***

(a) Bus Stops: Where developments are located on an established transit route, the Board may require a designated bus stop on site. Bus stops can be in the form of either a signed bus stop or bus shelter depending on the location and projected use. (b) Satellite Parking for Public Transit: Certain development projects or parcels may be appropriate for the siting of park-and-ride facilities to enhance public bus service. These parking areas may be established as part of a development project and reduce the number of spaces required on site if approved by the Board. These areas must be well marked and separated from general parking areas.

late into business losses. This is a chicken-egg situation: as long as there is ample, free parking, transit will not be a viable alternative to single occupancy vehicles, even if fixed transit routes provide frequent and reliable bus service. In one study, it was shown that employees who paid for parking drove alone 33 percent less and used transit 25 percent more than those who did not pay or whose parking was subsidized.

Many local zoning regulations have provisions that tend to discourage transit-oriented design, through promoting automobile-oriented, single-purpose, suburban-scale development. One way to overcome this is to establish design guidelines or a transit overlay district. A poor pedestrian environment also discourages transit use.

Land use officials, especially volunteer board members, often do not have the knowledge and understanding to require more transit-friendly measures as mitigation for traffic impact. That is why it is so important to work with the local transit provider.

Future of Transit

Transit will be another industry reshaped by the elderly. First, look for a lot more of it. The elderly are potent lobbyists, and they'll strongly support funding for trains and buses. Then expect big changes in the way transit works. Older people will want more comfortable vehicles (buses that can be boarded without climbing steps, for instance) and more responsive service. They'll demand door-to-door service, and for those in convenient locations, they'll likely get it. (There is already a form of transit that serves the elderly and disabled with door-to-door service, but it is so inconvenient and expensive it hardly serves as a model for the future.)

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