

Vermont Transportation Equity Framework
Draft Chapter 3 – Stakeholder and Public Involvement

December 2022

Report Title:

Stakeholder and Public Involvement

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DRAFT

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

| | |
|-------|---|
| ACS | American Community Survey |
| ADA | Americans with Disabilities Act |
| ASL | American Sign Language |
| BTS | Bureau of Transportation Statistics |
| CEJST | Climate and Economic Justice Screening Tool |
| CTEDD | Center for Transportation, Equity, Decisions, and Dollars |
| DEI | Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion |
| DHAE | Disproportionately High and Adverse Effects |
| DMV | Department of Motor Vehicles |
| DOE | Department of Energy |
| DOT | Department of Transportation |
| EJ | Environmental Justice |
| EO | Executive Order |
| EPA | Environmental Protection Agency |
| ESL | English as a Second Language |
| FEMA | Federal Emergency Management Agency |
| FHWA | Federal Highway Administration |
| FTA | Federal Transit Administration |
| GMT | Green Mountain Transit |
| GTFS | General Transit Feed Specification |
| LATCH | Local Area Transportation Characteristics for Households |
| LEHD | Longitudinal Employer-Household Dynamics |
| LEP | Limited English Proficiency |
| LODES | LEHD Origin-Destination Employment Statistics |
| LRTP | Long Range Transportation Plan |
| MOU | Memorandum of Understanding |

| | |
|-------|---|
| MPO | Metropolitan Planning Organization |
| NASEM | National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine |
| NHTS | National Household Travel Survey |
| NRPC | Northwest Regional Planning Commission |
| RFI | Request for Information |
| RPC | Regional Planning Commissions |
| RTP | Regional Transportation Plan |
| TCDG | The Creative Discourse Group |
| TIP | Transportation Improvement Program |
| UI | Unemployment Insurance |
| USC | University of Southern California |
| USDOT | US Department of Transportation |
| VAPDA | Vermont Association of Planning and Development Agencies |
| VPSP2 | VTrans Project Selection and Prioritization Process |
| VTEDI | Vermont Environmental Disparity Index |

3.0 TASK 3 – STAKEHOLDER AND PUBLIC INVOLVEMENT

The goal of Task 3 was to evaluate the current barriers and opportunities for participation of marginalized or underrepresented groups in VTrans decision making processes. Members of the consultant team, led by Rights and Democracy Institute (RDI), performed outreach events and meetings to better understand stakeholder, community, and official feedback, insight, and questions for implementing the Transportation Equity Framework.

These engagement efforts revealed several key themes and issues that should show how transportation equity varies across the state and where flexibility is required in the VTrans Equity Framework.

Three primary approaches were used to solicit and involve a diverse cross section of participants. These were:

- Direct engagement: Four communities within Vermont were identified for in-depth conversation and consultation.
- Stakeholder Interviews: Ten one-on-one meetings were scheduled to answer a consistent set questions. The stakeholders included members of VTrans, DMV, RPCs, advocacy groups, and nonprofits that work within Vermont communities.
- Regional Planning Commission Meetings: Meeting with each RPC to explore the relevancy of the equity

framework pillars, identify how the equity approaches are currently being used within the activities at the RPCs and how the framework can enhance equitable outcomes in future work at the RPCs.

Each of the engagement strategies are summarized below along with key themes that emerged from the discussions.

See the **Appendix** for detailed summaries from each of the engagement activities.

3.1 ENGAGEMENT APPROACH

3.1.1 Direct Engagement

By engaging deeply within four communities around the state of Vermont we gained a better understanding of the perspectives and experiences of communities most affected by Environmental Justice and equity issues. Environmental Justice refers to the equitable distribution of environmental benefits, burdens, and decision-making power. Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) and low-income communities specifically, as well as older adults (those older than 65 years old), young adults (those younger than 30 years old) and rural communities, are disproportionately exposed to environmental injustices.

21 community engagement events were held with a total of 324 participants.

The goal of the four community-specific engagement plans outlined in Table 1 was to learn and test approaches, strategies, and tools with each community, based on our research and communication with members from each of

these communities. The outreach team focused on prioritizing community knowledge and expertise, desires, priorities, needs and concerns and responding to communities' need for information and connection to decision-makers.

TABLE 1: CONSULTATION METHODS

| Method | Description | Locations Applied |
|--|--|----------------------|
| Participatory Mapping | Maps as a visual aid to allow community members to communicate information about their environment | Bennington, Rutland |
| Community Meetings, Focus Groups, and Forums | Group discussions with, facilitated dialogue, with or without educational guest speakers | All |
| Photovoice Challenge & Ceremony | The collection of perspectives through photos as taken and described by community members. This also included a ceremony where photos were celebrated, discussed, and evaluated by a panel of community-based judges, gamifying participation, and creating the basis for a focus group discussion | Winooski/ Burlington |
| Neighborhood Walks | Conversations that happen while walking (or using a wheelchair) around a community to ground conversations in local environments | Bennington |
| One-on-Ones with Community Leaders | Direct conversations with community leaders to gather information, receive guidance and feedback, and to understand and connect to local social networks | All |
| Facilitated Dialogue | Reciprocal dialogue between decision-makers and community | Rutland |

| | | |
|-------------------------------|--|---------------------------------------|
| | members that allows for distribution of information and direct feedback | |
| Assisted Public Participation | A collaborative effort of working with individuals to share information on processes, best-practices, and to support community members to effectively engage with public participation opportunities | Bennington, Winooski/ Burlington, NEK |

Four communities were selected as target populations for testing and exploring various methods of community engagement. These sites were identified using tools such as the Vermont Environmental Disparity Index (Panikkar 2021), and qualitative research conducted by members of RDI and REJOICE (Rural Environmental Justice Opportunities Informed by Community Experts). These target populations included: BIPOC young adults in Winooski and Burlington; residents of Bennington living in low-income housing; older adults and mobile home park residents in the Northeast Kingdom; and low-income and un/under-housed residents of the Rutland area.

3.1.2 Stakeholder Meetings

The goal of the stakeholder interviews was to gauge the level of understanding, reception, and maturity for implementing an equity framework for VTTrans. They helped to identify the Vermont equity-seeking communities, ways to leverage approaches taken to-date, lessons learned by state departments and staff, and implementation successes and challenges.

Ten stakeholder interviews were conducted between during summer 2022 (July 18 – September 14) lasting between 60-90

minutes each. Interviewees included representatives from within AOT and from Regional Planning Commissions as well as community-based organizations representing statewide interests. They were identified based on discussion with VTrans and the working group.

The stakeholder interviews included the following VTrans, DMV, and VAPDA representatives:

- Lori Valburn, Director of Civil Rights // Office of Civil Rights
- Erin Sisson, Deputy Chief Engineer and Ann Gammell, Chief Engineer // Highway Division
- Vicki Good, Branch Operations, Supervisor of the South Burlington Office // DMV
- Kevin Marshia, Bureau Director // Asset Management
- Ross MacDonald, Public Transit Program Manager // Public Transit
- Charlie Baker, Secretary/Treasurer of VAPDA and Executive Director of Chittenden County Regional Planning Commission and Catherine Dimitruk, Chair of VAPDA and Executive Director of Northwest Regional Planning Commission

The primary VTrans stakeholder interviewees above also coordinated additional written responses to the interview questions from Highway Division staff members in the Operations and Safety Bureau, including Operations, Transportation Management Center, State Highway Safety Office, Data, and Project Delivery.

The four stakeholder interviews with statewide community organizations consisted of:

- Dorah Nkurunziza, Case Manager // Community Asylum Seekers Project (CASPV)
- Mia Shultz, President // Rutland Area Branch of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP)
- Vermont Public Interest Research Group (VPIRG) (representative asked not to be identified and for responses not to be attributed to VPIRG)
- Marita Canedo, Program Coordinator // Migrant Justice

The key takeaways from the interviews were organized into three main categories – external-facing programs, internal-facing programs, and the equity framework – and include the following common themes:

- **External-facing programs:** the dynamic and complex nature of equity itself (how it is defined and by whom, persons/communities in need, appropriate resources to equitably meet needs, etc.), engagement (with other agencies and organizations, stakeholders, and the public), and funding priorities (how are decisions made, and is the process transparent).
- **Internal-facing programs:** internal organizational culture and awareness, hiring practices, and bidding processes for contractors, especially registered DBE entities.
- **The equity framework:** what does the framework look like, how will it be implemented, and should it aim to accomplish, and who will lead the charge.

Several interviewees mentioned that there was no formal definition of equity that informed and influenced their work but noted a desire or need to work with agency partners to establish a formal definition for equity. The RPCs attempted to do this over the summer, but were unable to, in part, due to variations in understanding of what equity means and requires. It is also important to note there is a clear distinction between “equality” and “equity”, and the two should not be conflated. Furthermore, even among interviewees, there were differences in how both terms were defined and understood in practice.

During conversations with community organizations, it was apparent that there was a significant knowledge gap: three of the four organizations were not aware of any strategies the agency was taking to increase equitable engagement, and all four expressed there is a lack of engagement around the design of policies, programs, and projects.

Opportunities were identified, such as, more intentional, and targeted communication on the part of VTrans, and greater support to RPCs that are on the frontlines of transportation planning in cities, towns, and communities around Vermont and, in many ways, are an extension of the Agency. But there is still a need to examine existing capacity and the need to either expand or reconfigure existing channels and methods of communications so that key stakeholders and organizations that are deeply embedded in communities can play active roles in transportation planning and service delivery.

3.1.3 Regional Planning Commissions

Eleven meetings were held between June and October with each of the Regional Planning Commissions. Regional Planning Commissions serve as the local voice in the statewide planning process, legally delegated to represent VTrans at the local level as defined in the TPI process.¹ The RPCs are involved in local and regional planning across the state and have a range of experiences regarding equity in their work. The following key themes were derived from the meetings.

Key Themes

- Equity is unique and local: The understanding of equity varies for each community and their respective transportation issues.
- Standardized metrics: Communities and VTrans need to determine what equity metrics should be tracked and accounted for.
- Public transit and active transportation: Improve accessibility and remove barriers to both modes.
- Transparency: Improve funding transparency for projects to bring more voices to the table, shift focus to more equitably developing projects outside dense urban areas.
- Holistically integrate equity: Equity should be a key piece of all business and public processes.

¹ 19 V.S.A. § 101

- Public engagement: Substantially change engagement and communication to encourage involvement from marginalized groups. Community organizations and institutions should be used to supplement data and improve community engagement. Create and maintain durable two-way communication channels.

The Appendix has a detailed summary of each meeting.

3.2 EQUITY VARIES IN COMMUNITIES

The RPCs interviewed varied in their understanding of what inequities are prominent throughout their communities, the specific demographics, or areas in which they exist, and specific solutions that they believe can be used to rectify each community's specific issues. Several are still working to understand where gaps exist in their communities, and how best to engage those most impacted. The groups identified in need of equity improvements throughout Vermont include low-income communities; the elderly; the disabled; people discriminated against due to race, gender, or sexual orientation; people living in rural areas; and people with language barriers that impair participation in decision making processes. These groups included people of color, people experiencing homelessness, people previously incarcerated, people without cars, immigrant agricultural workers, refugees, and members of the Abenaki indigenous population.

3.3 ESTABLISH EVALUATION METRICS

Community organizations and stakeholders noted there are currently no evaluation strategies in place for monitoring equity improvements and progress. Creating or identifying standardized performance metrics is necessary to track progress and evaluate the effectiveness of an equity framework. RPCs and other stakeholders also noted that data limitations create difficulties when integrating equity into project planning or when communicating with the public. This especially pertains to groups that are overlooked or not included in traditional Census data but are important for equity considerations, such as people experiencing extreme poverty, the homeless, or those in rural areas with significant land but little in monetary assets. Interviewees also stressed that this data should be flexible enough to be used in multiple evaluation formats, such as spatial data, and should be measurable in both capital projects and new programs or services. Additionally, interviewees indicated that having data at a higher resolution than the Census-tract level would provide even greater insight into where inequities are located, particularly in rural areas. This would provide further detail about what projects would carry the greatest equity impacts. Suggestions for achieving this level of resolution included leveraging data from schools or health care facilities in respective communities.

3.4 PRIORITIZE PUBLIC TRANSIT

Community members identified both improved and free or low-cost access to public transportation as a significant opportunity for improving equity outcomes. Specific access improvements included expanding routes and schedules for public transit, namely those along routes to schools, health care facilities, and employment opportunities. This was cited as key for low-income community members who rely on either public or active transportation methods to get to work. Providing the service for no cost was also desirable and would remove further barriers to access for low-income or marginalized communities. Community members also emphasized the importance of continued safety improvements on public transportation, such as training skilled and reliable drivers or operators. There was also interest in on-demand transportation services, with many noting that most current services, such as taxis, are either unavailable in their communities or simply unaffordable.

3.5 INTEGRATE ACTIVE MODES

RPC and stakeholder interviews both highlighted that an equity framework must also prioritize active transportation methods, such as bicycle and pedestrian travel, along with motorized and public transportation. Making these improvements would provide secure transit infrastructure for community members that rely on accessible and safe active transportation throughout the year and provides low-emission alternatives to motorized transport. RPCs noted this is particularly important in rural areas where low-income or

marginalized community members may be at least partially reliant on active transportation to reach employment opportunities. RPCs also showed concern for modal bias that influences placement of pedestrian or bicycle access on roadway projects. Additionally, projects designed to connect employment or community hubs should include infrastructure for active transportation as well.

3.6 IMPROVE FUNDING TRANSPARENCY

RPC members expressed concern that funds were being overly concentrated in urban areas, which has exacerbated inequities in rural or low-income areas. RPCs showed interest in having a pro-rata process or a project selection framework like the Vermont Project Selection and Prioritization (VPSP2) mechanism but expressed that the system needs to focus on improving the level of local input, improving assessment of equity outcomes, and include assessing safety information for active transportation modes. In contrast, stakeholders had mixed comments on VPSP2 as well, with many key stakeholders involved in the process stating that it the tool does not include enough equity considerations to be used for developing the equity framework. Community members also suggested diverting funding from road maintenance to focus on equity-based projects, indicating that they do little to improve equity since these projects and primarily benefit private vehicle owners. Community members were especially interested in allocating these investments to improving public transportation and pedestrian infrastructure, specifically routes with between affordable housing communities, employment

opportunities, and public or recreational facilities. Creating periodic summaries of funding by geography and by travel mode was a common suggestion.

3.7 ALTER BUSINESS AS USUAL

Stakeholder interviews emphasized that implementing the equity framework requires altering project approaches to ensure equity considerations become a routine part of business. This includes allowing flexibility in how the framework is tracked or measured so that it is accessible for a variety of official staff and community organizations. Suggestions for accomplishing this included utilizing dedicated staff members to identify, monitor, and work with impacted groups throughout the community. In addition to dedicated staff members, stakeholders have also suggested disseminating DEI trainings and information among staff and the community to improve involvement and thinking regarding the equity framework.

3.8 LOCALLY IMPROVE PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT

Finally, all interview groups gave extensive feedback on how to improve public engagement strategies:

Information on participation opportunities & utilizing community organizations

Community members stated that current public engagement practices do not provide enough information on how to best participate in public meetings or decision processes, which causes many to simply not participate. Many interviewees

stated that lack of information limits not just participation potential, but also how effectively community members and officials can collaborate in any public processes. Some communities found that engaging or disseminating information through trusted community organizations resulted in higher engagement, particularly for marginalized groups. Interviewees noted that utilizing community groups as liaisons can provide specific issue analysis, help perform culturally sensitive engagement approaches such as translation services, and more effectively provide channels of communication between officials and their constituents. However, community groups also emphasized not to become overly reliant on them for disseminating or collecting information. This helps to avoid participation burnout and helps build trust between officials and community members through in-house efforts.

Engagement methods should vary by community

The preferred or most effective methods of communication varied by community. Technology-based outreach, such as texting, email, or Facebook communications was found to be very effective when conducted in conjunction with recognizable community organizations. In-person outreach, such as canvassing and providing door-to-door information services, was successful in urban areas with high population density but was not as effective in rural areas. Community web platforms, such as Front Porch Forum, also had varied success due varied community connectivity to respective platforms. Telephone campaigns were the only method that had little success across all communities.

Information should be openly disseminated and received in multiple forms

Community members expressed that informational materials should be available in multiple languages or interpretations, and that channels for requesting information or submitting feedback should be easier to access. Additionally, these reports noted that transportation officials and their staff should be prepared to receive feedback that uses non-professional tone or language. Emotional responses and input should not be dismissed (also known as “tone policing”), and instead be viewed reflecting the inequities or needs in the community.

Strategies need to focus on encouraging participation of marginalized groups

These reports noted that marginalized and BIPOC groups do not routinely participate in engagement events or respond to outreach. Reasons for not attending included lack of internet access or technology skills for virtual events, lack of transportation for in-person events, or health reasons. Marginalized community members also expressed little confidence that their input would be valued or lead to substantial change. RPCs also noted the need to improve how public input is considered, including providing further information on how and when public input is used, and treating all community members input with equal respect to reduce marginalization in decision making processes. Multiple interviewees also highlighted the need to engage community members more actively and holistically, particularly those from marginalized or rural areas. Some RPCs found that less formal engagement events were more likely to draw input and were better received by community members. These included

approaches such as Front Porch Forum, attending other community activities including neighborhood walks and interactions used by Rutland’s Project Vision., It was suggested these events should focus on integrating safety, access, mobility, equity, and affordability. Additionally, RPCs expressed a desire to target public communication and project engagement towards specific populations affected by transportation inequities, such as low-income, migrant, or rural households, to solicit stronger participation from these key marginalized groups. RDI also notes that this will help officials handle more immediate community concerns, and bridge gaps in bottom-up communication throughout the community. This is key to building community trust, and more directly connects community members to transportation officials and organizations. These reports also suggested compensating participants for their time when conducting meetings and similar activities, which will bring more low-income and marginalized people to the table. This will help improve targeted outreach by encouraging community members experiencing the highest inequities to participate in events and decision making.