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**Contact: Wayne Symonds
(802) 828-0503**

Environmental Assessment to Delay Middlebury Tunnel Project

MONTPELIER, Vt.—December 15, 2016--The Vermont Agency of Transportation (VTrans) has been working with the Town of Middlebury and stakeholder groups in recent months to advance a project that replaces two aging highway bridges in downtown that cross the rail line known as the Western Corridor. Due to objections raised recently, the Federal Highway Administration (FHWA) and VTrans work will likely not begin in 2017. The delay will allow time for a more detailed examination of project risks under the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA).

“It is unfortunate that the collective efforts of so many can be sidelined by the threat of legal action”, said Transportation Secretary Chris Cole. “But rather than carry that risk into construction and potentially cost the taxpayers additional funds, VTrans and FHWA have elected to engage in an additional administrative process.”

FHWA and VTrans will conduct an Environmental Assessment (EA) to more thoroughly examine whether the project presents significant environmental impacts. The EA will cover all components of this project. A finding of no significant impact (FONSI), will allow the project to proceed with the current alternative to replace the aging bridges with a tunnel. A comprehensive alternatives analysis in the form of an Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) will need to be performed if the EA identifies significant impacts.

“The decision to perform an EA reflects the need to manage environmental and legal risks,” said Middlebury Selectboard Chair Brian Carpenter. “While we all understand the need for replacing our downtown bridges and improving the safety of the rail line, I think the decision to undertake an EA is right for Middlebury. I support the Agency’s revised plan as the best option for addressing the serious safety concerns posed by our deteriorating downtown bridges and rail line. We now have a project design that vastly improves heart-of-town safety. The EA will involve additional documentation and analysis of the potential environmental risks to our town and will ensure the project includes all necessary risk mitigation measures. I have faith that our community will make good use of the additional time before construction to ensure that we are all doing everything we can to minimize the impact of construction on our businesses and on the quality of life in our unique community.”

FHWA and VTrans have previously documented a categorical exclusion (CE) for this project and have decided to conduct an EA rather than reevaluate the CE in view of project’s small but vocal opposition. Under NEPA, a CE applies to actions that do not individually or cumulatively have a significant effect on the environment.

In addition to replacing the aging downtown bridges, the project will correct poor drainage and related icing along this segment of the rail line, and increase train clearance beneath the highway overpasses to modern standards.