

## Municipal Corner – Traffic

Stowe has been undergoing tremendous change, growth and transformation in the past several years. The US Census indicates Stowe's population has grown by 21% in the last decade. We are also seeing an uptick in visitation, housing demand, development and traffic, among other things. When I first came here fifteen years ago, there were empty storefronts on Main Street and work was just beginning on the Spruce Peak development at the top of the mountain. The Town worked with interested citizens to revitalize Downtown Stowe and add vibrancy back into our village. Those efforts were successful beyond what we could have imagined – now there are no empty storefronts and parking spaces are in higher demand.

The Town of Stowe has always been thoughtful in its land use planning, conservation, and economic development efforts. This led to a good balance of open land, village centers, residential neighborhoods and commercial development that we all benefited from. However, the pace of change in Stowe has now accelerated due to a number of external forces. The pandemic and climate change has caused people to look for safe places to live and to enjoy the outdoors, and expanded broadband technology is allowing more people to live and work remotely.

Vermont has always struggled to maintain and grow its population, but places like Stowe have now been discovered and we need to focus on being welcoming while focusing on sustainability. Stowe is fortunate that it has a history of working together in a civil manner and it will need to do this now more than ever as we work together to find the balance that leads to sustainable development.

Traffic has been one of the most visible manifestations of change and reflects the challenges we face. We have seen major traffic back-ups this winter on random winter days in addition to the expected traffic on powder days and peak holiday weekends. We are also seeing an uptick in traffic in all other seasons and not experiencing the dramatic fall-off we used to see in mud and stick seasons. It is a sign of vitality but at this time is impacting the Stowe experience for both residents and visitors alike. Traffic can have a point of diminishing return if motorists don't dare get out of line to visit local businesses and visitors are discouraged from returning not to mention the impact it has on resident quality of life.

Stowe faces some unique challenges when it comes to traffic management. There is one way up to the top of the hill in the winter, especially once you get past Edson Hill Road. Downtown Stowe is historic, and our roadways follow pre-built environments. It is not just a matter of building new roads or expanding the ones we have; the character of Stowe is also vitally important to its local economy and our way of life. We have worked hard to protect our viewsheds and rural landscapes and we need to be thoughtful on the approach to improvements. It is not just a matter of how many cars we can move how fast.

So, what might be done. One thing for sure is there is no silver bullet. Stowe residents and visitors are not likely to go back to being able to hop in the car to zip up for a quick run on a powder day. There may be some things that can be done such as installing traffic signals and roundabouts at key intersections to help with safety and efficiency. However, a surface transportation is as strong as its weakest link. Stowe's topography and the aforementioned challenges are likely going to limit our ability to significantly improve traffic without changing the way people move around and when they do it.

Parking can help create capacity by enabling people to get off the road in a timely manner, but we need to think broadly about how best to tackle it – where it might be located, and how much land area should be taken up by impervious asphalt surfaces from a land use, aesthetic, and storm water perspective. We have a great deal of existing parking at hotels and other places. We need to think creatively to change behavior, to entice more people to take public transit and carpool to reduce demand on our roads. In the meantime, we may also have to adjust our schedules and allow for more time to get places. Also, we may not all be able to go to the same place at the same time. We may have to make choices and spread things out. If not, we should expect delays.

We all need to work together, but it is noteworthy to remember that the State of Vermont (VTrans) owns the right-of-way on Rt. 108 from approximately the intersection with Eagle Ridge Road up and over Smuggler's Notch into Cambridge. VTrans Policy & Planning staff are collecting background information and analyzing the problem to develop ideas for help to help alleviate peak traffic congestion. They are also meeting with key municipal department heads, representatives from Stowe Mountain Resort, and other stakeholders to gather information, discuss, and review ideas. The intent is to engage the Selectboard and community later this spring/summer regarding some near-term improvements we can consider. We also recognize this issue isn't likely to go away any time soon and anticipate this to be an on-going discussion that will take continuing collaboration.