

Municipal Corner – Traffic

The Town of Stowe is busier than ever – something that can be seen and felt in nearly every aspect of the Town. According to the US Census, the Town has seen a 21% increase in population between 2010 and 2020. Our local option tax receipts are expected to include 50% increase in annual receipts since 2019, which is an indicator of a significant increase in economic activity. Stowe Mountain Resort was purchased by Vail Resorts, which offers the Epic Pass, drawing more and more visitors to the area during the winter season. While these are indicators of a vibrant community, it should then be no surprise to anyone that traffic has also continued to increase as well. This is something the Selectboard members are keenly aware of, as they all live, work and play here, too. While traffic can be gridlock on the Mountain Road during peak ski arrival times, the Town is seeing an uptick in traffic year-round that impacts citizens' ability to get around town to work and to obtain services.

The Selectboard recognizes that something needs to be done to help alleviate the traffic congestion. To date, the Town has ensured that VTrans is aware of the concerns of the citizens, as the State controls the public right-of-way for the State highways and provides much of the funding for major transportation improvements. The Town has also made the Lamoille County Planning Commission aware as well since it plays a role in providing advice to VTrans on prioritization of Federal/transportation improvements in the region. Pertinent municipal staff have been meeting with VTrans Policy & Planning, Regional Planning, and representatives from Stowe Mountain Resort to discuss the situation and develop ideas for the governments and private sector's consideration over the short-, mid- and long-term.

The Selectboard approved a Lamoille County Regional Planning Commission Traffic Mitigation Grant application to the State of Vermont. The project area is the *“State and Town road networks between I-89 in Waterbury and Smugglers’ Notch State Park. The primary areas will be assessed to identify both known needs and feasible solutions for implementation: transportation options including public and non-public transit; parking improvements opportunities; and marketing and promotion of techniques to reduce congestion. Within the topic of public transit, there are three demographics of travel needs the study will consider: employers and employees; tourism and recreation visitors; and local residents.”*

Also, at the request of the Selectboard, I am working with municipal staff to develop a capital project for their and potentially the voter's consideration next Town Meeting. The proposed capital project would involve hiring a transportation engineer/planner to document the baseline traffic conditions the Town is experiencing, the capacity of the Town's existing surface transportation network, options and opportunities to provide traffic mitigation and improvements while maintaining the character of Stowe, and community engagement. The information gathered could be used as the basis of updating the transportation chapter of the Stowe Town Plan and developing informed choices about shaping the Town's future in a collaborative manner and through regulatory means if possible and necessary. We anticipate a continuing engagement with the transportation professional.

VTrans is anticipated to install a traffic light at the West Hill/Rt. 100 intersection commencing this fall. They have also advanced the Luce Hill Road/Rte. 108 intersection to the “project refinement phase.” This means they will be looking at the purpose, need, site characteristics and challenges of that intersection to prepare for future designs. Practically, the planning and funding of such a project can take 5+/- years under ideal circumstances. VTrans also continues to focus on plowing Harlow Hill and working with Stowe Mountain Resort to allow a private contractor to assist, at their expense, to ensure this section of Rt. 108 is regularly plowed and passable. The Town also provides back-up plowing when necessary. Winter conditions are not as much of an issue as they once were due to this cooperative effort but sometimes Mother Nature can take over despite our best efforts.

Green Mountain Transit and Stowe Mountain Resort have obtained and provided funding to increase the number and size of buses used during the winter ski season for the Mountain Road Shuttle. Green Mountain Transit will increase vehicle hours 58% over last year. However, this will only work if people use the shuttles rather than their private cars. In this regard, Green Mountain Transit and Stowe Area Association are working with hotel owners to promote awareness and to encourage visitors to ride the shuttle. Stowe Mountain Resort has planned a prime pick-up and drop-off location for shuttle riders at the base area as an incentive, making it easier to take the shuttle than drive.

Stowe Mountain Resort has also instituted paid parking at some of their prime parking areas during peak times. While understanding that this proposal was not well received by some, it is an effort to encourage carpooling and the use of public transit. The fact of the matter is our current road system can only handle so much traffic at any one time. While some transportation improvements can be made over time, it takes time to evaluate options, obtain funding and permitting, and ultimately implement the improvements. It should also be understood that we cannot create unlimited surface transportation system capacity. We must consider our historic community centers and Stowe’s natural environment/character as they are large parts of what makes Stowe a four-season destination and the quality of life it provides its citizens. It is also important to understand that in the winter, Route 108 is a dead-end road to a major destination, with no other outlets or routes in/out.

While we hope these measures will help, there is no guarantee that traffic will not continue to exceed what the Town’s surface transportation system can handle, resulting in delays and potentially even gridlock, particularly during peak ski times. This will not only be near-term but also potentially long term if we do not make strategic investments in the Town’s transportation infrastructure and modify consumer behavior. The community cannot expect to go back in time to the days when you could zip up to the top of the hill on a peak ski day for a quick run. We are all going to have to make choices as we work together to navigate the future to maintain our vitality and sense of community.

