

Montpelier Planning Commission
July 14, 2008
City Council Chambers, City Hall

Subject to Review and Approval

Present: Mark Kaufman, Chair; David Borgendale, Claire Benedict, Anne Campbell, Alan Goldman, and Youth Member Lucia Bragg.
Staff: Gwen Hallsmith, Planning & Community Development Director

Call to Order:

The meeting of the Montpelier Planning Commission was called to order by Mark Kaufman, Chair, at 7:00 P.M.

Review of Minutes:

Upon motion by David Borgendale, seconded by Claire Benedict, the Minutes of the last meeting were approved.

Comments from Chair:

None. Mr. Kaufman said there was one added item. The Planning Commission was able to persuade GMTA officials to stay.

GMTA Transit:

Mr. Kaufman told GMTA officials that Montpelier had launched an enVision process, which is a long term planning operation. A big part of the discussion has been public transit. He said he is a huge fan of public transit. He would love to see more it available, and he does understand the cost constraints. He would be very interested over the next few months about learning what models had been investigated from around the country. For example, the City of Houston entered a long term contractual relation with the Harris County Transit Authority to provide school access rather than buying new school buses. They bought bus passes for the students at a discount.

Mr. Borgendale said as the discussions were going on earlier tonight it became clear that public transit, at least as it exists in Central Vermont right now, is very highly subsidized. It is about 93 to 94 percent costs borne via subsidies. What he is really curious about is measurements of the real costs of moving day passenger from point A to point B, whether it be on a per trip basis or on a per mile basis. He realizes that varies with route. As governmental units start to make these decisions one of the things that is going to be a concern is how much does it really cost in total for us to have somebody take the bus for a mile.

A Representative from GMTA said as an organization they bill their services on an hourly rate, so it is a fully allocated rate they use which covers all of the administrative overhead, operating costs, maintenance costs, etc. Basically, their total operating budget, take the total number of hours they operate divide their total operating hours by that budget number and you come up with the operating cost. For fiscal year 2009 it is approximately \$55 per hour per bus. An hour of operation cost their organization \$55. They can operate a bus for an hour with fuel, tires, salary, and drug testing, insurance for \$55 per hour.

Mr. Borgendale asked if that was irrespective of the size of the bus. GMTA replied yes. There is very little difference in the vehicles they operate. The Link Express bus gets about 4.7 miles per gallon; the smaller cut-away buses will get 9 to 11 miles per gallon. The smaller buses have higher maintenance costs because they are not engineered as well and take more time to fix than the bigger bus.

Mr. Borgendale said if you have a 40-person bus and when you go to Burlington you then have to head back it is really costing only \$2.50 and \$3.00 per passenger to go from here to Burlington. The representative from GMTA said if you had 40 passengers to go from Montpelier to Burlington, it is about an hour travel time, about ½ hour of time on either end for the drivers. You are talking about \$150 to \$175. When you take 40 passengers and multiply it by 40, that service because of the high dollar amount they charge to ride and the fact the buses are almost always full to capacity, and in certain instances over full, the recovery rate is the highest. It is also the easiest route for GMTA to add service to.

Mr. Kaufman said he has heard several people talk about the fare cost for the rider. He doesn't see it as a high cost. How does it compare with CCTA?

The representative from GMTA said CCTA charges \$1.25. They recently redid their peer analysis. There is a peer group where they look at 18 other transit agencies throughout the country that are in college towns that have inner city rail and inner city, which is a profile like Burlington. At \$1.25, out of the 18 GMTA is at the top for transit agencies. Boston only charges \$1.50, so we are only 25 cents less than Boston. For transit as an industry and as a public service we're priced in Burlington where we should be. Is \$1.00 a lot? No, it's not a lot, and as a percentage of their overall budget that ridership figure needs to be higher. In Burlington for CCTA they like fare routes recovery rate to be somewhere in the neighborhood of 25 to 30 percent of the budget. When it drops below 25 percent, the Board starts thinking about a fare increase. GMTA's population they serve is different. It's not as affluent. That \$1.00 is a hardship to a lot of people that they can't afford. They offer a 25 percent discount if you buy a pass. A lot of people can't afford to buy a pass. They can't afford to come up with the \$10 and are looking for that dollar each day. They have struggled with it, and this will be a year the Board looks at that issue again as they start looking at what their deficit is going to be. You have to have a balanced budget and you solve it three ways – increasing fares, cutting service, or getting more government subsidies.

Mr. Kaufman asked if he had a ridership pool analysis for each of the routes, or possible routes, where service might be cut.

The GMTA representative said they couldn't afford to do customer surveys to that extent. They are really a lean operation. A few years back they did a customer survey for GMTA and they can provide copies of the survey if they would like to see the data. They asked demographic questions, income, how long their average bus trip was and the overall satisfaction with their service, courtesy of the drivers and asked for improvements they would like to see. They try to do this every other year.

Mr. Borgendale said the reason he is asking the questions he is asking is because it is pretty clear that a lot of the riders are people who basically need subsidized transportation. What he is really interested in is how we can get people who don't need subsidized transportation to start using other transportation, people who could conceivably pay the full cost of the trip.

The GMTA Representative said that is a large part why the Link Express is \$4.00 per trip, and they don't offer half fare as somebody asked them to do and they have no intention of asking half fare. They want to maximize the dollars for those services and want to bring in as much from the passengers supporting that service. The first passenger survey they did for the Link Express was in the first year they operated, and the average income was \$65,000 a year. In their industry those are choice riders, people who are choosing to ride. On those services you want to target a higher price that the customer is paying to support the service. When they first started that service the fare was \$3.00. Two years ago when fuel first went over \$3.00 per gallon they increased the fare to \$4.00. He was dragged into the Legislature by several outraged riders who were demanding that we go back to \$3.00 and they were going to stop riding. His response to them was talk to him about it in six months. If no one is riding in six months they might go back to \$3.00, but if people are riding at \$4.00 they'll leave the fare alone. Service not only didn't drop off but increased by 15 to 20 percent.

Mr. Borgendale said he wanted the EXXON station to sell him gas for half of what they have posted, too.

Ms. Hallsmith said they had talked about the possibility of the City of Montpelier providing matching funds for a grant to activate more service to the city. She has met with National Life to ask them to cooperate with the city on finding that match and they seemed very interested in it. She understands they are second in line to Waitsfield to do that for the congestion relief grant. Is that still the case?

The GMTA Representative said the Board authorized staff to submit an application for the Waitsfield commuter. They are actively seeking the local match from the towns of Warren, Fayston and Waitsfield and have sent all three of their Select Boards letters asking them to jointly contribute in the local match. They have yet to hear a response. They are having two Select Board meetings this evening and they have a staff attend to provide information. If those municipalities are unwilling to provide the local match, they sent a letter to the City of

Montpelier today requesting whether or not the City of Montpelier could make a local match to support a city circulator. Part of what they have received in requests over the years as well as from Montpelier Representatives to GMTA, as well as the enVision Montpelier programs, is a desire to link Montpelier neighborhoods together with the rest of the transit service that is operating and also providing a connection to the high school and National Life. They don't actually have a route by route service plan, but they have a concept they want to do a Montpelier circulator that connects to the rest of the system and to the Link Express, so somebody with a disability and has an issue to getting to Shaw's or making a transfer they could now take that bus.

Ms. Hallsmith said when she was talking to National Life it was interesting to her that they mentioned they have a lot of people who come to National Life from Barre, and the woman she was speaking of wasn't even aware of the GMTA bus that runs back and forth between Montpelier and Barre. She explained it came and dropped people off in front of Shaw's. It struck her that if they have a big ridership that comes to their facility it doesn't currently loop up around National Life.

GMTA said she has had a lot of people who would actually like the Barre Hospital Hill bus to go up around and down like the Capital Shuttle. A circulator may achieve the same process of what we are talking about.

Ms. Hallsmith said if they could do that loop up and around for the regular bus run and then have the circulator connect in down at Shaw's that might also work. The city is ready to get this match organized.

GMTA replied that National Life is very willing to participate. VTrans has a new program they are launching called "Go Vermont" and it matches with "Go Maine" and "Go New Hampshire." It's a van pooling program and a car pooling program and a marketing program. They are in the midst of negotiations with a proposal that came in. National Life is very interested in establishing two or three van pools as soon as this gets up.

Ms. Hallsmith said another thing they have developed and are ready to send out is a survey of businesses in the area to find out what the needs are. There was a question about whether intra city, like a circulator, was needed and also more inter-city service. She has certainly heard a lot of requests for inter city service. They are interested to know what the demand is in Montpelier for increased transit. They sent the survey out last week to the organizations that had agreed to help us circulate it. It can be sent out by e-mail and compiled right on the web. They would love it if they had an e-mail list they could send it out to.

A member of the audience said that is very important information to have for a short range public transportation plan. Consultants will look at employment concentrations to try to figure out what is suitable for transit, but if you have specific information on employer needs that would be helpful.

Ms. Hallsmith said they are going to be giving this questionnaire to all of the major employers in the city and asking them to send it out to their employees. One of the goals was to try to get the employers to send it out to all of their employees. It asks questions like, where do you come from to work. Would you ride a bus that comes into Montpelier? Would you ride a bus into town if you live out in the neighborhoods of Montpelier? What are your commuting patterns? What hours do you need service? They are going to send the questionnaire out to all of the stakeholders and employers and try to get some good data on where the likely demand is. If the city is going to put up a match for one of these congestion reduction grants, then we should be spending it where people need it.

Mr. Borgendale said he understands it is a regional issue and Vermont for the most part does not have regional benefits. He asked if Chittenden County has regional transportation.

GMTA said they don't have regional funding, so the only difference between Chittenden County and GMTA is Chittenden County can send a letter to its municipalities and they have to include their number on the letter in their municipal budget. It's funded the same way.

Mr. Borgendale said it is funded locally but it's a contribution to a regional authority.

GMTA replied it's a contribution to an authority that is supposed to have a regional frame of mind, but the CCTA couldn't even fund the Burlington to Waterbury commuter shuttle because we don't have regional funding. The CCTA service area is Chittenden County and Washington County, and Franklin County to some extent.

Mr. Borgendale asked if Montpelier contributed to CCTA.

GMTA said no that Montpelier contributes to GMTA and CCTA communities contribute to CCTA, and then there are services that go back and forth and operate in each other's funding areas. They have a right to operate in Washington County but they exercise that right through GMTA. CCTA has a strategy committee and GMTA has a strategy committee, and they have started joint meetings to talk about the issue of coming together as one entity and one regional transit authority. The problem is going to be on the funding side. CCTA municipalities contribute 25 percent of our funding. The municipalities in GMTA contribute 13 percent, so there is a major difference. If they were to bring the two organizations together under the same funding program right now, Montpelier would have to more than double what it is paying for its current level of service. They would have to double what they are paying to GMTA and not getting any additional services. That probably wouldn't pass muster with the taxpayers. That's a prohibition for the two organizations coming together. Right now there are two separate budgets, two separate audits, two separate grant managements, so the work they are doing is duplicative and isn't really the best use of the taxpayer resources. At some point they are going to come together as one single entity, and how that entity is funded, whether they still use local dollars or whether the Legislature authorizes this regional entity to raise a regional tax throughout the entire service region so as to make the service region and the funding region the same. Then, service decisions aren't made on whether or not the City of Montpelier can scratch together with National Life money to support a commuter route. Funding decisions are made based on where is the greatest ridership. Where are the employers to be served? Right now the funding system for public transportation doesn't allow you to do real planning the way you do with everything else.

Ms. Hallsmith said to pit Montpelier against Waitsfield for one limited little grant is nuts.

GMTA said it is political will. It is which Select Board, which City Council feels it can get reelected by raising the taxpayer dollars to support the 20 percent match. That is how transit is grown in the state of Vermont. There is so little money to put towards it. There is \$350,000 this year that the entire state is competing against that the planning aspect doesn't really matter because there isn't enough money to make everybody happy anyway. That is the system they have inherited to administer, and until this pops up as one of the items the Legislature is going to focus on it won't change. He has talked with the House Transportation Committee Chair and his comment to him was that public transportation funding is broken. Funding for transportation in Vermont is broken. Until we fix roads and bridges and highways and paving we aren't going to focus on public transportation. There is the whole area of transportation that isn't meeting its expectations.

Mr. Borgendale asked if the two municipal entities were chartered and has bonding authority.

GMTA Representative said CCTA was chartered in 1973 and is a Vermont municipality. It has all of the rights and powers and can condemn land, bond. GMTA is a Section 501(c)(3) nonprofit and a charitable organization like the Red Cross.

Mr. Borgendale said there is a huge difference.

The GMTA Representative said the GMTA relies upon the charity of the municipalities that support the service. Most of the communities they serve waive the petition requirement if they don't ask for more money. That is the way municipalities keep not for profits from asking for money. They only have limited staff, so they haven't asked for more money in our community for three years because they don't have the staff to do 23 petition drives. Next year they are going to ask for more money and also ask communities to waive the petition. It's ridiculous that in the state of Vermont general managers, the highest paid employees of transit agencies, spend two months out of the year going from community to community hanging outside Laundromats looking to collect petitions so they can fund the services that draws down federal and state funds.

Ms. Campbell said given the interest in tonight's hearing, and presumably subsequent hearings, could riders and other interested members of the public get those petitions?

The GMTA Representative replied they could, and they do use volunteers. People do assist us in this way. You still have to get it done and coordinate all of that, and it's still a lot of oversight. The Legislature fixes things that are broken, and unless somebody tells them this is broken. The legislative process is the classic definition of the squeaky wheel.

Thanks to Mark for being Chair:

Ms. Hallsmith reported this is Mark's last meeting and he won't be a member of the Planning Commission any longer. This begs the question of who will be Chair and it defaults to David as Vice Chair for the next meeting. The next meeting will be August 11th. By then the City Council should have appointed our new members. Diane Scolaro and Barbara Blythe have indicated interest in serving on the Planning Commission.

Review enVision Goals and Vision Statement:

The Planning Commission reviewed the third draft of the Vision Statement.

Regarding the enVision Goals, the Natural Environment goals have changed, but the rest are up to date. Ms. Hallsmith said these are the vision and goals that the enVision Montpelier's committees have prepared. The ultimate destiny of the vision and goals will be to shape the Master Plan and Long Range Plan for the community, so it would make a lot of sense for the Planning Commission to review them as drafted, make any changes necessary and forward them on to the City Council. If we can all agree on the vision and goals prior to commencing the strategy development and action plan process in the fall, then we can have some level of insurance that the final plan will be in keeping with what the city's objective should be. If the goals aren't agreed upon at the outset, then the strategies and action plan that is developed will not be consistent with what the city wants. It is important to have these types of check-ins and approvals as we move forward before we spend a lot of time and effort developing a lot of information and material on something the City Council will ultimately not approve.

Mr. Borgendale asked how the vision statement got developed.

Ms. Hallsmith said the surveys they have been circulating through the community were compile and reviewed by a small subcommittee of the enVision Montpelier Steering Committee. This is a draft.

Mr. Borgendale said one of his reactions to it is that one of the things he is so concerned about is that since his 14 years of living in the city and watching his daughter grow from toddler to graduating from high school is that this is a great place for families and for kids. That character of the community really ought to be part of which we are but also what we want to continue to be. He doesn't see anything about that here.

Mr. Goldman says he thinks that ties into a sustainable community. In order to have a sustainable community you need families and kids.

Mr. Kaufman said he sees it mentioned under Social Systems.

Mr. Borgendale said he is talking about including it in the vision up front. He said he thinks the community is at risk of losing its soul. Montpelier is becoming more and more of an affluent and exclusive retirement type community gradually over time. It would be really sad to see that happen.

Ms. Hallsmith said they could say we strive to continue to be a place where families raise their children in a supportive and nurturing environment. Mr. Borgendale said it is a part of who we are. It is one of our assets.

Ms. Hallsmith said the reason they moved into town was because their son pestered them to move to Montpelier. It wasn't just safe or a good educational system but a fun place to be for kids. It's welcoming, safe and things for kids to do. "Montpelier is a place where families thrive and where children find a lot of fun, safe and challenging activities." Mr. Borgendale said that is a good start.

Ms. Hallsmith said there was a small Steering Committee group who got together and drafted it. Then, there were a couple of stakeholder meetings where it was on a big paper on the walls and then it was redrafted. This is the second public draft. Ultimately, all of the documents are City Council documents to approve. One of the important steps along the way is that the Planning Commission approves it, too. She said members should take the draft home to review. When a member makes a proposed change for any of the goals that are in each of the committee areas they send those changes to the point person on the Planning Commission who is responsible for that committee and they can circulate it. Mr. Kaufman said he would recommend some timelines to get the input back to the committees. Ms. Hallsmith said two weeks would be good.

Mr. Kaufman said members of the Planning Commission should get their comments to the various committees by July 28th so they can turn it around into a new draft for the Planning Commission's August 11th meeting.

Ms. Hallsmith said the way all of the goals are stated are as asset based outcomes, so they are basically describing the way things should be when we have achieved the goals. They aren't strategy statements. This is the outcome. This is what it is like 100 years from now when we have achieved our vision.

Update on Capital City Challenge:

Ms. Hallsmith said she had submitted a grant application to Green Mountain Coffee Roasters and will be submitting one to National Life. When she was talking with National Life it seemed one of their contributions to the Capital City Challenge might be to assist the city in matching this grant for the congestion mitigation to get more transit. She spoke at UVM last week and one of the executives from IBM was in the audience and they were interested in helping with the Capital City Challenge as well. The whole idea behind the Capital City Challenge was to make something interesting and fun that you get corporate sponsorship for and they get publicity out of it.

Comments from Chair:

Mr. Kaufman said he wanted to thank each member for the opportunity to serve on the Planning Commission. His work schedule has changed so he has to leave the Planning Commission.

Adjournment:

Upon motion by Mr. Borgendale, seconded by Ms. Benedict, the Planning Commission meeting adjourned at 8:15 P.M.

Respectfully submitted

Gwen Hallsmith, Director
Planning & Community Development