

Public transit funding system is broken

The Valley Reporter

July 24, 2008

By Mary Alice Bisbee

“Gloom, despair and agony untold.... If it weren’t for bad news, there’d be no news at all....” These few words from an old song keep running through my head as I read my local morning paper. Our country (we, the taxpayers, that is,) is saddled with what now is approaching a \$10 trillion debt; the housing industry is collapsing due to bad mortgages, unemployment is up and getting worse, the war in Iraq continues at an outrageous cost daily in money and lives, our roads and bridges are crumbling, energy prices are soaring and public transit is a non entity in this most rural state. As conscientious Vermonters try to save the planet by composting, neighbors are concerned about the messiness and unsightliness of our efforts to conserve, recycle and reuse, and here is yet another:

At a recent VTRANS hearing on public transportation needs, held at the Montpelier City Hall on July 14, over 60 Vermonters, including the Montpelier mayor, turned up to tell about their struggles with getting from here to there, many of them with disabilities that preclude driving an automobile. Bicyclists bemoaned the fact that the bus between Montpelier and Burlington, the LINK Express, which currently is packed to the rooftops and has seen a 47 percent increase in ridership, with standing room only, has only two bike racks.

When the question was raised about who, from the press, was reporting on the meeting, no one identified themselves and I have heard nothing about it since.

Central Vermonters do not all live in Montpelier and Barre City, and if they do, they are unhappy with the lack of ability to get from there to here. Many came from Plainfield, East Montpelier, Barre Town, Waitfield and Northfield, from towns that have little or no public transit for its citizens. This was our chance to be heard by the Agency of Transportation as they

are creating their federally mandated five-year Short-Range Public Transportation Plan (SRPTP).

As more and more Central Vermonters expressed their dismay about lack of public transit for various reasons, we then heard from director of the Chittenden County Transportation Authority (CCTA) Chris Cole, who contracts to oversee the Green Mountain Transit Agency (GMTA) which serves the Central Vermont area. His message was extremely disheartening. He stated that he would love to see all of these suggested enhancements, but it all boils down to lack of money and the political will at the federal, state and local levels to see these projects added.

He further stated that “our funding system is broken.” While GMTA has received a 2 percent increase in their budget this year, fuel costs alone have gone up by 85 percent. Cole stated that he is dealing with, “Which services are we going to have to reduce, rather than expand? Tomorrow at CCTA, I am faced with making \$100,000 in cuts.” He suggested that the assembled crowd needed to inform their legislators, federal representatives and the administration and concluded by saying that he would love to make all the suggested improvements in rural transportation if he only had the money to do so.

The public hearing was conducted by the Milligan Agency on contract with VTRANS to complete public hearings and provide a synopsis for inclusion in the SRPTP to be written this fall. This Montpelier meeting was the first of 24 meetings to be held around the state to receive input on public transit needs. Written testimony was encouraged and more information is available on the VTRANS web site as to how to submit it in writing or by email.

When the people speak, our elected representatives and officials need to listen.

Just perhaps, out of crisis we can still find opportunity. Let’s hope so, anyway!

Mary Alice Bisbee lives in Waitfield.