

1. Pitch Submitted By [Name(s) and Organization(s)]

Sustainable Transportation Vermont

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4. Pitch Title: (one line)

Statewide, State-Funded Fare-Free Transit

5. Pitch Summary: (one paragraph)

Transportation accounts for the largest share of emissions in Vermont and is the most difficult sector to decarbonize. In addition to electrifying vehicles, we need massive efficiency gains to achieve our goals while reducing the economic burden of transportation. Boosting the use of public transportation in Vermont is critical to achieving those goals, as it requires far less energy per passenger-mile than private automobile use. A strong public transportation system is essential for lifting Vermonters out of poverty and allowing those who cannot afford a car to access employment, services, and live dignified lives. Vermonters using public transit are playing a key role in reducing transportation emissions and helping us reach our climate goals. Additionally, those using public transit regularly are disproportionately low income. We should not force these Vermonters to bear a disproportionate amount of the cost of operating public transportation systems. It is time to eliminate bus fares statewide by increasing what the State pays to public transportation providers. To do this would require just a small portion of the state's transportation budget. Eliminating fares makes transit systems more equitable, more efficient and cost effective, and more accessible. Fare-free transit also better allows for social distancing, which was a driving factor in Vermont's transit agencies switching to fare-free during the current pandemic. The federal relief funds that have enabled the current fare-free operation of Vermont's transit systems is temporary, limited, emergency funding. Therefore, it is key that the State of Vermont step in, beginning in 2021, to ensure that public transportation remains fare-free permanently.

6. How would you describe the status of this pitch?*

Level Two: Project in the planning phase – ready to create an action plan, draft a grant proposal, complete necessary research, etc.

7. What Energy Sector(s) Does this Pitch Apply to? (Check all that apply): *

Energy Efficiency

Transportation

8. Which Criteria Category(ies) Does It Address? (Check all that apply): *

Promote energy equity

Significant reductions in fossil fuel use and GHG pollution from energy

A stronger and more just Vermont economy

9. Which Leverage Areas Would It Attempt to Shift? (Check all that apply): *

Policy & Regulatory Reform

Public Engagement

10. Scale of Impact on Vermont's Energy and Emissions Goals: If this proposal came to fruition, how would it help meet Vermont's energy and emissions goals by 2025 and/or 2050? Please outline assumptions and, if available, provide calculations-- especially for emissions reduction estimates.

Bus transit results in a 33-81% decrease (depending on the occupancy of the bus) in emissions per passenger mile compared to a single occupancy automobile, according to the US Department of Transportation.

There is robust data from numerous transit agencies in the U.S. and many other countries that indicates that eliminating fares leads to significant increases in ridership. This data holds true in Vermont examples as well.

Advance Transit, which serves communities in the Upper Valley of Vermont and New Hampshire, went fare-free in the mid-1990's. Between 2003 and 2018, Advance Transit saw a 293% increase in ridership. 83% of riders use the service 3 days or more a week, with 76% of riders using it to get to work or school (19).

According to a 2018 study by Green Mountain Transit (GMT), making all of their buses fare-free would result in a total increase of ridership of 37% (11). For the LINK/Commuter routes, the

increase would be 40%, including 48% increases in Chittenden, Franklin, and Grand Isle Counties.

Making transit fare-free is not a silver bullet to increasing ridership and decreasing SOV usage. However, it is one piece of the puzzle, and one that is particularly important given its prioritization of those most vulnerable in our state.

11. Benefits and costs of this proposal for Vermont and Vermonters: Including, where possible, economic (local economic development and jobs), financial (consumer savings), social, public health, and environmental. Who will be better off? Who will not be able to benefit?

According to a January 2019 report from the Vermont Agency of Transportation, total fares collected by transit agencies in Vermont in FY19 were roughly 2.7 Million dollars. If included in the State's FY2019 transportation budget, this would amount to less than one half of one percent of the 610.9 Million in total programs.

According to U.S. Census 2016 estimates, 5.5% of Vermont commuters are people of color. When looking at Vermonters who commute by public transit, that number jumps to 18.2%. Low-income Vermonters similarly make up a much greater share of transit commuters (29.1%) than they do overall commuters (10.8%). In other words, bus riders are disproportionately low income and people of color. It is these Vermonters who are currently paying the ~2.7 Million dollars annually collected in bus fares. By shifting this cost burden to the State's transportation bill, we will create a more equitable and accessible system.

Fare free transit reduces costs for providers and improves convenience for drivers and passengers alike. Fare free transit would eliminate the need for providers to purchase, operate, maintain, and replace fare collection machines. That means passengers can enter on either the front or rear doors, which allows for easier entrance and greater social distancing. Additionally, drivers would no longer need to assist riders with payment (riders, especially new riders, may not have correct change and/or may not know how to use a mobile payment app or a swipe card) or deal with customers refusing to pay their fare. All together, a fare-free system results in

shorter stop times, improving reliability and decreasing route times. Such system improvements typically lead to increased ridership.

12. Collaboration and Commitment: What partners/organizations are already working together and/or committed to work together on this issue?

Sustainable Transportation Vermont, Transportation for Vermonters (have not yet set their policy agenda for the coming year, but are considering including this initiative), supportive State Legislators, transit agencies, municipalities.

13. Key stakeholders and decision-makers: Who else needs to be involved to move this proposal forward? (e.g., Legislature, Governor, a regulatory agency, a business, organization, media outlet, or financing institution, people with lived experience, etc.

The State Legislature would need to include this expenditure in the Transportation Bill as part of the broader annual budget. The budget would need to be passed by both chambers and enacted by the Governor.

In order to successfully achieve this policy change, this proposal would ideally engage transit providers, VTrans, legislators, municipalities, transportation advocates, climate advocates, low-income advocates, racial justice advocates, transit users, Vermonters struggling with transportation needs, economic development agencies, health providers and advocates, employers, and employment agencies.

14. If selected, EAN staff will support you in pulling together and facilitating a dedicated Action Team to work on this pitch over the next year, and possibly beyond. Describe what success would look like for this idea a year from now.

Success for this project would look like an FY2022 state budget passing next year that includes the funding necessary for all transit providers in the state to remain fare-free. This would set the precedent for including this funding in all future transportation bills.

15. Is there anything else you would like us to know about this pitch?

While this effort would be led by Sustainable Transportation Vermont, the focus of our work would be to bring together a broad, diverse coalition from across the state to support this push.

STVT's Jack Hanson, a Burlington City Councilor and former registered lobbyist for the Vermont Public Interest Research Group, could work part-time on this issue in the Fall, and, if funding is available to support this effort, could ramp up to a full time effort during the legislative session beginning in January in order to shepherd this policy over the finish line.

Dr. Richard Watts, UVM Professor, Director of the Center for Research on Vermont, and regular bus commuter from Hinesburg to Burlington, would bring decades of expertise, advocacy, and statewide connections to advance this policy.

Finally, STVT interns Christopher Harrell, a UVM Senior, and Catherine Farmer, a UVM Freshman and lifelong Westford resident, are prepared to devote 120 hours each towards this effort during the fall semester, with the possibility of continuing their work on this issue into the spring.