

Planning Commission Minutes
City of Newport
Tuesday, February 01, 2022

DRAFT

Members Present: John Monette, Chair
Denis Chenette, Vice-Chair,
Carole O'Connell
Kevin Mead

Guests: Fred Saar, Executive Director of Rural Community Transport
Alison Lowe, NVDA
Laura Dolgin, City Manager

Not Present with Regrets: Amanda (Mandy) Chaput, Secretary

Members of the Public: George B. Cudd

1. **Call to Order:** Meeting called to order by Chair Monette at 6:00 p.m.
2. **Approval of Minutes.** Motion to approve the minutes of January 18, 2022, made by Ms. O'Connell, seconded by Mr. Chenette, and the motion passed.
3. **Public Comment:** None
4. **Guest Speaker:** Fred Saar, Executive Director of Rural Community Transport (RCT) attended the meeting in person. Mr. Saar provided an overview of the current services RCT provides and gave us newly printed brochures that contain fresh maps. The PowerPoint is attached and incorporated into these minutes. Of course, COVID has made for challenges on services and ridership #'s. A new route is being established in Burke servicing Kingdom Trails, and 2 electric vehicles will be added to the fleet. The legislature is exploring several initiatives regarding RCT's role in meeting the Climate Action Plan, although nothing has been decided as of this writing. Vermont will be electrifying its bus fleets over the next several years. RCT is also looking at ways to make ridership more appealing and comfortable by installing Wi-Fi and upgraded seating. It is hard to compete against the convenience of private vehicles and access to easy parking.

Moving away from single occupancy vehicles is more about behavior change and the existing environment than it is about bus routes. Being known for providing efficient and reliable service on already established routes is a priority (marketing and promotions), as is expanding the Elderly and Disabled (E&D) Committee to "Mobility Committee," which has a more inclusive and equalized connotation. Job access, wellness, recovery services, and adding commuting options sets the foundation for expanded response with more partners helping to cover the costs.

RCT's services are free to the public regardless of income level, but for Community Organizations, Departments, and Schools (C.O.D.S) which can arrange to pay for services such as grocery pick-up. RCT is interested in working with the service areas to identify gaps which could lead them to using the "New Start" application process to apply for additional funding for more services. For example, if employers are interested in establishing routes from towns where employees live to the worksite, RCT will work with them. The employer could contribute to help cover these costs. Another new market is the rural remote worker who needs to run typical errands. RCT also has opportunities for people who want to become 'volunteer drivers' although the application process requires a rigorous inspection. A few volunteers can add several hundred dollars to their monthly income. RCT has a way to accommodate route diversions that are within $\frac{3}{4}$ a mile of the designated route with preplanning.

RCT will be reviewing their marketing and promotions strategy to determine areas of improvement to the website, outreach, etc., with the goal of providing better education to the public to encourage taking advantage of using public transit instead of single occupancy vehicles. It is challenging to make this service attractive to riders who have a choice to drive their own vehicles on their own schedules. RCT is aiming for reliable, customer centric, user friendly, WIFI, clean and comfortable buses, and bus shelters with other passenger amenities. RCT is attuned to what the community wants. Discussion ensued about experiences with services for medical appointments and being able to use the service to make connections to additional public transportation to airports and enjoying shopping excursions.

A heartfelt thank you to Mr. Saar for attending the meeting tonight. Mr. Saar expressed gratitude for the opportunity to attend and is available to us should we have additional questions. We will share this portion of the Municipal Plan draft to make sure the language is appropriate to capture the direction of the service over the next 8 years.

5. **City Development Plan:** The latest version of the Plan is posted on the website. However, there is no way for the commission to receive comments. Ms. O'Connell mentioned one comment she heard was about the Northern Star Boat. After reviewing the history of the versions, we found the comment and will review it again as the final edits draw closer. We discussed getting the link into the Front Porch Forum, as well as submitting a blurb to the local media for some coverage.

Another remote (or in-person) Community Summit Update is being scheduled for June 15, 2022, and this would be a great opportunity to present the Plan to the public. Chair Monette has presented at the last 2 summits. The Commission likes the idea of using this date as a milestone to hand it off to the council for their public hearing process.

For tonight, Ms. Lowe summarized the value of Mr. Saar's presentation to the municipal plan is to raise awareness of RCT, emphasize the potential for partnering with downtown business for errands, heighten awareness for employers to fill a need meeting transportation demands of employees, make sure RCT is in the mix of services, promote the use to avoid single occupancy vehicles, and really emphasize partnerships, collaborations, and accessibility. The Commission further discussed identifying opportunities to use RCT services for downtown events where parking is limited or a hassle to help to raise the visibility of RCT among potential users who have a choice, as well as entertained the possibility of collaborating with RCT for some sort of public awareness campaign.

6. **Old Business:** Ms. Lowe reviewed a section in the old plan regarding the Newport Derby Road that we found out of date. After hearing the commission's thoughts, Ms. Lowe will draft new language and present it to the board at a future meeting.

Ms. Lowe also enlightened the commission to the 2021 State Rail Plan with the perspective of growth and expansion of use of the rail line in Newport. Weight capacity is an issue. The 21 bridges to the south can handle a lower weight than the rail which will require an astronomical number of resources to mitigate. If freight rail can make a comeback, that will entice passenger service. We also want our bylaws to encourage areas for possible rail amenities for transferring freight and passengers, and make sure that existing commercial/industrial properties with rail access retain rail access. Once those capacities are lost through redevelopment or reuse, they are very hard to get back. We have recently learned that the requirements to get a CDL are becoming more rigorous and expensive which could impact the number of CDL drivers.

7. **New Business:** Keep in mind the June 15, 2022, Community Summit Update. More to come on that.

8. **Set a draft agenda:** the next regularly scheduled Planning Commission Meeting will be held on Tuesday, February 15, 2022, at 6:00pm. Agenda will be like the agenda for tonight. Anne Lawless from Heat Squad will be the guest speaker.
9. **Adjourn.** Motion made to adjourn by Ms. O'Connell and seconded by Mr. Mead. Meeting adjourned at 8:21pm.

Respectfully Submitted by Laura Dolgin
Unofficial Until Approved

Approved this _____ day of _____, 2022

Chair, City of Newport Planning Commission



Rural Community Transportation, Inc.

Offices in Lyndonville, Newport, and Morrisville

RCT's Mission

Our Mission is to provide public transportation services for everyone that are safe, reliable, accessible, and affordable to enhance the economic, social and environmental health of the communities we serve.

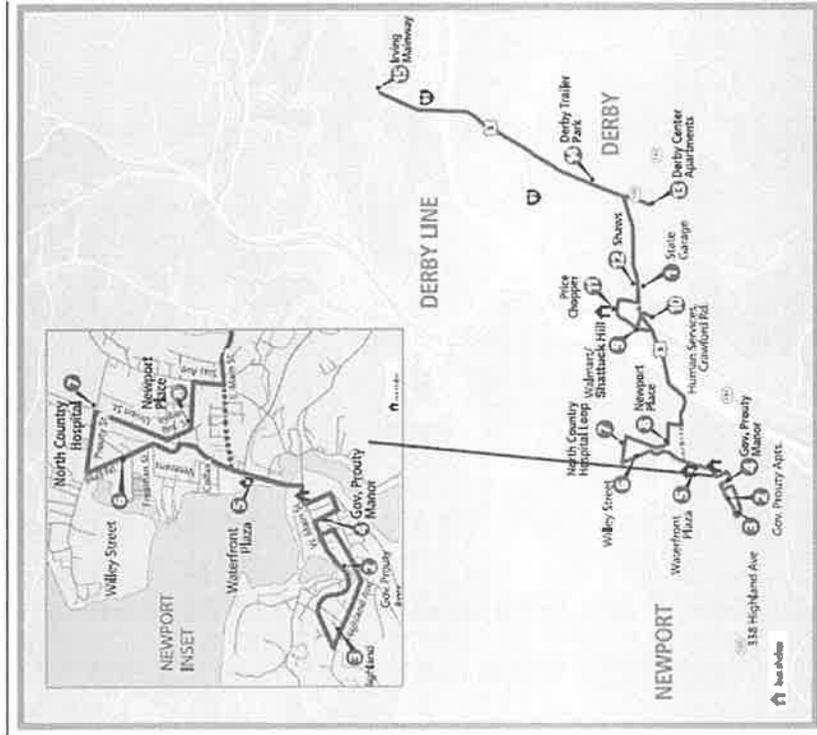
Services We Provide

- Commuter Bus Routes
- Shopper Bus Routes
- Non Emergency Medical Transportation (Medicaid)
- Elderly and Disabled
- Ride to Wellness, Recovery, Jobs
- CODS – Agency/rider pays (Airport, students, grocery delivery, etc.)
- Volunteer drivers – Reimburse for mileage @\$58.5 per mile
Can support all non-bus trips

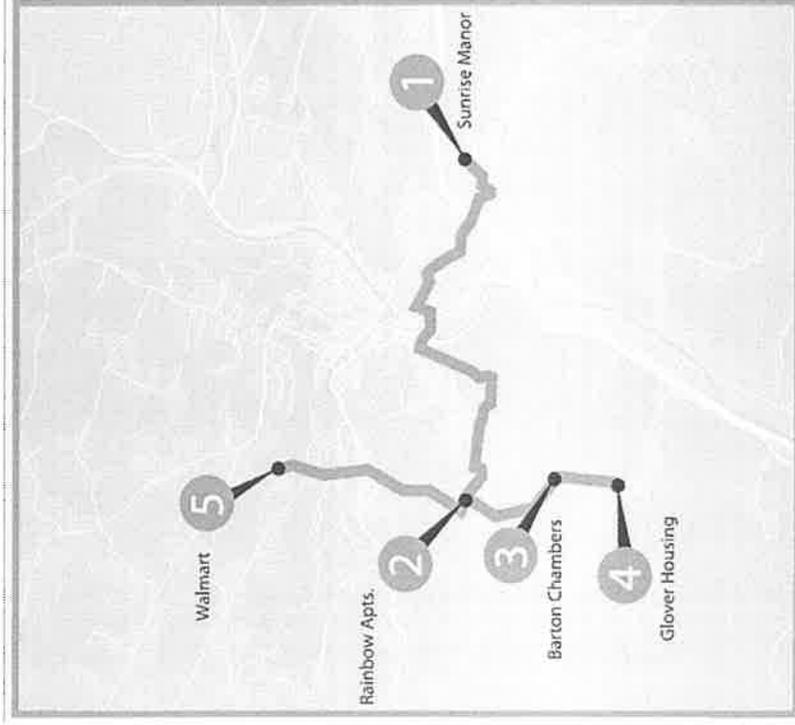
RCT's Routes

- St. Johnsbury – Lyndonville
- St. Johnsbury – Montpelier
- Morrisville – Morrisville / Johnson / Barre / Waterbury
- Newport – Highlander / Kingdom Shopper
- St. Johnsbury – Littleton, NH and Woodsville, NH

The Highlander



The Kingdom Shopper



Challenges

- Vehicles – Shortages of everything
- Drivers – Labor pool
- COVID
- Volume – Ridership approximately 50% of 2019 passengers
- Volunteer Drivers – approximately 50% of 2019 volunteers

What's New?

- New route in Burke servicing the hotel and Kingdom Trails
- Two electric vehicles will be added to the fleet

How Can We Help Newport?