

Can't get there from here

Stranded in Burlington

Report of findings from the Burlington Town Meeting Transportation Committee

The Burlington Town Meeting Transportation Committee was created as an ad hoc committee in response to a warrant approved in January 2020. Its charter is to...

“Assess public and private transportation demand and proposed options available to Burlington residents and others who travel to, from, and within Burlington.”

We met weekly throughout 2020 and into 2021 to better understand the obstacles and options for getting around Burlington.

We looked at professional studies

It turns out that there's a lot of research around transportation issues in and around Burlington.

We interviewed key stakeholders

Our interviews included a broad range of people - from regional transit experts, to Burlington department heads, to seniors and high school students stuck without a ride.

We surveyed the public

We wanted to hear views from the general public. Over 300 people gave us a piece of their mind.

Without question, Covid-19 makes predictions of any sort difficult.

However, we believe that Burlington can responsibly manage its transportation future by leveraging available financial and technical resources, working with our regional neighbors, and exploring all available transportation options in Burlington.

Our report in a nutshell

Burlington does not have a coordinated transportation strategy.

Burlington has few safe, reliable transit alternatives to the automobile.

Cooperation with other towns and regional transit experts is minimal.

Burlington is not making effective use of available technical and financial resources.

Lack of a comprehensive transportation strategy puts Burlington at a competitive disadvantage.

We offer 5 recommendations

Participate in the Safe Routes to School Program.

Implement a cross-departmental transportation strategy.

Review transportation assets currently under control of the Town and the Burlington School District.

Establish a standing Town Meeting Transportation Committee.

Name a senior-level Transportation Coordinator responsible for managing the Town's transportation strategy.

What the professionals say

Like many people, we initially thought that there wasn't enough research and data to adequately understand Burlington's transportation situation. We were wrong.

In fact, there are many professional reports and studies related to transportation in and around Burlington. They share many common themes, including references to unsafe or missing sidewalks, inefficient local bus routes, and surveys that confirm the importance of local transit service.

Lack of a coordinated approach

Several studies point to a lack of coordination between public and private transit services.

“Shuttle services will often need to cross municipal lines to service significant regional destinations, such as hospitals, shopping centers, major employers, or connections to additional transit services. Where these municipal services connect, municipalities can agree to, for example, free transfers, or municipalities might find it beneficial to merge their programs completely.”

Boston Metropolitan Planning Organization (Boston MPO)

And this...

“While there are many transportation options in the Boston region, a lack of coordination between agencies continues to be a barrier with regards to improved access to desired destinations.”

Coordinated Public Transit-Human Services Transportation Plan, Boston MPO

[Mass DOT Road Safety Audit Report](#)

December 2020

[Middlesex 3 - Future of Transportation](#)

November 2020

[Pioneer Institute - Telecommuting Survey Reveals Potential for Greater Shift Towards Remote Work After COVID-19 Pandemic](#) May 2020

[Regional Age Friendly Housing and Transportation Assessment and Strategies Report of MAGIC](#)

March 2020

[Town of Burlington Streetscape Design Guideline Memorandum](#)

February 2020

[MPO: Operating a successful Community Shuttle Program](#)

August 2020

[MPO: Coordinated Public Transit-Human Services Transportation Plan](#)

2019

[Burlington Town Meeting Sidewalk Committee](#) September 2019

[Tri-Town Efficiency and Regionalization Transit Study](#)

November 2018

[Burlington Complete Streets Policy](#)

Oct 2018

[North Suburban Mobility Study](#)

May 2017

[Burlington Master Plan](#)

November 2015

The importance of access

Some studies point to the growing importance of access to transportation to maintaining property values, which we know is an important driver of Burlington finances.

“Ask any realtor, and they will tell you transit access is becoming a bigger factor in desire and housing price, even being close to a bus line. Towns without good transit are falling behind in their ability to attract new residents.”

North Suburban Mobility Study

The same study points out that the impact of transportation access is not limited to the value of housing stock.

“It is becoming harder for businesses to attract younger workers (millennials); they want to live and work in urbanized and mixed-use areas with transit.”

Consider this in the context of Burlington’s economic development initiative to attract life sciences businesses – one of the few industries where the work cannot be done remotely – to augment to our commercial tax base. A robust transportation strategy becomes a competitive advantage.

Transportation for seniors and people with disabilities

Younger workers are certainly not the only group to seek access to reliable transportation. Most studies recognize that seniors and people with disabilities have special and pervasive transportation needs.

For example...

“...approximately one-third of seniors have a disability. With a projected increase in the share of the population in this age cohort, the share of the population with disabilities may increase as well. These data suggest that transportation providers in the Boston region will increasingly have to plan for the transportation needs of seniors and people with disabilities as they make up an increasing share of the region’s population. These patterns are likely to shape the demand for transportation by increasing the need for transportation that serves seniors and people with disabilities into the foreseeable future.”

Coordinated Public Transit-Human Services Transportation Plan, Boston MPO

Burlington has begun the subsidized Lyft ride-hailing service aimed at Burlington’s seniors, but the service’s support for non-seniors with disabilities is not clear. As the MPO study suggests, it is likely that more work remains to be done in Burlington.

Transportation for young people

On the other end of the age spectrum, various studies and transportation experts recognize the transportation needs of students and young people.

“In the same way that older adults are more likely to ride transit than the general population, so are young adults and youth aged 10 to 24 who either

cannot drive or do not own a vehicle. This demographic is also increasingly seeking alternative transportation options beyond the automobile.”

Tri-Town Efficiency & Regionalization Transit Study

And this...

“You will see that one recommendation is to integrate with school transportation resources. The reason for this is that is where the bulk of our transportation dollars go, and despite that, at least in Lexington, there are many demands from families for more flexible transportation. In fact, in 2011, in a survey as to why more families don’t use the school bus, they stated they wanted more flexible transportation, and a school committee memo from that time also noted that families wanted a more “MBTA-like” service”.

**Susan Barrett, Lexington Transportation Coordinator,
referring to the Tri-Town Efficiency & Regionalization Study**

A missed opportunity

One program that promises to help communities like Burlington address the transportation needs of its students is the Safe Routes to School Program.

The Massachusetts Department of Transportation’s Safe Routes to School program is a free, federally funded, grades K-8, public school initiative that works to increase safe biking and walking by using a collaborative, community-focused approach that bridges the gap between health and transportation. Positive programmatic outcomes include increasing physical activity, enhancing academic achievement, lowering absenteeism and tardiness, improving air quality, and easing traffic congestion while fostering the growth of safe and sustainable communities.

The Safe Routes to School Program was recommended by the Sidewalk Committee to the School Committee in late 2019 but has not been adopted by them or the Town.

The studies are not a surprise

The findings of the various studies that we examined mirror what Burlington residents and businesses already know. As early as 2015, their views were made known during the community outreach that was performed to create Burlington’s most recent Master Plan.

“Residents and business owners alike expressed interest in additional regional connections to surrounding towns and extended service to the Burlington Mall/business park areas outside of conventional business hours.”

And this...

“The responses from residents consistently indicated that there was a general lack of pedestrian infrastructure, including dangerous crossings, missing sidewalks, and sidewalks in poor condition. Residents also listed destinations where they would like to walk but feel unsafe, and locations with good infrastructure.”

Transportation section of the Master Plan

The interviews

We invited over a dozen individuals and organizations to speak to us and describe their perspective on Burlington's transportation puzzle. Here's some of what we heard and learned.

Sidewalks, sidewalks, sidewalks

We heard a lot about an issue that has been a hot topic in Burlington for many years. Almost all of the people we interviewed mentioned the absence of a contiguous network of sidewalks that would allow Burlington residents to walk safely to destinations in town.

Commenting on safe access to parks and recreation areas in Burlington, Brendan Egan said,

“Overall, sidewalks are probably the biggest thing for us that we’d like to see more of.”

Mr. Egan went on to observe that unsafe and non-contiguous pavements and sidewalks are barriers to using the fields, requiring a car to get to them.

Steve Morin picked up the theme by talking about walking as a form of recreation.

“...the other thing I always think about sidewalks is they’re not just transportation but they’re also recreation, they are an extension of the Recreation Department to some extent”.

We heard from several department heads that, unfortunately, the existing street network in Burlington presents a major challenge to establishing such a sidewalk network.

“There are a lot of Streets in Town that are too narrow, with no room for a sidewalk”

John Sanchez

In the same vein, we heard from the Burlington Police Department that, although they are aware of the dangers posed to

Burlington Against Racism Youth
(BAR Youth) *Burlington High School*

Burlington Board of Selectmen
Selectmen Nick Priest and Mike Runyan

Burlington Planning Department
Kristin Kassner, Director

Burlington Economic Development Dept
Melissa Tintocalis, Director

Burlington DPW
John Sanchez, Director

Burlington Police Department
Tom Browne, Assistant Chief

Burlington Council On Aging
Marge MacDonald, Director

Burlington School Department
Bob Cunha, Director of Operations

Burlington Parks and Recreation Dept
Brendan Egan, Director

Veteran Affairs Office
Chris Hanafin, Veterans Service Officer

Disability Access Commission
Chris Hanafin, Department Head

Disability Access Commission
Maura Mazzocca, Co-chair

Burlington Town Meeting
Ways & Means - Sidewalk Committee
Steve Morin, Committee Chair

Middlesex 3 Coalition
Stephanie Cronin, Executive Director

pedestrians and bicyclists in Burlington, many of the roads in town – including major connecting roads – are too narrow to legally support dedicated bike lanes or sidewalks.

Nevertheless, the pervasive desire we heard about walking around Burlington safely points to the necessity to get creative and make sidewalks a top priority for the town.

Young people are at a disadvantage

We spoke with a group of Burlington High School students who spoke at length about the dangers and missed opportunities they face due to a lack of safe reliable transportation. We heard that a significant number of BHS students are unable to participate in after-school sports or other activities because they have no way to get home.

“Most of the freshmen and sophomores that participate in sports are unable to have reliable modes of transportation to and from schools”.

Burlington high school student

We also heard that because of the Covid-19 reduction in school bus service, many students were forced to walk along busy Cambridge Street to get to school.

Steve Morin made similar observations about the challenges faced by teenagers in Burlington. *“Teenagers are car dependent as there is no public transportation.”*

The committee found the testimony from the high school students to be particularly compelling, in no small measure due to the fact that they are often forgotten in discussion of community-wide transportation issues.

Veterans are affected too

We heard from Chris Hanafin, from the Veteran Affairs Office, that veterans have two mobility issues - within Burlington and outside of Burlington. He told us that he has taken to driving older veterans to their medical appointments in his personal vehicle.

He said,

“The biggest shortfall that I see for veterans is transportation from their homes to a VA facility”.

As with the conversation about transportation challenges facing young people in town, the committee was struck by the fact that our veterans also appear to be forgotten in the conversation.

Many conversations, common themes

We heard from many voices from inside and outside of Burlington. Several common themes came up repeatedly in separate calls.

- People need a way to safely walk around town. We simply must find a way to overcome the physical limitations of the way that Burlington has grown over the years. Undoubtedly, this will require some creative thinking.

- Many communities have been forgotten in the conversation about transportation – young people, non-seniors with disabilities, veterans, people unable to afford an automobile, etc.
- There is a strong desire for safer ways to ride bicycles in town. However, the terrain and current roadway designs make that difficult. This appears to be yet another area for a creative approach to the problem.
- Several of the regional transportation advocates that we spoke to appeared genuinely thrilled to be invited to speak to a group in Burlington – because they are so rarely invited to do so. It appears that Burlington is not recognized as a player in regional discussions of transportation options and initiatives.
- We have a communication problem. The committee held its interviews remotely, usually in separate calls. We found that the people we spoke to often touched on the same themes - such as the need for contiguous sidewalks - but that they sometimes were unaware of the other people's similar problems, efforts, or even of each other's existence. The lack of coordination and cooperation was striking.

In general, we discovered a strong and present desire from many stakeholders and interest groups in Burlington and nearby towns for safer, more convenient, and reliable ways to get access to what Burlington has to offer. However, these groups do not appear to have found a common means by which to share their concerns and potential solutions.

After these calls, the members of the committee often wondered aloud how a common focal point for transportation issues might lead to better conversations and better outcomes.

The people's voice

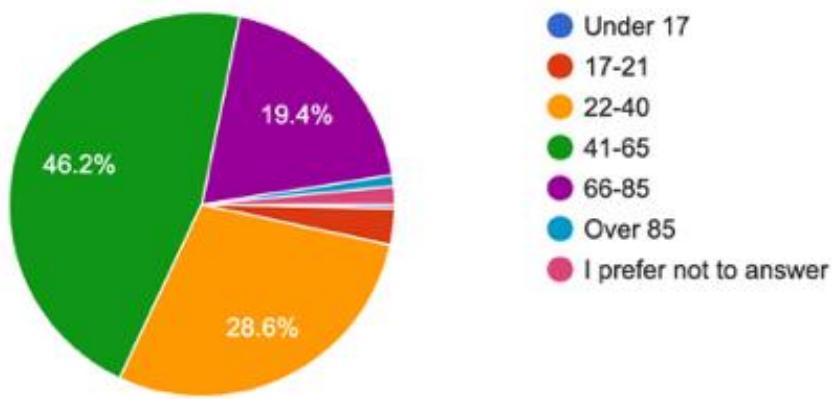
To get a fresh take on transportation, we created and published a 10-question web survey in early February 2021. Through the end of March 2021, we have received over 325 responses. We expect that with more time and wider promotion of the survey, we would receive even more input from under-represented groups like seniors, students, and people with limited access or skills with a computer.

Approximately 95% of the respondents live in Burlington.

Here's some of what they told us.

Wide range in ages

Of the over 300 people who took the survey, nearly 75% were between 22 and 65. Seniors (65 and older) accounted for 20% of the responses.



The relatively low number of seniors responding to the survey is somewhat surprising. It is widely assumed that seniors are a major consumer of public transit and therefore most likely to be interested in participating in the survey. Either that assumption is wrong, or seniors are underrepresented in this survey. We need a better way to gauge the transportation demand in the elder community.

Wide range of destinations

Burlington has a lot to offer. Judging from the survey results, people are trying to take advantage of much of it.

Where people are headed

Shopping	79%
Working	32%
Dining	71%
Medical visit	58%

Surprisingly, the survey indicated that there was no apparent "surge" time for travel in Burlington. Travel times appeared to be evenly distributed between time of day and weekday vs weekend.

Only 5% of the people contributing to the survey said that they were just passing through. This number might be expected to go up as more people return to pre-Covid-19 commuting patterns.

Popular alternatives

According to the survey, walking (at 67%) was the most popular alternative to driving an automobile to get around Burlington.

The runner-up was a close 3-way tie:

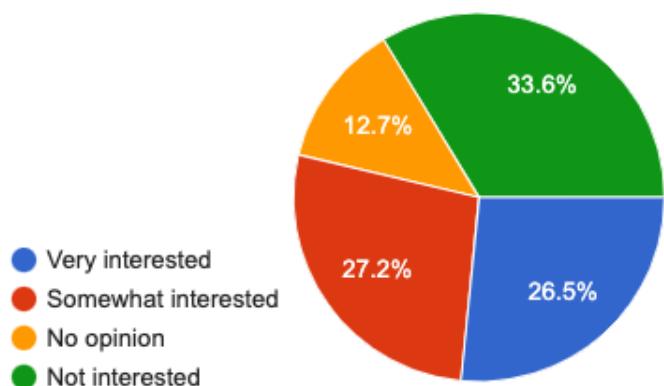
Bus: 21%

Bike: 27%

Ride share (Uber/Lyft): 28%

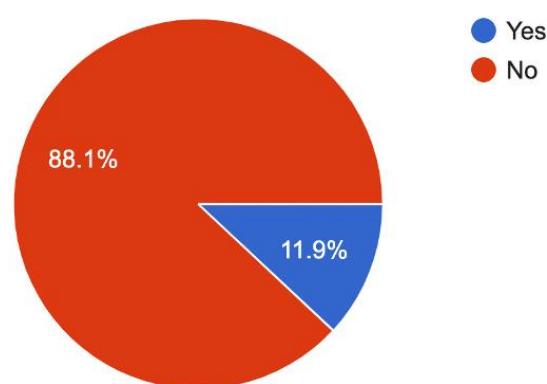
Making connections

Nearly 54% of respondents expressed some degree of interest in connecting to transit hubs outside of Burlington.



Missed opportunities

Just over 11% of the respondents said that they had been forced to give up an opportunity (educational, athletic, volunteer, employment, etc.) due to a lack of transportation.

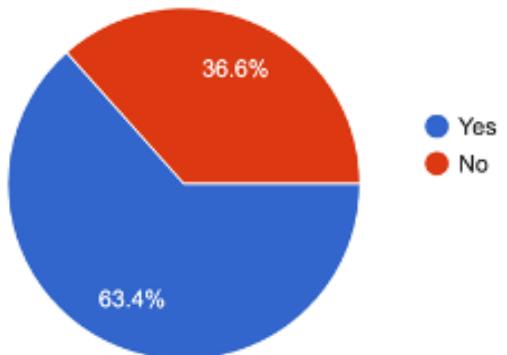
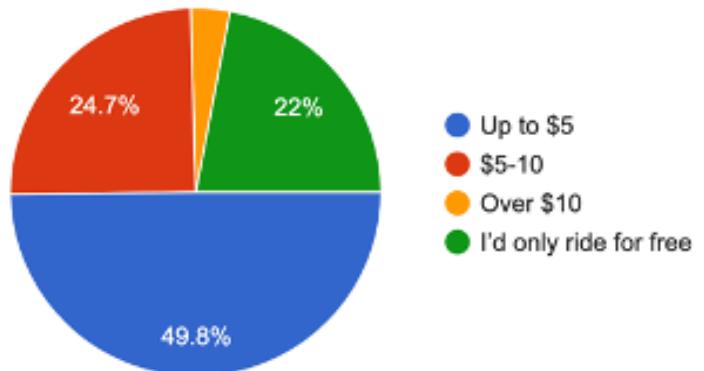


What people might pay for a ride

Nearly half of the respondents indicated that they would pay up to \$5 for a ride to a Burlington destination.

Another 25% would pay up to \$10.

A slightly smaller number, 22%, said that they didn't want to pay anything.



Just over 63% of the respondents said that they expected the Town to subsidize the cost of alternative means of transportation, such as sidewalks, bicycle lanes, and public transit.

Divergent views

Some respondents commented that Burlington is a small town with no need to look at transportation options.

Other respondents were extremely interested in alternatives to cars, specifically sidewalks and bike lanes.

Our observations and conclusions

- No champion in town for transportation issues.
- No or little coordination between Burlington municipal departments.
- No consistent outreach to regional transportation experts and advocacy groups.
- No coordinated actions taken on Safe Routes to Schools Program.
- No apparent coordination between Burlington and state agencies and elected officials regarding transportation issues.
- No follow-through on the Complete Streets Program.
We've done the work to make it to the final tier of applicants, but we have not yet submitted a bid for the money that is available in each May and October through 2022.
- No published transportation strategy and nobody to implement it.
- No **single** individual responsible for transportation, in the broad sense of the word, such as: vehicles, buses, pavements, crosswalks, local transit, bus stops, Veterans Affairs, or COA transportation issues.
- Inadequate/non-existent before and after school transportation for middle school and high school students.
- The Lyft program serves only a limited population, according to age or through a means test. There are no milestones set for success or failure.
- We are at a competitive disadvantage when trying to attract life sciences companies. We cannot compete with towns that offer easy, safe access to amenities, and convenient public transportation. This means decreased revenues.
- The town is segregated into multiple areas of commercial and recreational interest without safe and convenient linkage.
- Transportation solutions implemented in Burlington to date do not address pressing environmental and climate issues.
- It's simply not fair. By not acting to provide equal, safe, and dependable transportation access, we are saying that you need to own a car in order to be a full citizen of Burlington with all the rights of access to Burlington resources. That doesn't seem right.

Recommendations

1. The Burlington School District should immediately participate in the Safe Routes to School program, which is a free, federally funded program. Among other initiatives, it offers a district-wide cohesive approach to walking, biking, and overall safety to our schools.

This recommendation was previously made by the Sidewalk Committee in 2019.

2. The Town Administrator should implement a cross-departmental transportation strategy starting with - and in accordance with - the transportation recommendations of the 2015 Burlington Master Plan, which include:

- Actively encourage and support multi-modal transportation to reduce traffic congestion and encourage a sustainable, healthy, and livable community.
- Support and facilitate expanded use of public transit in Burlington.
- Improve the pedestrian experience and facilities to support them in Burlington.
- Improve the experience and facilities for bicyclists in Burlington.
- Manage traffic demand to reduce congestion and provide alternative modes by promoting private sector solutions and regional coordination.
- Provide for better traffic circulation and a more efficient street network through improvements and traffic management practices that also reduce congestion and improve convenience for the residents of Burlington.
- Improve safety for motorists, pedestrians, and bicyclists.

The 2015 Master Plan (currently pending approval) provides additional specific recommendations and implementation details.

For example, the Town Administrator, Town Engineer, and Assistant Town Engineer should take advantage of our Tier 3 status in the Complete Streets Program to apply for grant funding up to \$400,000 in the next funding rounds.

3. The Board of Selectmen's transportation sub-committee should conduct a review of the Town's and the School Department's current transportation assets (such as vans and buses) and report to the September 2021 Town Meeting. Subsequent to the report to Town Meeting, the sub-committee should work with the Town Administrator to devise a plan to optimize the use of these resources for Burlington residents.
4. Town Meeting should establish a standing Transportation Committee to provide guidance on transportation related issues, review warrant articles, and report to Town Meeting members.
5. The Town Administrator should name a dedicated senior-level Transportation Coordinator answering directly to the Town Administrator. The Transportation Coordinator would be responsible for implementing the Town's cross-departmental transportation strategy, as described in the recommendations above.

Submitted by the Burlington Town Meeting Transportation Committee

Mildred Nash, Chair	TMM Precinct 3
Jennifer Gelinas, Vice Chair	Planning Department
Eileen Sickler	TMM Precinct 4
Patricia O'Brien	TMM Precinct 2
Myrna Saltman	TMM Precinct 2
John Strauss	Resident
David Van Camp	TMM Precinct 7

Appendix

These are a few of the transportation resources that we used to compile this report.

Burlington resources

Burlington Transportation: <https://www.burlington.org/736/Transportation>

DPW Pavement Management: <https://www.burlington.org/444/Pavement-Management>

Burlington Master plan: <https://ma-burlington.civicplus.com/DocumentCenter/View/3638/Masterplan-Transportation>

External resources

MPO: <https://www.ctps.org/home>

MPO's Coordinated Public Transit–Human Services Transportation Plan:

<https://www.ctps.org/cpt-hst> supports improved coordination of transportation for seniors and people with disabilities in the Boston region. Organizations like MPO can help Burlington connect with multiple technical assistance and funding sources. We might not be taking full advantage at present.

“The Boston Region Metropolitan Planning Organization (MPO) is responsible for conducting the federally required metropolitan transportation planning process for the Boston metropolitan area.”

MAPC: <https://www.mapc.org/transportation/>

MAPC’s Transportation Department promotes sustainable transportation and strong infrastructure throughout the region in many ways, including transportation corridor planning, parking and land use studies, participating in projects to build bicycle and pedestrian infrastructure, coordinating transportation funding programs, and advocating for transportation finance reform. MAPC is one of 22 members of the Boston Metropolitan Planning Organization (MPO), which carries out comprehensive and cooperative transportation planning in the region.

Middlesex 3 Transportation Management Association (TMA):

<https://www.middlesex3tma.com/>

The Middlesex 3 Transportation Management Association (TMA) has been formed by the Middlesex 3 Coalition to address transportation issues in the region which includes the communities of Bedford, Billerica, Burlington, Chelmsford, Lowell, Tewksbury, Tyngsborough, and Westford, Massachusetts.

128 Business Council: <https://128bc.org/>

As advocates for green communities and better transportation solutions, we plan and execute shuttle services [throughout the Route 128 West Corridor and beyond](#), providing over 200,000 rides annually that connect major employers and residential communities to public transit hubs.