

## Strategies for Non-Car Access to Essential Services

Christine Bellmyer, Rob Fish, Anera Foco, Nicholas Leggett

### **Problem definition:**

Land use planning and its relationship with transportation are determinative of quality of life in the modern western world. The spatial allocation of essential services and facilities for a community (healthcare centers, grocery stores, fire stations, schools, administrative buildings, residences) and the means by which one can efficiently access these services and facilities is an issue of vital importance for the well-being of communities and individuals. When the composition of a community is such that access to essential services like hospitals or grocery stores is limited or is unreasonably taxing to achieve, strategies must be devised and implemented by policy makers and community leaders to make these locations more accessible. A demographic that represents the most transportation-challenged people are refugees who reside in the City of Winooski. Strategies that can serve to overcome the considerable transportation barriers of access to essential services for this community can provide helpful insights into strategies that can work for other transportation-challenged demographics.

The City of Winooski has had a seemingly intractable accessibility issue. The city itself, being only 1.5 square miles in size, is a walkable city with a highly developed downtown area. The downtown area's development is the result of a revitalization initiative the City Council of Winooski launched in the early 2000s. Despite the remarkable success the initiative has produced with respect to high-density residential and commercial zones, there are essential facilities that remain inaccessible to Winooski residents.

The examples of grocery stores and health care offices are presented as essential services not available, and therefore inaccessible, within the City of Winooski. The City's relatively diminutive size lends itself to the notion that there would naturally be certain facilities, even essential facilities, that would logically be located outside the city given the limits of developable land available. The issue at hand, however, is one of access. Despite being located outside of the city, residents of the City of Winooski must still purchase groceries and attend medical appointments, making the issue of accessibility to those facilities a matter of vital importance.

The City of Winooski is home to several refugee communities that have been arriving in the City for over two decades from across the globe. These new Winooski residents are made to navigate their new home-city in a language they are unfamiliar with, in a cultural environment they are unaccustomed to, and for many, using modes of transportation that are wholly foreign to them.

For most Americans, owning a personal vehicle is a common aspiration. Access to essential and recreational locations becomes virtually boundless through vehicle ownership. As personal vehicles have emerged as the predominant mode of transportation for Americans, American towns and cities of structured themselves under the assumption of near universal vehicle ownership by adult residents. The City of Winooski, albeit a comparatively walkable city, is an example of American land use planning placing essential services in locations only reachable by vehicle. Refugees do not enjoy the same agency in owning or operating a vehicle as most Americans; in many cases, they must rely on alternative modes of transportation (bike/ped, public transportation, etc.) to gain access. Currently, grocery stores and medical offices remain largely beyond the ability of refugees or any Winooski resident without a personal vehicle to access. As it is unlikely that refugees will be able to develop the financial wherewithal and aptitude to own and operate a personal vehicle, it is imperative that alternative modes of transportation be devised and implemented so access to essential services and facilities can be possible for all Winooski residents.

## **Winooski, Food Desert**

In 2009, the U.S. Department of Agriculture classified Winooski as a food desert, or a low-income area where a substantial number of residents have a low access to a supermarket or grocery store. Vermont's only other food deserts are in the Northeast Kingdom and the Old North End in Burlington. According to the same source, 44 percent of Winooski residents live more than a mile from the only grocery store, Shaw's. The lack of access to a grocery store is further exacerbated by the following facts:

- Public transportation is not available to the Shaw's grocery store and last available CCTA bus stop is approximately 0.7 of a mile from the grocery store.
- The last evening CCTA bus runs at 6:15 and there is no bus service available until 11:25 pm, leaving a huge public transportation gap.
- Sidewalks stop approximately 0.5 mile from the grocery store and pedestrians and bicyclists have to maneuver up to 6 lanes of traffic without access to sidewalks.
- Winooski has become a refugee resettlement hub and access to grocery store affects refugees disproportionately more than the American - born Winooski residents.
  - Studies show that 28 percent of Winooski residents do not have access to private vehicles.
  - In refugee instances the number is just as opposite. Refugees who are residing in Winooski rely heavily on the public transportation (60%), walking (15%) and bicycling (2%) in their daily commute.

The Winooski Downtown Redevelopment Project has revitalized the town but has failed to attract expected number of businesses. Winooski retail vacancy is costing the community almost \$150,000 a year in lost tax revenue.

### **Recommendations:**

1. **Fresh Food Financing Initiative** - Presently there are a dozen or more small "mom & pop" style convenience stores scattered throughout Winooski. Despite their diversity these convenience stores cannot resolve access to affordable and healthy foods for Winooski residents. To this end, one of possible solutions could be a public-private partnership among the Federal/State, local government and grocers to create grant and loan programs to help convenience stores locate in Winooski obtain more fresh produce and healthier foods while bringing the prices down. This program, like Pennsylvania Fresh Food Financing Initiative, lets people shop for nutritious food in their neighborhoods instead of having to struggle to get to distant grocery stores. In addition, this initiative promotes economic development in lower-income communities.

2. **Extend CCTA bus route to Shaw and Extend sidewalks to Shaw**

This will improve residents' mobility, safety, and accessibility to grocery store.

Roadblocks to extending sidewalks and moving the bus stop is complicated by the issue of Colchester and Winooski Town lines. Since Shaw's is technically in Colchester and not Winooski, Colchester might not be sympathetic to the needs of Winooski residents. In addition, Colchester has opted out of participation in the CCTA pooling system and once again since Shaw's is technically in Colchester there are minimal chances that Colchester can be persuaded to participate in CCTA for the sake of Winooski residents.

In addition, both of these endeavors, even if the town line was not an obstacle, could be cost prohibitive especially for a community, like Winooski, that is losing about \$150,000 in tax revenue annually .

### **Tilley Drive**

Tilley Drive is a campus of Fletcher Allen Health Care located in South Burlington, Vermont. Services offered at this campus include orthopedics, cardiology, physical therapy, sports rehabilitation and diabetes support. Patients of Tilley Drive, who do not have access to a car, face challenges in accessing the facility. The facilities are located almost  $\frac{3}{4}$  of a mile from the last bus stop on the Burlington Circular Route. For those who are forced to walk this distance from the bus stop to the facility, there is a considerable stretch that has no sidewalk making the walk difficult and dangerous. To remedy this situation, an on demand shuttle operated by Special Service Transportation Agency (SSTA) has been put into place.

This shuttle is available to transport patients from the University Mall in South Burlington to Tilley Drive at no cost to the individual. The Tilley Drive Shuttle is funded by multiple sources, including Pizzagalli Construction, Maitri Health Care, Community Health Center of Burlington, CCTA and Fletcher Allen. This shuttle service costs \$30.90 per person based on average ridership, which is quite expensive considering it is less than 2.5 miles each way. Patients are responsible to bus fare or other transportation costs to the University Mall. This shuttle is available Monday-Thursday and requires riders to make a reservation one day prior to their trip.

Despite efforts to make Tilley Drive more accessible, it appears that the shuttle is not providing adequate service. According to CCTA data, the shuttle only had 63 individual clients in FY11 and 68 in FY10. In FY10, the number of rides taken was 161. In FY11, this number dropped to 114. It has been suggested that non-english speaking clients face challenges when trying to reserve a shuttle ride because translation services are not available. It is possible that providing translation services would increase the ridership of the shuttle.

In order to best serve patients, there needs to be better access via public transportation. There are several possible solutions, some more complex than others. The following are suggestions for solutions:

- Redesigning the Burlington Circular Route to serve Tilley Drive
  - This is not possible within the current running time of the route; therefore additional funding and a redesign of the route would be necessary.
- Shuttle service connecting the main Fletcher Allen Campus to satellite campuses
  - At this time, there has been no apparent movement from stakeholders towards this option
- Constructing a sidewalk to make it safer for patients who walk from the current bus stop

These solutions are simple in comparison to the complexity of the issue. Conversations surrounding transportation to services must be had prior to construction of new facilities to prevent similar problems in the future. Had this conversation taken place before Tilley Drive was built it may have been less complicated. The SSTA shuttle service to Tilley Drive is only Band-Aid to temporarily fix the problem. There needs to be a long-term solution that better serves patients.

### **Recommendations**

While the mobility issues that have limited the refugee communities' access to certain basic services, such as the medical offices at Tilly Drive and the Shaw's grocery store, can be address on a case by case basis, only a rethink of development patterns and society's dependency on the automobile as the primary mode of transportation can address these problems in the long-term.

As recently acknowledge and the policy amended in Burlington, requirements that businesses provide off street parking requirements for new businesses have limited infill development in the urban core. The requirement was nothing more than a hat tip to the primacy of automobile travel and often resulted in new businesses locating outside of the urban core and beyond the reach of current mass transit. Revitalizing the urban core is essential to increasingly access. Eliminating requirements for off street parking would spur commercial growth in already accessible areas. In addition, by reducing access to parking, ridership may increase generating much needed income for mass transit.

In place of parking requirements, new developments should be asked to pay a small mass transit user fee to support additional capacity. For development outside the city core, planning for mass transit and pedestrian access should be required as part of the Act 250 planning process. If a development is to be built outside of existing mass transit service areas they should be subjected to a fee that will be aggregated and used to improve transit options.

In summary, by realigning incentives to promote livable communities where access to essential services doesn't require access to an automobile, communities may be able to

reverse the very development trends that resulted in the current lack of accessibility to Tilly Drive medical services and shopping opportunities at Shaws.

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