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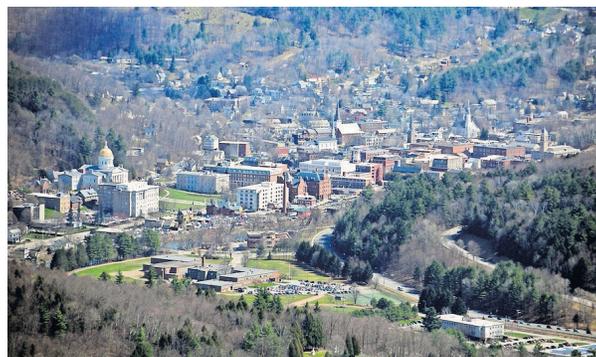
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# Breaking rule of the alpha dog

Commentary

*The Times Argus* | February 17, 2018

Elizabeth COURTNEY



*Montpelier High School, the Capitol, and downtown Montpelier are seen in this aerial photo looking south through clear air over the Capital City. STEFAN HARD / STAFF PHOTO*

Who is alpha dog in the Capital City? The economic, environmental and energy future of Vermont's Capital City,



land area. These lots prevent the construction of energyefficient residential and commercial space, send polluted runoff into the North Branch and the Winooski, while they contribute nothing to the city's grand list. And yet, they persist. Why is that? The luxury of a single-occupancy vehicle that takes you to and from work every day is surely a great convenience, but over the decades since the end of World War II, we have let the commuter car become our unleashed alpha dog. You probably wouldn't expect that moving the Farmers' Market up to State Street for the last three Saturdays of summer had anything to do with this problem. But the Sustainable Montpelier Coalition pushed for the move to test an assumption: that citizens would feel empowered by the act of taking over a major vehicular artery for pedestrian use and that they could make a major mindmove toward defeating the car's alpha position, with this change.

And sure enough, minds were moved. Opinions were changed. Skeptical farmers and shopkeepers alike were pleased with the results. Shoppers were thrilled to be in the car-free-street. The mindset of the car as alpha dog was cracked just enough for people to see another way. A car-free street can empower us to take back property "owned" by the vehicle. This summer, the market will be on State Street every Saturday. For once, the citizens of Montpelier were the alpha dog.

What if we could do that again and focus the alpha in all of us on a bigger picture. What would it take to transform a parking lot into protected and enhanced public open space, a cleaned-up

distance of schools, stores and work?

Let's take the huge, stateowned parking lot along the Winooski from the Taylor Street Bridge to the Bailey Avenue Bridge. While the state is working hard to clean up Lake Champlain — and that means all its tributaries, including the Winooski — the very same state is parking cars along that river and the polluted runoff from those parked cars, along with the sand and salt, is traveling untreated into the river. This stretch of river frontage is the major entry to the capital of Vermont. The welcome-to-Vermont arrival sequence — the very showcase for the state — takes you right by this enormous, polluting parking lot.

This lengthy parking lot should and could be a beautiful riparian park, with a model flood abatement area and a state-of-the-art stormwater treatment system, and potentially hundreds of units of energyefficient, affordable, riverfront housing units.

To start, let's assume we find a couple hundred state employees living within a four-mile radius of the downtown who could give up their access to one small part of the long lot to demonstrate how this transformation could happen. By the way, there are more than 1,000 commuters to downtown Montpelier within that radius. Those commuting employees could trade in their

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every day with guaranteed emergency pick-ups and regular errand stops, and the bonus package of a significant savings afforded in — if they so wish — letting go ownership of the car that used to sit idle all day in the state lot.

Radical, but with the advent of the on-demand vehicle services of companies like Chariot, Lyft and Via, this is a very doable scenario.

The Bailey Avenue to Taylor Street parking lot should be an embarrassment to the state of Vermont. It's a shame that Vermonters are tolerating the alpha-car's control over this precious, vulnerable, beautiful and potentially productive riverside property. Let's not allow this to continue. It's time for us to rethink the fate of this valuable real estate and put a leash on its current master, the alpha-car.

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