

# Burlington Free Press

## The future of public transit in Vermont just pulled up in Montpelier — and it's a van?

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Smaller buses and shared-ride vans will soon replace most regular bus service in Montpelier with flexible, passenger-mapped "microtransit" routes, transportation officials say.

Scheduled for an early-January launch, the mobility re-boot aims to boost convenience, shrink the number of cars that clog local streets and parking lots — and field-test a public-transit future for the rest of Vermont.

Advocates for microtransit in Chittenden County and Rutland are already studying ways to ditch existing "fixed-route/fixed-schedule" bus service, Jamie Smith, director of marketing and planning at Green Mountain Transit, said in mid-September.

"We're looking at Montpelier as a jumping-off point," Smith added. "This is step one of a greater mission."



The mission begins simply: Rather than waiting at a bus stop, passengers within a 5.5 square mile service area around Montpelier and parts of Berlin will be able summon rides for point-to-point service by telephone, smartphone app or desktop computer.

In transportation lingo, that approach is called "demand-response."

In practice, microtransit means that buses and vans won't go where they're not needed.

## Montpelier: little city, big vision

Swapping out 40-passenger buses with smaller 14- to 20-seat models and 7- to 10-seat vans is a small but important piece in a much bigger puzzle, says Dan Jones, executive director of the nonprofit Sustainable Montpelier Coalition



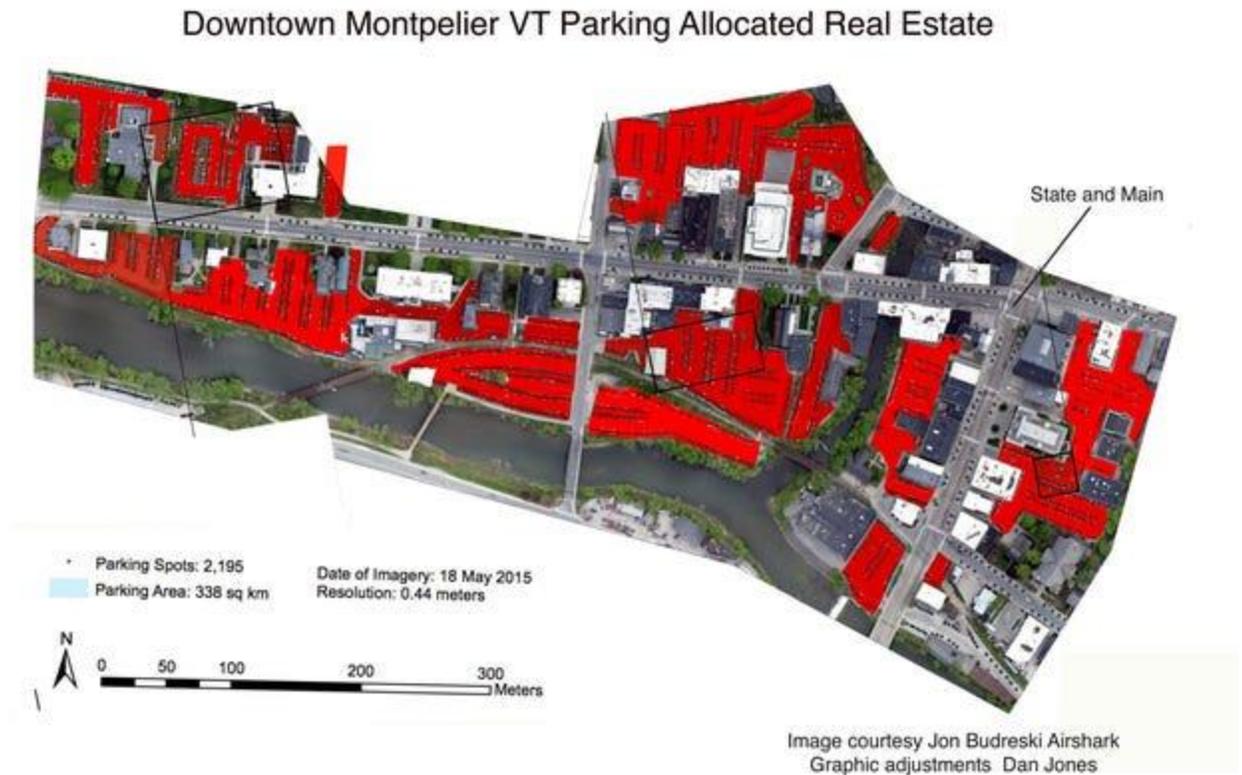
"We intend to change the conversation about transit," Jones said about his group's commitment over the past two years, and its work with GMT and the Vermont Agency of Transportation.

"But it's not just about getting on a bus," he added. "It's about getting out of cars and still going where you want to go."

A small fleet of what he calls "smart-jitneys" will improve service to current bus riders, he predicts, and will attract new customers who are weary of shoveling driveways, paying for insurance and repairs — and hunting for a parking spot.

**EARLIER: Montpelier activist lobbies against more parking lots**

Jones warms to the topic of parking, one of Montpelier's most persistent vexations. Reduce the need for parking, he says, and you open up the potential for an urban "sea-change," where vast swaths of asphalted downtown can become neighborhoods and parks.



"We think it's going to be a big deal," Jones said of the introduction and long-term significance of microtransit.

"It's a glacial force," Jones said. "It's not moving fast, but it's unstoppable."

## **If microtransit works in Montpelier...**

Throughout Vermont, planning rules that increasingly favor concentrated housing development, fewer parking spaces — and which discourage sprawl — have buoyed bus ridership, state officials say.

But that trend faces headwinds from low gas prices and the accustomed ease of door-to-door car travel, said Ross MacDonald, public transit coordinator at Vermont Agency of Transportation.



A faster embrace of transit is needed to meet the state's air-quality and carbon-footprint goals, MacDonald added; microtransit has the potential to whittle down the advantage of shorter travel time usually enjoyed by automobiles in urban and suburban settings.

Another virtue cited by MacDonald and other transportation experts: Buying into microtransit at \$1.50 - \$2 per ride, over the course of a year, will cost considerably less than buying, insuring and maintaining a car.

As of January 5 (the proposed kickoff date for Montpelier), Via Mobility LLC, the New York City-based company designing the city's system, says local

transit passengers will be pleasantly surprised to find they spend significantly less time waiting for their rides — and less time en route.

## **Microtransit in 'transit deserts'**

More than a transit cure-all, Via Mobility describes itself as a supplement.

The algorithms that dispatch vehicles in 90 municipalities in more than 20 countries fill gaps in "transit deserts," Via says, such as "first-mile and last-mile" trips to and from major train or bus stations.



There is evidence to suggest that Vermonters might favor such tweaks.

In 2019, statewide ridership grew by a modest 3.5% over the previous year according to VTrans' year-end report.

Those gains were mostly driven by folks using "demand-response" services, the report adds: the van rides called, when needed, to transport medical patients, people with disabilities and the elderly.

Using state and federal money (about \$700,000) that would have otherwise supported Montpelier's three moribund bus routes, VTTrans is banking on microtransit as a game-changer.

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