

Rethinking the Circ: Task force recommends smaller steps to ease traffic congestion

New **local** streets?

Intersection redesigns?

Encouraging people to embrace alternatives to **driving** alone?

Those might serve as alternatives to the now-defunct plans for the Circumferential Highway, says a task force set up after Gov. Peter Shumlin killed the original highway plan.

The Circ was to be a 16-mile ring road running through some of Chittenden County's busiest suburbs. Only a four-mile section in Essex was ever built.

Shumlin pulled the plug because of chronic concerns about **funding**, the highway's environmental effects and questions over whether the Circ would help alleviate traffic backups all that much.

Soon after he made the decision, Shumlin encouraged a task force to form that would explore alternatives that might help ease traffic congestion and make local roads

safer.

The Circ task force consists of about 30 people, including town officials from Colchester, Essex, Essex Junction and Williston; regional transportation planners, representatives from the Vermont Agency of Transportation and members of the local business and environmental community. (Information on the task force is available online here: www.circtaskforce.org/committees.php) Members of the task force decided to find short- and long-term solutions. Earlier this week, the group revealed some short-term options.

All of them were already at various stages of planning, so it would be relatively easy to complete environmental reviews, design and construction of the five ideas, said Michelle Boomhower of the Chittenden County Metropolitan Planning Organization, a group that sets priorities for transportation in the county.

The task force looked at the entire area along the intended path of the Circ in

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Williston, Essex and Colchester.

“This task force is looking comprehensively at the entire study area,” Boomhower said.

The five projects are:

- Reconstruction around Exit 16 of Interstate 89 in Colchester. The work would radically reconfigure lanes on U.S. 7 at the interchange to make traffic flow more smoothly. Additional turn lanes would be installed at the nearby intersections with Mountain View, Hercules and Rathe roads. The work would **cost** roughly \$5 million.
- The intersection of Vermont 2A, and Vermont 289, which is the four-mile section of the Circ that was built. The intersection was never intended to act as the terminus of the Circ; a **redesign** would prevent traffic jams there, according to the task force. The estimated cost is a little under \$800,000.
- A road, called the Crescent Connector Road, would be built in Essex Junction. It would connect Vermont 2A, also known as Park Street, and Vermont 117, also known as Maple Street. The road would allow many motorists to bypass the perennially congested Five Corners and open a underdeveloped part of Essex Junction to new stores, residences and commercial space, Essex Junction Village Manager David Crawford said. The project would cost roughly \$3 million.
- A new traffic signal, pedestrian walkways, and other improvements would go in at the intersection of Vermont 2A and

James Brown Drive in Williston. The project would cost about \$1.5 million.

- A comprehensive effort to make **car** sharing easier for the public, improve traffic signals for pedestrians, and otherwise encourage people to find alternatives to driving alone and encourage them to carpool, take public transit, use bicycles or walk, would ramp up across Chittenden County. The cost would amount to a little over \$930,000.

All of these projects are subject to local and Vermont legislative approval, Boomhower said.

Crawford said he is thrilled the Crescent Connector made it onto the task force’s list, because it increases the chances that it could be built sooner rather than later. Colchester officials have in the past expressed support for the Exit 16 improvements.

Chapin Spencer, executive director of

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Local Motion, a pedestrian and bicyclists' advocacy group, said he was pleased the effort to encourage carpooling and other **commuting** alternatives is on the list.

"It's really forward thinking in terms of how we reduce rush hour congestion," Spencer said.

A public hearing is planned next month. Federal and state money would pay for the projects, Boomhower said. Many of the projects could be completed within two years, she said.

The task force will soon turn its attention to other projects that would take more than two years, Boomhower said.

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If you go

A public hearing on the task force's short and long term transportation plans is scheduled for 7 p.m. Dec. 14 at the Albany College of Pharmacy and Health Sciences, 261 Mountain View Road, Colchester.

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