

**FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE**

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## **Baker: Chittenden County I-89 2050 Study is an Investment to Meet State and Regional Goals**

*This commentary is by Charlie Baker, Executive Director of the Chittenden County Regional Planning Commission.*

In light of Richard Watts' recent opinion piece, I would like to address the [Interstate 89 2050 Study](#) to clarify its goals and current status. I've addressed Mr. Watts' areas of concern: Climate, Equity, Travel Patterns, and Cost.

### **Context**

The [ECOS Plan](#), the regional plan for Chittenden County, meets all of Vermont's and the Chittenden County Regional Planning Commission's (CCRPC) livability, climate, energy, transportation, and environmental goals. To reach these goals, it calls for a continued increase in housing density in the areas served by transit to decrease dependency on automobiles, improve public health, decrease pressure on our rural landscape and thereby address climate change. Specifically, the ECOS Plan Metropolitan Transportation Plan (MTP) calls for an increase in density with 90% of all new housing units to be developed in planned growth areas – we have been averaging 86% the last eight years.

The ECOS Plan MTP also includes significant investment to support these compact settlement patterns by investing \$115 million in bicycle/pedestrian, transit, park & ride projects, technology and other efforts to reduce the demand on driving. These private and public investments are estimated to have the following impacts on regional travel through 2050 when compared to a business-as-usual future:

- 2.4% Reduction in Vehicle Miles Traveled
- 4.6% Reduction in Vehicle Hours of Travel
- Increase in Non-Automobile Mode-Share from about 12% to 16%
- 90% Fleet Electrification compared to 2015
- 77% Reduction in Fuel Consumption compared to 2015

However, even with all of these land use changes and investments to reduce the demand on our roadways, we only reduce the share of auto trips from 88% to 84%. It is no surprise that in a rural state like Vermont, most people must drive to get to their jobs, childcare, shopping, etc. each day.

The ECOS Plan MTP found that it is probable that traffic demand at the Exit 14 interchange and I-89 between Exits 14 and 15 will exceed available capacity. That is what sparked the I-89 2050 Study. There may well be opportunities to further reduce travel demand and there are also surely better ways to design our roads for all users than the designs of more than 50 years ago. The MTP explicitly states that we should do everything possible to reduce traffic demand before investing precious taxpayer funds in highway capacity. We have made this point repeatedly during the study process.

We are currently looking at the designs of existing and previously proposed interchanges to determine if they are needed and how their designs could be improved for bicyclists and pedestrians. The I-89 2050 Study is the opportunity to improve the interchanges to meet our goals and the needs of our residents. This is an especially important conversation in the center of Chittenden County, where interchange investments have been debated

for decades at Exit 13 and a potential Exit 12B at Route 116.

We will need to keep monitoring actual travel patterns with particular attention to the impact of increases in working from home, electric autonomous vehicles, and other changes we do not yet know about. One important principle in the I-89 2050 Study is the notion of “triggering” or not building anything on the roadway system until it is needed.

### **Climate**

The CCRPC fully supports the State’s energy and climate goals, and our 2018 regional [ECOS Plan](#) specifically addresses the State’s energy goal of 90% renewable energy by 2050. As the region’s planning agency, it is our responsibility to do everything we can to work with our municipalities and partners to achieve these goals. Reducing transportation-related impacts to the climate is an essential component of the I-89 2050 Study and is stated as such in the Draft Vision, Goals and Objectives statements, which can be viewed in full on the study website [here](#).

### **Equity**

The study is not, as Mr. Watts claims, a car-centered road study; its scope expands beyond the actual interstate and includes its exits and adjacent communities; connecting roads and bridges; public transit accessibility; walking and biking connectivity; and the mobility needs of all users – including, specifically, the groups Mr. Watts mentions. This is addressed under the Mobility & Efficiency goal, which can be viewed in full on the study website [here](#). Equity is critical to this study; hearing from and meeting the needs of all residents, including those traditionally left out of the planning process, is essential to its accuracy and usefulness. The public participation process includes gathering feedback from diverse stakeholders, and will continue throughout the duration of the study. The next phase of public participation, in February and March 2021, is a focus group series for BIPOC and other underserved populations.

Examining the future of I-89 also leads us to a conversation about economic development. While our economy is growing at a small but important pace, employees in those jobs are driving longer distances to find housing that is affordable – often outside of Chittenden County. Until that pattern changes, I-89 continues to be an essential component of our overall transportation system and a critical access route to the rest of the state. It is also a major public safety route, as our largest medical center is located directly off Exit 14. Ignoring these realities would be a disservice to our residents, most of whom live in rural areas and still need personal vehicles to access services and get to work.

### **Travel Patterns**

While this study began in 2019 prior to the pandemic, the subsequent implications are vast, which is why the study was amended to specifically outline [a commitment](#) to periodically reassessing its goals, objectives, and implementation actions to ensure its alignment with the best data and projections available.

The CCRPC and our ECOS Plan have a strong commitment to reducing travel demand. If enough people convert to other modes of transportation over the next 20-30 years (post pandemic), major capacity investments to I-89 will be unnecessary – and will not be implemented. Pre-pandemic, the trends and traffic volumes, however, show that I-89, particularly the Exit 14 area, will be over capacity before 2050. Peak hour congestion is common between Exits 12 and 17 and causes significant safety issues. While one of our roles is to enable and encourage behavioral shifts that allow Vermonters to drive less, another is to serve as the region’s planning agency and to address the data surrounding how people use the transportation system, now and in the future. It is our responsibility to plan for and explore all possible future scenarios, so we are prepared for them. We cannot ignore pre-pandemic trends, but the I-89 2050 Study acknowledges that due to uncertainties in future travel patterns, triggers will be developed to determine if, and when, to pursue major I-89 improvements.

### **Cost**

The I-89 2050 Study comes at a significant cost, including a projected increase of \$200k-\$300k for a total of

\$800k-\$900k (of which two thirds will be paid by CCRPC with the other third paid by VTrans). However, it is important to note that this amount is spread over three fiscal years and is 12% of CCRPC's approximate \$5 million direct investment in regional and local transportation-related initiatives including to Green Mountain Transit, Local Motion, CarShareVT, Chittenden Area Transportation Management Association, Vermont Energy Investment Corporation, United Way – NeighborRides, and many projects requested by our municipalities to improve safety, biking, walking, transit use, and water quality. Three projects were delayed because all three project sponsors were not ready to move forward this year; they will be included in next year's work program instead. All of our communities' transportation-related planning requests continue to be met.

We strongly encourage everyone in and outside Chittenden County to participate as this study continues to move forward so its outcomes incorporate all feedback and meet the needs of all users of this vital transportation corridor and its connecting communities. There will still be many opportunities to share your feedback, and we invite you to [visit the project website](#) or [contact us](#) for more details.

We look forward to continuing to work closely with our community as this study progresses.

Charlie Baker  
Executive Director  
Chittenden County Regional Planning Commission

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The Chittenden County Regional Planning Commission (CCRPC) provides planning and technical assistance in the areas of community development, transportation, natural resources, housing, economic development and emergency management to the 19 municipalities of Chittenden County and to the public, while remaining consistent with federal and state requirements. The collaboration between the CCRPC, Chittenden County municipalities and other related resource agencies results in the development and implementation of plans that support sustainable development and improve the region's environment and quality of life. For more information about the CCRPC, please visit [www.ccrpcvt.org](http://www.ccrpcvt.org).