

## Embracing New Transit Solutions for Vermont

The rural nature of our Green Mountain State means that many Vermonters currently rely on a personal vehicle to get them where they need to go. But other modes of transportation are essential, considering car ownership can be out of reach for many people, and reducing Vermonters' reliance on single-occupancy vehicles is pivotal to cutting climate pollution. Traditional, fixed-route transit services often work well in more urban areas but aren't an option or can't cost-effectively or efficiently serve rural Vermonters. Excitingly, a fairly new approach known as micro-transit sometimes referred to as a "rural Uber," has the potential to play a meaningful role in rounding out transportation services that can serve all Vermonters.

In a small, rural state like Vermont, micro-transit and on-demand modeling offer real promise when it comes to finding solutions to overcoming Vermont's public transportation challenges and heavy reliance on single-occupancy vehicles. Transportation is the largest source of air pollution and accounts for nearly half of the greenhouse gas emissions in Vermont. Our transportation infrastructure is built on a system designed to predominantly support singular occupancy vehicular traffic. Vermont has been working hard to build out the state's sustainable and accessible transportation infrastructure, but there is still a lack of affordable, convenient, and reliable transportation to schools, jobs, and doctor's offices. Getting off fossil fuels for transportation presents one of the biggest opportunities to reduce energy use, climate pollution, and energy costs in Vermont. Supporting micro transit and other on-demand models that utilize new methods for accessible and flexible transit is an important pathway to do so while also working to overcome these systemic barriers and inequities in how we can get around.

Gopher is a new pilot transportation program serving central Vermonters in Washington county and 3 neighboring towns of Washington, Orange, and Williamstown. Operated by Community Rides Vermont, "Gopher aims to meet your everyday transportation needs by providing convenient door-to-door rides to and from work, appointments and errands, as well as to social and recreational activities." Its fleet of cars consists of zero emission SUVs and electric sedans and its flexible/unique model enables Gopher to serve Vermonters in remote areas at times of the day when it's harder to get a ride. Gopher offers both a subsidized fare free option for qualifying customers and a market priced service fare for everyone else who wants to take advantage of this convenient and sustainable option for transportation.



Gopher's new model of on demand/demand response micro transit with fare free rides through its Mobility For All program is increasingly being seen as where transit in Vermont needs to move towards. However, it does not come without growing pains. Due to existing silos, not everyone or every trip is

eligible for the Mobility For All (MFA) program. These situations generally arise when someone doesn't understand the complexities of the existing transportation system. The MFA program is intended to fill in the gaps of the existing transportation system, so if someone is eligible for another program (such as the Medicaid transportation program), they would need to book their ride in that program. Gopher understands that the public transportation system can be difficult to navigate. They have been able to add a position, Mobility Manager, that's specific to assisting people navigate the public transportation system. If they're not eligible for Gopher's subsidized rides program, the Mobility Manager will assist them with figuring out their eligibility in other existing programs.

Below is a map of the service area Gopher operates within, however, they will travel outside, if needed, for appointments:



The nature of the rides Gopher provides span from reoccurring rides to work, to assisting families living at local motels access State services, to family enriching activities, to accessing medical care. This past year, a family that was evicted and moved to a shelter requested Gopher's assistance transporting their children to their school of origin. Gopher was able to provide transportation until a more formal contract was established with the school. And, in Gopher's recently launched weekend service, Sunday mornings have been busy as they help transport people to church service. Prior to the launch of weekend service, there were no other public transit services available in Central Vermont on Sundays. Riders shared, usually through a phone call, their gratitude, and what a difference it has made to be able to access church and social activities.

Gopher is currently outpacing its current capacity, which is a good problem to have. They are in a continued growth stage going into the end of 2024 working on hiring more drivers and adding vehicles to the fleet. Community Rides Vermont welcomes all donations to support this important and exciting pilot program working to solve Vermont's transportation challenges. You can find more information on who qualifies for the subsidized program and details on their [website](#). Additionally, for contact information

and to learn more about the Mobility For All/Subsidized service or Vehicle For Hire service and/or to schedule a ride, call 1-855-GOPHER5 or 1-855-467-4375. Office hours are Monday-Sunday 8:00 AM – 5:00 PM (unless otherwise posted) or email [rides@communityridesvt.org](mailto:rides@communityridesvt.org).

Resources:

Learn more about Gopher:

<https://gophervt.org/>

Find a ride in Vermont:

<https://capstonevt.org/find-a-ride>

GMT programs:

<https://ridegmt.com/regional-programs/>

Contact:

Kati Gallagher, Sustainable Communities Director, Vermont Natural Resources Council –

<[kgallagher@vnrc.org](mailto:kgallagher@vnrc.org)>

Community Rides Vermont, Information and Support –

<[rides@communityridesvt.org](mailto:rides@communityridesvt.org)> or [855-467-4375](tel:855-467-4375)