

## **Modernizing the Infrastructure of Our Cities and Towns Including Public Transportation**

### **Self Advocacy Leadership Team (SALT)**

We are the Self Advocacy Leadership Team (SALT) and we are writing to ask that you designate more money in the state budget towards solving critical issues with our transportation infrastructure. Our group serves as consultants to the New Hampshire Council on Developmental Disabilities and other Advocacy organizations. All of our board members experience disability in one form or another. We are committed to addressing the issues that keep citizens with disabilities from living quality lives in the community. But today we write to you on behalf of all New Hampshire citizens because the issue of transportation is one that effects everyone. According to the US Department of Transportation, transportation is a critical component of a Livable Community.

EngAGING NH strongly supports the SALT (Self Advocacy Leadership Team) initiative to compile the personal stories of its members. The initiative is intended to underscore the importance of transportation and mobility issues that must be addressed in order to progress toward the development of Livable Communities, where all people would have access to adequate, affordable, and environmentally sustainable travel options.

EngAGING NH is an all-volunteer not-for-profit organization registered with the State of NH. We work to support and promote activities, policies, planning and values that respect and include ALL older adults.

## Something to think about

The Transportation for America - Dangerous by Design report states: “Between 2000 and 2009 100 people were killed while walking in New Hampshire, which cost the state \$430.0 million. Reducing pedestrian fatalities just 10% would have saved New Hampshire \$43.00 million over 10 years.”

67% of all pedestrian fatalities occur on federally funded roadways. Only 1.5% of the federal funds put aside for making these roadways safer is being used.

<http://t4america.org/resources/dangerousbydesign2011/>

## Introduction

Thriving communities are safe and support full inclusion by responding to the diverse needs of the citizens. People have a strong need to belong and be productive. This can be particularly challenging when you choose not to or are unable to drive. Due to rising gas prices research shows that Americans are driving less than they were just a few years ago. The media is constantly bombarding us with stories about the obesity epidemic and the need to increase our physical activity. Walking and biking would be the simplest and less costly form of exercise but it can be risky getting around on dangerous streets without enough crosswalks and too few sidewalks. The sidewalks that do exist are often in disrepair. If walking or riding a bike is difficult or impossible then safe sidewalks are essential in order to access the community and public transportation. Redesigning the infrastructure in our cities and towns, including full access to public transportation would allow everyone to safely get around the way they wanted to. This would create a stronger economy, greater energy security, a cleaner environment, and healthier citizens.

There comes a time in life when driving a car is not an option. Almost all drivers outlive their driving abilities. Given NH's limited public

transportation, "no car" can mean a reduced quality of life. Many older people are faced with a number of transportation and mobility issues in every town across the state. To name a few, they include: the expense of operating a car, the high cost of taxis, limited public transportation services, difficulties in accommodating special needs, curbs where they should not be, poorly maintained roads and sidewalks, snow and ice-covered walkways.

Those now in or entering their retirement years have enjoyed unparalleled freedom of daily travel and movement unknown to previous generations. We will want to remain active and mobile as we age. However, like every other prior generation, abilities such as strength, vision, reaction times, and short-term memory deteriorate, often so slowly that it's difficult to determine when to stop driving.

Where public transportation does exist, rules and regulations that come with the funding often limit the service to certain categories of people such as 'for older people over a certain age' or 'for people with a disability of a certain type', or 'for people of a specified income range who need transportation to medical appointments'. The same barriers apply to private, not-for-profit organizations that receive federal funding for the provision of transportation to their clients. School buses, for example, are usually limited to transporting school children. This may all be further complicated by regulations and insurance requirements.

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## Our Stories

**Our member, Roberta who is a resident of Concord, slipped one winter and came very close to injuring herself. As a result she now is forced to ride a taxi to work in the winter months.**

*“One of the many issues we face within our communities occurs in the winter. The Americans with Disabilities Act allows for temporary interruptions of snow and ice removal. This law permits private businesses to become temporarily inaccessible to people with physical disabilities. Unfortunately, the ADA in no way defines "temporary". As a result, many businesses do not remove snow and ice from their walkways and allow the snow piles to build up. This is a safety risk not only for people in wheel chairs but for everyone.”*

**Another issue that needs to be addressed is the disrepair of our sidewalks or complete lack thereof. The following is testimony from our group leader, Kathy.**

*“I use a motorized wheelchair to get around. Though I have an accessible van, I have never been able to drive. I use my wheelchair for errands, work and social activities, the same way other people use their cars. It is not always very easy to get where I need to go. There are not that many sidewalks in my town, except for the main streets. The sidewalks that do exist are in really bad shape. This is due to frost heaves, and trees that are planted in the path of the sidewalk. The large roots make it hard to travel on them. My town is built on a very large hill which also makes the terrain very difficult to travel on. I am a teacher and all of the schools in my town are located within a couple of miles of where I live. The location is great as far as distance but I often get stuck just trying to get to work. I don't often take the bus because the closest bus stop to me is right near where I work and not that far from where I have to shop. Often there is not a safe place to be dropped off if I did use the bus. The three bus stops near me are on the busiest streets in Somersworth.*

*On those occasions when I don't have a driver to take me to a medical appointment I may have to use a Medicaid covered van service. The cost to the state is astonishingly high. My dentists' office is approximately 2 miles away from my home. It is located on a very busy street with no sidewalks and no safe place to be dropped off. For these reasons, I can't drive my wheelchair to my appointments. Just to get picked up no*

*matter where you are going, it costs \$30 to go one way with an additional \$3 per mile. A four mile round trip from my house it costs \$72. This is the standard rate for all medical van services.*

*New England weather in general can make it very difficult to get around especially, in a wheelchair. Snow, sticks, and pot holes are just a few of the obstacles I face every day. It would be nice to have structures to shelter people from the elements while waiting for the bus. I can drive my motorized wheel chair at about 7 miles per hour at its top speed (I always drive the top speed when I'm outside). That is like a jog for most people. With that said, I still do not have enough time to use the crosswalk within the allotted time to cross the street. The streets I have to cross have the highest traffic volume in my town. One way to solve this is to put longer end caps wherever there is a crosswalk”.*

**Even in towns where we are fortunate to have bus service, we often find that they are more limiting than we would like. Almost all buses stop running in the early evening, but our lives don't end between 6 and 7:00 pm. Here is Peter's story.**

*“The current bus schedule is not very useful to me. I would really appreciate being able to ride the bus to go and visit my friends in the evening after work. The problem is, that’s not possible because buses stop running at 6 pm I walk just about everywhere I need to go. It doesn’t matter if it’s the middle of winter or dark out. I have fallen at night on the ice. Luckily I live very close to stop and shop, where I work. It only takes me a few minutes to get there. The only reason I ever ride the bus is to get to my medical appointments. My friends are very important to me and sometimes I have to walk 3 to 4 miles one way just to spend time with them. My life would be a lot easier if the buses ran later at night. I would not have to spend half my evenings walking to visit my friends and back.”*

**There are many rural towns in New Hampshire, whose residents have to endure the challenges that come with a complete lack of public transportation. Tammy knows exactly what this feels like.**

*“I don't know how many times I've thought about going somewhere fun during the weekend then ended up being stuck at home because I didn't have transportation. The dirt road I live on tends to get really slippery and snowy in the winter. Slipping and sliding on ice I have taken several bad spills. Without a sidewalk or walking/bike paths on most of the roads in my town of Plainfield, there's no way I can prevent*

*myself from getting hit by cars.*

*None of the local buses come to my town, nor are there any safe bus stops where I can go to catch a public bus. Another important issue is that crosswalk signals should be both visual and audible in order to safely cross the street. These problems are very important to me, and others who have visual challenges. The situation needs to be corrected!"*

**The absence of reliable public transportation makes it very difficult to fully participate and contribute to the economy. Being able to be employed and stay involved is very important but is nearly impossible when reliable transportation is the issue. Cordelia's story illustrates this very well.**

*"In December of 2012, I was offered a job at the Institute on Disability in Concord. I was thrilled because I had not had a paying job since 2005 when I was bagging groceries at Stop and Shop. My new job was located in Concord which is an hour from where I live in Exeter. I was trained to be a receptionist and I was looking forward to getting started. It all sounded great until the transportation issue came about. My plan was that I was going to work two days a week. My mom drove me to and from the office for one day of work. I was able to car pool with one of my co-workers. Due to the transportation issues I ended up working only twice. My mother would have had to drive me and it would have been fair for her.*

*The other part of the challenge was that after paying for transportation, I wouldn't have made enough money. I enjoyed working at the IOD even though it was short and sweet! It was heartbreaking to give up the job because I liked a lot of the people I was working with."*

**There are sadly many missed opportunities for our New Hampshire citizens, due to a lack of accessible transportation. Here is John's testimony.**

*"Having the ability to go anywhere you want, shop anywhere you want, and work anywhere you want is a luxury that I'm sure many car owners take for granted. Early on in life, I had a brain tumor that had grown against my optic nerve. Four surgeries later, the tumor is gone but sadly, so is the sight of my right eye and peripheral sight in my left. I may be legally blind, but I still have a limited field of vision in my left eye, and I take full advantage of it. I have an irrepressible passion for drawing,*

*making the colorful and fantastic characters in my imagination come to life on the page. But I am not one of those stereotypical reclusive artists, because I love talking with people and constantly strive to make their day brighter with a silly doodle or a joke. Where do I work? Alone, in the basement of a local bike shop, unpacking and labeling new shipments that trickle in. I know you are probably thinking that this is wasted potential, and I would agree. But, it is a ten minute walk from my apartment and on the bus route for when it's too dangerous for me to make the walk in the winter. Recently in my search for a career worthy of my talents, I saw an ad in the paper for Stave Puzzles, "Seeking a creative, artistic, and energetic person to join our team." It was perfect! It was fantastic! It was ten miles away and nowhere near a bus route. So here I remain at my less than ideal job, waiting for my local transportation to expand so that I might reach my full potential."*

**A transportation system needs to be truly responsive to its patron's diverse needs. Some riders would have a great deal of difficulty using the typical bus system. The cost of purchasing a wheelchair accessible vehicle is astronomic for many people who would need them. Susie's story expresses clearly that Para transit is an important piece of the transportation puzzle.**

*"I know how lucky I am to have a wheelchair accessible van. Without it I would not be able to attend my college classes, go shopping, or get to my appointments.*

*My mom bought a used van for \$28,000. It's about 5 years old now and she is still making payments on it. I was extremely grateful that Lakes Region Community Services paid the \$15,000 to make my van accessible by putting in a lift and some tie downs.*

*About 5 years ago my huge gas guzzling van had a price tag of about \$43,000. Many people who need accessible vans simply can't afford them and anyone who has an accessible van really appreciates it.*

*It would be very difficult for me to use the public bus. I know I would have trouble getting to and from the bus stop, navigating myself on and off of it, and I would have trouble handling my money in order to pay for my ride.*

*I believe that many people who experience a disability or who are elderly would benefit from a para-transit bus. The service to patrons is door to door and the driver would be able to assist riders more."*

**For some people to be able to drive it takes many forms of support. It can take adaptive equipment, a team of professionals, supportive family members, and access to financial resources.**

*“My name is Katie Epstein and I am an adult who experiences mild cerebral palsy. I had to find an alternate way of getting my driver’s license than my classmates. I couldn't physically shift the gearshift in the driver’s Ed car so my parents found a man two hours away at Crotched Mountain that was willing to teach me with my mom's van. My parents had to pay him, and pay for us to stay at the mountain for a week so I could drive for five hours a day and then take the test on a Friday afternoon. Even though I got teased for this I know how lucky I am to own a car and get to where I need to go, especially living in rural NH.*

*I moved to Concord NH a few months back and while I love the change, I have realized that I would have a difficult time if I were to lose my car in some way. I would lose my freedom in every aspect of my life. Since I am new to the area I am not familiar with the buses or any of the public transportation, that Concord offers or if it offers any. I know I would research this if I needed to, but my friends tell me that the bus schedules are hard to read and they stop running early. If I wanted to go out at night I wouldn't be able to anymore, because I wouldn't be able to get home.*

*People stop driving for a variety of reasons, and some people who shouldn't drive refuse to stop because they do not want to lose their freedom. They need to get to work and want to continue to do the social activities they enjoy. However their refusal to stop driving becomes a safety issue for everyone else on the roads. If the public transportation system in the state of NH was more appealing and more convenient to use, then the transition of being a driver to a non-driver would be easier.”*

**The reasons a person can lose the ability to drive can vary from simply not being able to afford a car, aging or disability. The sense of loss and frustrations, however, are the same. Michelle’s story clearly makes this point.**

*I had the pleasure of driving a car in my 20's and 30's. Driving gave me my independence. I could maintain a career, get a college education, work, date, and live in my own apartment. Going on trips to see friends and family allowed me the feeling of adventure. It gave me freedom to live life. I did run into times where my car died and I had to go without my own transportation. I wasn't able to walk to the bus stop or afford public transportation. I had to rely on help from others to get where I needed to go. It was hard, but I eventually was able to save enough to get a new car. After fourteen years of driving I lost my ability to walk and had to sell my car. For*



*five years I lived in a nursing home but I am back living in my own apartment. Trying to maintain my life through public transportation is difficult. I do not have as much freedom without my own personal wheelchair van. To visit loved ones or have that freedom of adventure seems impossible. I find public transportation hard to access with the new Managed Care rules. It is expensive and I have to rely on funding to maintain my ability to volunteer on the NH Council on Developmental Disabilities. I am fortunate enough to use COAST Para-transit for social activities and I am in walking distance to local businesses on days when the weather cooperates.*

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## In Conclusion

The Department of Transportation should not strive to present a 10-year plan that might be accomplished within the constraints of an anticipated limited budget in these difficult times. It is not DOT's job to make the legislature's job easy. As suggested by someone at the hearing in Concord, the 10-year plan should include 11 or more years of real need in order to urge and encourage greater accomplishment in one of the wealthiest states in the nation. As a state, we also need to be preparing for the future, which encompasses not only adding rail, but also retooling roads to be "complete streets" friendly to all modes of transportation--pedestrian, Segways, bikes, cars, and wheel chairs--and projecting even further out to roads modified to handle driverless cars - we might possibly see them in our lifetime. So we must be smart in our planning to keep current modes up to date, but use some resources for prepping for the future.

It should be clear that more people would be able to use the public transportation system if our streets and towns were easier to navigate. Whether you use a wheel chair or a bike or you are a pedestrian there is a direct correlation between using the bus and having a safe route to travel to get to the bus stop. It would be great if a couple nights a week they ran a little longer so that patrons could enjoy evening social activities or even work late once in a while. The more accessible our towns are, the more independent we all become.

We have collected a good number of personal testimonies, some of which couldn't make it into this report, and while they all may be written from different perspectives, they are all crying out for support. We are asking that our state congressional leaders provide this critical support by applying more funding to our transportation infrastructure. Hardly any of our rural communities see the trickle down of the mere one percent designated to transportation in the New Hampshire budget. This simply cannot be tolerated. We believe that all of our elected officials ran for office with the fervent hope that they might make New Hampshire an even greater state to live in than when they first took office. This is an opportunity to do just that. This would be an investment towards a safer and more accessible tomorrow.

Our state motto is “Live Free or Die” but these words hold no meaning if our citizens are forced to live on the fringes of society where they can’t fully participate and safely get around their communities. We need to ask ourselves if that is the sort of freedom our founders had in mind. But imagine how wonderful New Hampshire would be if it **were** truly accessible so that **all** of us could achieve our full potential.

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