

Leahy Wins Key Step for Measure Aimed at Reducing Heavy Truck Traffic in Vermont Downtowns

The Vermont legislature has yet to convene and already one of VLCT's 2010 legislative priorities appears close to passage. We have learned that, through U.S. Senator Patrick Leahy's efforts, Congress is ready to pass an appropriations bill that contains language increasing the commercial truck weight limits on Vermont's Interstate highways (89, 91 and 93) to the same weights as for those on state highways. The bill would take effect next year on a pilot program basis.

Current federal law restricts trucks weighing more than 80,000 pounds from regularly using the Interstate highway system. But portions of the Interstate network in neighboring states allow higher-weight trucks to operate there due to special circumstances, from tolling to grandfather clauses. These exceptions, combined with a state law that allows trucks over 80,000 pounds to operate on Vermont's secondary roadways, have resulted in overweight truck traffic traveling through Vermont on some of the state's smaller roadways, creating safety concerns and putting pressure on the state's aging transportation infrastructure.

In a press release issued today (Dec. 9, 2009), Leahy said, "Vermont state policy and neighboring states' policies on truck weights have produced the reality that overweight trucks are here, and they will continue to operate in Vermont. No one thinks that overweight trucks should rumble through our historic villages and downtowns on two-lane roads, putting people and our state's failing transportation infrastructure at risk. This step will get these trucks out of our downtowns in the short term. In the longer term it will help us determine, with real-world experience, whether it is safer and better for both our infrastructure and the environment to have these trucks use the Interstate system."

This result temporarily solves a long-standing problem in which heavier trucks carrying fuel oil, gasoline, forest products, and other commodities are forced to travel through Vermont village and city downtowns on state and local Class 1 roads, rather than on Interstate highways that were built to higher design standards. The issue is one that VLCT has worked on for many years with the Vermont Petroleum Association, the Vermont Truck and Bus Association, the state agencies of Transportation, Natural Resources, and Commerce, and the city of Burlington and town of St. Johnsbury. It has been the subject of several joint resolutions of the Vermont Legislature. Railroad interests and some environmental organizations have opposed it. It is a problem that literally has required an Act of Congress to resolve.

Once approved as part of these appropriations bills, the higher weight limits will be in effect for a one-year period. The bill also contains a requirement that "[n]ot later than 2 years after the date of enactment of this paragraph, the Secretary shall complete and submit to Congress a report on the effects of the pilot program under this paragraph on highway safety, bridge and road durability, commerce, truck volumes, and energy use within the State of Vermont."

This change is part of VLCT's Municipal Policy, which states that "[t]he legislature should instruct VTTrans to work with the federal government to set weight limits on interstate highways consistent with existing state highway weight limits."

Sen. Leahy's press release also indicates that both Sen. Sanders and Rep. Welch support and worked on gaining the Vermont program's passage in Congress.