

Transportation a balancing act

Area forum aimed at improvement

By **DAVE EISENSTADTER**
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While the region is a long way from a robust public transportation system, community organizations are trying to get there from here.

A Monadnock "TranSymposium," to be held Wednesday at the Courtyard by Marriott in Keene, will give residents and businesses a chance to share and learn ideas about how to improve area transportation.

Todd A. Litman, executive director of the Victorian Transportation Institute in Canada, will be the keynote speaker.

Litman works primarily on "sustainable transportation," which means something different than what most people think, he said.

"People misunderstand, and think it's just environmental sustainability, but it's not," Litman said. "Sustainable transportation is about balancing economic, social and environmental objectives."

Reducing traffic congestion, increasing public transportation affordability and reducing other transportation costs are many of the problems his organization tackles.

But primarily, Litman tries to change the way people think about transportation.

In the past, transportation meant driving, but in recent years transportation professionals have worked to include other ways to travel into the mix, Litman said.

Rather than widening roads to address traffic demand, community organizations have increasingly worked to start ride-sharing programs, bolster public transportation and change land use to create residential neighborhoods closer to job centers, according to Litman.

In the primarily rural Monadnock Region, the main issue transportation planners have run up against is too few people who might benefit from regular bus lines.

One way to fight that is through economic incentives, Litman said. One of his favorites is working with employers to offer cash benefits to employees who opt out of us-

ing a company parking space.

"If you drive to work, you get a benefit called a parking space, but if you walk, you get no equivalent benefit," Litman said. "With a 'parking cash out,' an employee could gain \$50 to \$100 per month, which is what the employer would have been spending on the parking space."

Litman has seen such initiatives significantly decrease the number of a company's employees who drive alone to work.

While the old way of thinking focused exclusively on cars, he hopes the new paradigm will focus on multiple transportation methods, including walking, biking and public transportation, he said.

The percentage of people traveling by car has steadily dropped since the 1990s, according to Litman. Increasing fuel prices and aging populations have made people look elsewhere for travel, he said.

"If we're stupid, we will extrapolate past trends from when there was this growth in driving and work to accommodate more and more growth," Litman said. "If we're smart, now that people have basically reached their peak of auto travel, we're going to want better alternatives where people don't need to own a car."

The economic incentive of not driving a car one owns is low, but not owning a car at all releases a great financial strain, Litman said.

Litman, once an Olympia, Wash., bicycle shop manager, got involved with transportation issues through advocating for making Olympia more bike-friendly.

For the past 20 years, Litman has collaborated with businesses, municipalities and other organizations to work toward having sustainable transportation.

► The Monadnock Transportation Symposium will run from 8 a.m. to 2 p.m. Registration is required by Friday, Nov. 12. For more information or to register, call 357-0557 or visit www.monadnocktma.org.

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