



Making Roads Safer | Protecting the Environment | Strengthening the Economy

---

## **Q&A with John Zicconi, Director of Planning, Vermont Agency of Transportation**

*In January, Sen. Patrick Leady won approval for a one-year Pilot Project allowing heavier trucks on Vermont's interstate highway system. Heavier trucks already had access to state roads, but the discrepancy between the federal and state weight limits caused many trucks to go through Vermont's downtowns as they traveled across the state.*

*By granting interstate access to heavier trucks, the Vermont Agency of Transportation hopes the Pilot Project will promote highway safety, environmental efficiency and shipping productivity. To find out more about the Pilot Project, CTP conducted the following Q&A with John Zicconi, director of planning for the Vermont Agency of Transportation.*

**Q: *What is the role of the Vermont Agency of Transportation in terms of ensuring that goods can be moved to market efficiently?***

**JZ:** It is the responsibility of the state to understand how state business can best be transacted. We have long thought that giving heavier trucks access to our interstate would be not only the most efficient, but the safest and most environmentally friendly way to move these goods.

You have to look at everything from commerce to safety to pavement costs and bridges costs to greenhouse gases. The world is very different now than it was when the interstate was built 50 plus years ago. There are more issues that are facing us as a society, and greenhouse gases are one of them. All of these issues need to be thrown in the mix. Safety is paramount, but all issues have a balance and a place in this debate. We need to understand the tradeoffs in order to understand whether it is the right thing to do.

The Pilot Project gives us a chance to examine if what we think of anecdotally is, in fact, true. With Congress controlling the interstate weights, they are not going to be moved to change federal policy simply because we think it is a good idea. We have always wanted the opportunity to explore why it is a good idea, and then be able to present it to Congress. We welcome the opportunity to be able to show that what we think anecdotally is correct and true.

**Q: *What industries in Vermont will benefit from truck weight reform?***

**JZ:** Industries in Vermont aren't the only ones that benefit from having a higher interstate weight limit. We have our milk trucks, logging and other industries. But even from a through-traffic standpoint, it is potentially safer to have these trucks on interstates rather than rumbling through our historic towns and villages, passing pedestrians, shopping malls and schools.

From a greenhouse gas reduction standpoint, all individual states are trying to reduce vehicle miles traveled and our carbon footprint. If you have trucks that are allowed to maintain consistent speeds

and travel the shortest distance between two points without all the starts and stops and additional mileage, that is a benefit to Vermont.

There is a holistic approach to doing business in Vermont. We are looking at everything. Clearly the construction companies that have large trucks, as well as our logging and aggregate projects will benefit. But this is not just about businesses locally. Our through-traffic and safety of our motorists is important as well.

**Q: *State transportation agencies have tough choices to make when it comes to both maintaining highway infrastructure and facilitating the flow of goods. Will the higher interstate truck weight limit provided by the Pilot Project present a beneficial solution?***

**JZ:** Clearly the intuitive facts show that it is good for commerce because you can move goods to market cheaper and faster, which will affect prices and therefore consumers. It is a fact that it will reduce greenhouse gases. Intuitively, it is a fact that there are safety improvements because trucks are not rumbling through historic and congested downtowns, shopping malls and schools. We are taking pressure off local bridges and pavement, and shifting it to the interstate. There is a tradeoff associated with that. It is beneficial because you have fewer bridges and pavement miles than you might on the longer, winding state network – which is also federally funded, so there is a cost improvement for the federal government.

**Q: *Do you think the truck weight Pilot Project has proven to be of value to Vermont so far?***

**JZ:** It is too soon to tell. We have just begun. A lot of the data will be collected during the spring, summer and fall.

**Q: *What are the safety advantages of moving heavy trucks off state and local roadways and onto interstate highways that were engineered to handle them?***

**JZ:** Right now we have the 99,000 pound limit for state roads, so we literally have trucks rumbling through villages and towns, by schools, shopping centers and other places where pedestrians are – with the turning that is associated with rural intersections and hills in the wintertime. The interstate is always the best-maintained roadway, so moving that traffic to the interstate, where you no longer have pedestrians, schools, shopping centers and the turning movements of intersections, means you have the best conditions. We think the potential for better safety is great. We would not have asked for this Pilot Project if we didn't think interstates were the preferred mode of transportation.

It is important to remember that not all stretches of interstate are created equal. I will be the first to say that in Vermont we have a lot of capacity in our interstate. We are a very rural state with only one major metropolitan area. Our interstate is not congested, and traffic flows freely. There is a big difference between going down I-91 along the spine with New Hampshire and an interstate going through downtown Detroit, which is going to be quite crowded and congested. You have larger trucks quite close to smaller vehicles. So here in Vermont we think it makes a lot of sense to move truck traffic to the interstates because we have the capacity. It appears anecdotally to be the safest place to put them. In a place like a very crowded downtown metro area, potentially having them on other roads

is more beneficial from a safety standpoint. So we don't look at this as a 'one-size fits all' proposal. It is all about understanding what is good for Vermont and what is good for our types of highways. I have never professed to think that this is a 'one-size fits all', and that what we determine here will be right for every highway in our nation.

**Q: *Can you provide any anecdotal or statistical examples of how the Pilot Project has reduced truck traffic on state and local roads?***

**JZ:** I haven't gotten much feedback yet from communities. We do know that the folks in downtown Burlington have a very keen interest in this and believe it is going to make a difference in the community, but it is too soon to know.

**Q: *We know that the Federal Highway Administration will be evaluating the Pilot Project's impact after six months and again at the end of the year. When it comes to evaluating the impact of the pilot program on infrastructure and bridges, do you think it is important to look at the entire state highway system, and not just Interstates?***

**JZ:** Yes. Here is why: When you're looking at potential stress on bridges and pavement, intuitively speaking, if you put heavier trucks on the interstate, it is going to stress the infrastructure of the interstate more. And also if there is a safety implication, intuition would tell you that it potentially could make the interstate less safe. You might have more accidents because now you have heavier trucks – and maybe more trucks. The value of whether you do this likely lies in the tradeoffs.

If you stress the interstates to the point where it costs a bit more to maintain it properly, it is a tradeoff. What are you saving on state roads where these trucks are currently allowed? And how many accidents do you reduce on the local network? If the overall numbers fall, that is a good thing. You have to understand what the tradeoffs are to understand whether allowing heavier trucks on the interstate is a worthwhile endeavor. It is absolutely critical to understand the tradeoffs. From Vermont's point of view, the main focus of this pilot program is to understand what the tradeoffs are. Intuitively we know that putting heavier vehicles on the interstate will stress interstate more. It must. We have always acknowledged that. The benefits are in the tradeoffs.

**Q: *What is the Vermont Agency for Transportation's position on making the Pilot Project truck weight increase permanent?***

**JZ:** Intuition tells us that it is a good idea to make this permanent, but I do not want to jump the gun. That is why we have this Pilot Project to find out. If our intuition proves to be correct, we will advocate that this measure be made permanent.

We agree with CTP's assessment that we do not need a blanket law that raises weight limits for every mile of interstate. States understand their local networks – and where the safety benefit is. If states were allowed to make those decisions for themselves and consult with the Federal Highway Administration, that may be the way to go.