



# EVALUATION OF FRANKLIN COUNTY PARK AND RIDE FACILITIES



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Franklin Regional Council of Governments

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# Evaluation of Franklin County Park and Ride Facilities

## Introduction

In 2008, the Franklin Regional Council of Governments (FRCOG) completed the *Franklin County Park and Ride Study*. This 2008 study identified a number of potential park and ride locations and documented demand for park and ride facilities throughout the county. Since 2008, there has been significant progress towards implementing the recommendations from the study. Specifically, three recommended sites have been established as official MassDOT Park and Ride facilities in Franklin County, in addition to the already existing one in Charlemont on Route 2. They are:



- The Greenfield Park & Ride located at the MassDOT RMV near the Route 2 Rotary;
- The Sunderland Park & Ride located on Route 47 near the intersection of Route 116;
- The Whately Park & Ride located at the intersection of Route 116 and Route 5/10; and

In 2014, the FRCOG assessed the performance of the existing park and ride facilities to determine how well they were functioning and to look at other sites in Franklin County that may be functioning as informal park and rides. This 2018 report expands upon the findings of the 2014 report. By comparing this year's findings with those from 2014, this report identifies potential changes in how the park and rides are being used. This report will also re-examine the recommendations of the 2014 Park and Ride Study to determine what future actions can be taken to continue to promote and support park and rides in the region.

## Methodology

For this study, there were five sites that the FRCOG selected to evaluate: the four existing official MassDOT Park and Rides and a municipal parking lot in South Deerfield, which is not currently an official park and ride facility. The following section provides a description of each of the study sites.





Figure 1. Charlemont Park & Ride Facility

The Charlemont Park & Ride was constructed in 2004 and has an approximate capacity of 50 vehicles. It is located on Route 2 in East Charlemont near the intersection of Route 112. The facility includes a bus shelter with space for a bus pullout in front of it. The facility is currently served by the Franklin Regional Transit Authority's (FRTA) Charlemont/Greenfield Route 41 with stops at that location three times a day: one round trip in the morning and two in the afternoon.



Figure 2. Greenfield Visitor's Center/Park & Ride Facility

The Greenfield Park & Ride was established by MassDOT in 2011. The 2008 *Franklin County Park and Ride Study* recommended this site as a potential park and ride. It is located at 18 Miner Street in Greenfield, just off of Route 2A near the Route 2 Rotary and Interstate 91. The site also functions as a MassDOT Registry of Motor Vehicles (RMV) and Visitors Center. The facility has approximately 60 spaces for vehicles in addition to large spaces for tractor trailers, buses, or motor homes. The FRTA Greenlink Connector Route 20 stops at the Greenfield Park & Ride once in the morning, and the Greenfield Community Route 21 stops once in the morning and once in the afternoon.



Figure 3. Sunderland Park & Ride Facility

The Sunderland Park & Ride was established by the Town of Sunderland and MassDOT in 2011. The Town's Energy Committee worked with FRCOG and MassDOT to identify an appropriate site near the Town's village center and have wayfinding signs posted directing drivers coming from Interstate 91 and Route 5/10 on Route 116 towards Sunderland. This facility is located in front of the Town Historical Society building and contains approximately 10 spaces for vehicles. The Pioneer Valley Transit Authority's (PVTA) Sunderland Route 31 and South Deerfield Route 46 currently pass near this facility on Route 116. The Sunderland Route 31 runs every fifteen minutes during the weekday and also runs with more limited service in the evenings and on the weekends. South Deerfield Route 46 makes 2 roundtrips during the day: once in the morning and once in the evening.



Figure 4. Whately Park & Ride Facility

The Whately Park & Ride was constructed by MassDOT in 2013. The completion of this facility fulfills a recommendation from the 2004 MassDOT *Connecticut River Crossing Transportation Study* that examined ways to reduce traffic over the region's Connecticut River bridges. This facility was also highly recommended by the 2008 *Franklin County Park and Ride Study*. This facility is located in the Town of Whately at the intersection of Route 116 and Route 5/10. It has approximately 45 spaces for vehicles and includes a bus shelter, bus pullout, and bicycle parking. The FRTA is currently serving this facility on its Northampton/Greenfield Route 31 service with 7 roundtrips throughout the day. Soon after the 2014 Park & Ride study, the PVTa changed its South Deerfield/UMass Route 46 to begin stopping at the park & ride facility 6 times a day. However, this service was reduced in September 2018 to two round trips per day: once in the morning and once in the evening.





Figure 5. South Deerfield Municipal Parking Facility

The South Deerfield municipal parking facility is located on North Main Street in the South Deerfield village center near the intersection of Elm Street and Sugarloaf Street. The parking lot is currently half paved and half gravel. The parking lot has an approximate capacity of 25 vehicle spaces. Both the FRTA and PVTA have a bus stop located a half block away from the lot in the village center. The FRTA Northampton / Greenfield Route 31 makes 7 roundtrips throughout the day. The PVTA South Deerfield Route 46 makes 1 round trip a day: one in the morning and one in the evening. Each transit authority has coordinated their service so that there are two timed transfers from one bus to the other during the workday. The South Deerfield municipal parking lot was selected as a study site for this report because anecdotal evidence has suggested that it has been functioning as a de facto park and ride for that area and there are often vehicles parked in it throughout the weekday. The Town of Deerfield completed its *Downtown Complete Streets and Livability Plan* in 2013 that recommended that this municipal parking lot be expanded to serve as shared parking for all of the various village center destinations. The Town owns additional land behind the existing lot if further parking capacity is needed.

After the FRCOG selected the above sites to evaluate, staff conducted two different surveys of users at the park and ride facilities. Both surveys were completed on four different weekday between the dates of September 5 and September 17, 2018. The timing of the survey was intentional in order to capture potential education-oriented users (such as UMass Amherst employees or students) at the beginning of the academic year so that their transportation needs could be assessed. FRCOG staff visited each of the facilities during

the middle of the workday so that the majority of the facility users would have their vehicle in the lot assuming they were working a typical 9-5 shift.

The first survey conducted was a license plate survey in which FRCOG staff counted each vehicle in the parking lots on each day of the survey and documented the number of days that vehicle was present in the facility. The purpose of this survey was to document the number of vehicles in each lot and their frequency of use.

The second survey was a paper survey that was placed on each vehicle's windshield with pre-addressed and pre-paid return envelopes. This survey asked the vehicle's driver various demographic, transportation, and geographic questions, such as: the frequency in which they use the facility; their travel origin; their travel destination; and more. (A copy of the survey is included in the Appendix). The purpose of this survey was to understand who is using the facilities, how often, and why. The response rate of the windshield survey was 28% (31 surveys were completed and returned to the FRCOG).

### Study Results

Similar to the 2014 findings, the surveys showed that the majority of the parking facilities evaluated had consistent and regular use. Of those that responded to the windshield survey, 64% of the vehicles are using the lots for work or school-related reasons; 75% (21 respondents) of the users parked in the lots to carpool to work, school, or for recreation/social purposes; 14% (4 respondents) parked to catch a bus to work, school, or for recreation/social purposes; and 14% (4 respondents) parked to bike for recreation . Only 3.6% (1 respondent) park and commute by bicycle to work.

The license plate surveys showed that the Greenfield and Whately Park & Ride facilities are used by the most people. It should be noted that the Greenfield Park & Ride is a shared parking lot with the MassDOT Registry of Motor Vehicles (RMV) and Visitor's Center and that the license plate survey could not distinguish between the types of various users – whether they were parked there for the Park & Ride or to use the RMV. As a result, the daily vehicle count for this specific location is most likely artificially higher than it would be if it were solely a park and ride lot.

Each of the five facilities had some vehicles that parked for multiple days. Greenfield, Sunderland and Whately had the highest number of repeat vehicles during the study week. If many of the users are driving to the lots to carpool, than it is unlikely that there would be many vehicles parked in the lots for more than 2-3 days, since many carpoolers tend to split the driving during the work week. Table 1 below shows the results of the license plate

survey for each of the park and ride facilities.

Table 1. Results from License Plate Survey of Franklin County Park & Ride Facilities

Parking Facility	# of Unique Vehicles	Parked 1 day	Parked 2 Days	Parked 3 Days	Parked 4 Days	Average # Per Day
Charlemont	6	3	2	1	0	2.5
Greenfield	35	30	2	2	1	11
Sunderland	10	5	5	0	0	3.75
Whately	52	36	13	2	1	18
South Deerfield	8	5	2	1	0	4

Table 2 below shows how well each of the park and ride facilities is being used in terms of the maximum number of vehicles each lot could accommodate. By measuring the number of vehicles present and comparing this to the total number of spaces in the lot, a utilization rate can be determined. A utilization rate will show if there is: some excess capacity available, vehicles are having a difficult time finding parking, or if the lots are barely being used at all.

Based on the license plate survey, all of the facilities are being used, but have capacity for additional park and ride users. Utilization rates in Charlemont, Greenfield, and South Deerfield were lower in 2018 compared to 2014, while utilization rates in Whately and Sunderland were higher in 2018 compared to 2014.

Charlemont had the lowest utilization rate at 5%, which is consistent with its rank in the 2014 report. This means that only an average 5% of its parking spaces are being used on a daily basis. Utilization here is down from 8% in 2014, which may be attributed to the reduced bus service since the beginning of September 2018. The windshield survey showed that two-thirds of users (6 out of 9 respondents) were parking and then going for a bike ride and/or carpooling for recreation, while one-third (3 out of 9 respondents) carpooled to work from the lot daily, weekly or infrequently. Charlemont was the 2<sup>nd</sup> most utilized lot for carpooling in general (25% of all respondents), with 7% (2 respondents) carpooling daily to work, and 11% (3 respondents) carpooling weekly for work or recreation/social, and 11% (3 respondents) carpool monthly for recreation/social reasons. Recreation is the main purpose for users of this lot (66.6%).

Sunderland had the highest utilization rate this year. With only 10 spaces, it also has the smallest capacity of all the lots. Based on the windshield survey, it is the 3<sup>rd</sup> most utilized facility for carpooling to work on a daily basis (3.6% or 1 respondent). It is the most utilized

lot for catching the bus to work either daily or weekly (11% or 3 respondents), which corresponds with current feedback from riders indicating that the new schedule for PVTA's South Deerfield/Whately Route 46, which now only comes once in the morning and once in the evening, has prompted them to park in Sunderland and catch R31 instead, which runs every 15 mins throughout the day. Riders taking the R46 from Whately or South Deerfield would have to manage a 10 hour gap between trips (10.5 hour gap during reduced service weekdays), as well as the risk of being stranded if they miss the bus because there is only one trip each morning and evening. Since the change went into effect in September 2018, FRCOG staff has received correspondence from multiple riders describing how this change has negatively affected their ability to utilize the bus system and/or carpool to work or school. Given the limited capacity of this park and ride in light of the current trend involving PVTA R31 & R46 ridership, utilization of the Sunderland lot should continue to be high.

The Greenfield Park & Ride had the highest utilization rate of 35% in 2014, but was only 18% this year. Bus service here has also been reduced since the beginning of September 2018, which may be prompting people to drive to their destinations instead of parking to catch the bus. Because of the multi-purpose nature of the lot, it is difficult to discern which vehicles are parked for the park & ride versus the MassDOT RMV and Visitor's Center, and therefore, it is also difficult to speculate as to why utilization rates at this site are changing. Ultimately, there is still capacity at this lot for additional vehicles.

Whately's Park & Ride utilization rate increased from 26% in 2014 to 40% in 2018, despite the negative impact on ridership from this site due to the PVTA R46 schedule change. It's likely that the Whately Park & Ride is still being discovered and utilized by more people in the region five years after its construction, which was in 2013. The windshield survey did show that the Whately lot was used for regional trips including locations as far as Boston, Great Barrington, Central CT, Southern NH, and Northern VT. Whately is the most utilized lot for carpooling (43% of all respondents), with 11% (3 respondents) carpooling daily to work or school, 18% (5 respondents) carpooling weekly for work, school or recreation/social, and 11% (3 respondents) carpooling monthly for recreation/social. Only one respondent from the windshield survey in Whately indicated that they parked here to catch the bus and they did so only for recreational/social purposes on a weekly basis (3.6%).

South Deerfield had a below average utilization rate of 16%, which also represents a decrease since the 2014 study. This corresponds with feedback from riders about the negative impacts of the R46 schedule change on ridership from South Deerfield and Whately. As a result, it seems that the South Deerfield lot is no longer serving as an informal Park & Ride. The windshield survey further supports this finding with 100% of respondents

(3 surveys returned) indicating that they were parked while working in South Deerfield and did not use the lot to carpool or use the bus.

Table 2. Utilization Rate of Franklin County Park & Ride Facilities

Parking Facility	Average Per Day	Estimated Capacity	Utilization Rate
Charlemont	2.5	50	5%
Greenfield	11	60	18%
Sunderland	3.75	10	38%
Whately	18	45	40%
South Deerfield	4	25	16%

The results from the windshield surveys reveal that the majority of the park and ride users (64%) are driving and parking at the lots for work or school-related reasons. Seventy percent of the users parked in the lots to carpool to work, school, or for recreation/social purposes. 14% parked to catch a bus to work, school, or for recreation/social purposes, 14% parked to bike for recreation, and 3.6% park and commute by bicycle to work.

The most common destination of all park and ride survey respondents was the Town of Amherst (17% of respondents). Since UMass Amherst is the largest employer for Franklin County residents, it most likely that the UMass campus was the final destination for these survey respondents. The FRCOG staff have heard anecdotally that the increasing cost of parking on the UMass campus for employees and students was causing people to search for more affordable travel options and that carpooling and taking the bus was one such choice that had been becoming more popular. The survey results do seem to corroborate this anecdotal evidence.

Users of the park and rides are traveling from all over the region in order to use the facilities. The most common geographic origins for the official MassDOT park and rides (excluding the South Deerfield lot) are:

- Ashfield, 21%
- Route 2 West County towns: Colrain, Charlemont, Heath, 21%
- Route 116 Hilltowns (Conway, Deerfield, , Sunderland, South Deerfield), 21%
- Hampshire County towns (Amherst, Hatfield), 12.5%
- More than 25 miles, Boston, Springfield, Swanzey NH, East Hampton CT, 17%
- Town of Greenfield, 8.3%



- Town of Montague, 4.2%

The survey results regarding the geographic distribution match closely with the expected range of where users are traveling from. The Route 2 Charlemont Park & Ride is intended to serve the West County communities along Route 2 such as the towns of Charlemont, Buckland, Shelburne, and Heath and the survey results show that these residents are indeed using the facility. Likewise, the Whately Park & Ride was intended to serve central Franklin County and particularly the Hilltowns along Route 116. Similarly, the survey results show that these communities are using the facility as intended, and that more people from farther distances in the Southern New England region are also using the facilities. Respondents indicated traveling to and from locations such as Boston, Great Barrington, East Hampton CT, Manchester NH, and Tunbridge VT.

### Recommendations

The low to medium utilization rates of some of the park and ride facilities strongly indicate that marketing of these resources should continue for the region. According to the windshield survey results, 36% of respondents found out about the park and ride facilities through word of mouth; same as in 2014. An additional 43% of the respondents knew about the facilities because they saw signage; an increase from 29% in 2014. Another 11% were not even aware that the facilities were official park and ride lots; same as 2014. If most of the park and rides currently have a 20-30% utilization rate without any active marketing, then there is significant potential for an increased use of the lots if promoting of the facilities were to occur.

The particularly low utilization rate of the Charlemont Park & Ride indicates that targeted marketing of this facility and its bus service should be a priority. And, the high utilization of the Charlemont lot for recreational cycling suggests that this facility could be marketed especially to the recreational cycling and bike tourism industry, which is strong and growing in the region.

As described earlier, the study results revealed a change in utilization of the Whately, Sunderland, and South Deerfield Park & Rides sites stemming from the PVTA's Route 46 schedule change. Riders are parking at the Sunderland Park and Ride in order to catch the bus daily and/or weekly, and no longer utilizing the other lots to do so. If transit experiences further schedule revisions that reduce utilization of the Whately and South Deerfield Park & Rides by people catching the bus, then there may be a need to increase Park & Ride capacity and options along the 116 corridor in Sunderland within close proximity to the

Route 31 bus route to accommodate the affected riders. Further research should monitor the utilization rate of the current Sunderland Park and Ride. If it increases toward maximum capacity, it would indicate an increased need for parking.

Reinstating the previous PVRTA R46 schedule would relieve some of the pressure on the Sunderland lot and help Whately and South Deerfield support people taking the bus. The Whately Park and Ride facility is presently best-utilized for carpooling by local commuters and appears to be gaining carpoolers from across the state and the greater Southern New England region. With a utilization rate of 40%, there is plenty of room for increased use. Outreach should continue to encourage use by local commuters as well as long-distance travelers.

The South Deerfield lot is effectively no longer serving as a Park and Ride. Its primary use is for free public parking and supports commuters from several towns away who work within walking distance of the village center. As such, the lot would benefit from basic infrastructural improvements to address signage, lighting, and the presence of hazardous potholes and rough grading in the lot. The lot should also be assessed and remedied for ADA accessibility.

Increased transit service at all Park and Ride facilities would support more people parking to take the bus and/or biking there to take the bus on regular, frequent basis. Ensuring that each Park and Ride has adequate bike racks is critical. A public restroom and bike repair station, particularly at the Charlemont Park and Ride, would be additional, supportive amenities for which funding should be sought. Additionally, all Park and Ride facilities should offer electric vehicle charging stations.

The 2008 *Park and Ride Study* recommended that a park and ride lot be established in the eastern section of Franklin County and provided several locations that may be suitable for a facility. As of this report, there is still not an official park and ride in that portion of the region. The West River Health Center located in Orange on Route 2 was suggested as a possible site among several others. The 2008 Study also documented that there seemed to be unofficial sites in that portion of the county that were being used as unofficial park and rides – showing that there is a demand for a facility. The establishment of a park and ride lot in East County needs to be further pursued in partnership with MassDOT and the eastern communities.