VERMONT

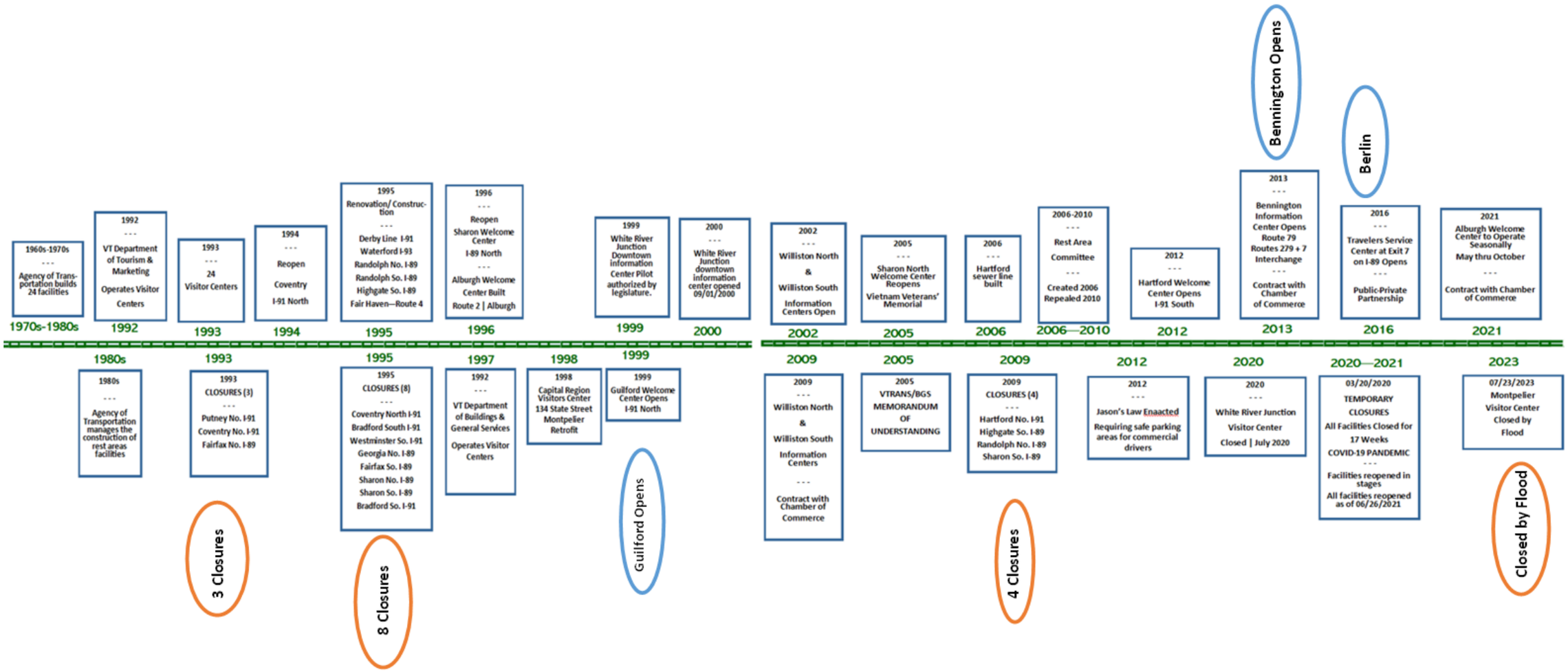
DEPARTMENT OF BUILDINGS AND GENERAL SERVICES

Vermont Information Centers Division
March 2025

Wanda Minoli, Commissioner
Emily Kisicki, Deputy Commissioner

Goals

- Facilities are open and available 365 days a year to serve traveler needs for safety breaks and information.
- Provide superior customer service that includes staff's welcoming attitude and knowledge of the available attractions, events, and services.
- To direct travelers into Vermont's communities.
- Provide clean facilities.
- Employ well-trained staff.
- Provide consistent oversight to ensure the visitor experiences the same level of service at each facility.


1960s-1970s
Agency of Trans-portation builds 24 facilities
1970s-1980s
1980s
1980s
Agency of Transportation manages the construction of rest areas facilities
1992
VT Department of Tourism & Marketing
Operates Visitor Centers
1992
1993
1993
24 Visitor Centers
1993
CLOSURES (3)
Putney No. I-91
Coventry No. I-91
Fairfax No. I-89
3 Closures
1994
Reopen
Coventry
I-91 North
1995
1995
Renovation/ Construc-tion
Derby Line I-91
Waterford I-93
Randolph No. I-89
Randolph So. I-89
Highgate So. I-89
Fair Haven—Route 4
1995
CLOSURES (8)
Coventry North I-91
Bradford South I-91
Westminster So. I-91
Georgia No. I-89
Fairfax So. I-89
Sharon No. I-89
Sharon So. I-89
Bradford So. I-91
8 Closures
1996
1996
Reopen
Sharon Welcome Center
I-89 North
Alburgh Welcome Center Built
Route 2 | Alburgh
1997
1992
VT Department of Buildings & General Services
Operates Visitor Centers
1998
1998
Capital Region Visitors Center
134 State Street
Montpelier
Retrofit
1999
1999
White River Junction Downtown information Center Pilot authorized by legislature.
1999
1999
Guilford Welcome Center Opens
I-91 North
Guilford Opens
2000
2000
White River Junction downtown information center opened 09/01/2000
2000
2002
2002
Williston North & Williston South Information Centers Open
2009
2009
Williston North & Williston South Information Centers
Contract with Chamber of Commerce
2005
2005
Sharon North Welcome Center Reopens
Vietnam Veterans' Memorial
2005
2005
VTRANS/BGS MEMORANDUM OF UNDERSTANDING
2006
2006
Hartford sewer line built
2009
2009
CLOSURES (4)
Hartford No. I-91
Highgate So. I-89
Randolph No. I-89
Sharon So. I-89
4 Closures
2006-2010
2006-2010
Rest Area Committee
Created 2006
Repealed 2010
2012
2012
Jason's Law Enacted
Requiring safe parking areas for commercial drivers
2012
2012
Hartford Welcome Center Opens
I-91 South
2020
2020
White River Junction Visitor Center
Closed | July 2020
2013
2013
Bennington Information Center Opens
Route 79
Routes 279 + 7 Interchange
Contract with Chamber of Commerce
Bennington Opens
2016
2020—2021
2016
Travelers Service Center at Exit 7 on I-89 Opens
Public-Private Partnership
Berlin
03/20/2020
TEMPORARY CLOSURES
All Facilities Closed for 17 Weeks
COVID-19 PANDEMIC
Facilities reopened in stages
All facilities reopened as of 06/26/2021
2021
2021
Alburgh Welcome Center to Operate Seasonally
May thru October
Contract with Chamber of Commerce
2023
07/23/2023
Montpelier Visitor Center
Closed by Flood
Closed by Flood



16 Information/Welcome Centers
Montpelier closed since the July 2023 Flood
4 Supervisory Districts
Hours of Operation Vary by Site
Predominantly single-layer staffing
318 Miles of Interstate Highway
1 Public-Private Partnership- I-89, Exit 7 in Berlin
1 Public-Private Partnership – I-91, Exit 19 in Waits River

	Hours of Operations
Alburgh	9:00 a.m. – 5:00 p.m., Thurs – Mon*
Bennington	7:00 a.m. – 7:00 a.m., 7 days a week
Bradford	10:00 a.m. – 6:00 p.m., 7 days a week
Derby Line	10:00 a.m. – 6:00 p.m., 7 days a week
Fair Haven	7:00 a.m. – 7:00 p.m., 7 days a week
Georgia N.	10:00 a.m. – 6:00 p.m., 7 days a week
Georgia S.	10:00 a.m. – 6:00 p.m., 7 days a week
Guilford	7:00 a.m. – 7:00 p.m., 7 days a week
Hartford	7:00 a.m. – 7:00 p.m., 7 days a week
Lyndonville	10:00 a.m. – 6:00 p.m., 7 days a week
Randolph	7:00 a.m. – 7:00 p.m., 7 days a week
Sharon	7:00 a.m. – 7:00 p.m., 7 days a week
Waterford	7:00 a.m. – 7:00 p.m., 7 days a week
Williston N.	7:00 a.m. – 7:00 p.m., 7 days a week
Williston S.	7:00 a.m. – 7:00 p.m., 7 days a week

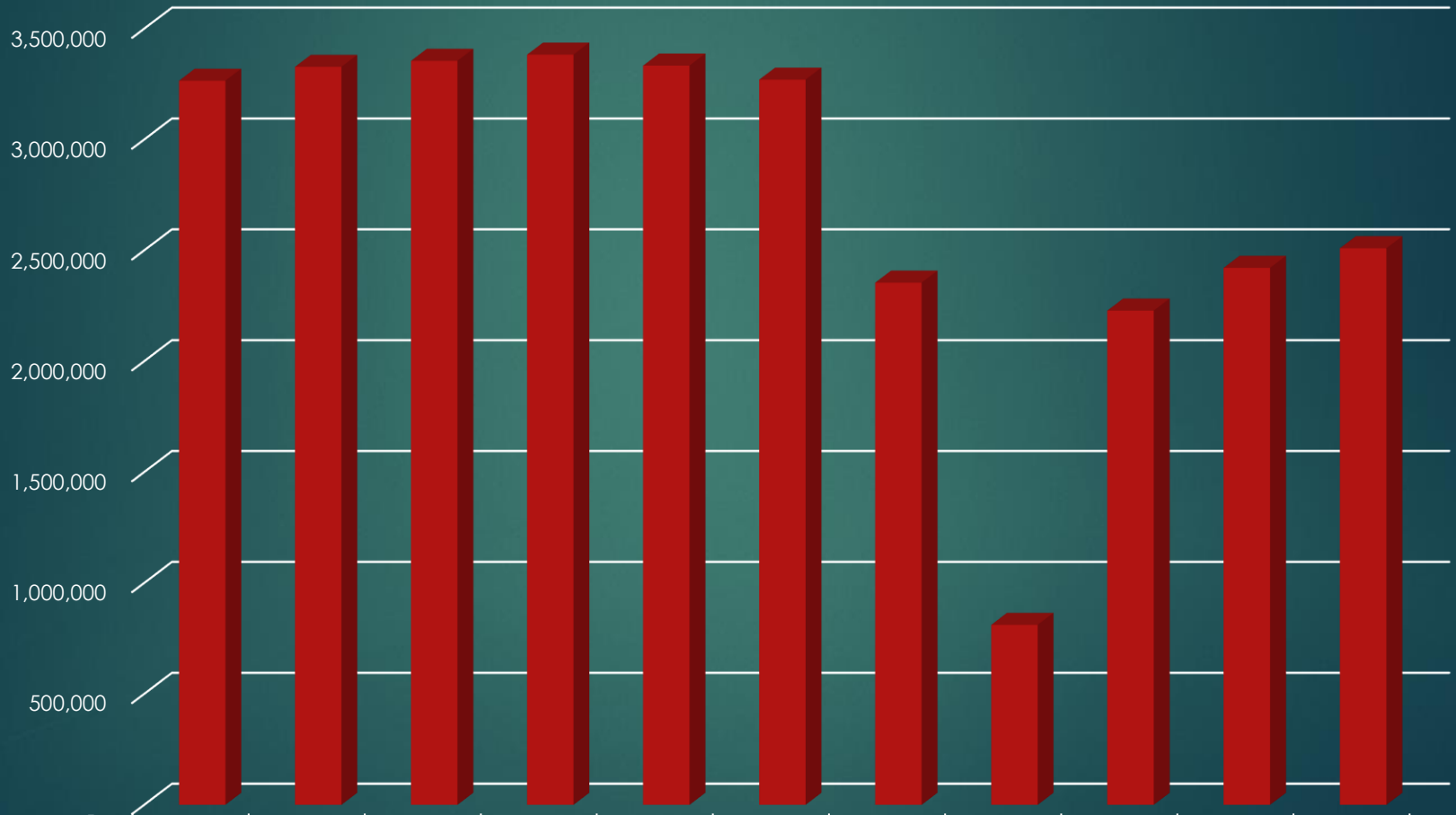
**Operates seasonally May through October*

VICD | 16 Facilities	Mile Marker	Highway Location + North/South Direction			
		I-89	I-91	I-93	Other
Alburgh | Route 2	3.35				X
Bradford	100		North		
Bennington | Rts 279 and 7					X
Derby Line	176.5		South		
Fair Haven | Route 4	0.0				X
Georgia North	110	North			
Georgia South	110.5	South			
Guilford	5.5		North		
Hartford	68.2		South		
Lyndonville	141		South		
Montpelier | 134 State St.	53	Exit 8			X
Randolph	33.5	South			
Sharon	10	North			
Waterford	1.5			North	
Williston North	82	North			
Williston South	83	South			

Operated by Contracts with Chambers of Commerce

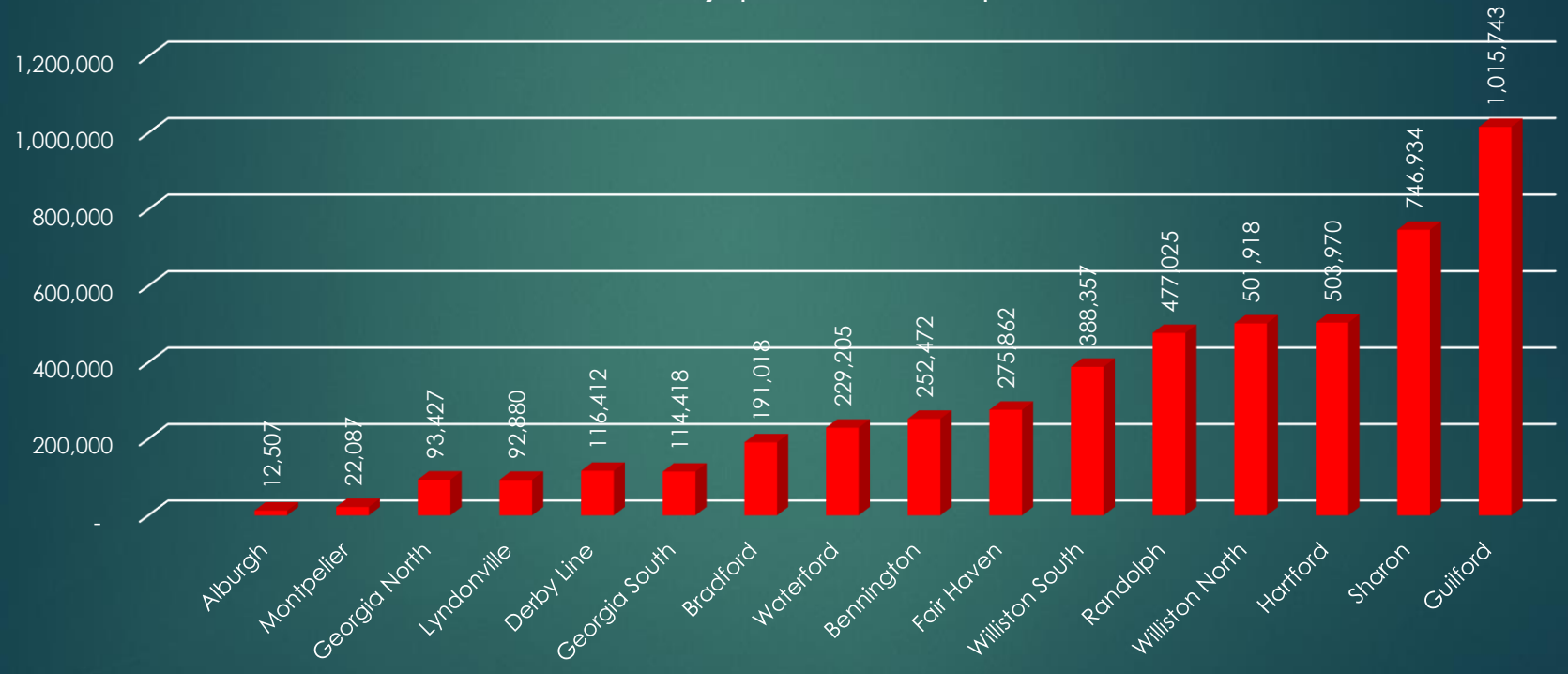
VERMONT INFORMATION CENTERS DIVISION				
WELCOME CENTERS | VERMONT POINTS OF ENTRY				
	Northbound or Southbound	Mile Marker	Name of the Facility	Traffic Entry Source
Interstate-91	North	5	Guilford Welcome Center	Western MA
	South	68.2	Hartford Welcome Center	NH and Eastern MA from I-89
	South	176.5	Derby Line Welcome Center	Canada
Interstate-93	North	1.5	Waterford Welcome Center	NH Interstate 93
Interstate-89	North	10	Sharon Welcome Center	NH and Eastern MA
Route 4	East/West	0.0	Fair Haven Welcome Center	Northern NY | East of Rutland

Vermont Information Centers Division
Total Visitors | FY 2014 thru FY 2024



	FY 2014	FY 2015	FY 2016	FY 2017	FY 2018	FY 2019	FY 2020	FY 2021	FY 2022	FY 2023	FY 2024
Total Visitors	3,265,164	3,327,826	3,354,964	3,382,850	3,333,424	3,269,873	2,354,146	811,211	2,228,196	2,421,133	2,509,486

Vermont Information Centers Division
Visitor Traffic Per Facility | 2-Year Total | CY 2023 - 2024



Highgate Welcome Center

Visitation Statistics Prior to Closing (2009)	
FY2008	79,695
FY2007	79,040
FY2006	62,103
FY2005	54,148





Front Desk





The Guilford Meadow



Picnic Area Birches & Playground

Crabapple Orchard



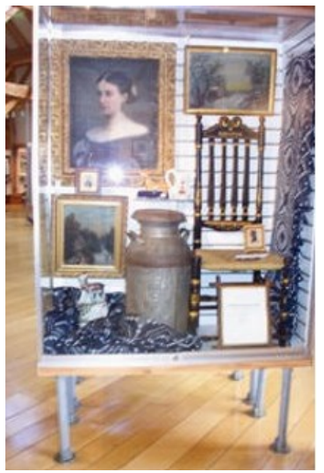
The building is open from 7:00 AM to 7:00 PM with courteous, knowledgeable travel professionals who will assist you with directions, where to stay and dine, and current happenings.

Provide information on maple sugarhouses, cheesemakers, breweries, wineries, farmers' markets, skiing, golfing, camping, hiking, fishing, hunting, boating, bicycling, music, theater, museums, galleries, antiquing, lodging, ning, bookstores and shopping.





Art & Furniture Displays



8 Locked Display Cases





The Guilford Welcome Center Display Program is available to Vermont artists, businesses, chambers of commerce, craftspeople, furniture makers, and galleries.

There is no charge for the program. Displays are scheduled in advance and change monthly.

Vermont's Information and Welcome Centers serve over 7,000 travelers each day and are an important planning resource utilized by Vermont tourists. In a state absent of billboards and with limited directional signage, Information Centers serve the purpose of providing helpful, courteous and knowledgeable information to our visitors. This places us in the unique position of being able to influence the traveler passing through the state.

Eye-catching displays, colorful brochure racks, and knowledgeable and enthusiastic employees are persuasive tools that encourage the visitor to linger in Vermont; visitors that represent

Guilford Welcome Center
History | Location | Features

Opening | Opened in 1999 | Dedication Ceremony 10/25/1999

Location | Mile Marker 5.5 on I-91N
Brattleboro has exits 1, 2, 3 | MMs 7, 9, 11 (see VT Exits map)

History

Putney North – I-91N closed in 1993 – exit 4 at Mile Marker 18
Westminster South – I-91S closed in 1995 – exit 5 at mile marker 28

Features

Beautifully landscaped grounds, a 72 foot by 32 foot perennial garden, birch trees interlaced with granite monuments, an apple orchard, and a stone silo observation tower.

Multimedia shows on large-screen televisions, computerized information kiosks, wayfinding computer programs, exhibit panels, stunning photography, displays of fine Vermont made crafts and foods.



Guilford Welcome Center | Building Features
7130 sq. ft.
The post and beam structures: a 50 ft. x 100 ft. main barn, an acorn crib information kiosk and an outbuilding/picnic area.

Guilford Welcome Center
Travel Services Information

Provide information on maple sugarhouses, cheesemakers, breweries, wineries, farmers' markets, skiing, golfing, camping, hiking, fishing, hunting, boating, bicycling, music, theater, museums, galleries, antiquing, lodging, ning, bookstores and shopping.

Available Displays

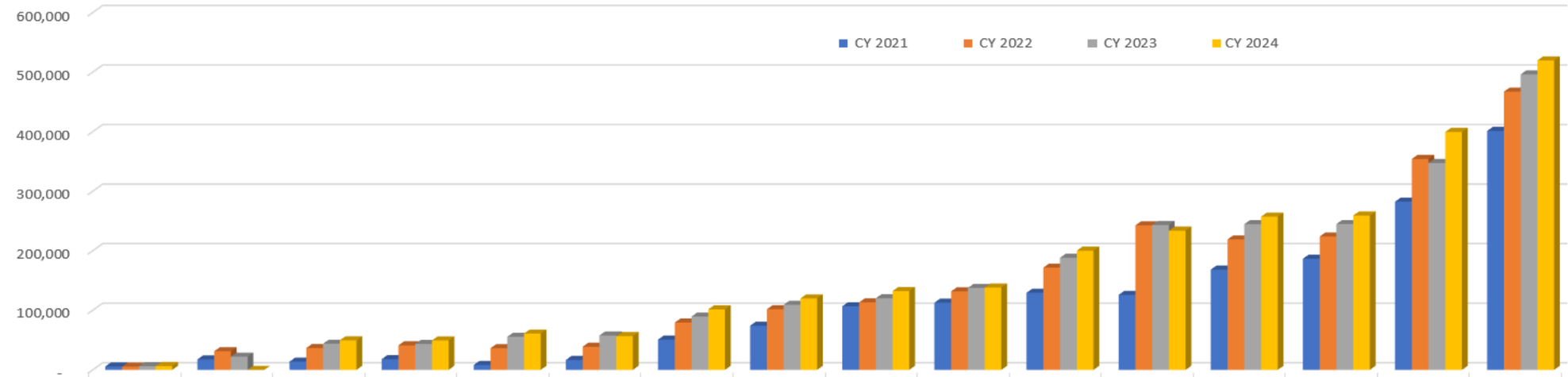
Display cases | 8 locked display cases
Free-standing displays, e.g. furniture

Ad panels | 15 different advertising panels of various sizes

Registered Brochures | 165 brochures for winter season | 210 in the coming summer

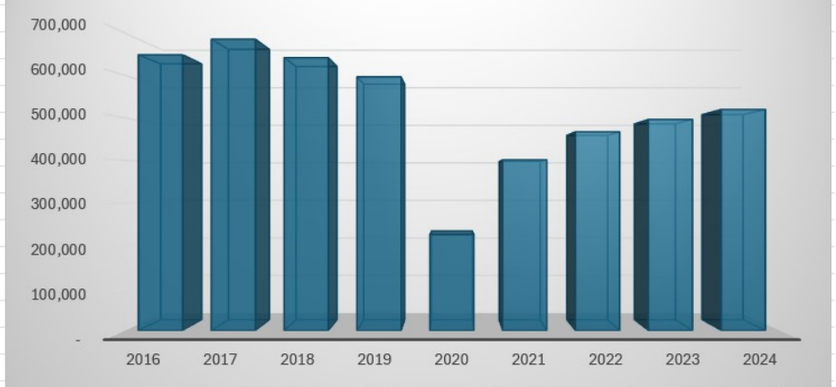
Guilford Welcome Center | PARKING SPACES
CAR PARKING | 100
TRUCK PARKING | 17

Vermont Information Centers Division
CY 2021-CY2024 Visitor Traffic - 16 Facilities



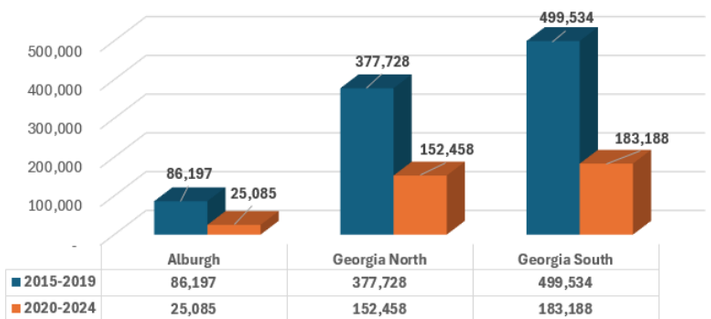
	Alburgh	Montpelier	Georgia North	Lyndonville	Derby Line	Georgia South	Bradford	Waterford	Bennington	Fair Haven	Williston South	Randolph	Williston North	Hartford	Sharon	Guilford
CY 2021	5,719	17,523	13,833	17,951	8,284	16,670	50,775	74,151	106,751	112,803	129,481	125,933	168,374	186,637	282,454	401,262
CY 2022	5,410	31,206	36,610	41,172	36,398	38,852	79,378	101,762	113,248	131,840	171,635	242,710	219,027	223,867	354,164	467,186
CY 2023	6,091	22,087	43,851	43,528	55,495	57,695	89,498	109,273	120,217	137,658	188,209	243,222	244,639	244,833	347,378	496,150
CY 2024	6,416	-	49,576	49,352	60,917	56,723	101,520	119,932	132,255	138,204	200,148	233,803	257,279	259,137	399,556	519,593

Guilford



	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024
Guilford	647,987	684,662	641,212	596,384	225,670	401,262	467,186	496,150	519,593

Vermont Information Centers Division
VISITOR TRAFFIC | Ten Years | CY 2015 - CY 2024
Alburgh | Georgia North | Georgia South



	Alburgh	Georgia North	Georgia South
2015-2019	86,197	377,728	499,534
2020-2024	25,085	152,458	183,188

Alburgh | Seasonal Operation | May of 2022 | 5 Days/Week | 8 Hours/Day

I-91 NORTHBOUND





Main Building - 7,130 SF
Property - 29 Acres
Site as shown - 15 +/- Acres



STATE OF VERMONT
Department of Buildings
and General Services
Agency of Administration
Montpelier, Vermont

GUILFORD
WELCOME CENTER
SITE PLAN

VERMONT

REVISIONS	
SCALE:	AS NOTED
DATE:	JANUARY 2005
DRAWN BY:	S.K. Janawicz
APPR. BY:	-

GUILFORD
WELCOME CENTER
SITE
PLAN

S-1

1 OF 1

Taken From Report to the 2006 Legislature
by BGS Engineering

History

During the late 1980's, a program to reconstruct the rest areas was instituted. As a result, plans were developed for most of the facilities including those recently constructed in Guilford and Williston, and those proposed for reconstruction in Hartford and Randolph.

Unlike the former generation of rest areas, which provided little more than bathroom facilities and a place for travelers to stretch their legs, these new designs sought to capitalize on the numerous opportunities that rest areas present for promoting travel information and travel related services.

In many states, roadside signage helps visitors find services or get clear direction to where they are going. By contrast, in Vermont where we have a strict billboard law and rules limiting directional signage, the traveler has no option but to utilize the assets provided by the State's information centers located across the State. We are, in essence, the directional signs and billboards that are not seen from the roads and byways of our state. Instead, this information is provided in safe, warm and dry centers by friendly and knowledgeable staff whose only mission is to provide answers to travel-related questions and the maintenance of services at that site.

Although all of our rest areas are information centers, those located at entry points to the State also serve as welcome centers and are typically larger to allow for a greater area to display Vermont products, provide travelers assistance and promote tourism within the State. The Williston rest areas, though not considered welcome centers, are larger due to their location on possibly the heaviest traveled section of the Vermont Interstate System. Their size is in keeping with AASHTO Guidelines.

It is accepted universally that the traveling public expects to have convenience services offered to them in their travels. In metropolitan areas, where services are plentiful off the interstate or state-owned routes, convenience services are provided in many cases privately at local gas stations, restaurants or fast food establishments. However, in order to provide the needs of the traveling public, many states operate a network of visitor centers. These centers provide not only convenience services, such as bathrooms and safe rest areas, but also the information that is important to the traveling public when visiting from other states or countries.

According to the "Guide for Development of Rest Areas on Major Arterials and Freeways", prepared by the American Association of State Highway and Transportation Officials (AASHTO), "A building's form can create a positive image which in turn fosters a good impression of the state responsible for it. A stripped down building will not save much money and may even leave a negative impression on visitors". As we move forward in the development of the facilities program, our charge to reduce the amount being spent to construct and operate these facilities must be balanced against any impacts to marketing our tourism industry, and meeting the demands that will be placed on these facilities in 20 or 30 years.

			BUILD/REBUILD DATES & SIZE		
	Sites	Location	Original Construction Date	Build/Rebuild Completed	Square Feet
1	Alburg Welcome Center	Rte 2 W	1996		1150
2	Bennington Welcome Center	Route 7	2013		7500
3	Bradford Information Center	I-91 N	1995		2290
4	Derby Welcome Center	I-91 S	1968		1300
5	Fair Haven Welcome Center	Rte 4	1980	1997	2345
6	Georgia Northbound Information Center	I-89 N	1968	1999	1230
7	Georgia Southbound Information Center	I-89 S	1999		1230
8	Guilford Welcome Center	I-91 N	1999		7130
9	Hartford Southbound Welcome Center	I-91 S	1964	2012	7500
10	Lyndonville Information Center	I-91 S	1973	1996	1300
11	Montpelier - Capital Region Visitors Center	Rte 2 E	Unknown	1998	
12	Randolph Southbound Information Center	I-89 S	1970		1470
13	Sharon Northbound Information Center	I-89 N	1960s	2005	7440
14	Waterford Welcome Center	I-93 N	1982	1997	2340
15	White River Junction Information Center	Downtown	n/a	n/a	n/a
16	Williston Northbound Information Center	I-89 N	1960s	2002	4600
17	Williston Southbound Informaton Center	I-89 S	1960s	2002	4600

The Burlington Free Press
35 cents
168th Year Serving Vermont
Tuesday, August 15, 1995

Rest area complaints grow

Vermont begins to close seven of 20 locations

By Matt Sutkoski
Free Press Staff Writer

Many tourists and truckers say the long, lonely stretches of Vermont highways seem uncomfortably longer now that the government is closing seven of the state's 20 rest areas to save money.

Already, rest areas on Interstate 89 in Georgia and Fairfax have closed, and that has southbound motorists from New York or Canada clenching their teeth as they search for a roadside bathroom.

"We had to go four hours before I found a rest area," said John Lally of Brandenton, Fla., who held on through northern New York and northwestern Vermont before finding the rest stop on Interstate 89 in Williston.

"I guess they don't want people to travel if the state is closing rest areas," he said.

Another couple, D.N. and Maria Batista of Ottawa, Ontario, said they had looked forward to a picnic lunch at rest areas in Franklin County and found them closed. "We're used to having that rest area there. It was really disappointing," D.N. Batista said.

The Legislature adopted a plan this year to close the seven rest areas along Vermont's interstates to save $1.3 million. "We're trying to cut back on the number we maintain," Vermont Deputy Transportation Commissioner Glenn Gershanek said. "We can't staff all of them. Ideally, a rest area should be open 24 hours a day. We're not able to do that because we have too many and they cost too much."

An American Automobile Association spokesman said that while he understands Vermont needs to save money, rest areas are vital. "Both automobile drivers and truckers need a safe place to pull over, an occasion to take a rest break," said George Vivette, director of highway transportation for the association.

In a perfect world, an interstate rest area would be found "every 50 to 60 miles. Some would say every 30 miles," Vivette said. After the seven rest areas close, about 60 miles will separate most Vermont rest areas.

Truckers like Ron Skorstad, supervisor for Carolina Freight Carriers in Williston, said long haulers need more rest areas. "You'd think they could save money in other areas, and yet they choose to do away with a convenience for people who are paying taxes in the state, and truckers do pay taxes," he said.

See REST, back page



Photos by PETE KENDALL, *Free Press*

ABOVE: Americo Cruz (left) and D.N. Batista and his wife, Maria Batista, take a break Monday at the Williston south rest area along Interstate 89 while traveling from Ottawa to visit friends in Massachusetts.
BELOW: Motorists no longer have the option of stopping at the St. Albans rest area along I-89.



Vermont rest areas

The state is closing seven rest areas, while renovating the remaining 13.



○ Renovate building
■ Close building

Free Press

REST: Cuts a frustration

Continued from Page 1A

One answer might be privatizing rest areas. Such rest areas could be run profitably if a company were allowed to sell food or gasoline.

A group of Franklin County residents is fighting the closure of rest areas in Fairfax and Georgia. Rest areas have many tourist brochures, and the information might encourage people to get off the interstate and visit attractions in Franklin County, said state Rep. Madeline Manahan, D-Enosburg.

Members of the Franklin County group have suggested reopening the rest areas by turning their operation over to a for-profit business.

Gershanek said he had asked agency lawyers whether federal law or policy prohibits commercial activity. He expects an answer soon.

St. Albans council reacts

ST. ALBANS — The St. Albans City Council on Monday voiced support for efforts to reopen the two rest areas on Interstate 89 in Franklin County that the state closed July 5.

"We think they can and should be reopened as soon as possible," Rep. Albert Perry, D-Richford, told aldermen.

Perry and Rep. James Willett, D-St. Albans, said the Franklin County Rest Area Task Force has collected more than 10,000 signatures on petitions that support reopening the facilities. The petitions will be presented to Gov. Howard Dean on Aug. 29.

The task force supports closing the relatively little used state Welcome Center on I-89 in Highgate Springs and shifting its state funding to reopen the two closed rest areas — one southbound and one northbound — near the Georgia-Fairfax line.

Two council members expressed reservations about closing the Welcome Center, which is in the southbound lane, north of the two St. Albans exits on I-89.

— By Richard Cowperthwait

Rest area closings

- 1995 tough budget times
- Governor Howard Dean opts to close rest areas to help balance budget
- Public outcry
- Governor changes his mind and embarks on $30 million capital construction campaign

Vermont
Wednesday, April 12, 1995
Metro Editor:
Rob Eley, 660-1862
or (800) 427-3124

Rest areas circle the drain

Legislature ready to close seven sites

By Betsy Lilley
Free Press Staff Writer

MONTPELIER — The Legislature seems poised to close seven of Vermont's 20 interstate rest areas in order to have more money to repair the remaining

concerns about safety and cost.

The closings were added by the Senate to a transportation bill in a House/Senate conference committee. Negotiators put the measure before House caucuses Tuesday to gauge their support.

House Democrats, who hold a large majority, supported the closings. House Republicans did not.

The Coventry rest area was chosen after a public outcry.

If the House approves the closings, demolishing the targeted rest areas would begin this summer.

Rivers explained that the Senate Transportation Committee made its selections on the basis of a number, of problems, not for political reasons.

two murders, a kidnapping and rape, assaults, robberies, drug deals and vandalism.

One of the two rest stops targeted for closure in Franklin County needs a new septic system and expensive renovations to comply with the federal Americans with Disabilities Act, Rivers said.

"We've had a problem with these

Sept. 4 1996 3B pcan ... THE BURLINGTON FREE PRESS

VERMONT

Barbara Puddicombe of Stowe chats with Travel Ambassador Nora Loura-Lewis of Randolph as other motorists check out maps and brochures at the northbound Randolph rest area on Tuesday. Puddicombe stops at the rest area weekly on her travels, and signed a guest book with a plea to the state to keep the stop open.

Rest areas may close

Move could be temporary way to save state money

By Robin Palmer
TIMES ARGUS STAFF

RANDOLPH – Randolph's two interstate rest areas could close in the next couple of months as the state tries to find budgetary savings.

The six state employees who work at the rest areas will be retained and offered jobs at the Sharon, Bradford and Hartford rest areas, where there are vacancies. The Randolph rest areas would also be kept intact for possible re-use, said Ed von Turkovich, director of the Information Center Division of the Department of Buildings and General Services.

The closure of the Randolph rest areas were part of the $39 million in budget cuts announced Monday.

"The Department of Buildings and General Services is looking to contribute to the rescission package," von Turkovich said.

The state will save $200,000 annually by closing the rest areas, which must be maintained, plowed, mowed, staffed and

"It's a tough decision to make. These are tough economic (times) for the state and tough decisions must be made."

Ed von Turkovich

supplied, said von Turkovich.

Deciding to close the rest areas was not easy.

"It's a tough decision to make. These are tough economic (times) for the state and tough decisions must be made," he said.

There is a chance the rest areas could remain open, however.

The state's joint fiscal committee must review the proposed cut, said von Turkovich.

"At this point, I can't tell you what's going to happen with the facilities ... ," von Turkovich said. "There's no guarantee that they will close at this point."

If approved, the rest areas will not close for about 60 days, he said. The northbound Randolph rest area will also be reopened in about 12 months when construction on a new northbound Sharon rest area, or welcome center, begins.

Also, said von Turkovich, "I think we're looking at how we would recycle those buildings through use of other agencies (such as VTrans or the Department of Motor Vehicles perhaps for a truck weighing station)."

Commuters made it clear this week that they want the buildings to remain rest areas.

About 200 people over two days had written their names on a sign-in sheet regularly displayed at the front counter of the

(See Rest Areas, Page A8)

St. Albans Messenger
Monday, Jan. 5, 2009
Vermont's Oldest Evening Newspaper
BERKSHIRE MONTGOMERY SHELDON FAIRFIELD HIGHGATE RICHFORD ENOSBURG SWANTON GEORGIA FAIRFAX FRANKLIN BA

JOSH KAUFMANN, St. Albans Messeng



'I love this job, I love working with the public.'
Johanne Labounty, Highgate Welcome Center



Where will they stop?

Welcome Center at I-89, Highgate on chopping block

By VICKY SINAGRA
Messenger Correspondent

HIGHGATE — Johanne Labounty loves her job and is worried she is about to lose it.

Labounty, of Swanton, is the supervisor of the Vermont Welcome Center in Highgate. For 19 years, she has been the first person many have met after going through the border crossing into Vermont.

According to an e-mail Labounty received on Dec. 15, the Legislature and Gov. Jim Douglas' administration proposed budget cuts including the Vermont Information Centers Division.

The e-mail, which Labounty has posted on her countertop in the Welcome Center for traveler's to read,

► See WELCOME on page 8A

VICKY SINAGRA, Photos

Above left, Marco Brelli of Montreal gets directions to Burlington before heading to First Night with his family. Johanne Labounty, left, is supervisor of Welcome Center in Highgate. Above, the Highgate Welcome Center is right next to the border for visitors arriving from Canada. Above inset, Goran Necak gets a complimentary cup of coffee at the welcome center.

Welcome

continued from page 1

states that some of the expenditure reductions call for closing four visitor centers, including Highgate on or about Feb. 15.

Labounty was surprised that her Welcome Center made the list of proposed closures.

"As a port of entry, it would be had to people to find out that they'd closed it. It's not about the money, it's about people who come in, no matter what they get here," said Labounty.

She said travelers need a safe, warm place to use the restroom, get directions and stretch their legs.

"Sometimes it's an hour and a half wait at the border and people need a break, especially people with kids," Labounty said additional during the summer and holidays, the wait at the border can be as long as three hours.

The Highgate Welcome Center is open from 7 a.m. to 11 p.m. 365 days a year.

The Welcome Center parking lot is plowed when snow falls, but Labounty, who works 7 a.m. to 3 p.m., comes in during the winter 45 minutes early to clear snow on the pathways with a snowblower and by shoveling.

The Welcome Center employs four people. There are two full-time people who cover the Monday through Friday hours, a permanent part-time person for weekends and a temporary part-time person to fill in when other workers need a day off.

"If a sub can't come in, you've got to come in, this job requires a lot of dedication," said Labounty.

In 2007, almost 74,000 people visited the Welcome Center in Highgate. Labounty said 2008 figures will be close to that amount. She said that in August 2008, the rest stop had 15,754 visitors, an increase from 11,914 in 2007. Labounty attributed the increase in visitors this past August to the exchange rate.

The Welcome Center offers free toilets, including a handicapped restroom. Green Mountain Coffee Roaster's coffee is free, but donations including Canadian coins are accepted. All monies collected for the coffee goes back to the state. Labounty gives out free maps and displays 350 brochures on area attractions.

She generally sees people stop who are on their way to Stowe or Burlington and are looking for directions to shopping or the airport.

Labounty said the Welcome Center is more than just a rest stop.

"It's a home away from home," she said.

On New Year's Eve, the Necak family of Montreal, Quebec was headed to Mount Washington and stopped at the Welcome Center. They had not heard the Center might be closed to cut costs.

"This is a very useful stop. We drove an hour and a half and this was the first stop," said Goran Necak.

"We visit here every time we cross the border, at least two to three times a year, especially with this one," said his wife Valerie motioning to their six-year-old son, Vincent.

Mr. Necak said he did not know where he would stop if the Welcome Center was closed.

"We'd really prefer having this here. It's very convenient. When you get in (the U.S.) you need directions right away," he said.

Over her almost two decades at the Welcome Center, she has helped many who had car problems, those who were turned away from the border because they did not have proper documentation, even people who were made to depart from buses, letting them make contact with someone to pick them up.

"Some of them had to hang out all day, so I started bringing food and hot chocolate in," she said of those who were denied access to Canada.

She had held babies so mothers traveling alone could use the restroom. She is constantly asked if she has a microwave by parents looking to warm up a baby bottle or baby food.

This past holiday week, she offered her counter for people to eat the lunches they packed. Labounty loves talking with people and helping them out in any way she can.

Asked why she is so generous, going beyond her assigned duties, "You have to put yourself in that person's position," Labounty explained.

Born in Canada, Labounty speaks French fluently, which is greatly appreciated by French-speaking visitors looking for directions and information.

She said some who come through the door are frustrated, especially when the weather is bad, Labounty offers them a coffee and a chance to relax.

"I love this job, I love working with the public. You get to meet a lot of people and different cultures," Labounty said.

Labounty worries what will happen to travelers if the Welcome Center is closed.

If it closes, the first choice travelers will have for a restroom is to take the Highgate Springs exit at which signs shows facilities are available three miles away. That restroom is located at Martin's Store in Highgate Springs.

Martin's owner Gilbert Gagner said he had learned on television around the holidays that the state had announced plans to close the Welcome Center. He said the Welcome Center is "pretty important" because once travelers leave Montreal there are no rest stops before the border crossing, which he said could involve a 30-minute or four hour wait if there was a back-up at the border.

"It's a crying shame the first thing people would see is 'Welcome to Vermont,'" and then have to search for restroom facilities, said Gagner.

He said it was possible if the Welcome Center closed he would see more traffic in his store, or the travelers would go to different areas.

"It might be positive, but it may overwhelm," said Gagner, noting that he only has two restrooms available and uses a traditional septic system. He said he does not have a policy that someone using his facilities have to make a purchase, but wondered what might happen, if as a result of state restrooms closing his septic failed. "Who would pay for that?" he asked.

Also, Martin's closes on Christmas Day and the store's restrooms are not handicapped accessible.

Nancy Paquette, owner of the My-T-Fine II restaurant in Highgate Springs said the Welcome Center should not be closed.

"Travelers need to have this. They've been good to me. If they're not there, we're going to lose," she said of the Welcome Center staff that has sent diners her way.

The other visitor centers that may be closed are Hartford North, Randolph North and Sharon South.

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