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30% of Chittenden Co. Homes Exposed to High Levels of Night-time Traffic Noise

Vermont firm maps house-by-house traffic noise levels

White River Junction, VT, January 27, 2005 – Traffic noise keeping you awake at night? You're not alone. RSG Inc., an environmental consultancy located in White River Junction, recently determined that as many as 30% of households are located in areas where nighttime sound levels could cause sleep disturbance. During the day, about 20% of households are exposed to traffic noise levels that are "seriously annoying," as characterized by the World Health Organization (WHO).

The WHO sets nighttime sleep disturbance sound levels at 45 decibels and daytime annoyance levels at 55 decibels. Sections of downtown Burlington, areas around the interstate highways, major thoroughfares such as US 7, and the Burlington International Airport at times experience noise levels as high as 70 decibels or more.

"People think of Vermont as a quiet, bucolic place where the loudest noise might be the gurgling stream in the backyard," said Ken Kaliski, Director of Environmental Services at RSG Inc. "But quite a bit of new development gets completed without regard to minimizing traffic noise impacts."

Curious and concerned about noise levels in Chittenden County, Kaliski created a "noise map" that shows areas above, at, and below WHO noise guidelines. "Viewers can zoom down to their general neighborhood, and, if the points that represent buildings along their street are yellow or red, they're exposed to a lot of traffic noise." As expected, houses located near major roadways get the bulk of the noise effect. However, it is a combination of vehicle speeds and traffic volumes that determine whether a home is above or below the WHO guideline level.

The RSG noise map was created using a calibrated computer model that includes traffic volumes, vehicle speeds, and other highway data that drive the Metropolitan Planning Organization's (MPO's) Chittenden County Travel Demand Model, updated last year by RSG, along with U.S. Geologic Survey terrain data, building cover from the Vermont Center for Geographic Information, and aerial photos from the Vermont Mapping Program.

In its Guidelines for Community Noise document (August 2003), WHO points out that exposure to above-standard noise levels increases stress and incidence of stress-related disease including heart attack and increased blood pressure. Noise also impairs or interrupts sleep which can lead to depression and impact physiological function. In addition, children have difficulty learning in noisy environments creating implications for schools and houses in which home work assignments are being completed.

“Noise is an emerging issue as the peace and quiet of Vermont’s soundscape disappears” said Les Blomberg of the Noise Pollution Clearinghouse in Montpelier, Vermont. “Local governments and businesses are being hit by community concerns, and they’re unprepared to respond, let alone proactively fix noise problems before expensive mitigations are required.” While European countries have been studying noise pollution and implementing policies for years, US counties, towns, and cities continue to use standards that were set in the 1960’s when acceptable noise levels were based on measurements and definitions that no longer exist.

RSG is one of a very few firms with the expertise and equipment to tackle the noise issues that have come up in Chittenden County and across New England. “With the right data, we can map noise levels for any geography and quickly discover areas where traffic noise has, or with unplanned development, might have a negative impact,” says Kaliski. Along with the growth in noise related concerns and complaints, RSG’s noise practice has grown more than thirty-fold in the past decade.

To view or download the Chittenden County Traffic Noise Map, visit <http://www.rsginc.com/eea/projects/ccnoisemap.htm>.

About RSG, Inc. – RSG specializes in the planning, analysis, and management of business, infrastructure and natural resources. We believe that high-quality, objective analysis is a prerequisite to resolving complex problems. More than just analysts, scientists, and technicians, we’re communicators – our study results are clear, concise, and directly applicable to a client’s particular questions and challenges. Our solutions are creative and grounded by 20 years of experience with clients as large as federal government agencies and Fortune 500 companies or as small as local interest groups and townships.

About Noise Pollution Clearinghouse – (www.nonoise.org) Headquartered in Montpelier, Vermont, Noise Pollution Clearinghouse is the nation’s largest organization working to protect the peace and quiet.

