

Planned southern Durham roundabout riles neighbors

The Herald-Sun By Matt Riley April 20, 2018

DURHAM – A new roundabout coming to the intersection of Hope Valley Road and University Drive is generating complaints months before the state even starts building it.

Officials say that the roundabout will improve traffic flow and safety at the intersection, but locals say that it will disrupt the area and hurt property values.

"The idea has come up quite a few times," said Jim Dunlop, a congestion management engineer at the N.C. Department of Transportation. "Ultimately the city submitted a project request for a roundabout there, and it scored high for prioritization and got funded."

The NCDOT estimates traffic at the intersection — nearly 19,000 cars a day now — will increase by 16 percent over the next 25 years.

The city first asked the NCDOT to look at a roundabout in 2000 and received approval in 2015. The project is expected to cost \$1.5 million and take 18 months.

Ben Upshaw, the design engineer, said the roundabout will handle higher traffic in the future and alleviate congestion at rush hour.

"Durham is growing, and in this case that means more traffic coming through that area," he said. "We need to do something to prepare for that traffic."

Roundabouts move traffic efficiently, as cars mostly flow freely in the same direction and at a slow speed, Dunlop said. At a signal intersection, cars stop, which can lead to backups.

Roundabouts are also safer than traffic-signal intersections, where drivers sometimes disregard the signal and cause accidents.

In 2018, the NCDOT reported that roundabouts reduced total crashes by 48 percent and reduced fatal crashes in urban areas by 60 percent, compared to signal intersections. When drivers do get into an accident at a roundabout, they are more likely to rear-end someone rather than cause a head-on or T-bone collision at a signal intersection, Upshaw said.

But landowners say construction will impede traffic and cost them money.

"We have 150 children in our preschool, so during the school year we have those parents coming in five days a week," said Karen Whitaker, pastor at Epworth United Methodist Church. Construction will make it difficult for parents to enter and exit the church grounds.

"If you can't get into the place, you do away with our congregation," said Thomas Biggs, chairman of Epworth United Methodist Church's board. "And we can't afford that."

Biggs and Whitaker are also concerned the roundabout will require the church to build a 200-foot retaining wall and remove 35 pine trees on the property, and that the church won't be fairly compensated.

"The Department of Transportation just values square footage, but they don't value what impact it does to your property," Biggs said. "You can value square footage, but you can't value accessibility."

The law firm Maxwell, Freeman & Bowman, which will lose some land on property it has leased since 1982, also opposes the project. (CONTINUED...)

"[T]raffic incidents occurring at the intersection have been few and far between," it wrote in a letter to NCDOT. The construction of a turn lane greatly eased congestion, the letter said, adding the roundabout "will not 'enhance' the aesthetics at the intersection" and property values of affected owners will be "significantly diminished."

"It's a colossal mess," said Chris Crenshaw, who owns Crenshaw Financial Services. NCDOT is planning taking a small part of his property, valued at \$1,100, as part of the project. "I think a [traffic] light is doing just fine."

The NCDOT built the state's first roundabout in Winston-Salem in 1999. Since then, 323 roundabouts have been constructed by counties, municipalities, and the state. According to Kittleson & Associates, Inc., a transportation engineering and planning firm, North Carolina is ranked third in the nation for number of roundabouts, behind Washington and Florida.

New roundabout meeting

The N.C. Department of Transportation will hold a public meeting from 5 to 7 p.m. Monday, April 23, regarding a proposed roundabout on Mineral Springs Road at Pleasant Drive in Durham. A map of the proposed design of the roundabout can be found at www.ncdot.gov/projects/publicmeetings.

The meeting will take place at Story Church, 100 Pleasant Drive in Durham. Interested residents may attend at any time during the meeting hours, as no formal presentation will be made. NCDOT representatives will be available to answer questions and listen to comments regarding the project.

Comments may also be submitted via phone, email, or mail by May 8. For additional information or to submit a comment after the meeting, contact NCDOT Capital Region Traffic Engineer John H. Grant, P.E., at jhgrant@ncdot.gov, (919) 814-4952, or 1561 Mail Service Center, Raleigh, NC, 27699-1561.

As Durham grows, another call to unravel the Downtown Loop

The Herald-Sun By Dawn Baumgartner April 9, 2018

DURHAM – Over the past decade, downtown Durham has gained 1,000 more residential units, 529 more hotel rooms, 300,000 more square feet of commercial space, 60 restaurants and 30 shops.

Those numbers are since Downtown Durham Inc.'s last master-plan update, and a new one just came out.

Downtown development isn't slowing down.

What else is in the the works:

- More than 1.2 million square feet of office space.
- More than 1,500 housing units.
- More than 100,000 square feet of retail space.

DDI was formed in 1993 to be the catalyst for downtown revitalization and is funded by city and county governments and other sources.

The nonprofit group's update wants to make downtown walkable and vibrant for the people who live, work and visit. DDI held three focus groups, four public meetings and interviewed 36 stakeholders. It also had a steering committee of city and county department heads, property owners and residents. They presented the (CONTINUED...)

final report to the Durham City Council last week.

Matt Gladdek, director of policy and planning for DDI, said this update, unlike previous plans, was primarily fueled by public input. He said they sought diversity for gender and race but that there is very little Latino community representation downtown right now.

Downtown is a living room for Durham and they want to make it welcoming for everyone, Gladdek said.

What the plan calls for:

- Retail clusters
- High quality, diverse retailers
- A sense of place
- Discouraging non-retail at street level
- Racial and cultural diversity
- Embracing density
- Downtown-wide parking solution

What the plan wants to get rid of:

- The downtown loop and one-way streets.

One-way streets kill retail, Gladdek said, because it's harder to get in and out of businesses.

Durham was not among [the 41 cities to receive the most recent round of U.S. Department of Transportation Transportation Investment Generating Economic Recovery \(TIGER\) grants](#) announced in March.

Mayor Steve Schewel told Gladdek he's not offering city money, but hopes another TIGER grant could fund turning the downtown loop back into two-way streets.

Schewel also reminded Gladdek that there will be retail space in the new city-owned parking garage being built at Mangum and Morgan streets. That's inside the loop.

New mixed use parking garage

Gladdek said because the new mixed use parking garage is on the loop, new retail will be in a really difficult retail situation. The garage will open in 2019.

City Manager Tom Bonfield said the city is engaging a broker sometime soon for the mixed use garage space.

Council member Mark-Anthony Middleton, who is on DDI's board, asked about the impact of new apartment buildings going up downtown instead of office space, and how that will affect job growth.

Gladdek said the market right now is pushing development that way because timber multi-family units are inexpensive and profitable compared to office buildings. But for the city, that means lower tax value and fewer jobs.

There have to be incentives if the city wants offices downtown, he said.