

## NCDOT's plan to make I-540 commutes faster? \$2.5M worth of ramp signals

Triangle Business Journal By Lauren K. Ohnesorge April 6, 2017

As the N.C. Department of Transportation continues to plan I-540 improvements, a lane closure this weekend offers insight into what's to come.

The state is spending about \$2.5 million to bring [four metered signals](#) to westbound I-540 ramps.

It's a first for North Carolina, according to NCDOT.

On-ramp signals, also referred to as ramp meters, are described as stop-and-go lights. When activated, vehicles on the ramp must stop when the light is red, only proceeding to the highway when the signal is green. By only allowing a few vehicles to merge at a time, officials hope to space out the traffic and create a better flow on I-540. The goal is more reliable travel times and a reduction in crashes, according to NCDOT.

It's worked in other metros. According to an NCDOT report, the signals resulted in a:

- 22 percent decrease in travel time during peak periods in Houston;
- 155 percent peak period travel speed increase in Portland, Oregon; and
- 16 percent decrease in its crash rate during metered hours in Phoenix.

Numbers show congestion is growing at the four ramps NCDOT has targeted for the signals' initial rollout.

Locations of planned ramp signals

- Falls of Neuse Road (Exit 14)
- Six Forks Road (Exit 11)
- Creedmoor Road (Exit 9)
- Leesville Road (Exit 7)

According to an NCDOT study, peak congestion lasted 44 minutes on Leesville Road in 2011. That total grew to 73 minutes in 2013. [An I-540 Westbound Capacity Analysis published](#) in 2014 graded Leesville Road's "level-of-service" with an "F" – the worst of the four ramps targeted for signals.

On Friday, crews will install the Leesville Road ramp signal, the first of the four. They will close the ramp at 9 p.m. and plan to reopen it in time for Monday commutes.

If all goes well, the state hopes all four signals will be operational in September. The state is also evaluating on-ramp signals for Charlotte-area interstates, according to NCDOT.

In a statement, NCDOT said the signals can be activated at any time in response to unusual circumstances – such as special events and collisions – but typically, their use will be limited to peak periods, such as morning and evening commutes.

Signal installation is just one of the projects planned for I-540, [which will soon host a driverless vehicle pilot program](#). The state recently [opened the Veridea Parkway interchange](#) to traffic and is in the design stages of planning another interchange at Morrisville Parkway.

Read: [Four traffic-snarling projects NCDOT is working on in 2017](#) (CONTINUED...)

But it all pales in comparison to a project that's been repeatedly called priority one by the Regional Transportation Alliance business coalition: [the \\$2.2 billion "Complete 540" project](#). The latest NCDOT schedule doesn't have the project moving forward for another three years, but that hasn't stopped groups such as RTA from campaigning for an acceleration of the timetable. [The current North Carolina Transportation Plan is in draft form](#), and RTA Director Joe Milazzo said Thursday in an email his team plans to be active in the public comment process.

NCDOT is [planning a public meeting](#) April 10 on the draft of its 10-Year State Transportation Improvement Program. The goal is to finalize the plan in June.

## Legislation could help fund RDU runway, statewide airport projects

The Herald -Sun By Kathryn Trogon April 7, 2017

MORRISVILLE – Raleigh-Durham International Airport officials say a bill filed at the N.C. General Assembly could help pay for a \$305 million project to rebuild its longest runway, which is needed to continue to accommodate and attract new international flights.

Sen. Bill Rabon, a Republican from Brunswick County and chair of the Senate Rules Committee, filed Senate Bill 351 that would allocate \$100 million for runway improvements at RDU over two years, starting July 1.

The money would come from a short-term motor vehicle lease and rental tax, which generates about \$65 million per year. That money currently goes into the general fund, but Rabon's bill would instead put it into the dwindling Highway Fund, he said.

"The money for these short-term leases – it's really money that is generated by airports and by transportation, and it should go back in transportation," he said. "I think it would just do a world of good."

Rabon said he initially included RDU in the bill because he knew it "desperately" needs a longer runway to accommodate [international flights](#), and he wanted to find a way to facilitate that.

But he said he has some changes he hopes to make to the bill later this session to make it an ongoing source of revenue for projects needed at airports statewide, "so the whole state benefits not just one individual."

"Airports really, really have a huge return on investment as far as transportation and state dollars that we put in," Rabon said.

The state's Highway Fund has provided money to airports since 2006 but only for general aviation airports. All publicly-owned airports have been eligible to receive capital project funding from the state's Highway Trust Fund since 2015.

Under existing state funding sources, RDU gets \$500,000 per year, said Michael Landguth, the airport's president and CEO. "Half a million dollars doesn't go very far," he said.

Kristie VanAuken, RDU's vice president of communications and community affairs, said Rabon's bill is a step in the right direction, particularly, she said, since "airport funding is broken at the federal level."

"We don't feel tremendously optimistic about new tools at the federal level at this point," she said. "But we're not going to quit trying."

### Talks about airport funding

State funding is just one element needed for RDU to rebuild its runway. RDU is working on a funding model that officials hope to release this summer that would lay out how the runway would be paid for. This could include state or federal funding or airport revenues, such as parking and landing fees. (CONTINUED...)

RDU officials have recently been in talks with some of the state's congressional representatives about receiving more federal money. Staff said for every dollar the airport has paid into the Federal Airport Improvement Program, it has gotten back about 3.7 cents. That's because the \$20 billion needed by U.S. airports each year is significantly more than the funding available through federal programs, according to a report by Airports Council International – North America, an association representing airport owners and operators.

Also, under federal rules, RDU must forgo 75 percent of the airport improvement program money it is entitled to because it collects a \$4.50 facility charge from every passenger who boards a plane there. Airport officials nationwide are urging Congress to repeal that rule as well as lift the \$4.50 cap on passenger facility charges, which haven't been raised since 2000.

"As we start to look at the taxes the citizens of this region are paying into the Federal Airport Improvement Program versus what we are getting back, I don't believe that it's fair and equitable," Landguth said. "When we are coming forward with a program like a runway, it should be a number one program that should be funded appropriately ... We've paid into the system for years, and it's time to get our fair funding back."

RDU's runway will need to be [rebuilt](#) in the next few years before it reaches the end of its useful life. It will be built parallel to the existing 10,000-foot runway which is on the western side of the airport. There is no set timeline for when construction will begin or how long it will take, at least until RDU receives approval from the Federal Aviation Administration, according to RDU staff.

If the useful life of the runway were to end before a new one is built, the airport would have only one commercial runway, and at 7,500 feet, it isn't long enough to accommodate trans-Atlantic or trans-continental flights. A new runway also would be needed if the airport hopes to attract a flight to [China](#).

"We can't wait to get started on this because the runway life is short," VanAuken said. "We simply can't wait. We have to get moving."

### **Other airports**

While RDU's runway may be the most pressing aviation project across the state, some of the more than 70 other publicly-owned airports in North Carolina also could benefit from a source of funding for capital projects.

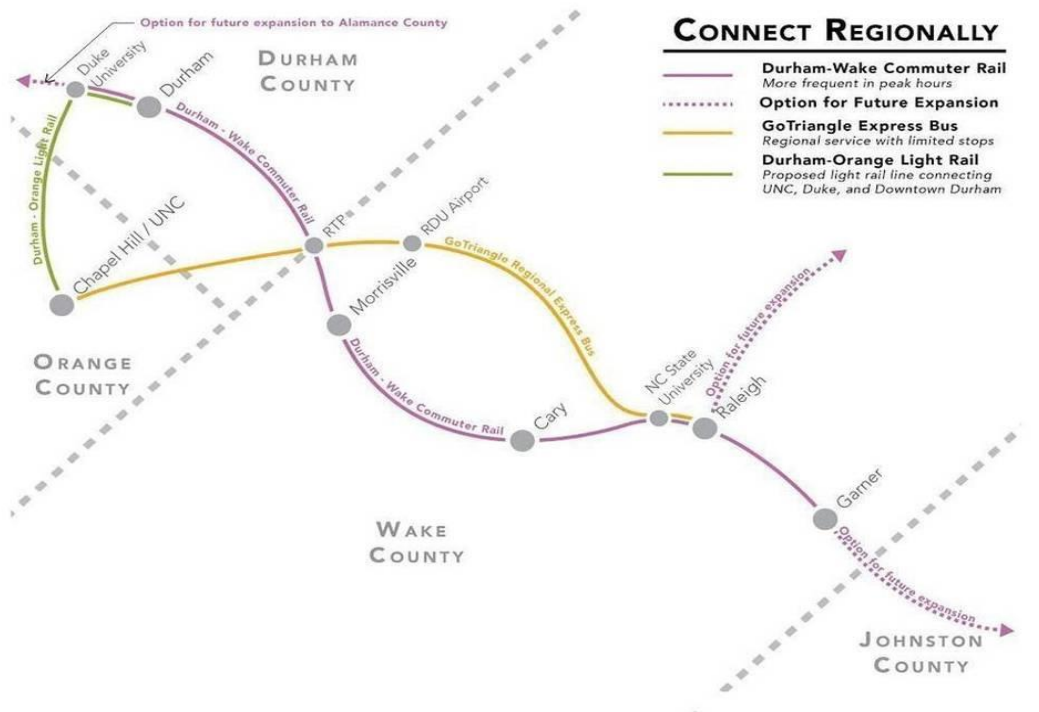
In the last seven years, Triangle North Executive Airport in Louisburg has grown from having 80 aircraft based there to 130, said Steve Merritt, airport manager. The airport is one of several in the area, including Raleigh Executive Jetport in Sanford and Johnston County Airport, that provide relief to RDU.

"They're growing, and we're growing," Merritt said. "We are only restricted by the pot of money we can get."

Triangle North Executive Airport recently completed a \$2 million project to increase capacity for more corporate customers. There also are plans to extend the runway from 5,500 to 6,500 feet and strengthen it to accommodate heavier jets with an anticipated \$11 million state grant. The grant also would help make more land available for infrastructure.

"If there is a way to get more money for the airport system, I would absolutely be in favor of that," Merritt said. "I don't think we could have too much money. The needs are almost limitless."

## Durham-Orange light-rail costs could delay Durham-Wake commuter rail



The commuter rail corridor would start in Garner on existing rail lines, travel through downtown Raleigh, and ultimately extend to Durham, covering a total of 37 miles.

The Herald -Sun By Virginia Bridges April 8, 2017

**Durham** – The rising costs of the Durham-Orange light rail project may delay plans for a 37-mile commuter-rail line connecting Wake and Durham counties.

The [Wake County Transit Plan](#) calls for the Wake-Durham Commuter Rail Project to connect Garner and Durham with stops in Raleigh, including N.C. State University; Cary; Morrisville and Research Triangle Park by 2027.

In November, [Wake County voters agreed to raise](#) the county's sales tax rate by a half-cent in order to help fund the 10-year \$2.3 billion transit plan, which also includes bus service improvements.

The Wake plan is based on Durham County paying 33 percent of the commuter rail's local costs, which corresponds to the percentage of track in Durham County.

In a presentation to the Durham City Council this week, GoTriangle officials indicated Durham County's existing transit revenue streams wouldn't support Wake's timeline for launching the commuter rail, considering the updated financing model for the light-rail project.

Durham County's transit fund cash balance would face a \$170.6 million shortfall in fiscal year 2035 if Durham agreed to a 33 percent share and a 2027 delivery date, said John Tallmadge, who directs GoTriangle's Regional Services Development Department.

Durham County is paying for its share of the light-rail and commuter-rail projects with money from a half-cent transit sales tax, car rental fees and vehicle registration fees. (CONTINUED...)

The commuter-rail project becomes more viable if it is pushed back 10 years, with an opening date in 2037 with Durham shouldering 20 percent of the costs. Durham County would have to pay cash for the project because financing wouldn't be viable, Tallmadge said.

Mike Charbonneau, a GoTriangle spokesman, wrote in an email that GoTriangle is providing financial analysis of hypothetical scenarios for commuter rail.

"The Commuter Rail project in the Wake County Transit Plan is still early in the planning process," he wrote.

Will Allen, who was appointed by the Raleigh City Council to the GoTriangle board, said it was a strategic decision to present a 10-year plan to Wake voters that was aggressive and concrete. It was based on a conservative investment model that delivered and paid for all the promised items by 2027.

Allen also pointed out that Wake County tax dollars can only be spent in Wake County.

"We are restricted," he said. "We can't pay for a mile of track in Durham County."

Delaying the plan could increase the costs due to inflation and other economic factors, he said.

"So it's important that we meet the schedule promised to the voters," he said.

Wake commissioners' chairman Sig Hutchinson was more optimistic about the potential financing challenges.

"We just have to get creative and find some alternative sources of funding," outside of additional Wake County funding. "We just have to do this work, and this is what we are about — we are about creating as 21st century community in which transit has got to be part of the solution."

The updated Durham Transit Plan presented to the City Council on Thursday included updated [figures for the Durham-Orange Light Transit Rail project](#). The project cost has jumped to \$3.3 billion, which includes construction, financing and other costs through 2062.

Orange and Durham will split the project's \$1.9 billion local cost with a cost-sharing agreement that is being renegotiated so Durham shoulders more of the cost to prevent depleting Orange County's transit funds. The local costs increased after the anticipated state share decreased from 25 to 10 percent of project costs and financing and inflation were included in the price tag.

Elected officials in Durham say there is a strong interest in supporting the commuter rail, but the plans may have to be adjusted.

"We do feel it is an important component for the overall plan for transit in the region," Durham County Commissioner Ellen Reckhow said. "We do want to do it. There is commitment to do it, so we are still looking at when and how that would be funded."

Options could include raising money from other partners, possibly through a special transportation-related tax in the Research Triangle Park district. The current commuter-rail plan doesn't include state funding, Reckhow said.

Durham County commissioners Chairwoman Wendy Jacobs said officials will work on solutions.

"I think there obviously will be adjustments that are going to have to be made in terms of the timing on how we will fill in some of the funding gaps," Jacobs said. "The important thing is we are as committed to doing the light rail as we are to doing the commuter rail."

## As Raleigh-Charlotte rail work progresses, N.C. receives new trains

Triangle Business Journal By Lauren K. Ohnesorge April 10, 2017

As [Raleigh's Union Station project moves forward downtown](#), the state of North Carolina continues to roll out a series of improvements expected to make train trips from the City of Oaks to Charlotte smoother in the coming years.

And that includes the addition of new trains.

[Paul Worley](#), rail division director of N.C. Department of Transportation, says his team has received one of its new locomotives, dubbed "City of Kannapolis." A second locomotive – dubbed "Town of Cary" – should ship from their manufacturer in early May, he says.

It's the testing phase for both trains, which are rebuilt models each equipped with a brand new cab control unit (CCU).

The state is paying about \$1.9 million for each train. According to Worley, comparable new models typically run about \$6 million each. CCUs allow the train to operate without two engines, and each one costs the state about \$700,000. The new equipment [was initially targeted to be shipped months earlier](#).

Worley says the massive rail overhaul, [dubbed the Piedmont Improvement Project](#), is on schedule. Construction is underway to implement double tracks between Charlotte and Concord and Kannapolis to Salisbury.

"All of the track work between Greensboro and Raleigh is complete, with the exception of usual punch-list items and some crossing work," he says.

## Self-driving car testing on Triangle Expressway hinges on federal funding

The News and Observer By Anna Douglas April 12, 2017

WASHINGTON – Budget negotiations in Congress later this year could determine whether North Carolina and eight other states begin federally-funded on-road testing of self-driving cars.

President Donald Trump and his administration are putting pressure on Congress to cut some federal spending, including a proposed \$2.4 billion decrease in funding for the U.S. Department of Transportation.

Federal DOT officials have already approved North Carolina's Interstate 540 Triangle Expressway, a toll road, as a future testing site for automated automobiles – passenger cars and trucks that navigate traffic without a traditional driver. The N.C. Turnpike Authority requested the designation and was picked in January as one of 10 sites nationwide to participate in the pilot program.

[\[READ MORE: Driverless cars to be tested on N.C. 540 Triangle Expressway toll road\]](#)

Now, supporters of the program say Congress must allocate money for the projects to move forward.

North Carolina's two Republican U.S. senators want federal transportation money for the research included in this year's appropriations bill. U.S. Sens. Richard Burr and Thom Tillis sent a letter to top Senate appropriators this month saying the DOT-funded testing and research will support safe development of connected and automated vehicles.

The letter was signed by three Republican senators and six Democrats but doesn't request a specific amount of funding. Tillis is leading the bipartisan effort along with Michigan Democratic U.S. Sen. Gary Peters.

(CONTINUED...)

Tillis' office said the amount of money that could go to North Carolina is undetermined but he wants to see enough federal resources provided to support technological innovation on the U.S. DOT pilot sites.

"Funding levels are something that appropriators will have to balance in a difficult budget cycle," he told McClatchy in a prepared statement Wednesday.

State transportation officials said the future Triangle Expressway self-driving car testing depends on federal funding. The N.C. [Turnpike Authority](#) anticipates signing an agreement with the federal transportation agency, said spokesperson Carly Olexik.

Other federally-approved testing grounds include two in California as well as sites in Michigan, Pennsylvania, Texas, Maryland, Iowa, Wisconsin and Florida. Federal DOT officials announced approval of the 10 testing sites on the final day of President Barack Obama's administration.

Last month, the [Charlotte Observer reported](#) Charlotte city officials are hoping to partner with auto giant General Motors to test self-driving cars locally.

## **We know it's dangerous. But we do it 88 percent of the time anyway.**

The News and Observer By Kate Irby April 17, 2017

It's common knowledge that using your phone while driving is dangerous. But people do it anyway – around twice as much as they're willing to admit, according to a new study.

The study by Zendrive, a research company working to improve road safety, looked at 570 million trips among 3.1 million drivers between December 2016 and February 2017 and found [drivers used their phones a whooping 88 percent of the time](#).

They also found time on phones averaged three and a half minutes for every hour of driving. Looking away from the road for two seconds increases your chances of crashing 24 times over.

That number is much higher than previous studies that asked drivers to self-identify if they were texting while driving. About 40 percent of drivers admitted in a [2016 AAA Foundation survey](#) that they read an email or text while driving in the past month, and about a third said they had written a text or email.

Meanwhile, 81 percent said texting while driving is a "very serious threat to safety" and 88 percent support a texting ban, according to the same survey. Nearly all states and U.S. territories have blanket laws banning either handheld phone use or texting while driving, with Montana, Missouri, Arizona and Texas the exceptions. All four of those states have proposed those laws but have not passed them, though Texas does ban the use of phones in school zones.

The state with the most distracted drivers was Vermont, according to Zendrive, and the least distracted drivers were in Oregon. It's unclear how much of an effect bans on phone use have on cutting down on distracted driving, based on Zendrive's findings.

In 2015, [3,477 people were killed due to distracted driving](#) and nearly 400,000 were injured, according to the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration.



## Orange County residents weigh in last time before light rail vote

The Herald -Sun By Tammy Grubb April 19, 2017

CHAPEL HILL – The \$3.3 billion Durham-Orange light-rail financial plan still is being revised, but GoTriangle officials said Tuesday the share Orange County could pay may be shrinking.

A public-private Funding and Community Collaborative also pledged to raise \$100 million for the 17.7-mile light rail line from UNC Hospitals to N.C. Central University in Durham.

Durham and Orange counties recently negotiated a proposed 82/18 percent split of light rail's roughly \$1.9 billion local cost. Durham County was expected to pick up 80 percent under the original plan, and Orange County was to pick up 20 percent.

However, GoTriangle officials told the Orange County Board of Commissioners before Tuesday's public hearing that Orange County might pay only 16.5 percent of the local [light rail cost](#), or \$313.5 million.

The state is expected to pay up to 10 percent of the local cost.

Durham and Orange commissioners will decide this month whether to continue seeking Federal Transit Administration funding for 50 percent of the project's cost. The Durham County commissioners will vote April 24; the Orange County commissioners will vote April 27.

The deadline for applying to the engineering phase of the FTA's New Starts grant program is April 30.

Former GoTriangle General Manager David King said FTA approval would trigger a private, \$100 million fund-raising effort. The 21-member collaborative includes private citizens and leaders from universities, health care institutions and governments.

"That is a large number. It's not automatic that it's going to happen, but as you look at the names on this list ... you'll see it involves people who have a track record of being able to do things at this scale," King said.

The commissioners also heard Tuesday from 70 people, all of whom said they support transit, but only half of which supported advancing the light rail project.

Their voices ranged from the UNC graduate students and working commuters excited about having another option for getting around the region to residents living on fixed incomes and others who fear light-rail costs will siphon county money from other services or push taxes higher.

Carrboro resident Linda Haac said she agrees with those on both sides of the issue, but the project's route across the county's southwestern corner fails to serve most residents.

But the decision is not about the future of social justice, regional transit or future growth, she said. It's about fiscal responsibility.

"Not only does it have to be fair for all our residents, you first and foremost have to meet your fiduciary responsibilities," she said. "The business plans I have seen from GoTriangle made me question them as a partner ... If my financial adviser brought me this, I would have to say it's highly speculative."

While he has the same concerns about using tax dollars responsibly, Orange County resident Jim Parker said he and his business, Summit Design and Engineering, support the light rail initiative.

"For our area, a major population center, effective and multimodal transportation options are critical to continue growth. Increasing population demands place our transportation infrastructure under tremendous strain, and it will continue to do so," he said. (CONTINUED...)



It's about the next 30 years and beyond, noted Matt Fajack, UNC's vice chancellor for finance and administration. He predicted the county would be considering light-rail spurs into the county and into Chatham County in 20 years if the commissioners are courageous.

UNC Health Care communications Chief Karen McCall added light-rail also will have benefits for patients from across the state that need dependable alternatives to cars and parking when they come to UNC for care.

"We have to take a lesson from RTP. Where would this region be if 50 years ago the people that were developing RTP didn't have the vision and courage to put that project forward. There were a lot of anxieties about developing RTP that they had to overcome," Fajack said.

The light-rail plan is great for UNC and Duke, said Desiree Goldman, a local resident and Realtor who added the universities and health care centers are two of the area's largest property owners who don't pay taxes.

The light-rail cost is too high, even if Orange County only pays 16.5 percent, she said, because no one knows the final cost or the amount of overruns. While Durham will make money from the deal, she said, there's no chance for that along Orange County's short portion of the rail line.

"Bus rapid transit would allow us to be more adaptable," she said, "and in the current state of our politics ... do we really think that the federal government is going to give us money for this and that we can count on that we're going to be able to keep to cost projections for 10 years out?"

Chapel Hill resident Kimberly Brewer agreed with giving bus-rapid transit another look, noting that it not only would serve UNC and the hospital but also the rest of Orange County, and at a lower cost.

"It's not cost effective when you look at the cost per rider, when you're comparing that to buses and bus rapid transit. The cost is significant, and I think it's a very significant financial risk for the Orange County taxpayers," she said. "It really doesn't go to places that many people want to go and need to go."

Revised [figures](#) now show Orange County's cash balance hitting a minimum of \$1.05 million in 2030. The minimum cash balance expected for Durham County could be \$7.1 million in 2027, officials said.

Durham County also is working on a [commuter rail line](#) with Wake County; the cost of that project isn't known yet but is expected to be at least a billion dollars.

Orange County's commissioners will continue the light-rail discussion Thursday, April 20, at the Whitted Building, 300 W. Tryon St. in Hillsborough. The board won't hold another public hearing before voting, but residents can email comments to [OCBOCC@orangecountync.gov](mailto:OCBOCC@orangecountync.gov).

Durham and Orange commissioners will get the final version of the financial plan Friday, April 21.

## Chapel Hill-Carrboro mayors send letter backing light-rail project

The Herald -Sun By Staff April 20, 2017

HILLSBOROUGH – Nine current and former mayors from Chapel Hill and Carrboro jointly sent the Orange County Board of Commissioners a letter Thursday expressing their endorsement of the Durham-Orange Light-Rail Transit project.

The proposed 17.7-mile light-rail line would connect UNC Hospitals in Chapel Hill with N.C. Central University in Durham, and form one leg of a regional transit system that's also expected to include a commuter rail line between Durham and Wake counties. (CONTINUED...)

The letter, taken from former Chapel Hill Mayor Mark Kleinschmidt's Facebook page, stated:

"We are writing in support of the proposed Durham-Orange Light Rail Project that will connect Orange County with the rest of the Triangle. The project is essential to our future for a variety of reasons, including keeping our community an environmentally healthy and economically vibrant anchor of the Triangle metropolitan area.

Over the past 50 years, our community has repeatedly decided to invest in public transportation. This began with Chapel Hill Mayor Howard Lee's creation of the bus system in the early 1970s, and Carrboro Mayor Robert Drakeford's persistent efforts to extend the system, which has grown into the robust network today that carries almost 7 million riders each year.

It required vision and commitment to start and sustain this public transportation system. The vision began with a sense of community, and this is what sustains the vision today. Think about how those seven million riders would get around today without our public transportation system:

What would the roads look like? There would be more of them, they would be wider, and they would be more crowded.

What would our community look like? There would be more paved parking lots, fewer trees and less green space.

Public transportation shapes our daily lives in ways that are sometimes invisible. For example, in the middle of downtown Chapel Hill – which has far more people, stores, and restaurants today than it did 20 years ago – there are 25 percent fewer cars today than there were 20 years ago. Likewise, even as Carrboro's population has increased by nearly one-third over the past 20 years, average daily traffic on downtown streets has stayed roughly the same.

Public transportation brings environmental benefits and contributes to social justice goals. While the towns in Orange County have grown, the pollution and frustration of traffic congestion have been reduced; in addition, the county has maintained environmental benefits such as the rural buffer and watershed protection. Social justice goals are served because mobility is the single strongest factor contributing to economic advancement for low-wealth families.

The economic benefit of public transit is illustrated by the seamless integration of the county's largest institution into the community. UNC is a partner in financing Chapel Hill Transit, and the system serves UNC Health Care staff, patients and visitors. The University recognizes that public transit is essential to the campus and hospitals.

All of this background informs the decision our community confronts today: should we invest in the first leg of a Triangle-wide light rail public transportation system?

We believe the answer is an emphatic yes. Our county leaders have negotiated an equitable cost-sharing agreement, and in return we can expect significant community-wide benefits. Just look at the enthusiastic support for the project from Clean Air Carolina, the Sierra Club, and Medical Advocates for Healthy Air, all of which endorse the light rail plan because it "yields significant environmental benefits," assists low-wealth families "by enhancing transportation options and access," and "boosts economic development."

Orange County as we know it today came about through many decisions over the years. None have been more important than decisions about transportation. The right decision today for our future is supporting the light rail plan. We enthusiastically support it – and urge our commissioners to support it too."

Carrboro Mayors Lydia Lavelle, Mark Chilton, Mike Nelson and Ellie Kinnaird

Chapel Hill Mayors Mark Kleinschmidt, Kevin Foy, Rosemary Waldorf, Ken Broun and Howard Lee

## Orange County may push ahead with lesser share of light-rail cost

The Herald -Sun By Tammy Grubb April 21, 2017

HILLSBOROUGH -- A plan reducing Orange County's share of the Durham-Orange Light-Rail plan's \$3.3 billion cost won support Thursday but also raised questions about the county's options if something goes wrong.

The Durham County Board of Commissioners will vote Monday, April 24, on a revised transit plan, financial model and cost-sharing agreement with Orange County. The Orange County Board of Commissioners will vote Thursday, April 27.

The public won't be able to weigh in at Thursday's meeting but can email comments to [OCBOCC@orangecountync.gov](mailto:OCBOCC@orangecountync.gov).

The decisions are required by April 30 to meet a Federal Transit Administration deadline for moving the light-rail project into the engineering phase. The project, if the FTA agrees, will move another step closer to seeking federal money for half of the \$2.5 billion construction cost.

The project's total cost, including interest on planned loans, would be \$3.3 billion through 2062.

Durham and Orange counties will ask the state to pay up to 10 percent of the construction cost, leaving the counties to split nearly \$1.9 billion.

The current agreement requires Durham County to pay 77 percent of the local cost and Orange County to pay 23 percent, based on how much of the 17.7-mile light-rail system is in each county. The system would link 18 stations from UNC Hospitals in Chapel Hill to N.C. Central University in Durham.

However, Orange County's commissioners expressed interest Thursday in pursuing the latest renegotiated proposal. The suggested split would require Durham County to pay 81.5 percent of the local cost, or about \$1.55 billion, and Orange County to pay 16.5 percent, or roughly \$316 million.

A public-private Funding and Community Collaborative offered to pay the remaining 2 percent through donations of cash and land for the rail system. The group, which has pledges for \$18 million in land, set a goal earlier this week of raising \$100 million in cash and land. The group's 2 percent share is not guaranteed.

The cost-sharing proposal is a big improvement, Commissioners Mia Burroughs and Barry Jacobs said.

"I think that Durham – just as it was with Little River Regional Park and Hollow Rock – is a very accommodating partner," Jacobs said. "They worked hard to try and make this work for us as well as for them."

Ted Cole, the county's consultant from Davenport and Co., calculated that Orange County alone would spend about \$980 million over the next 45 years and earn roughly \$1 billion from the transit tax revenues, generated by a half-cent sales tax, car rental fees and registration fees.

Revised [figures](#) now show Orange County's cash balance for the project hitting a low of \$4.4 million in 2019. The lowest cash balance for Durham County could be \$3.4 million in 2027. Durham County's numbers also include a [commuter rail line](#) project with Wake County, Cole said.

Orange County could use any remaining money to buy more bus services, Deputy County Manager Travis Myren said. County transit director Theo Letman has identified several Hillsborough and county routes that could be expanded.

If the counties don't get the anticipated state or federal funding, the agreement requires them to meet with GoTriangle and consider other solutions. (CONTINUED...)

"In the absence of federal funding, I would venture to say the project is not possible," Myren said. "In absence of state funding, it becomes very difficult or impossible."

However, GoTriangle and Durham County oppose a clause that would let either county back out if funding falls through and there's no mutually agreeable solution. FTA officials could see that as undercutting the local commitment to the project and decide not to award the counties a grant, GoTriangle officials said.

Other clauses indicate the counties would be required to pay only what they can cover with the tax district revenues.

Orange County Attorney John Roberts will meet with his Durham County counterpart to consider new language before the boards vote next week. Jacobs argued for keeping the exit clause, which he said helps Orange County protect its residents and their money.

"The attorneys are going to get together and bring us something next Thursday that we're going to be comfortable with," Jacobs said. "If not, I will vote against the entire proposal, because I don't want to be subject to the GoTriangle board or the MPO board or even our partners in Durham deciding they've already invested, they want to keep it going, and they're going to ask us to put in money that we don't have, to make a commitment that we can't afford."

"If we're committed to the project, then we will do our best, as we have so far in good faith, to make it work," he said.

Commissioner Penny Rich argued for removing the clause, which she said a future board opposed to light rail could use to abandon the project. That's not likely once the county has put millions into light rail, said Commissioner Earl McKee, a longtime light-rail plan critic.

Tammy Grubb: 919-829-8926, @TammyGrubb

## **OTHER ADDITIONS**

Durham and Orange county commissioner representatives have recommended additional changes to each county's revised bus and rail transit plan:

- Consider moving the Gateway station west, away from I-40, to increase Orange County's economic development potential
- A clause protecting the New Hope Creek Watershed if Durham's Patterson Place station is moved; GoTriangle is considering whether to shift the Patterson Place station east, beyond Sayward Drive.
- A clause requiring all parties to the agreement to approve any changes to station location or alignment
- Create a part-time position to manage Staff Working Group business, including quarterly status updates
- Require annual work plans tracking the transit plans' implementation
- Orange and Durham counties form a partnership by June 2018 to pursue economic development at the Gateway and Woodmont border stations
- Require the partners to review the cost-sharing agreement at four-year transit plan updates

## Votes keep Durham-Orange light-rail, bus plans on track to engineering phase

The Herald -Sun By Tammy Grubb April 27, 2017

**CHAPEL HILL** – GoTriangle got the final two votes needed Friday to keep the Durham-Orange Light-Rail Transit project moving through the Federal Transit Administration's grant process.

The \$3.3 billion light-rail project, if fully funded, would link 18 stations along a 17.7-mile rail line between UNC Hospitals and N.C. Central University. Six stations would be in Chapel Hill and 12 in the city of Durham.

The Durham-Chapel Hill-Carrboro Metropolitan Planning Organization and the GoTriangle Board of Trustees voted Friday to approve Durham County's and Orange County's revised transit plans and their new cost-sharing agreement.

Durham County Board of Commissioners Chairwoman Wendy Jacobs, who serves on the GoTriangle board, called the votes "a historic moment and a significant investment in the future prosperity of Durham, Orange and Wake counties."

GoTriangle now will ask the FTA to approve engineering work on the plans, which need federal money to pay half of the light-rail construction cost and state money to pay up to 10 percent. The counties would share the remaining \$1.8 billion local cost and interest on debt that will bridge the years until state and federal money is available.

Friday's votes followed less than two hours of discussion and two 5-2 votes Thursday at the Orange County Board of Commissioners meeting. Commissioners Earl McKee and Renee Price voted against the Orange County Transit Plan and the cost-sharing agreement.

Price said she weighed the county's financial risk, the potential environmental and traffic impact, and the lack of direct service to rural communities and those where lower-income and people of color live.

She compared the proposals to "shifting sand without firm foundation and without confidence."

"Even though I'm very much in favor of mass transit ... and I acknowledge the potential benefits of light rail in concept, I truly think the current proposed light rail project for Orange County is economically unviable, environmentally unsound and socially unjust," Price said.

While some commissioners remained firmly behind light rail, Commissioner Barry Jacobs noted his was not a clear-cut decision. But sometimes you have to take a chance and work with your neighbors, he said.

"The world requires at some point that you take little leaps of faith, and I think that if Orange County is fiscally protected, I'm willing to take the leap of faith," he said.

More about the plans:

### **Q. What's in the Orange County Transit Plan?**

- A light-rail transit route from Chapel Hill to Durham
- Bus services and \$6.1 million for Chapel Hill's \$125 million bus-rapid transit route
- An Amtrak train station in Hillsborough

### **Q. What's in the Durham County Transit Plan?**

- A light-rail transit route from Chapel Hill to Durham
- A Wake-Durham Commuter Rail line and bus services (CONTINUED...)

**Q. Where does the local money for light rail come from?**

- A half-cent transit sales tax, vehicle registration and car rental fees; no other local money is required
- \$965.5 million in short- and long-term debt (to be repaid using taxes, fees, and state and federal dollars)

**Q. What does Orange County pay?**

- \$316.9 million (16.5 percent of construction costs, 18.5 percent of interest)
- 19 percent to 20 percent of the light-rail operations and maintenance (\$6.2 million/year by 2045)

**Q. What does Durham County pay?**

- \$1.5 billion (81.5 percent of construction costs and interest)
- 80 percent to 81 percent of light-rail operations and maintenance (\$26.2 million/year by 2045)

**Q. Other money?**

- A federal grant could pay \$1.2 billion, and the state could pay up to \$247 million. The final state contribution won't be known until June 2019. Failing to get federal money could stop the light-rail project.
- A public-private Funding and Community Collaborative, GoTriangle, and its partners could pay 2 percent of construction costs; that money is not guaranteed.

**Q. What if something goes wrong?**

Durham, Orange and GoTriangle would meet within 15 business days to consider other solutions, including looking for other money; delaying, suspending or reducing the project; or stopping the project. If the project stops, officials would meet within 20 business days to draft a new transit plan.

If they can't agree, it goes to mediation and then an arbitration hearing before three judges – one picked by each county and one picked jointly.

**Q. What's next?**

- GoTriangle, with FTA approval, starts \$70 million in engineering work. The final state and federal funding decisions could be in mid-2019, with construction starting in 2020. The opening date is in 2029.
- The Orange and Durham county commissioners will have to fully commit to the plan in 2018.