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BUSINESS

'I cried all weekend.' Chatham residents react to NCDOT plans for VinFast factory site

BY RICHARD STRADLING

UPDATED AUGUST 23, 2022 9:22 AM



The state of is using eminent domain to buy five businesses, 27 homes and a move a church in Moncure and the Merry Oaks community along old U.S. 1 in Chatham County, NC which will make way for Vietnamese automaker VinFast. BY ABC11

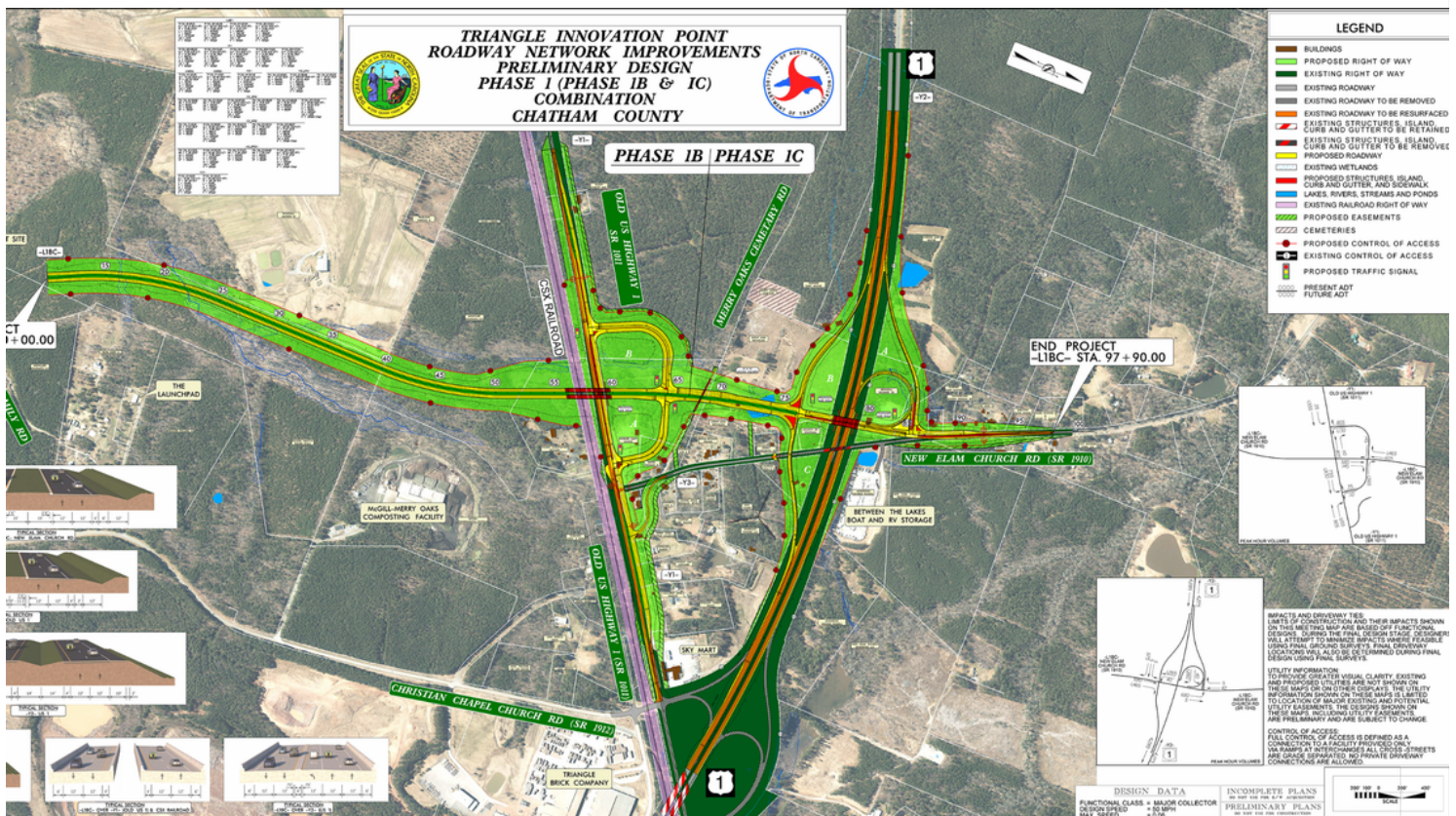
PITTSBORO

They knew that the state had persuaded the Vietnamese automaker VinFast to build a massive factory in their corner of Chatham County. They knew the roads around the site would be changing; some had even seen surveyors or the wooden stakes they left behind.

But only in the last week did residents of Moncure and Merry Oaks see what the N.C. Department of Transportation plans to do in their communities.

More than 250 showed up to a meeting in Pittsboro on Tuesday to see large maps of the network of roads and highway interchanges [NCDOT says are needed to improve access](#) to the 2,150-acre site. Another 80 tuned in to a virtual meeting Thursday.

They studied the maps to see where the right of way for the new roads, shown in bright green, overlapped with their homes and land. Altogether, NCDOT estimates it will need to take 27 homes and five businesses and move Merry Oaks Baptist Church.



To ease access to the planned VinFast electric vehicle plant in Chatham County, the N.C. Department of Transportation wants to replace Exit 84 from U.S. 1 (bottom center) with a new interchange at New Elam Church Road, which would be relocated and extended over old U.S. 1 into the site (left). [NCDOT](#)

“They’re going to mess up a good home place,” said Lena Stone, who stands to lose four houses — hers and three rental properties where NCDOT plans to widen Pea Ridge Road. Stone has lived there since 1973, and the property has long been a family gathering place, said her daughter, Rhonda Mitchell.

Like many who came to the Chatham County Agricultural and Conference Center on Tuesday, Mitchell said she had only learned of NCDOT’s plans a few days earlier.

“I was in shock. I cried all weekend,” she said. “It’s just going to change the whole community.”

Dhillon Singh Hardip learned about Tuesday’s meeting from a flyer someone posted in his Sky Mart convenience store at Exit 84 from U.S. 1. The maps show Hardip will lose all 20 of the gas pumps he installed in 2008. There’s room on the lot for new pumps, but it will mean demolishing and rebuilding the store.

“I have to redo everything,” he said. “Totally everything. 100%.”

Hardip lives nearby and is invested both financially and emotionally in the area, where he owns several pieces of property. He feels like he has no choice but to rebuild.

“I love to go to work right there,” he said, gesturing toward his store on the NCDOT map.

NCDOT SAYS IT’S ON A ‘TIGHT SCHEDULE’

It often takes many years for NCDOT to plan big highway projects like this. But the timeline here is set by VinFast and the state’s desire to see it [begin producing electric SUVs at the plant in 2024](#).

Chatham County and the state offered the company \$1.25 billion in tax and other incentives to locate here, including about \$250 million for road and rail improvements in and around the site.

NCDOT started its planning in March and quickly completed the surveys and environmental studies reflected in the preliminary plans it published for the first time late last week, said Colin Mellor, an environmental policy adviser for the department.

“We’re not looking to surprise anybody,” Mellor said. “But it’s happening quickly because we’re on a tight schedule.”

NCDOT plans to begin buying right-of-way in September for the first phase. That includes relocating, widening and extending New Elam Church Road to the VinFast property and building a new interchange to replace existing Exit 84 at old U.S. 1. NCDOT hopes to start construction early next year.

The second phase would create a new interchange at Exit 81 and turn two-lane Pea Ridge Road into a four-lane divided thoroughfare that also leads into the VinFast site. NCDOT says the timing of that work depends on VinFast meeting some of the job goals set by the state.

Members of the Sanderford family have lived off Pea Ridge Road for more than 70 years.

“They’re taking everything we got,” said Jack Sanderford Jr. after looking at the NCDOT maps Tuesday. That includes five acres, the houses where his mother and son live and his business, Logger Head Clearing and Grading.

Not only will the rerouted Pea Ridge come through their land, but so will a new access road to a FedEx distribution center that's now under construction.

"I said to my wife, 'If I can get on with FedEx, I could walk to work,'" Jack's son Lewis said. "Not anymore."

Lewis Sanderford said he had no idea where he will go, given the price of land and housing in the Triangle.

"I said could you leave me a piece so I could live there?" he said he asked an NCDOT representative. "And he said, 'No, we need it all.'"

Gov. Roy Cooper announced on Tuesday, Mar. 30, 2022, that VinFast, a Vietnamese startup electric car company, will build a factory at the NC Moncure megasite, now known as Triangle Innovation Point, invest billions and add at least 7,500 jobs. BY ABC11

'WE'VE NEVER HAD INPUT'

Those who aren't bought out entirely may endure different hardships, as the VinFast plant, with its thousands of workers, opens in their quiet, rural community. The two new interchanges and access roads will help spur other development. It's not likely that Hardip's Sky Mart will remain the only retail business at the two interchanges.

Mellor said NCDOT will review public feedback on its preliminary plans but said he couldn't say how much the department will be able to change in the months ahead.

Kay Hinsley doesn't expect it will be much. Hinsley will lose 80 to 100 feet of her front yard along old U.S. 1, near Exit 84.

There's a history of this in the family and the community, she says. Her grandmother's farm was split in two by U.S. 1 in 1958. Hinsley is living on part of that land.

After the highway came the construction of Jordan Lake and Harris Lake, which also required families to give up their farms and their homes.

“I call it the shredding of our little corner of the county,” Hinsley said. “These are massive changes. We’ve never had input. It’s always after the fact.”

This story was originally published August 20, 2022 7:00 AM.

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RICHARD STRADLING

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Richard Stradling covers transportation for The News & Observer. Planes, trains and automobiles, plus ferries, bicycles, scooters and just plain walking. Also, hospitals during the coronavirus outbreak. He’s been a reporter or editor for 35 years, including the last 23 at The N&O. 919-829-4739, rstradling@newsobserver.com.

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BY DREW JACKSON

AUGUST 25, 2022 5:08 PM



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DURHAM COUNTY NEWS

Couple allows Durham ATV Club to build trails on their land, to help keep riders off streets

by: [Crystal Price](#)

Posted: Aug 29, 2022 / 06:55 PM EDT

Updated: Aug 31, 2022 / 07:01 PM EDT

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ROUGEMONT, N.C. (WNCN) – A Durham ATV Club is preparing to build new trails for ATV and dirt bike riders after a couple in Rougemont, North Carolina decided to donate use of their land for this cause.

Jamal Lewis is president of the Southern Soul ATV Club, a group of ATV riders who go on monthly rides in Durham. Lewis said his mission is to serve as a mentor and give young people in Durham something to do.

“The ultimate goal is to change the way the kids look at the world right now,” Lewis said. “I feel like we can make a change and make a way through ATVs and doing it the right way.”

PREVIOUS: Concerns rise about ATV riders illegally driving on Durham streets: What can be done to address this?



Lewis said he has been working for a while to get help with finding more safe places for dirt bikers and ATV riders in Durham to ride.

Right now, he said there are not many places where ATV riders can ride in Durham, and that's why many riders are on the city streets.

Lewis said his group must ride on the city streets too, to get to their trails.

While Lewis said his club obeys the traffic laws, CBS 17 recently showed a special report where some ATV riders in Durham have been causing traffic concerns for motorists.

Some videos CBS 17 obtained showed ATV riders stopping traffic on North Duke Street and passing cars in no passing zones on county roads.

"I've been fighting this and trying to speak with people who will help get these riders off the streets," Lewis said.

[Shortly after CBS 17's special report aired](#) in mid-August, Lewis said he met with his friend Brian Stoner and his wife, Lee, who own farmland on Red Mountain Road in Rougemont.

Stoner said he and his wife decided to allow Lewis's non profit group to use the 140 acres of their land to build ATV trails for riders.

"We love their mission, we support anything where you have enhanced mentorship," Stoner said.

Lewis said he's excited to get to work on building these trails on the property.

"To be able to live my dreams, help people, and have someone to help me help someone, that's amazing," Lewis said.

While Lewis has permission to use the land to build the trails, he said he still needs help with building the trails. He has started a [GoFundMe page](#) to help raise money to purchase machinery.

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How Five U.S. Cities Built 335 Miles of Bike Lanes in 24 Months

Bike lanes can take forever to build in the U.S. A new project offers a proven playbook to fast-track bike lane networks.

YASMIN GARAAD AUGUST 24, 2022



(Photo by Andrew Gook / Unsplash)

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When the Copenhagenize Index released its 2019 [list](#) of the world's 20 most bike-friendly cities, not a single U.S. cracked the list. Part of the reason may be a persistent notion in the U.S. that safe and modern bike infrastructure takes decades to build.

A new nonprofit is showing that idea is faulty by proving that a robust bike network can be built in as little as 24 months.

Led by mobility experts Kyle Wagenschutz, Sara Studdard and Zoe Kircos, the Denver-based nonprofit consultancy [City Thread](#) is helping cities accelerate the completion of projects that improve mobility, safety and community connectivity for all their residents. City Thread was born out of a proof-of-concept pilot project called The Final Mile, through which five U.S. cities built 335 miles of new bike lanes in only 24 months.

That's a full 25 years earlier than expected, according to their estimates.

"It takes over a decade in the U.S. to build a complete and safe infrastructure," Studdard says.

"Why are cities not like Amsterdam and Copenhagen? Why are we having disconnected trips across our communities whether we're walking, biking, taking transit or driving?"

The Final Mile project – a partnership between Wend Collective and People For Bikes – that Studdard and Wagenschutz spearheaded showed just how quickly and efficiently bikeways can be constructed, even in the U.S.

The five cities – Austin, Denver, New Orleans, Pittsburgh and Providence – all had existing relationships from People for Bikes' prior partnerships. They also, as Studdard put it, "had strong elected political leadership who were already standing at the forefront in the U.S., telling the residents that they deserve a variety of ways to get around their cities."

What made the pilot program different, and what City Thread hopes to duplicate with other cities, is the inclusion of key players who are often left out of the planning. These include the city officials who carry out bike lane projects, the elected officials who support them, local business owners and the community organizations who engage the residents the lanes will impact most. That includes engaging non-cyclist residents who may not see any personal benefit of bike lanes to them.

"There are projects with real trade-offs that are best understood with a community conversation," Laura Dierenfield, Austin Transportation Department active transportation and street design division manager, [told City Thread](#) in May. "In these cases, we may offer several options, including doing nothing, to gauge folks' preference over one or another. And sometimes it's best to just begin by listening without any preconceived idea of what is needed, except to offer what the various modal plans recommend. Only after listening to what the community expresses as [needs], do we then develop and present a proposed design."

Another key component for The Final Mile's success was building diverse coalitions of support with the aim of working with local stakeholders and discussing the community's vision.

“Our interest was not in coming in and saying ‘Hey, bike lanes can solve everything for you,’” Kircos says. “That is not the way we operate and that’s not the way that we think we will be successful.”

That public engagement process is crucial to shape a city’s messaging and strategizing as it plans new bike infrastructure. Through working with community residents and business owners in New Orleans, the city created the New Orleans Complete Streets Coalition to build broad support for “mobility for all.” As a result, the city saw 27 miles of new bikeways constructed in its historically underserved Algiers neighborhood – as well as road repairs, high-visibility crosswalks and other comprehensive improvements to its streets.

Through similar processes, Austin completed 115 miles of new bike lanes; Pittsburgh completed 50 new network miles; Providence constructed 43 miles of new bikeways; and Denver constructed 100 miles of new bikeways.

The communities in the pilot received an average of \$2.2 million to help them execute their goals. However, none of that was used towards construction material, setting their bike lane development strategy apart from many other sustainable transportation accelerator programs. Instead, funding was used for technical assistance, public opinion surveys, focus groups, communication campaigns and other such activities.

Many European cities have been lauded for their cycle-friendly roadways as well as their “cycling superhighways” and “bike freeways.” Transportation experts say because those cities have been able to develop strong cycling networks ahead of the demand and, as researchers tell [Business Insider](#), because their transportation departments “think top-down rather than bottom-up.”

“Amsterdam and Copenhagen are fabulous examples of cities that looked at their horizon and saw where automobile dependence was taking them — in terms of the environment, in terms of access to opportunity, in terms of financial cost, the financial burden of providing streets for cars, and they said, ‘We need to do something different,’” Tabitha Combs, a researcher of transportation planning and policy at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, told Business Insider. “Places like that built out their bicycling networks and their walking networks in advance of the demand, and they’re still building out those networks.”

In 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic brought on a surge in cycling in the U.S. Some preferred choosing to bike over using public transportation. And some turned to biking due to gym closures, making it [one of the most popular forms of recreation](#).

Cities all over the world were forced to reevaluate their bike infrastructure. Some cities, like Berlin and Paris, successfully created temporary pop-up bike lanes by reallocating streets and public spaces to accommodate cyclists.

The lessons learned from bike lanes that were created rapidly during The Final Mile project and the pandemic should shape future policies for building safe and effective bike infrastructure as a tool for mobility justice, City Thread says.

“Any time cities want to put heads and hearts together with their citizens to make their city a great place to live, City Thread can help,” Studdard says. “We have the tools to help them be more successful. The rest is communications, planning and working toward shared desires in good faith.”

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Yasmin Garaad is a New Orleans-based writer who covers the city's arts and culture as well as environmental justice.

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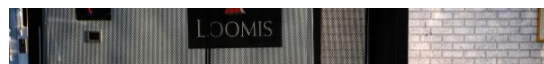
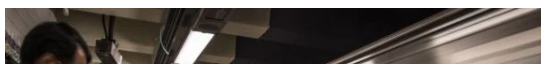
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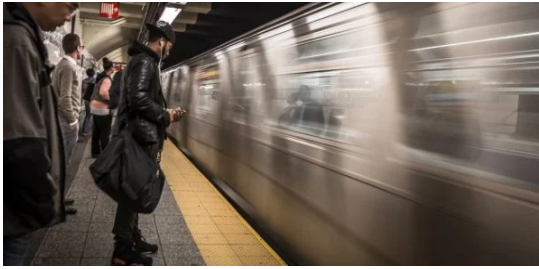


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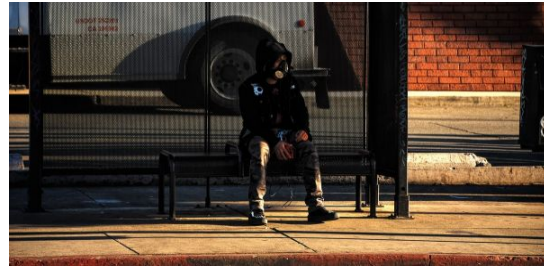


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JOHNSTON COUNTY

Several more all-way stops are coming to Johnston County. Here's where — and why.

BY RICHARD STRADLING

UPDATED AUGUST 23, 2022 1:33 PM



Drivers in Johnston County will see more signs like these at rural intersections by next spring. RICHARD STRADLING rstradling@newsobserver.com



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RALEIGH

In an effort to improve safety, the state occasionally adds a couple of stop signs to a rural crossroads to make it an all-way stop.

Now the N.C. Department of Transportation is planning to create several new four-way stops in Johnston County in the coming months. NCDOT hired a contractor to install the signs needed to bring all traffic to a stop at nine rural intersections where only drivers on one road stop now.

The common type of crash at these intersections involves drivers pulling out in front of others that don't have to stop, according to NCDOT. Requiring drivers on both roads to stop reduces the number and severity of crashes.

In 2010, NCDOT studied 53 intersections that had been converted and found that all-way stops reduced crashes by 68% and crash deaths and injuries by 77%.

The Johnston County intersections that will become all-way stops by next spring are:

- U.S. 701 at Stewart Road
- N.C. 50 at Woods Crossroads Road
- N.C. 39 at Little Devine Road/Browns Pond Road
- N.C. 39 at N.C. 231
- N.C. 222 at Antioch Church Road
- N.C. 96 at Earpsboro Road
- N.C. 231 at N.C. 222/Buck Road
- N.C. 242 at Tarheel Road
- N.C. 42 at Thanksgiving Fire Road

The contractor, [Highway Traffic Control Inc. of Durham](#), will erect signs near each intersection in advance to let drivers know the change is coming, according to NCDOT.

Traffic engineers say not only are four-way stops cheaper than traffic signals, they're also more predictable for drivers and help regulate traffic better on rural roads.

But sometimes the all-way stops are a temporary measure. NCDOT made the intersection of N.C. 42 and N.C. 96 east of Clayton an all-way stop in 2019 but plans to replace the signs with a roundabout. Construction of the roundabout is expected to begin next spring.

There had been 37 crashes at the intersection in the previous five years, according to NCDOT. About 75% of them occurred when drivers on N.C. 96 pulled into traffic on N.C. 42, which did not have to stop.

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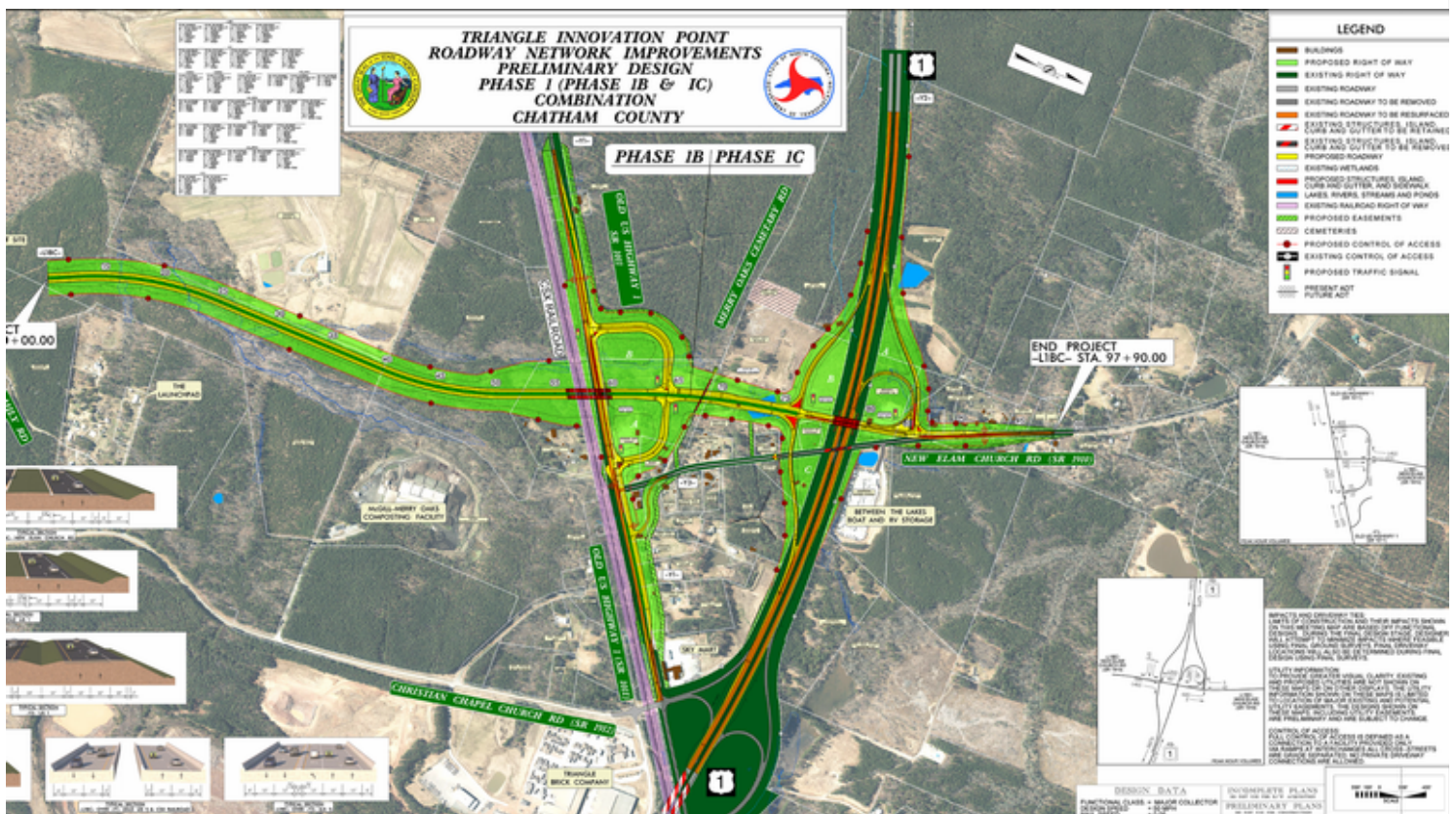
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BUSINESS

NCDOT proposes new access roads, interchanges to ease access to VinFast factory

BY RICHARD STRADLING

UPDATED AUGUST 14, 2022 3:02 PM



To ease access to the planned VinFast electric vehicle plant in Chatham County, the N.C. Department of Transportation wants to replace Exit 84 from U.S. 1 (bottom center) with a new interchange at New Elam Church Road, which would be relocated and extended over old U.S. 1 into the site (left). *NCDOT*



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MONCURE

The state has unveiled plans to build a new network of roads and interchanges near the site where Vietnamese carmaker VinFast will make electric vehicles in southeastern Chatham County.

The road construction, to be done in two phases, will transform a quiet stretch of U.S. 1 and old U.S. 1 near Moncure and require demolition of several houses.

The N.C. Department of Transportation will present the plans and answer questions at an open house at the Chatham County Agricultural and Conference Center in Pittsboro on Tuesday, Aug. 16, from 4 to 7 p.m., and again during an online presentation at 6 p.m. Thursday.

The changes are designed to make it easier for workers, visitors and suppliers to reach the plant from the highway. [VinFast says it expects to employ up to 7,500 people](#) and begin churning out 200,000 or more electric SUVs a year by 2027.

But the 2,150-acre megasite can be reached only by two-lane country roads, primarily old U.S. 1. The \$1.25 billion incentive package that helped lure VinFast to Chatham County includes [about \\$250 million for road and rail improvements](#) in and around the site, according to the state Commerce Department.

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NCDOT proposes reaching the site by rerouting and extending two existing roads — New Elam Church and Pea Ridge. Both roads would be widened to four lanes separated by grassy medians and each would connect to a redesigned and expanded interchange with U.S. 1.

The new access roads would lead directly into the VinFast complex. New bridges would carry them over a set of railroad tracks and old U.S. 1, which would be reached with new exit ramps.

The work would begin at New Elam Church Road. NCDOT proposes building a new interchange that would replace existing Exit 84 at old U.S. 1.

Innovation & Technology newsletter

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NCDOT says it hopes to begin acquiring right of way next month and start construction in January.

The second phase would involve the new interchange at Exit 81 and the overhaul and extension of Pea Ridge Road. NCDOT says the timing of that work would depend on VinFast meeting some of the job goals set by the state.

For more information, including maps of the two phases, go to publicinput.com/Chatham-TIP-Road-Improvements. You'll also find a link there to register for Thursday's virtual meeting.



VinFast CEO Le Thi Thu Thuy and Gov. Roy Cooper sit inside a VF8 electric car Tuesday, March 29, 2022, outside the Raleigh Convention Center following an announcement that the company will build a manufacturing facility in Chatham County. Travis Long tlong@newsobserver.com

This story was originally published August 12, 2022 5:01 PM.

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MARCH 29, 2022 1:37 PM



RICHARD STRADLING

NEWSLETTER

The Morning

Race, Class and Traffic Deaths

A surge in vehicle crashes is disproportionately harming lower-income families and Black Americans.



By David Leonhardt

Aug. 23, 2022

Vehicle crashes seem as if they might be an equal-opportunity public health problem. Americans in every demographic group drive, after all. If anything, poor families tend to rely more on public transportation and less on car travel.

Yet vehicle deaths turn out to be highly unequal. Lower-income people are much more likely to die in crashes, academic research shows. The racial gaps are also huge — even bigger on a percentage basis than the racial gaps on cancer, according to the C.D.C.

Rates of U.S. passenger vehicle deaths, 2019



Note: Data understates all death rates because race is not recorded in all crashes. • Source: National Safety Council • By The New York Times

The unequal toll from crashes is particularly notable now because the U.S. is experiencing an alarming increase in vehicle deaths. Pete Buttigieg, the transportation secretary, recently called it “a national crisis of fatalities and serious injuries on our roadways.” And the toll is falling most heavily on lower-income Americans and Black Americans.

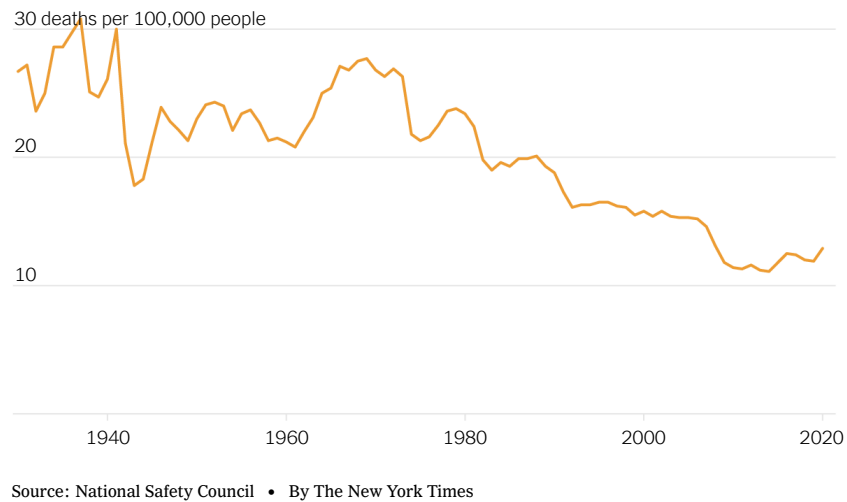
The reasons for the increase remain somewhat mysterious, experts say. But the consequences are clear. More than 115 Americans have been dying on the roads on average every day this year.

Today’s newsletter will explore the likely explanations for the increase, as well as its unequal impact and the potential solutions.

A decline, reversed

Not so long ago, the trend in car crashes was a good-news story. The death rate began to fall in the early 1970s, thanks in large part to the consumer movement started by Ralph Nader. Cars became safer. States passed seatbelt laws. Drunken driving became less common. The declines continued into the early 2010s, as airbags became standard and vehicles began to include technology to prevent crashes.

Annual rate of vehicle deaths in the U.S.

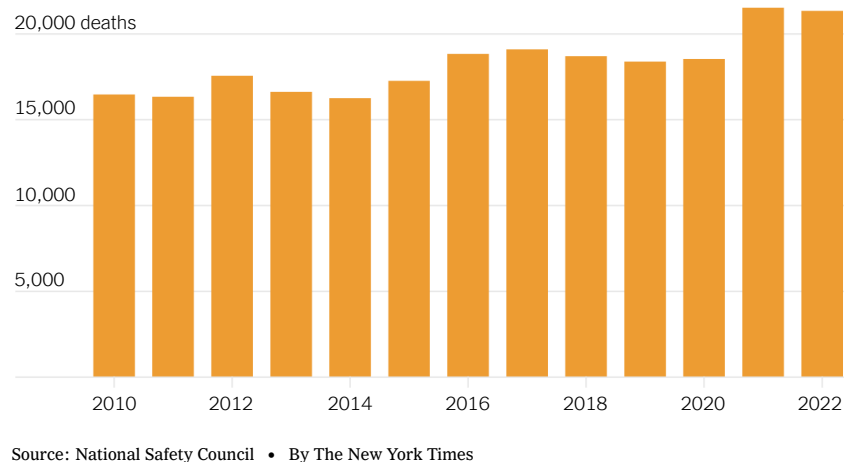


But the situation changed around 2015, with the death rate mostly rising over the next several years. One reason seems to be distracted driving. By 2015, two-thirds of U.S. adults owned a smartphone, up from almost none in 2006.

The U.S. has also been less aggressive about cracking down on speeding than Britain and some other parts of Europe, and vehicles here tend to be larger. “The engorgement of the American vehicle,” as Gregory Shill of the University of Iowa has called it, can kill pedestrians and people in smaller vehicles. These patterns help explain why death rates have fallen substantially more in other countries than in the U.S. during recent decades.

As alarming as these trends were, the biggest increases have taken place more recently — since the pandemic. In the spring of 2020, as Covid was transforming daily life, vehicle crashes surged. By the start of this year, the death rate had jumped about 20 percent from prepandemic levels. It has been the sharpest increase since the 1940s.

U.S. vehicle deaths from January to June each year



How did Covid lead to more crashes?

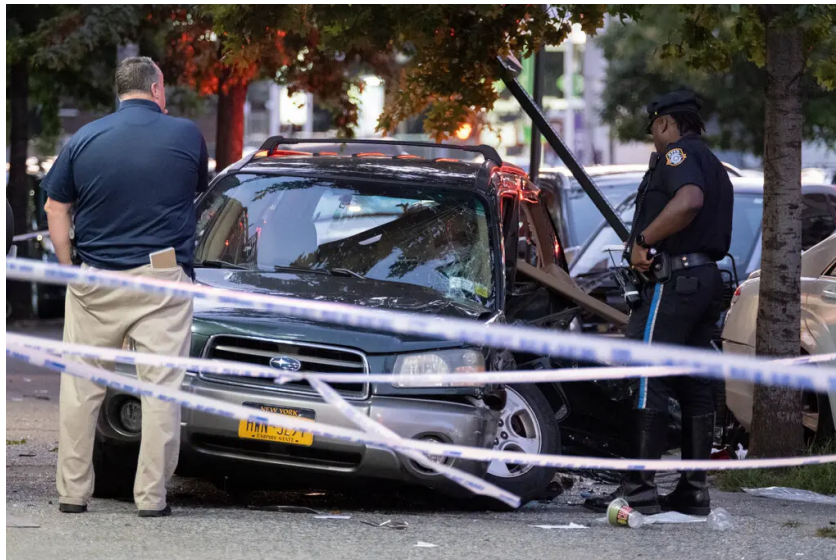
At first, researchers thought that emptier roads might be the main answer. Open roads can encourage speeding, and speeding can be fatal. But even as traffic returned to near-normal levels last year, traffic deaths remained high. That combination weakens the empty-road theory, as Robert Schneider, an urban-planning expert at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, said.

The most plausible remaining theories tend to involve the mental health problems caused by Covid's isolation and disruption. Alcohol and drug abuse have increased. Impulsive behavior, like running red lights and failing to wear seatbelts, also seems to have risen (as my colleague Simon Romero has reported). Many Americans have felt frustrated or unhappy, and it seems to have affected their driving.

"They're a little bit less regulated — they might not be considering consequences," Kira Mauseth, a clinical psychologist at Seattle University, has said. Frank Farley, a psychologist at Temple University, put it this way to The Los Angeles Times: "You've been cooped up, locked down and have restrictions you chafe at."

Ken Kolosh, who oversees data analysis at the National Safety Council, a nonprofit group, told me that researchers would need years to tease out all the causes. Confusingly, vehicle deaths did not surge in most other countries during the pandemic, suggesting that stress was a particularly American problem. "The world really felt upside down," Kolosh said.

One encouraging data point that's consistent with this theory: The most recent data shows that vehicle deaths declined modestly this spring, as Covid restrictions continued to recede.



The scene of a collision in Manhattan this month. Dakota Santiago for The New York Times

An unequal pandemic ...

Still, the surge in crashes has become one more way that the pandemic has hurt lower-income Americans and people of color the most — as did the early wave of Covid deaths and the consequences of closed schools.

As I mentioned above, vehicle fatalities have long been unequal. Poorer people are more likely to drive older cars, which can lack safety features. Low-income neighborhoods are also much more likely to have high-speed roads running through them. "We have systematically put these arterial roadways in areas where people had less political power to fight back," Rebecca Sanders, the founder of Safe Streets Research & Consulting, said.

The pandemic probably exacerbated the gaps because many professionals have begun working from home, while many blue-collar Americans kept driving, biking or walking to work. Some lower-income workers also drive as part of their jobs.

... and some solutions

Even if the full explanation of the surge in crashes is murky, many experts believe that the most promising solutions remain clear.

“Making streets safer doesn’t require designing new solutions in laboratories,” John Rennie Short, of the University of Maryland, Baltimore County, has written. Jeffrey Michael, another expert, told The Washington Post, “This is an issue for which answers are known.”

Those answers include: stricter enforcement of speed limits, seatbelt mandates and drunken-driving laws; better designed roads, especially in poorer neighborhoods; more public transit; and further spread of safety features like automated braking.

Continuing to leave behind the disruptions of Covid — and the loneliness and stress they have caused — seems likely to help, too.

Related: Buttigieg and the Transportation Department plan to use new funding from Congress to reduce vehicle deaths. Among the many projects: an elevated path for pedestrians in the Chicago neighborhood of Englewood; and new sidewalks, bike lanes and lighting near a mass transit station in Prince George’s County, Md.

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EDITOR'S PICK

Lawsuits could torpedo red light cameras in North Carolina

Brian Gordon, The News & Observer, Raleigh

Sep 5, 2022

By day, Brian Ceccarelli works as a software engineer in Cary. But by night, he's a self-described "red light robber."

For more than a decade, Ceccarelli, 61, has been on a mission to rid North Carolina of automatic red light cameras, which photograph vehicles running red lights and then mail the drivers fines. In 2010, he sued the town of Cary after receiving his second camera citation, arguing the length of time given for yellow lights was too short. Bringing a white board to the courtroom, he served as both expert witness and plaintiff. He lost in 2013, but the town soon shuttered its program.

Today, Ceccarelli operates the "Red Light Robber" website, which recruits plaintiffs to file legal challenges against what he believes are flawed, dangerous and unconstitutional local traffic systems.

And he's found some takers.

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Multiple ongoing cases against red light camera systems in North Carolina could reduce the already dwindling number of municipalities that operate them.

Automated red light camera programs exist in four North Carolina cities: Raleigh, Fayetteville, Wilmington and Greenville. But in March, the N.C. Court of Appeals **unanimously ruled** Greenville's program violated **state law** by not giving at least 90% of the fines collected from its camera program to public K-12 schools.

Greenville had been giving at least 90% of its red light fines to the local Pitt County Schools, but the city would then invoice the district to have part of the money sent back. Keeping more of the money allowed Greenville to self-fund its camera program to a greater degree, argues Paul Stam of the Apex-based Stam Law Firm, which is representing plaintiffs Eric Fearington and Craig Malmrose in their case against Greenville.

Stam, who goes by Skip, served 16 years in the N.C. General Assembly, representing southern Wake County. A Republican, he served as Speaker Pro Tempore from 2013 to 2016. He began to see red light cameras as an issue after Ceccarelli, a constituent, reached out concerning Cary's program. Through Ceccarelli, Stam also grew convinced the amount of time given for yellow lights throughout the state was too short.

"The camera is not the problem," he said. "The camera reveals the problem."

Kevin Lacy, the state traffic engineer with the N.C. Department of Transportation, pushed back on this assertion.

"There isn't a problem with yellow lights," Lacy said. "The legal teams that have come up with this approach have done an excellent job of creating a considerable amount of doubt, which is their job."

Greenville has appealed the Fearington ruling to the N.C. Supreme Court, which has yet to decide whether it will hear the case. Stam anticipates the city will end its camera program if it is made to pay for it through other means, such as raising taxes

or diverting money from other departments. And the city suggested he might be right.

Asked how the city might respond if the Fearington ruling isn't overturned, Greenville spokesperson Brock Letchworth said the city "will consider whether it wants to continue the program considering a new contract would likely include increased costs for the city." Letchworth noted Greenville has updated its funding system to comply with the appellate ruling in the meanwhile.

In 2006, the city of High Point folded its red light camera program **after the State Court of Appeals ruled the city** had to give more of its fine revenue to the local public schools.

According to Stam, neither Fayetteville nor Wilmington are using their red light camera revenues in compliance with state law. In July, his firm filed a lawsuit against the city of Wilmington and will soon do the same to Fayetteville.

Most of his red light camera plaintiffs, Stam said, came to his firm after visiting Ceccarelli's **Red Light Robber website**.

Raleigh's red light program is unique

In how it funds its SafeLight red light camera program, Raleigh gets to play by its own rules.

When the General Assembly **granted** Wake County municipalities the right to install red light cameras in 2001, it allowed them to use the fines they collected to cover the programs' costs. Any remaining funds would then go to local schools. This is why Raleigh was able to give only 9% of its SafeLight citation money to Wake County Public Schools last year, according to Rob Murray, spokesman for the city's transportation department.

Stam said he made it a point in the General Assembly to stop other municipalities from receiving this type of funding exception.

Raleigh began its SafeLight camera system in 2003 and issued nearly 30,000 citations last year. The citation is \$50, with another \$50 added for late payments. The cameras are operated by Conduent, a New Jersey-based IT management company.

Raleigh strategically locates its cameras at high-risk intersections using data on collision types and frequency, Murray said.

“Prior third-party reviews, specifically on Raleigh’s program, have shown this tool (Red Light Cameras) have a dramatic impact on reducing angle crashes,” Murray wrote in an email to The News & Observer.

While research backs this statement, the overall success of red light cameras is mixed.

“The effectiveness of red-light camera programs has been a source of controversy in the research community,” the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention **states online**. “The methodologies used to assess effectiveness have varied, as have the conclusions drawn from different studies.”

A **2019 research paper** from the University of North Carolina Highway Safety Research Center found the presence of red light cameras typically increased rear-end crashes while reducing side-impact crashes. It recommended the cameras are best placed at intersections with a greater ratio of angled crashes to rear-end ones.

A 2004 study by two N.C. A&T State University professors was less favorable to the cameras. Over a nearly five-year period, Mark Burkey and Kofi Obeng **analyzed more than 300 intersections** in Greensboro. They found a 40% increase in rear-end crashes, side crashes, and overall collisions at intersections with red light cameras.

Greensboro shut down its camera program the following year.

The number of cities with automated red light cameras in the United States peaked in 2012 at 533, according to the Insurance Institute for Highway Safety, a nonprofit funded by auto companies, and has since dropped to below 350.

In North Carolina, local governments must receive authorization from the General Assembly to operate a red light camera program. Since gaining this right in 2001, Charlotte, Cary, Chapel Hill, Knightdale, Greensboro and High Point have all shut down their camera programs.

‘It was intended to be a safety tool’

All traffic lights in North Carolina follow standards set by the Federal Highway Administration’s Manual on Uniform Traffic Control Devices. The manual states all yellow lights should last between three and six seconds, with individual state and local departments factoring in speed limit, terrain and speed perception to determine the time.

Lacy of the state Department of Transportation said the issue isn’t in the length of yellow lights but in the red light camera programs that penalize drivers who enter intersections fractionally too late. North Carolina, he explained, is an all-red state, meaning traffic lights will momentarily sit at red in all directions between color changes. Thus, he said, there’s no real risk of an accident when a car drives through an intersection the tiniest bit late, though an automated camera might still ding the driver.

“They’re sending out all these tickets for people who, by the letter of the law, ran the red light, but the red light camera was not intended to be an enforcement tool,” Lacy said. “It was intended to be a safety tool to prevent people from running red lights and getting in wrecks.”

Lacy suggested the camera programs would be improved if they focused on penalizing drivers who entered intersections after the all-red periods.

In his challenges to the remaining red light systems, Stam and his partners have argued the engineering principles behind the length of yellow lights is flawed. They have invited Ceccarelli to speak as an expert witness, yet his arguments thus far have not prevailed.

Another argument the Stam Law Firm has levied against red light camera systems is that they inherently violate the state constitution.

In 2018, Stam **filed a separate lawsuit against the city of Greenville and Pitt County Schools** alleging red light camera systems violated Article II, Section 24, of the state constitution which bans the General Assembly from creating local bills “relating to health, sanitation, and the abatement of nuisances.”

Yet this didn’t sway the state Supreme Court, which in June **declined to consider** overturning the Court of Appeals’ unanimous ruling which allowed red light camera systems to continue operating in the state.

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