

## GoTriangle now expects to fill light-rail funding gap with loans

The News and Observer-Chapel Hill News By Tammy Grubb January 6, 2017

CHAPEL HILL -- GoTriangle officials now think they may not need another \$175 million from Durham and Orange counties to pay for the nearly \$2.5 billion light-rail transit project.

That could change if the costs increase, sales tax revenues fall short or the economy hits a snag, GoTriangle officials said, noting it's important to keep working with the counties to build a safety net.

"Through continued work with our new financial advisor and financial modeling consultant, we are happy to report that in the 'base case,' the (light-rail project) debt can be restructured to allow for construction without the need for new local funds," project manager Danny Rogers said in an email. "The 'base case' is a scenario in which the financial growth assumptions and cost estimates are as expected."

The Durham-Orange Light Rail Transit Project would cover 17.7 miles and 18 stations from N.C. Central University to UNC Hospitals. The estimated cost covers the rail system, stations and potential development projects, such as affordable housing.

The Federal Transit Administration is reviewing the plan now and could let GoTriangle know by the end of February whether to start the engineering phase of the New Starts grant program. Construction could start in 2020 if the project stays on track.

### Project budget revised

An updated plan presented to GoTriangle's Board of Trustees this week still shows the FTA paying for half the project, if approved.

The plan still anticipates getting 10 percent of the money from the state. The final amount of state funding for the project won't be decided until 2019.

That leaves a local cost of about \$990 million, roughly \$227 million of which could be funded with the half-cent transit sales tax in Durham and Orange counties, registration fees, car rental taxes and in-kind land donations.

GoTriangle's plan also includes an optional \$65 million local cost for development projects around the stations. Chapel Hill, Orange County, Durham and Durham County all have "expressed interest in pledging local dollars" for joint development projects, such as affordable housing, the financial plan states.

The remaining \$698.6 million would be financed and spread out longer – from 2020 to 2028 – to better reflect when the dollars would be spent and avoid carrying too much debt until it's needed, GoTriangle officials said. The plan also includes an optional \$236 million in financing that could help manage the project's cash flow until state and federal money kick in.

GoTriangle also continues working on a nonprofit that could raise money for the project and with university, business, health care and community groups to secure donated right-of-way land. Officials said they have confirmed up to \$19.6 million in land donations, but still need to sign contracts.

### Still some questions

The updated plan reverses an earlier request that Durham County help find an extra \$135 million over 10 years and Orange County help find another \$40 million. The money was expected at the time to cover a \$250 million shortfall created when the state cut its expected share of project costs from 25 percent.

The request caused concern in both counties about the increasing burden on taxpayers and lack of communication from GoTriangle. The state funding gap was apparent last spring, some noted, but GoTriangle only approached the counties within weeks of its Dec. 31 deadline for federal submission. (CONTINUED...)

Light-rail opponents urged Orange County to reconsider the plan. The county has hired a consultant and wants to talk with Durham about changing the local funding formula, Commissioner Barry Jacobs said.

Orange County pays 23 percent under the current formula – based on how much of the light-rail project is in each county – and Durham pays 77 percent. However, the light-rail route primarily crosses UNC land in Orange County, serving the university and the hospital but creating few opportunities for economic development or affordable housing around the stations.

It does make sense to look at the funding formula again, particularly since the stop at N.C. Central University was added, Durham County Commissioners Chairwoman Wendy Jacobs said. However, she noted, connecting all three universities will offer educational and employment benefits to both counties.

Critics also have questioned the plan's assumptions about future sales tax revenues.

GoTriangle continues to work with N.C. State University economist Michael Walden and sought a separate sales tax study last year from Moody's Analytics. Both studies estimated the counties could see annual sales tax growth averaging more than 4 percent over the next 20 years.

Walden said this week his study compared the overall growth of the local and national economies and accounted for the shift from retail stores to online sales.

"The forecast for the region if you look out several decades are very 'bullish' in terms of population growth and development density, so down the line it may very well be that light rail makes more economic sense," he said.

While he is not well-versed in the latest plan, Walden noted that financing a long-term project has the benefit of spreading the cost among current and future users. It also allows GoTriangle to lock in lower interest rates now, he said.

### **Leaders optimistic**

Barry Jacobs said GoTriangle has made some progress.

"It's comforting that we weren't being asked for money at the moment, but we still have a way to go to improve communication with the public and with the elected boards. We still have a way to go to make things clear and timely, and we still have a way to go to understand what we're getting into," he said.

While Durham Mayor Bill Bell and Wendy Jacobs agreed the revised plan is good news, Bell hedged his words.

"I want to make it clear, and I hope they made it clear, it doesn't mean that we still are not going to be looking for other alternatives of funding through the local governments, because if you read the report, there are a lot of things that could cause those numbers to go down because of assumptions, in which case we still may need additional funding," Bell said.

The true test will be the Federal Transit Administration's response, he and Wendy Jacobs said.

"The due diligence is also going to come in the form of the federal government being the ones to evaluate it, and so we'll see what they have to say," Wendy Jacobs said.

## As Triangle toll road revenue beats expectation, prices still rise

WRAL.com Traffic By Brian Shrader, Hannah Webster January 6, 2017



When the first section of the Triangle Expressway opened in 2011, it was the state's first toll road. It now runs from RTP all the way through western Wake County, connecting with Holly Springs.

Five years after the Triangle's first toll road opened, the state has said it's a big success.

DOT spokesman Steve Abbott said tens of thousands of people use it each weekday, as traffic and revenue grow every year.

"It's been pretty steady growth as people get used to it," Abbott said. "(Prices) are going up, because costs go up."

Like many RTP workers, Michael Bridges said he uses the Triangle Expressway toll road every workday. One time, he tried taking the free roads home.

"I sat there an extra 20 minutes or so. I decided from then on, I'd just take the tolls," he said.

Many drivers are willing to pay for a quicker commute.

Over the past four years, the DOT projected the Triangle Expressway would bring in about \$77 million, while the actual revenue resulted in \$95 million dollars. With this data, drivers will pay 3.5 percent more this year.

	Projected	Actual	Actual %
FY 2013	\$6,616,000	\$9,817,739	148%
FY 2014	\$17,618,000	\$19,675,420	112%
FY 2015	\$23,704,000	\$28,998,493	122%

	Projected	Actual	Actual %
FY 2016	\$28,818,000	\$36,254,534	126%
Total	\$76,756,000	\$94,746,186	123%

Abbott said the annual hikes pay back the bonds sold to fund the \$1 billion road. It's also helping to pay for two new interchanges, one that will open later this year between Holly Springs and Apex. One between U-S 1 and the NC-55 Bypass in Holly Springs should open in the coming months. Another interchange at Morrisville Parkway will open in 2019.

Bridges says he doesn't like paying more, but he can't wait in rush hour traffic.

"I have a child in daycare, so I have to be at his daycare by 5:30, so I have to be on the tolls," Bridges said.

Toll Location	Sept. 2016	Annual Growth
1	17,300	10%
2	45,700	13%
3	32,900	21%
4	17,700	13%

## City Council to meet post-holiday

The Herald-Sun By Rachael Riley January 15, 2017

DURHAM -- The Durham City Council will meet at 7 p.m. Tuesday, Jan. 17 because of Monday's Martin Luther King Jr. holiday.

The council will consider an interlocal agreement with the state Department of Transportation and City of Raleigh for an N.C. 98 (Wake Forest Highway) corridor study.

The meeting will take place in the council's chambers on the first floor of Durham City Hall, 101 City Hall Plaza.

According to a Dec. 20 memo to City Manager Thomas Bonfield from Transportation Director Terry Bellamy, "the study will examine mobility issues along NC-98 from the interchange with US-70 in Durham through northern Wake County to US-401 in Franklin County."

The total budget for the project is \$300,000 -- with Raleigh's share at 42 percent, or \$125,000, NCDOT's share at 33 percent, or \$100,000, and Durham's share at 25 percent, or \$100,000, of which Durham would use \$60,000 from federal funds.

Mass transit plans for area planning organizations recommend a four-lane facility for N.C. 98 by 2040. Most of the highway in Durham's jurisdiction is four lanes, but most of the highway East through the Town of Wake Forest in the corridor is not, Bellamy said.

The study will determine if the recommendation is appropriate and if other improvements are warranted.

Also Tuesday, the city will hold a public hearing for residents to comment if the city should eliminate its primary municipal elections.

The city currently uses the non-partisan primary that "reduces the number of candidates for an office to a particular number when applicable," city documents state. A second election is then held among the candidates remaining from the primary election to determine the winning candidates.

According to the resolution and proposal, the candidate receiving the highest number of votes in a single election would be declared the winner. If the leading candidate does not receive the majority of the votes, a runoff election could be requested.

According to a memo to council members from City Attorney Patrick Baker, no action will be taken after Tuesday's public hearing, and if the city council directs staff to prepare an ordinance they would vote on the change 60 days after the public hearing.

## Driverless cars to be tested on N.C. 540 Triangle Expressway toll road

The News and Observer By Colin Campbell January 20, 2017

Federal transportation officials on Friday picked North Carolina's Interstate 540 Triangle Expressway toll road as one of 10 testing sites around the country for driverless car technology.

The N.C. Turnpike Authority applied for the program and was selected out of 60 applicants by the U.S. Department of Transportation. The 19-mile toll road connects Research Triangle Park with Cary, Apex and Holly Springs.

(CONTINUED...)

The Turnpike Authority's application says the road will be available for testing by Jan. 1, 2018. It's unclear if the testing could require road closures or if driverless cars would be operated alongside normal traffic.

"We are still waiting to hear what opportunities will come," Turnpike Authority executive director Beau Memory said in an email Friday. "We sought this designation because we hope it is an opportunity to learn how to more safely accommodate these new technologies.

"We will not do anything to compromise the safety of our customers or the reliability of their commute."

In its application, the Turnpike Authority touted potential partnerships with Research Triangle Park firms and transportation research programs at N.C. State University and UNC-Chapel Hill.

Memory wrote that the Triangle Expressway is "one of the most advanced freeways in the United States" because of its electronic toll collection system and its system for monitoring traffic conditions.

The application also notes that the toll road could help test driverless cars in construction zone conditions because new interchanges are under construction at Morrisville Parkway and Old Holly Springs-Apex Road.

North Carolina doesn't yet have any laws governing the use of driverless cars, and the legislature is currently studying the issue.

## Inside the state's massive \$2.2B 'Complete 540' project

Triangle Business Journal By Lauran K. Ohnesorge January 20, 2017

The 540 Loop – a project the N.C. Department of Transportation has been mulling for more than a decade – has at least three years to go before its southern section can move forward, according to a new project timeline.

But, as crews work off that directive, others are pushing for an acceleration of activity.

[Joe Milazzo](#), executive director of the Regional Transportation Alliance, has outlined the Complete 540 project as his group's "priority one," a designation previously held by efforts such as the East End Connector and the Wake Transit Referendum.

"Nothing is more important right now," he says, calling completion of the 540 project – at least through its intersection with I-40 in southeastern Wake County – crucial to easing traffic congestion that's set to increase as the Triangle grows.

Currently, it's scheduled to start moving forward in 2020. Milazzo, through an aggressive public awareness campaign, hopes to accelerate that timeline by two years.

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

In the meantime, [Brian Yamamoto](#), engineer of project development, says NCDOT is trying to move through preconstruction, which mainly consists of environmental planning.

His team doesn't see the new timeframe as a setback, as it calls for extending the six-lane toll road beyond what had initially been proposed to start in 2018. Instead of just one project section, from Highway 55 in Apex to Highway 401, NCDOT will be pushing ahead on two segments – meaning construction all the way from 55 to I-40. That second segment to I-40 had originally been scheduled for right-of-way acquisition in 2024, he points out.

And further work on the loop toward Knightdale is now scheduled to happen in 2027. As the previous timeline only went through 2025, it hadn't even been identified on the schedule. (CONTINUED...)

Armed with what they're calling a clear path to completion, teams are now working to finalize planning details and permissions – a painstaking, interagency effort dealing with everything from noise to wetland considerations.

It's further complicated by the presence of endangered species, such as the dwarf wedge mussel. "We're addressing it and working with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service," says [Roy Bruce](#), project manager at H.W. Lochner Inc.

The loop will also disrupt hundreds of residents. About 270 homes – including houses and apartments – are in 540's path, part of an overall estimate of 281 relocations required for the project. But officials hope the effort will be worth it when there's a highway alternative as crashes snarl rush-hour commutes.

"Once [540 completion] happens, when we have the next project like Fortify, we actually would have a good, solid alternative route for people to use," says Milazzo.

He calls the project important for "system resilience," as crashes on a transportation network are inevitable.

As the area grows, so will highway congestion. Raleigh was recently named the country's 16th fastest-growing metro area, with 1.3 million residents, based on U.S. Census Bureau data. When combined with the Durham-Chapel Hill metro, it ranks 37th.

"Everyone would like for that entire piece to be completed as soon as possible," Yamamoto says. "The change [to the timeline] was made to do that."

But planning such an expansive project could take the entire three-year window.

"Any time you undertake a major transportation project like 540, you're going to have a myriad of challenges that need to be faced," Bruce says. "You're putting up a roadway where there is no roadway right now."

NCDOT expects the Complete 540 project to cost about \$2.2 billion.

## **GoTriangle answers light-rail questions for Orange County commissioners**

The Herald-Sun By Tammy Grubb January 25, 2017

HILLSBOROUGH -- The bill for the \$2.5 billion Durham-Orange light-rail transit project could be paid by 2062, a GoTriangle representative said Tuesday.

Project manager Danny Rogers updated the Orange County Board of Commissioners on the project's latest financial plan, submitted Dec. 30 to the Federal Transit Administration's New Starts grant program. GoTriangle could learn in February whether to start the project's engineering phase.

Construction of the 17.7-mile rail line – from UNC Hospitals to N.C. Central University in Durham – could start in 2020 if the project stays on track. The estimated cost includes the rail system, stations, interest on debt payments and potential development projects, such as affordable housing.

The commissioners will discuss the updated plan at a Feb. 16 work session. A final draft of the plan is expected by March, and the commissioners could consider approving the updated plan in April.

Rogers said the new plan better matches when money will be available to pay for the project and spreads out the debt financing to complete it. The FTA still could pay half of the project cost, and the state is expected to pay 10 percent.

Durham and Orange counties would be responsible for about \$990 million, roughly \$227 million of which could be paid with existing revenues from the half-cent transit sales tax, registration fees, car rental taxes and in-kind land donations. (CONTINUED...)

Another \$698.6 million – plus up to \$236 million more to help manage cash flow – could be financed using short-term loans and longer-term, low-interest federal TIFIA loans.

The debt would be paid back as federal money comes in and with future sales tax revenues and fees, Rogers said. The counties could repay the debt more quickly, he said, but the extra income could be better spent on other light-rail costs.

That doesn't mean GoTriangle has stopped working with its partners to find other resources, Rogers said, but they don't expect to need more local money unless there's a snag, such as lower than expected sales tax revenues or state funding.

Commissioner Earl McKee questioned how GoTriangle could ask for up to \$175 million more from Durham and Orange counties in early December and return less than 30 days later with another option.

"I have a queasy feeling I'm living in Alice in Wonderland, that it's all numbers, and that I can't grasp these numbers," McKee said.

GoTriangle officials have continued to work on the project financing, Rogers responded.

The financial advisers "had just been on briefly at that point. We said this is where we are at this point; this is what we need. We have to go to FTA, and we have to share with them information to go forward," he said.

"We had to come through and talk to you at that point to make our schedule and keep this project moving forward. That means we're not going to stop trying to make it better, which is what I think we've done, is make it better."

McKee later asked the board to rescind its December agreement to help find more local money but didn't get any support.

Orange County has since hired its own consultant to look at the numbers and plans to talk with Durham about changing the local funding formula. Orange County now pays 23 percent of the local cost, based on its share of the light-rail line.

Commissioner Mark Marcoplos said he wants to see more information at a future meeting about the environmental effects, costs and other details of light-rail transit vs. bus-rapid transit, or BRT.

Hillsborough resident Bonnie Hauser is among those advocating to use the light-rail money for a BRT system, which gives high-capacity buses priority at traffic signals or puts them in dedicated lanes to be more efficient.

BRT will serve thousands of riders and be completed in a few years, Hauser said. Contrary to concerns about higher BRT costs – the project's cost has tripled since 2012 – it's still a fraction of LRT costs, she said.

"Since this project began in 2012, trains are now slower, less frequent and a lot more expensive. Shouldn't Orange County be considering bus-rapid transit as an alternative for the Durham-Orange corridor? We'd have service a lot faster, a lot sooner, and it would free up funds for transportation throughout county," she said.

BRT reinforces highway use and "less livable" urban design, Chapel Hill resident Tom Farmer said. Light rail "doesn't choke our roadways; it doesn't pollute our air and doesn't consume our open spaces," he said.

"In December and again tonight, Commissioner McKee asked when this project was going to cost \$3 billion. It will reach that number if we delay, only to realize later that our economic future and access to jobs require efficient, high-capacity transit," Farmer said.

Commissioners Chairman Mark Dorosin said the board expects regular updates from GoTriangle this year.

"There's a lot of strong feelings in the community about this, but I think ... everybody has some really important shared goals, which is getting all the information possible and having it conveyed – both to us on the board and in the (CONTINUED...)



community – in the most clear, the most accessible and the most understandable way possible,” he said, “so that the decisions that we all have to make around this are based on a shared and reasonable set of facts and assumptions.”

## **A LOT APART: Residents offer their 2 cents worth on new \$23M parking deck**

The Herald-Sun By Rachael Riley January 26, 2017

DURHAM -- Parking -- specifically downtown parking -- has been a recurrent email theme in Durham City Council members' inboxes recently.

Downtown business owners in particular have been seeking solutions to address limited parking access.

Parker and Otis restaurant owners Jonathan Kea and Jennings Brody also own the Chet Miller retail store on Parrish Street. They wrote council members in June to say that the Chapel Hill Street garage is often full by 10 a.m. weekdays.

“The lack of available parking drives visitors and retail customers away from Parrish Street and is making it very difficult for employees to come to work,” Kea wrote.

Others like Donna Deal shared personal experiences.

Deal's daughter works at a downtown deli and Donna Deal told council members paying for parking to go to work comes to about \$8 a day for her daughter. That number jumps to \$200 a month including the \$500 worth of parking tickets her daughter received during her first four months of employment.

“This crisis of parking is very stressful for the many low-wage earners who are supporting the downtown revitalization,” Deal wrote.

Megan Raley works with a small downtown business and echoed the emailed comments to the council, while speaking at a community design visioning session this week about the future of a soon-to-be-built \$23 million mixed-use parking deck bounded by Rigsbee Avenue and West Morgan and North Mangum streets.

The proposed garage will include 750-800 parking spaces and will be wrapped with 15,000-20,000 square feet of commercial/retail likely on both Mangum and Morgan streets. The garage will also house approximately 4,000-5,000 square feet of offices for the City of Durham Parking administrator.

“I appreciate the city wanting feedback on it, especially important for small businesses downtown to be able to have some sort of creative parking solution for their employees, because at this point some people have to pay cash out of pocket to come to work essentially to be able to park and come to work, which is a concern for me,” Raley said.

Raley said she'd like to see a parking deck geared toward tourists and downtown patrons.

Parking issues and downtown growth go hand in hand and is acknowledged by the city, which commissioned a parking study in 2012, said Thomas Leathers, parking systems manager.

“Parking downtown -- it's a result of our success,” Leathers said. “The success of downtown lends itself to a parking crunch, which happens in most cities.”

By 2013, 30 recommendations based on the study indicated the need for more parking space downtown because of development and redevelopment projects at that time, Leathers said.

“We actually did another part to refresh those numbers because development skyrocketed,” Leathers said. “We had a tremendous growth in a short amount of time.” (CONTINUED...)

Based on data models from engineers, it was determined 750 spots were needed to meet future demand, he said.

As the new garage project moves into its schematic design phase, residents are being asked how they envision the site, project manager Henri Prosperi said.

"We're going to use that to help inform our designers about making design decisions relative to the aesthetics of the building," Prosperi said. "A lot of people come down Mangum Street as they're coming downtown, and they want the garage aesthetics to be such that it kind of says that you're entering the downtown as a gateway."

Sisters Katie and Hannah Pitstick are part of a group geared toward Millennials' interest in design and progress, known as Durham For Inclusive Design, who attended Wednesday's session.

"We need to start planning what we want to see, because we're the ones who are going to be living here for a long time," Katie Pitstick said.

Hannah Pitstick said the group suggested idea for the parking garage to have a bar, green roof, garden or solar access at the top, a lower priced restaurant that is preferably minority-owned at the bottom.

Although Cliff Zinner said he sees the current existing surface lot of the site that has about 100 spaces empty "50 to 75 percent of the time," he said he is not the parking expert.

However Zinner's interest is related to owning buildings in the downtown area.

"They've already decided they're going to do it, so I want to make sure it adds to downtown and not subtract from downtown because it's on the fringe of downtown," he said.

According to a tentative timeline, the project is expected to be under construction by this fall, with a completion date of late 2018.

For residents and stakeholders unable to attend community visioning sessions, updates are available at [durhamnc.gov/761/New-Downtown-Parking-Garage](http://durhamnc.gov/761/New-Downtown-Parking-Garage) online.

## **Trump includes NC's I-95 upgrades in draft infrastructure plan, but some fear tolls**

The News and Observer By Colin Campbell January 30, 2017

BY COLIN CAMPBELL

Long-delayed upgrades to Interstate 95 in North Carolina would get a boost from the federal government under a draft list of 50 infrastructure projects compiled by President Donald Trump's transition team – but details of the proposal are scarce.

The draft document notes only that I-95 improvements are "ranked by the Federal Highway Administration as a top priority. ... I-95 is the busiest interstate in the nation, and this section is a major freight corridor."

Trump's stated desire to use public-private partnerships to fund his infrastructure plan could indicate tolls as a possible funding source if a private company builds the I-95 upgrades. The list does not specify if the plan includes tolls.

Ernie Brame operates a large truck stop along I-95 in Kenly, and he's lobbied against tolls because he fears it would prompt long-distance drivers to use another route. A drop in I-95 traffic would mean fewer customers for the hotels, restaurants and gas stations that rely on travelers. (CONTINUED...)

"Public-private partnerships scare us because how do you pay for it?" he said.

Brame said he'd prefer that upgrades be funded through the federal gas tax, and he notes that the state has been able to widen other interstates without tolls.

"I believe that when you are east of Raleigh, you find funding a lot harder to come across," he said. "We really want to be treated like the rest of the state."

The [list from the transition team, which was obtained last week by McClatchy newspapers](#), includes two infrastructure projects in North Carolina: About \$1.5 billion in improvements to I-95 as well as the planned Atlantic Coast Pipeline, a natural gas line connecting West Virginia and North Carolina.

The White House said Wednesday that the list is not an "official" White House document. A Washington-based consulting firm [confirmed that it produced the document for Trump's transition team](#), and the National Governors Association and a member of the U.S. House Transportation Committee said Trump's team sent them copies.

Trump campaigned on promises to rebuild the country's crumbling infrastructure, and he's spoken about a \$1 trillion infrastructure investment plan that would include public-private partnerships and create jobs.

The N.C. Department of Transportation has not received additional information about the transition-team proposal yet.

"While North Carolina would welcome resources to improve I-95 as well as other critical transportation needs, to our knowledge the prior administration (of Gov. Pat McCrory) did not submit anything to the National Governors Association," DOT spokesman Robert Broome said Friday. "DOT leadership is working to identify funding priorities."

While NCDOT has \$173 million in paving and other minor projects scheduled for I-95 over the next decade, the agency has struggled to find funding for \$4.5 billion in improvements needed, despite studying the issue for more than a decade.

Those plans call for widening the highway from four to six lanes from the Virginia to South Carolina borders, with an eight-lane section between Benson and Fayetteville. Multiple interchanges would get upgrades as well.

An NCDOT report in January 2016 determined that "North Carolina cannot depend on federal earmarks" to pay for improvements. It also found that the state's current formula for allocating funding wouldn't generate the money required for major I-95 projects.

The agency has studied the possibility of funding the project with tolls, but that option met with opposition from communities along the highway.

One option is to limit the burden of tolls by building "express lanes" where drivers pay to use the newly built lanes while the original ones remain free. The state is using that model for widening I-77 near Charlotte, but the approach has prompted outrage from commuters who use the highway.

### **Pipeline on the list**

In addition to I-95, the draft Trump infrastructure projects include the Atlantic Coast Pipeline, which would transport natural gas 600 miles from West Virginia to North Carolina, where it would stretch from Northampton County south to near Pembroke in Robeson County.

Dominion and several other energy companies are building the pipeline, and construction is scheduled to begin later this year. The document from Trump's transition team doesn't explain what role the federal government would play in the project.

Aaron Ruby, a spokesman for Dominion Energy, said the company can't comment on the infrastructure plan documents because "we cannot independently verify their source." (CONTINUED...)

“However, we are very encouraged by the Trump administration’s recognition of the urgent national need to build critically important energy infrastructure projects,” Ruby said in an email. “The administration has taken several important first steps in recent days to clear the path for these projects, and we are eager to work with the president to ensure that projects like the Atlantic Coast Pipeline are approved and built in a timely manner.”

In November, a group of residents and environmentalists known as the Alliance to Stop the Pipeline [held marches in Cumberland, Nash and Robeson counties](#) to protest the project. The protesters argue that the pipeline would endanger their health and property values.

The Federal Energy Regulatory Commission is reviewing environmental impacts of the pipeline and is accepting public comments on its draft report until April, [according to WMRA public radio](#).

FERC’s draft says the project would have “temporary and permanent ... adverse effects” on the environment, but the impacts can be “reduced to less-than significant levels” if the utility takes specific actions.

*MCCLATCHY WASHINGTON BUREAU REPORTER LINDSAY WISE AND KANSAS CITY STAR REPORTER STEVE VOCKRODT CONTRIBUTED TO THIS REPORT*